

EDITORIALS & OPINION

Colombia Pact Rising

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The Hemisphere: The U.S.-Peru free trade pact, to be signed Friday, will not just bring our ally closer and assure its prosperity. It also seems to be generating momentum for the more critical trade deal with Colombia.

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That's important, because extending free trade with Peru while denying it to Colombia sends a bad message to our 34 southern neighbors that the U.S. isn't all that committed to the region — or reliable as a partner.

Congress achieved something marvelous last Tuesday when the Senate gave a big thumbs up for the Peru pact, approving it 77-18.

But it's not a complete victory by any means. The House and Senate have yet to OK the almost identical trade pact for neighboring Colombia, which has been singled out for disapproval by some labor groups. U.S. unions cynically claim to be "concerned" about violence against trade unionists in a nation that's only now emerging from the violence of a long war.

It matters little to them that Colombian trade unionists arrived this week from Colombia to urge passage of the pact that will beef up Colombia's unions. They want to punish an ally to show they still matter. Many obedient Democrats may still be in their pocket.

But two events this week may change that.

First, the captains of American industry stepped forward, urging Congress with one voice to extend the pact to Colombia. "Congress' vote on the U.S.-Colombia (pact) will shape the next decade of America's engagement with our hemisphere," the 19 chief executives wrote in a Dec. 11 letter. It was sponsored by the Emergency Committee for American Trade, representing CEOs from Microsoft, Citibank, McGraw-Hill, GM, Oracle, Intel, Coca-Cola, 3M, Procter & Gamble, Target, Wal-Mart and Exxon Mobil, companies that together employ six million Americans.

Hopefully, that might just focus minds in Congress.

In fact, some of these companies — such as Citibank, Oracle, Target, and Microsoft — have leaders associated with Democratic causes and campaigns.

But it's not just about big business or big labor. As the Office of the U.S Trade Representative has noted, the U.S. now has about \$16 billion in trade with Colombia, \$6.7 billion of that in exports. More than 8,000 U.S. businesses sell to that country. Those businesses aren't the big boys: 84% are small and midsize firms.

Latin America is a fast-growing market. With businesses of all sizes speaking up for the Colombia pact, change may be in the offing.

Peru is the other helpful factor.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe made a spectacular state visit to Peru on Dec. 11. Not only did the leader get the red-carpet welcome, he got a big pledge from Peruvian President Alan Garcia to help his old ally get free trade.

"I want to say to everyone, Peruvians and especially to Colombians: This treaty of free trade that Peru has signed with the U.S. will not be complete until Colombia has signed the free trade treaty with the United States," Garcia declared.

Because Garcia is headed to Washington to sign the free trade agreement on Friday, it is likely he will urge congress to sign off on the Colombia pact, too.

It makes sense. The two pacts are about equal, were negotiated at the same time and required the same reforms.

Both nations willingly made the changes because they wanted free trade so badly.

To give one free trade while leaving the other in the cold will not only alienate both, but will send a message to the region that the U.S. is a mercurial partner unworthy of alignment.

Garcia has long favored integrating the region to create a better framework for prosperity.

His support for Colombia, along with the emergence of American business' support for Colombia, hopefully will help seal the deal.



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