

# WebMemo



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## Enhance U.S. Security: Pass Free Trade Agreements with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea

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From the Korean War to Operation Just Cause in Panama to Plan Colombia, the U.S. has expended lives and treasure to protect Colombia, Panama, and South Korea from Communist aggression, narco-violence, insurgency, and misrule. The investment has paid off.

Today, all three are increasingly prosperous democracies and geopolitical allies with 100 million citizens and a combined GDP of \$2 trillion. Despite this, the White House and Democrats in Congress denigrate these valuable allies by refusing to approve pending free trade agreements (FTAs).

Not only do FTAs promote economic integration and enhance competitiveness; they also build a greater sense of security and certainty in ties between states. It is time for Congress to align U.S. economic and national security interests and pass the pending FTAs.

**South Korea.** Rising from the rubble of the Korean War, South Korea has built the world's 14th largest economy and has become a linchpin in America's Asian security perimeter. To protect this vibrant democracy, the U.S. maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea against the multifaceted North Korean military threat and rising pressure from China. Both Pyongyang and Beijing share a common foreign policy objective to erode U.S. power and influence throughout Asia.

Passing the FTA would strengthen U.S. commercial ties and broaden the bilateral relationship with South Korea beyond the existing military alliance. It would also serve as a powerful statement of the

U.S. commitment to East Asia at a time when many perceive declining American interest, presence, and influence in the region.

South Korea is increasingly concerned about China's belligerent behavior and willingness to impose its growing military and economic power on smaller Asian nations. Seoul is fearful that Beijing could impose enormous political, military, and economic pressure on South Korea during a future confrontation.

Approving the U.S. FTA with South Korea would constrain Beijing's ability to extend its economic and political influence over the region. Diversifying Korea's trading base would decrease its economic reliance on China and reduce the vulnerability of a key U.S. ally to pressure by Beijing. The best South Korean defense against Chinese arm-twisting is a strong security and economic relationship with the United States.

**Colombia.** The gravest security challenges in the Americas are twofold. The first comes from transnational criminal organizations whose existence depend heavily upon the cultivation and delivery of cocaine. Since the 1960s, drug consumption in the U.S. has fueled narco-crime and narco-corrup-

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tion in the Americas. The threat remains acute in Colombia, Mexico, and elsewhere.

The second threat comes from the elected autocracy/revolutionary regime of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. The Venezuela populist employs his nation's oil wealth to power socialism of the 21st century and fuel his anti-American Bolivarian alliance with Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Chavez's Bolivarian strategy aspires to build a bloc of Latin American nations dedicated to socialism and committed to alliances—including strong military ties—with Iran, Syria, and other global destabilizers.

Venezuela has become the most probable entry platform into the Americas for anti-American terrorism and a major export route for the global drug trade. Venezuela's Russian-sustained military buildup has added fresh offensive weapons capabilities to Chavez's armed forces.

Colombia is situated at a vector point between the drug trade and Chavez. Past decades of civil conflict—fueled by government weakness, ideological conflict, and enormous drug profits—practically destroyed Colombia as a nation. By the late 1990s, Washington policymakers feared it was on the verge of becoming a failed narco-state. Starting with Plan Colombia in 1999, the U.S. invested more than \$7 billion to help Colombia recover lost security control.

Under the leadership of former President Alvaro Uribe (2002–2010), Colombia beat back the threat of state capture posed by the narco-terrorists of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and murderous right-wing paramilitaries. Uribe's democratic security strategy restored confidence in the Colombian state and substantially reduced chronic levels of violence.

Now, under Uribe's successor, Juan Manuel Santos, Colombia is addressing festering land, labor, and justice issues. Meeting these goals, however, requires expanded economic opportunities and an end to the myth that continuous U.S. denial of free trade benefits will protect and empower Colombia's small unionized sector.

Today Colombia has, as Under Secretary of State James Steinberg observed, “gone from being a consumer of security to being a provider of security and support for others who face even greater challenges.”<sup>1</sup>

Failure to ratify the FTA will only generate more insecurity in Colombia. Since taking office, Santos has grappled with Colombia's dual isolation—perceived isolation from the U.S. because of failure to pass the FTA and isolation from the region because of close ties with the U.S. Many see Santos's new understandings with Venezuela as a species of appeasement induced by Chavez's economic pressures and by his capacity to manipulate support for FARC. Without a strong U.S. to counterbalance Chavez's bid for influence, Colombians will likely yield to an inevitable erosion of national self-esteem and security before the *Chavista* onslaught.

**Panama.** The security and free passage through the Panama Canal has been a historic must since the U.S.-built canal opened in 1914. Although its salience has diminished in the air and space age, access and free passage through the canal is still massively important to the U.S. economy and critical for its shrinking naval forces. The opening of a third set of locks in 2014 will substantially increase shipping capacity for the coming decades.

Before the negotiated transfer of sovereignty over the canal was completed, a narco-general Manuel Noriega hijacked his country and forced Operation Just Cause, which led to his removal and the renewal of democratic politics. The experience led to the abolition of the military in 1994, leaving the nation with a small police and maritime service force and reliant on U.S. support to guarantee its security.

Panama is playing an increasingly important role in cooperating and combating drug trafficking in the Central American isthmus. Failure to approve the FTA has already hurt U.S. competitiveness in Panama's recent expansion boom and will further dampen Panamanian enthusiasm to cooperate with the U.S. on security issues, especially as attention focuses on combating money laundering in Panama's robust financial sector.

1. James B. Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State, remarks to the Center for Strategic and International Studies Colombia Conference, June 13, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2011/166096.htm> (June 20, 2011).

**Upholding a Geo-Strategic Vision of Peace and Prosperity.** The case has been made repeatedly and effectively that the FTAs are an economic win-win opportunity. Less commonly discussed is the importance of FTAs as cost-free ways to enhance U.S. security. For too long, President Obama and many in Congress have failed to listen to the advice of the Secretaries of Defense and State who are on record repeatedly in favor of passage of the FTAs. They recognize that a long-range and national

interest vision of U.S. foreign and security policy includes the overdue passage of the FTAs.

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