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President Obama and Colombia's Uribe Meeting: A Pivotal Hemispheric Encounter

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Colombia is one of the oldest democracies in the world and has consistently been among the U.S.'s best friends in Latin America. President Obama should use his White House meeting with Colombian President Alvaro Uribe on June 29 to reinvigorate the U.S. relationship with Colombia by offering presidential backing for the U.S.–Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as well as continued funding for Plan Colombia's civilian and military programs.

Revitalizing American Influence through Free Trade. Despite fancy words about new beginnings for its relations with the rest of the Americas, the U.S. is losing leverage and influence throughout Latin America. The recent expansion of Latin America's global trade and investment ties to Europe, China, Russia, and even Iran have opened new economic and political paths independent of the U.S. Consequently, if the U.S. wishes to accomplish positive ends in Colombia and elsewhere in the Americas, it still needs a robust and productive trade relationship.

Free trade may not be a panacea, but it is a vital tool. Weaning farmers from coca farming and putting them on an alternate path to licit crops requires infrastructure, investments, and markets. Giving displaced individuals new hope and opportunity requires the creation of productive jobs. Neither ex-guerrillas nor ex-paramilitaries will lay down their AK-47s and become law-abiding citizens without the promise of economic security. Trade and investment follow each other and are motors to propel us toward critical ends.

There is a perception among conservative-minded thinkers that the Obama Administration and a Democratic majority in Congress are more enthralled with courting the ideological enemies of American values, like Fidel Castro or Hugo Chávez, than with working with friends. Keeping nations like Colombia and Panama, who are ready to close trade deals and align with the U.S., on extended legislative hold or threatening to scuttle agreements altogether sends a shiver down the spine of our friends—and further delays expansion of free trade needed to revitalize the U.S.'s influence and standing in Latin America.

President Uribe: A Transformational Leader. The architect and anchor for much of Colombia's positive changes over the last decade has been President Alvaro Uribe. As an independent formerly aligned with Colombia's Liberal Party, Uribe has provided dynamic leadership that has infused a majority of Colombians a new sense of pride and self confidence.

With the help of the Democratic Security Policy, the Colombian government has restored its civic, social, and security presence throughout Colombia. With President Uribe as a driving force, the govern-

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ment has infused patriotism into government institutions and turned its former garrison military into an increasingly effective field force. No Latin American leader has a better record in fighting against the drug trade in the Western Hemisphere than Uribe. Furthermore, the substantial U.S. investment in Colombia means that the U.S. has developed an unparalleled capacity to work with the Colombian government on projects ranging from military reform to dealing with refugees.

The grand objective for the U.S. and Colombia is the building of a nation where democracy, stable institutions, and the rule of law prevail. The balance sheet under the Uribe administration on security, reducing violence, disarming paramilitaries, and curbing the murder of trade unionists is quite positive. These improvements have taken place in the crucible of a wartime atmosphere where old animosities and hatreds are not easily eliminated.

Yet two recent incidents—the “false positive” case and the “*las chuzadas*” case—have raised question about Colombia’s fitness for a privileged place among Washington’s friends. In the “false positives” case, in order to improve “body counts,” the Colombian military killed civilians they falsely claimed were Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrillas. These were deplorable actions. In the wake of the scandal, disciplinary action resulted in the forced retirement of several generals and other high-ranking officers for either involvement or tolerance of the abuse. Criminal prosecutions are pending. A U.N. Special Envoy severely criticized the military but found that these killings were neither state policy nor known to Uribe and senior civilian officials.

In the “*las chuzadas*” case, elements of Colombian intelligence service and finance ministry reportedly engaged in illegal wiretapping and snooping into financial records. The Uribe government, through the Justice Ministry, has pledged a full investigation.

Building a more just and equitable Colombia remains a work in progress, just as it is elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere. In the spirit of partnership, Washington can speak out if Colombia falters on human rights while committing to work with Colombians for stronger, more independent courts and watchdog agencies.

U.S. and Colombia: Mapping the Road Ahead.

Supporters of President Uribe are undertaking a major effort to carry out a referendum that would change Colombia’s constitution to allow him to run for a third consecutive term as president. No Colombian president has been more popular or more effective, and the months ahead will be complicated. President Uribe should beware of seeking a third term in a Latin America, where the traditional alternation of power, vital to a healthy democracy, has been shattered by Hugo Chávez and others on the left. U.S.–Colombia relations must be based upon mutual interests that are not politicized to fit the agendas of far right or far left special interest groups. These interests should not focus on personalities but on advancing common goals.

The current U.S. budget for FY 2010 calls for approximately \$500 million in assistance to Colombia. After 10 years, strategists on both sides agree that Plan Colombia needs to be placed on graduated glide path down toward reductions. The U.S. needs to recognize the substantial achievements of Colombia’s professional military and reassure President Uribe that it views any resurgence of narco-terrorism as a threat to Colombia and the security of the Americas. President Obama can offer to work with Uribe and the Colombian government to achieve a rational and effective distribution of assistance resources, albeit at reduced levels, for both “hard” security ends and “soft” development and humanitarian assistance programs in the coming years.

Recommendations. When he meets President Uribe, President Obama should:

- ***Commit to the FTA.*** It is time to give the FTA the presidential seal of approval. America’s continued efforts to protect trade unionists and improve human rights belong in a political security basket, not in endless haggling over a beneficial trade bill.
- ***Propose a bilateral pact for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.*** Obama should move to strengthen ties with a cooperative, inter-governmental review mechanism that focuses on the protection of trade unionists, the displaced, Afro-Colombians, and others while committing to a rigorous process of reform and implementation founded on shared commitments to democ-

racy, respect for human and labor rights, and rule of law.

- *Re-forge a consensus on drug policy.* This consensus should use Colombia and other threatened nations like Mexico to launch a comprehensive drug strategy that spans both the supply- and demand-reductions sides and explores new options from alternative development to treatment.

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