Pelosi, Dems threaten a vital U.S. ally

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Congressional Democrats are taking aim at the decade-old alliance between the United States and Colombia, Washington's staunchest ally in Latin America. For sheer strategic myopia, it would be hard to beat this act of folly.

Even as much of Latin America moves left, Colombia's commendably democratic government continues to share the core U.S. values in the region - fighting terrorism, combating drug trafficking and liberalizing trade. Compare that agenda with the yanqui-bashing alliance pursued by Colombia's neighbor and rival, Venezuela, under leftist demagogue Hugo Chavez. While Chavez makes common cause with the Castro brothers in Cuba and courts Iran's radically anti-American regime, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe remains a committed democrat and firm friend of the United States.

You might assume, then, that Uribe would get a warm reception and a fair hearing on Capitol Hill when he visited Washington recently to lobby for ratification of the U.S.-Colombia free-trade pact and request continued economic and military assistance. What he got, instead, from the Democrats' congressional leadership was the equivalent of a diplomatic mugging.

The free-trade agreement is imperiled if not dead, blocked by protectionist Democrats in Congress at the behest of the AFL-CIO. Economic and military aid for Colombia is stalled and almost certain to be reduced. Bipartisan support for Plan Colombia, the decade-old strategic framework for the U.S.-Colombia alliance, is on hold and at serious risk.

The pretext for this repudiation of a loyal ally is a hodgepodge of murky accusations that some in Uribe's government have links to rightist paramilitary groups engaged in drug trafficking and death squads. Reading from a script written by Uribe's political opponents in Colombia and left-leaning activists in Washington, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi reportedly lectured Uribe about alleged human rights violations and civil rights abuses by his government.

Never mind that Uribe has done more than any Colombian president in decades to disarm and neutralize paramilitary groups, left and right alike. Never mind that Uribe is proving the best ally the United States has ever had in attacking Colombia's cocaine traffickers. And never mind that Uribe's tough law-and-order policies have dramatically reduced Colombia's endemic violence, stabilized a once-chaotic country and revived its economy.

None of this seems to matter to Pelosi and company, heedlessly playing politics with national security.

Before wrecking the U.S.-Colombia alliance, congressional Democrats should ponder some relevant realities.

Colombia, the oldest democracy in Latin America, retains its credentials as a defender of liberal democratic values. Alvaro Uribe won two successive presidential elections, in 2002 and 2006, by resounding margins against a free and unfettered opposition. Colombia has multiple political parties, a free press, independent courts and judiciary, and a long history of free and fair elections at the local and national level.

Tragically, Colombia is also under siege from two lethal enemies of liberal democracy: a long-running communist insurgency waged by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and an illicit cocaine trade whose murderous cartels grew so powerful in the 1980s and early 1990s that they threatened to turn the country into a narco state.

Uribe, a tough conservative, was elected to save Colombia from these perils. After five years in office, his public approval ratings stand at 80 percent. Maybe he's doing something right.

The proposed free-trade agreement with Colombia would slash tariffs on U.S. manufacturing goods, farm exports and services in exchange for indefinitely extending Colombia's existing duty-free access to the U.S. market. Only the blindly protectionist could see that as a bad deal for the United States.

U.S. trade leadership in the Americas now rides on the fate of the free-trade pact with Colombia, and on comparable pending treaties with Peru and Panama. If Democrats in Congress reject ratification, they'll be ceding the trade issue to the likes of Hugo Chavez, who preaches a Latin version of anti-U.S. protectionism.

Colombia is the key to fighting the deadly international cocaine trade. At least 80 percent of all cocaine entering the United States comes from Colombia. Without the cooperation and active participation of Colombia's government, the entire U.S.-led fight against this hemisphere-wide scourge would be hopelessly crippled.

Uribe's government has apprehended and extradited to the United States hundreds of narco-traffickers wanted for trial in U.S. courts. Previous Colombian governments were too intimidated by ultra-violent cocaine cartels to extradite anyone. Uribe's government is spraying the coca plantations and eradicating vast areas of coca cultivation. Pelosi should ask the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration about the help it's getting from the Colombian government in fighting the cocaine trade.

On security issues, Uribe has increased the Colombian army's combat forces by 60 percent. He's using U.S.-provided helicopters to give his soldiers vital mobility against the FARC. Uribe's amnesty program has

disarmed 30,000 members of the paramilitary right, and 60 of its leaders have been jailed. Better overall security has dropped Colombia's homicide and kidnapping rates by more than 50 percent.

Plan Colombia began a decade ago as a Clinton administration initiative with bipartisan support in Congress. Now that it's working, Pelosi and the Democrats threaten to pull the plug. That would be folly.

Robert J. Caldwell is editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune's Sunday Insight section and can be reached via e-mail at robert.caldwell@uniontrib.com.

Pelosi, Dems threaten a vital U.S. ally by Robert_J_Caldwell