

Bush to Pitch Free Trade

President to Push Skeptical Congress For Colombia Deal

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush will ask skeptical legislators not to spurn free trade, urging passage of a pact with Colombia in a State of the Union address expected to stress keeping the U.S. engaged in the highly competitive global economy.

Winning passage of the proposed trade pact with Colombia, and also pending deals with Panama and South Korea, is a priority for Mr. Bush in his final months in office. The Latin American nation is among the U.S.'s closest allies in a region simmering with anti-American sentiments, as Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez uses his country's oil revenue to undermine U.S. influence.

In his speech tonight, Mr. Bush is expected to portray Colombia, which is struggling to get beyond its history of narcotics trafficking and violence, as a strategic partner worthy of closer economic ties.

For Mr. Bush, the State of the Union represents a chance to confront the increasing fear among lawmakers and voters that free trade is turning out to be a bad bargain for American workers and companies. Mr. Bush will talk about the "importance of trade to the U.S. economy and the importance of opposing the forces of protectionism and isolationism," a senior administration official said.

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Mr. Bush's focus on trade tonight dovetails with a broader White House push to rebuild public support for the issue and propel the Colombia, Panama and South Korea deals -- all completed before Mr. Bush's trade negotiating authority expired -- through the Democratic Congress.

After Democrats took control of Congress last year, the president's trade negotiating authority wasn't renewed by lawmakers. The authority ensures trade deals can be pushed through Congress without amendment. That offers an incentive to potential trading partners to cut free-trade deals with the U.S., but critics say it erodes the power of Congress. Mr. Bush now has limited power to push for new deals abroad.

All three of the pending deals -- Colombia, Panama and South Korea -- were negotiated under the president's now lapsed "fast track" authority. Mr. Bush can still force a vote on any one of them on Capitol Hill, but he faces critical strategic decisions about when to move, especially with such uncertain support for continued expansion.

Expanded trade has been a priority for Mr. Bush throughout his two terms in office. The Bush administration helped launch the Doha Round of global trade talks, which Mr. Bush is also expected to mention in his State of the Union. He is expected to urge that the long-running negotiations -- beset by differences over how much to scale back global farm supports -- be brought to a conclusion. And the administration has negotiated a series of smaller deals, such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement, that have lowered trade barriers and created new markets for American exporters.

But amid the expansion of deals, public support for free trade has eroded sharply, as manufacturing jobs have moved offshore and middle-class incomes have stagnated.

Mr. Bush did persuade lawmakers last fall to approve a trade deal with Peru after many months of wrangling and a pledge to better reflect Democratic priorities in U.S. trade policy. But even with that commitment, a majority of House Democrats opposed the Peru deal. And amid the divisions, Democratic leaders have shown no interest in holding a vote this spring on Colombia. Not only have American unions sounded alarms about the history of violence against labor organizers in Colombia, but top Democratic presidential contenders have voiced concern about continued action on the Bush trade agenda.

"We can't afford more of the same," said Sen. Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat who was among several lawmakers elected in 2006 while campaigning as skeptics of the Bush trade agenda. "His prescription of passing more NAFTA-style trade deals is throwing gasoline on a fire. Job-killing trade agreements shut down our factories, hurt our communities and send toxic toys into our children's bedrooms."

Unbowed, Mr. Bush is pushing forward. To help bolster support in Congress for the Colombia deal, top administration officials -- including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice -- are leading a series of lawmaker delegations to the country.

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