

McCain visits a skeptical Latin America

Presidential hopeful John McCain visited Colombia on Tuesday and wraps up his three-day trip Thursday in Mexico.

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Mexico City; and Bogotá Colombia - On a three-day visit to Colombia and Mexico, Republican presidential hopeful John McCain is seeking to show that he cares about the same issues as Latin Americans: security, immigration, and trade.

But the tour will likely do little to woo people in the region, analysts say. Even though Mr. McCain enjoys a better image than President Bush in Latin America, Democratic contestant Barack Obama has an edge simply because he is the fresher figure, says Michael Shifter, the vice president for policy at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington.

"[Senator] Obama is seen as someone who could understand a changing Latin America... one that rejects the 'you are on one side or the other' politics," says Mr. Shifter. Also, the fact that McCain has chosen to visit the region's most conservative leaders – Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and Mexican President Felipe Calderón – could underscore a more traditional mind set. "It reinforces the sense that he will stand with his friends," says Shifter. "But even the people in those countries say [US politicians] can't afford to look at the region that way."

McCain's visit to Colombia, where he met with Mr. Uribe on Tuesday, is an attempt to mark a difference with Obama on both trade issues and counterterrorism, says political commentator Andrés Peñate. A Colombian free trade deal negotiated between the Bush and Uribe governments is bogged down in the US Congress amid concerns from many Democrats about human rights, including a long history of violence against trade unionists in Colombia.

McCain praised Colombia in its fight against drug production and leftist rebels. In doing so, Mr. Peñate says McCain seeks to showcase Colombia as a "success story" of Republican foreign policy. The United States supplies Colombia with about \$600 million a year in mostly military aid.

Trade and security are expected to dominate meetings in Mexico, too. Both nominees support the Merida Initiative, a new package passed by Congress to help stem drug violence in Mexico and Central America. McCain's visit also allows him to emphasize support for the North American Free Trade Agreement, which Obama has said should be renegotiated to better address labor and environmental terms.

Still, no matter what McCain says, many Mexicans say the visit does not instill faith that he will have any greater commitment to Latin America than Bush.

Juan Pablo Hurle, a consultant in Mexico City, says that McCain is better than Bush, but he sides with Obama. "If Obama wins, things will change," he says. "McCain is not interested in Latinos in Latin America, only those Latinos in the US whose vote matters to him."

Some Mexicans say they favor McCain, but a zeal for Obama, as a minority, is an undertone across Latin America. "Obama will change everything if he is elected... there will be true immigration reform and not a band-aid because he has African heritage and understands the plight of immigrants," says Marco Polo Herrera, a student in Mexico City. "McCain will be more of the same."

- *Rafael Rivero contributed from Mexico City.*