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DR-CAFTA

Pact would strengthen region's democracies

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It was a very serious matter. Concern was visible in everybody's face. Oscar Arias, former President of Costa Rica and Nobel peace laureate (perhaps the most internationally respected Latin American politician), arrived in Miami one day ahead of schedule. He was followed by the presidents of Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

They came to sensitize U.S. public opinion to something on which Central America and the Dominican Republic may be staking their future as viable states in the 21st Century: the approval of DR-CAFTA, a free-trade agreement that will intensely promote all exchanges between that impoverished part of the world and the United States. Without that pact, there will be no political stability or economic development in the region.

For Washington, it is a convenient business. Taken as a whole, those countries, with barely 43 million people, constitute the United States' 13th largest trading partner, with a trade volume worth \$32 billion. That's more than Brazil, Australia, Russia or India, four of the largest nations on the planet. At the same time, the DR-CAFTA nations are trustworthy political allies.

Apparently, we are dealing with a commercial endeavor: to reduce customs tariffs, facilitate all transactions, promote investments and guarantee property rights and contract sanctity. Tradition has shown that whenever a legal environment with those characteristics is created, relations multiply, production and productivity increase, prices drop, consumers benefit and a spontaneous and much more efficient assignment of resources occurs.

The political issue may be even more transcendental.

It is obvious that Latin America is entering a turbulent stage where two conflicting ways of organizing society come face to face: the reborn revolutionary and authoritarian populism advocated by the Cuba-Venezuela axis versus representative democracy, which is linked to the market and is eager to integrate into the First World's mechanisms of production and trade.

If DR-CAFTA is approved, the democratic trend will be strengthened. If the U.S. Congress rejects the pact, however, the forces of populism will get a dangerous pat on the back.

That would be playing with fire. A roiling, more impoverished Central America (including the Dominican Republic) would increase illegal immigration and drug trafficking flows into the United States. It also would foment political violence both in Mexico and Colombia, the two conflict-ridden borders that flank the Caribbean basin.

Is this assessment too pessimistic? No. Judging from the information published by the respected journalist Raymundo Riva Palacio in the Mexican daily *El Universal* on May 9, it's not just Colombians who have proven that Venezuelan weapons are flowing to communist narco-guerrillas.

Mexican intelligence also has discovered that part of the Venezuelan arsenal reached Mexican guerrillas in the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) with the complicity of "PRD cadres within the Federal District government." The PRD, or Democratic Revolution Party, is led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a candidate for the presidency of Mexico.

A swift review of contemporary history would show the United States that whenever Mexico and the

Caribbean Basin nations have entered convulsive stages, they have drawn Washington into the fight. Therefore, we can deduce that the best way to prevent that fatal attraction is for the U.S. to stimulate the consolidation of prosperous and stable neighbors with whom it can build a tranquil community of interests and ideals.

DR-CAFTA is just that. Or the germ of that. To shut the door to free trade is to invite the Devil to supper -- a reckless gambit.