

Colombian President Visits White House Days Before Trump Unveils New Budget - Now, Congress Reacts to Trump's Budget Cuts

Friday, May 26, 2017

U.S. President Donald Trump welcomed Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos to the White House on Thursday, May 18, to discuss strengthening bilateral relations, including efforts to combat illegal narcotics. Entering the final year of his presidency with strong political headwinds, President Santos brought attention to this growing partnership, including in trade, saying during their joint press conference, "The number of Colombian businesses that are exporting to the United States has grown. And we both believe that we can take greater advantage of those agreements in order to increase flows in both directions for the benefit both of the Colombian and American peoples."

President Santos' visit came just days before President Trump unveiled his Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 budget request calling for significant cuts to funding for the U.S. Department of State and other international agencies. The budget proposal called for \$250 million in support for Colombia, a marked cut as compared to the \$450 million President Obama pledged to help support Colombia's efforts to implement the government's peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia ("FARC").

However, as the adage goes, "the President proposes, and Congress disposes." While the President's budget provides detailed information on his policy priorities, Congress is responsible for passing appropriations bills to fund government programs.

Lawmakers from both parties were critical of President Trump's proposed cuts to foreign assistance programs. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State-Foreign Operations, called the cuts to diplomacy irresponsible and a gutting of "soft power." Senator Ben Cardin (D-Maryland), Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement: "Luckily, the majority of Members of Congress know this budget is dead on arrival." He added: "I look forward to working with my like-minded Republican colleagues to make sure nothing remotely close to this budget is enacted." Representative Ed Royce (R-California), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC), said he recognized the importance of reigning in spending, but added: "I don't support deep cuts to the State Department and [USAID] that undermine national security. Diplomacy matters." He further noted: "My priority has always been efficient, effective, and transparent programming. And there's no question improvements can be made. So I look forward to working with my colleagues in Congress, and the Administration, to ensure adequate funding for vital programs that advance U.S. interests and keep our country safe." Representative Eliot Engel (D-New York), HFAC Ranking Member, said the President's international affairs budget is an "embarrassment" that would "be a disaster for the United States at home and abroad." He suggested that the "Trump foreign policy sidelines diplomacy and development, threatening American leadership; risking American lives; and ceding ground to Russia, China, or whoever else wants to fill the void."

Lawmakers will hold hearings to plan FY 2018 spending priorities over the coming weeks.

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