

Peru's García touts free trade, sounds alarm on Chávez

Peruvian President Alvaro García defended free trade and criticized Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez during a visit to the United States.

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CHARLES DHARAPAK/AP

AN ALLY: President Bush, right, meets with Peruvian President Alan Garcia Tuesday in the Oval Office of the White House.

WASHINGTON - Once a furious critic of U.S. policies, Peruvian President Alan García brought his charismatic ways to Washington on Tuesday to meet with President Bush on a free-trade pact and attack Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez for sowing divisions in Latin America.

In a reversal for a man who during his recent presidential campaign said he wanted to review a free-trade agreement negotiated by his predecessor, García urged Bush at their White House meeting to lobby a reluctant U.S. Congress to pass the pact.

The Peruvians wanted Congress to vote on the agreement before it went into its summer recess, and are now pushing for approval during the lame-duck session after the Nov. 7 elections in what many analysts see as a tough vote.

The agreement cuts Peruvian tariffs on most U.S. exports to the Andean nation, but Democratic critics say its labor and environmental provisions are too weak.

Bush greeted García warmly and called him a "friend, somebody with whom we can have good working relations."

"I assured the president that I will work with Congress as soon as possible to get this agreement passed," Bush added.

During his brief one-day stay, García also met with Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Criticized by his foes as an opportunistic political chameleon, García nationalized banks and defaulted on foreign debt during his first presidential term 1985-1990. But this time, he defended globalization and free trade.

"We see the free-trade agreement as one of our tools in our fight against poverty," he said in the Oval Office, where the loquacious Peruvian went beyond the habitual few minutes leaders take to summarize their meetings with Bush.

García reiterated his pro-trade message at a gathering at the Institute for International Economics, a Washington think tank. "We're going to prove that trade can help the poor inside Peru," he said.

At times appearing as a thoughtful economist and at others an engaging politician, García opened his remarks by recounting how his motorcade had stopped to refuel at a Citgo station, whose gasoline is supplied by Venezuela.

"So much for a country that does not believe in free trade," he quipped, drawing laughs from the audience even before delivering his punch line: ``for others."

More seriously, he warned of a coming "Cold War" in Latin America fueled by Chávez, who he said was sowing divisions in the region and engineered an oil and gas nationalization in Bolivia so that the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, could gain more control of Bolivia's crucial natural-gas reserves.

He said the Bush administration ought to back the Camisea natural-gas project in Peru -- which is controversial for environmental reasons -- because this would help offset Venezuela's energy influence in the region.

Asked about his career's many twists, García noted that the world had changed since the 1980s. "The first norm for a politician," he noted, ``is realism."