

Retreat to Colombia: The Pentagon Adapts Its Latin America Strategy

By John Lindsay-Poland

WHEN THE U.S. MILITARY BASE IN THE PORT city of Manta, Ecuador, formally closed in mid-September, grassroots activists and government officials celebrated. Ecuador's foreign minister, Fänder Falconí, noted that the base closure marked a "moment of deep transformation and of Latin American vision."¹ The same week, Paraguayan president Fernando Lugo rejected a cooperation agreement with the U.S. military that would have brought 500 troops to his country's territory, and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) held its third high-level meeting in which most of the body's leaders criticized a soon-to-be-ratified accord allowing the United States to use military bases in Colombia.

The events reflected a dynamic and changing phenomenon. The Pentagon, responding to new political constraints—the harvest of decades of grassroots movements—is retreating in Latin America. The retreat is traced by the military's gradual withdrawal from bases in Panama (1999), Puerto Rico (2003), and now Ecuador; by the cancellation of maneuvers in Ecuador and Paraguay; and by the rise of governments seeking independence from Washington's hegemony. The number of places where the U.S. military can freely operate is shrinking in the region.

But the military's strategic vision has changed little. It has adapted to the new regional scenario by consolidating its assets in Colombia, still the Pentagon's primary strategic partner in Latin America. As the Ecuadorans celebrating the Manta closure put it, "the alligator left for Barranquilla," as the song "Se va el caimán" goes, in this case referring to the U.S. military moving to Colombia.

The new agreement, finalized October 30, permits the United States to use seven Colombian military bases—Apiay, Cartagena, Bahía de Málaga, Larandia, Malambo, Palanquero, and Tolomaidá—

as well as others on which the two countries may agree, for a wide array of missions. It does not limit the number of personnel deployed to Colombia (which is capped in U.S. legislation at 800 soldiers and 600 contractors, respectively) and confers diplomatic immunity on U.S. soldiers and civilian employees. It does not prohibit operations in other countries, but it does prohibit appeals to international entities in case of conflicts. It contains no provisions for the remediation of environmental damage stemming from military activity, requiring only that the United States to turn over installations "as is" at the end of the agreement.

Negotiations with Colombia began in the first half of 2008 and continued after President Obama took office. The talks built upon a long and intimate military-to-military relationship dating to the 1940s. Parts of the relationship, including aid packages like Plan Colombia and aerial monitoring operations, were formalized in earlier agreements, although none of them provided for the use of Colombian military facilities or diplomatic immunity for U.S. soldiers.² The United States already maintained a military presence on several bases in

Colombia, including four that are part of the new agreement—Apiay, Bahía de Málaga, Cartagena, and Tolomaidá—as well as Tres Esquinas and the naval base in Cartagena, on the Caribbean.

As soon as some of the base agreement's contents became known to the public in July, Latin American leaders began asserting that the plan would destabilize the region. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who has long warned of a U.S. invasion of his country, led the charge against the base agreement, declaring at the UNASUR meeting in September that "the winds of war are blowing" in South America. Bolivia's Evo Morales proposed banning all foreign troops in South America.

Despite the new regional scenario, the military's strategic vision has changed little.

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An agreement finalized in October grants the U.S. military access to seven bases in Colombia.

U.S. officials tried to quell any worries that the base agreement was meant for anything more than enhancing its ability to carry out already existing commitments in Colombia alone: fighting the War on Drugs and fighting Colombian insurgents. The agreement “does not envision any larger military presence” and only “formalizes what we’re already doing,” said Frank O. Mora, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Western Hemisphere, at a press conference in August. “There will be no offensive capacity from these bases whatsoever. There’s not going to be F-16s flying in or tanks or anything of the sort.”³ U.S. Ambassador William Brownfield called the agreement “a modernization of already existing agreements.”⁴

But military planning documents tell a different story. In its document justifying \$46 million for an upgrade to the Palanquero air base submitted in May, the U.S. Air Force asserted that “security and stability is under constant threat” in South America “from narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-US governments, endemic poverty and recurring

natural disasters.”⁵ To confront these challenges, the base would allow the military to “conduct full spectrum operations throughout South America” and expand its “expeditionary warfare capability.”⁶ An earlier Air Mobility Command paper identified Palanquero, about 60 miles northwest of Bogotá, as an ideal location partly because a C-17 airplane—a large transport craft used to deploy personnel and cargo—could cover “nearly half of the South American continent without refueling.” If fuel were available at its destination, the planners wrote, “a C-17 could cover the entire continent, with the exception of the Cape Horn region.”⁷

The military defined the threat to security and stability in South America so broadly—including everything from poverty and natural disasters to terrorists and “anti-US governments”—that it arrogated to itself a virtually unlimited mission. The military base pact is an empty vessel for whatever form that mission takes, providing the infrastructure for a U.S. military presence and deferring the content of its operations to later implementation agreements.

Thus, although the Pentagon’s Palanquero base upgrade budget statement explicitly plans for combat operations, the vessel can just as well be filled by “humanitarian assistance” operations. This is in fact likely, given that the base agreement occurs in the context of an overall militarization of U.S. foreign policy, with civilian functions increasingly in the hands of the Pentagon. Directive 3000.5, issued in 2005, authorizes the Pentagon to conduct a stunningly wide array of tasks in other countries in the name of “stability operations,” from building prisons and judicial institutions to building the private sector and infrastructure.⁸

In Latin America, the military’s entry into such civilian functions is facilitated by the role of the Southern Command (SouthCom), which is responsible for operations in Central and South America as an “inter-agency,” bringing together the functions of every branch of government. This means that the Defense Department both integrates and dominates a “whole of government” approach, if only because it has many more resources than the State Department and other agencies. In medical and humanitarian exercises in Guyana, Panama, and a dozen other Latin American countries, U.S.

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A U.S. infantry vehicle exits a C-17 Globemaster plane at Daegu Air Base, South Korea, in 2007. A plane like this one, used to deploy personnel and equipment, could cover almost half the South American continent without refueling from the Palanquero base in Colombia, according to an air force budget document.

soldiers provide onetime treatment to many thousands of patients, generating not only good press for U.S. soldiers, but also a sense of virtue to policy makers and officers.

U.S. AND COLOMBIAN OFFICIALS' CLAIMS THAT THE BASE agreement represents nothing more than a formalization of the status quo is a striking admission that the Obama administration's approach to Colombia rejects change, an important keyword from his campaign. There were signs of this contradiction during the 2008 campaign, when Obama explicitly endorsed the Colombian attack on an insurgent camp in Ecuadoran territory, thereby maintaining the Bush doctrine of preemptive, transnational attacks against groups the United States designates as terrorist.⁹ Moreover, the base agreement continues the logic of Plan Colombia, which puts military approaches at its center and altogether ignores the possibility of a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict. As senators Patrick Leahy (D.-Vt.) and Christopher Dodd (D.-Conn.) suggested in a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the agreement conflicts with "the U.S. interagency commitment . . . to gradually reduce U.S. military assistance to Colombia and 'nationalize' major elements of Plan Colombia."¹⁰

The base agreement also continues the project of transforming Colombia's role as a U.S. ally into that of regional spy. In terms of espionage, the Colombian state is perhaps best known for the recent scandals involving the Álvaro Uribe administration's illegal wiretapping and "offensive intelligence" against domestic political opponents, as well as journalists,

Supreme Court justices, and human rights organizations. Since 2006 the United States has assisted the 6th and 7th Regional Military Intelligence Units, which produced specious reports accusing human rights defenders, university professors, and community leaders of being members of the FARC. The U.S. Air Force budget document and base agreement call for furthering such intelligence collaboration.¹¹ But with sophisticated new U.S.-supplied platforms from which intelligence is shared in real time, Colombia can extend its espionage from its domestic civil society to its neighbors.

Two high-profile operations in 2008 highlighted the growing importance of U.S.-supplied high-tech intelligence to the Colombian military: the incursion into Ecuador, which may have been facilitated by satellite-phone wiretaps provided by the FBI and DEA, and Operation Jaque, the rescue mission that liberated FARC hostages, including Ingrid Betancourt, which was aided by U.S. spy satellites.¹² An outward-pointing intelligence apparatus at Palanquero would correspond to the recasting of national enemies in the discourse of Uribe and the Colombian media. Chávez and his allies have become the new FARC: evil, anti-Colombian, violent.

Meanwhile, some, including Chávez, have compared Colombia's role in U.S. Latin America policy to that of Israel in the Middle East. There are meaningful differences, but there is at least one important similarity: The ideology of American exceptionalism, which interprets U.S. foreign-policy motives as wholly benevolent, is extended to the United States' strategic allies, insulating U.S. relationships from any serious examination. There will be no discussion in Con-

gress of whether the widespread use of torture or the killing civilians with impunity disqualifies either Colombia or Israel from U.S. military assistance.

Despite the continuities embedded in the base agreement vis-à-vis Colombia, there are also important changes: The agreement gives the U.S. military the capacity to operate throughout the South American continent. It commits the United States to maintaining a military presence in Colombia for at least 10 years, rather than the previous annual budgeting cycle. And, perhaps most perversely, it envisions establishing a regional military-training center in Colombia, a country notorious for the human rights abuses of its security forces. The agreement calls for the two countries to “deepen their cooperation in areas such as . . . training and instruction . . . and combined exercises.”¹³ In a July letter to Colombian senators, Interior Minister Fabio Valencia noted that under the agreement, Colombia will “expand training offered to other countries in the region,” specifically mentioning helicopter-pilot instruction and training in “human rights and international humanitarian law.”¹⁴

Colombia is already drawing on its decades of irregular warfare to instruct other Latin American countries’ jungle commandos and naval forces. Valencia said Colombia will continue to offer “low-cost training of the same quality as that offered by countries such as the United States and United Kingdom.” The United States plays an important role in this. Twenty Colombian military units receiving U.S. assistance are training groups. More than 90% of U.S. training of Colombian troops already occurs in Colombia itself—and the United States trained more Colombians since 2003 than troops from the rest of Latin America combined.¹⁵

From the U.S. perspective, helping to turn Colombia into a military training center may serve in part as a contingency plan in case the School of the Americas (now known as WHINSEC) should close. The school remains the premier Spanish-language school for Latin American army officers, and Pentagon brass still lobby Congress to support the school, but the SOA Watch movement continues to powerfully demand its closure.

In November, after Congress approved the Palanquero funds and the base agreement was signed, the air force issued a revised budget justification for the bases, removing all references to “anti-US governments,” “full spectrum operations,” and “expeditionary warfare.”¹⁶ It is unclear whether the revision reflected a true change of intent by the Obama administration, reversing the Bush doctrine, or if it was a tactical response to the uproar created by the Pentagon having mistakenly broadcast its real intentions. Either way, the administration’s future use of the bases will be shaped by pressures brought to bear on it, from the Pen-

tagon to UNASUR, as well as from U.S. grassroots protests and Colombian challenges.

TELLINGLY, MUCH OF THE DISCOURSE WITHIN COLOMBIA about the base agreement doesn’t dwell on the U.S. military’s role in fighting drug trafficking. Rather, the increased U.S. presence is largely seen as a bulwark against Venezuela’s military, perceived as a powerhouse with unlimited petrodollars for weapons acquisitions. The location of most of the bases away from the Pacific—where operations from Manta were concentrated—appears to confirm this, as does Uribe’s claim, shortly after disclosing the base agreement, that Venezuela had supplied rocket launchers to the FARC. The U.S. presence will be more oriented toward the Caribbean and Venezuelan side of Colombia, instead of the south, where U.S. aid to date been concentrated.

However, although U.S. planning documents contemplate possible future combat operations, it would be a mistake to conclude that the bases immediately position the United States to conduct land incursions into Venezuela. Not only will a relatively small number of U.S. troops be present on the bases, but the United States suspended training in 2008 for Colombian army brigades in several oil-rich states bordering Venezuela.¹⁷ (The assisted brigades include the 30th, Norte de Santander; 18th, Arauca; and 16th, Casanare. The United States still approved the 5th Mobile Brigade in Arauca for assistance in 2009–10.) The brigades in Arauca and Casanare states had been beneficiaries of Washington’s pipeline-protection initiative, while the 30th Brigade in Catatumbo was implicated in the “false positives” scandal, in which the army abducted young civilian men, killed them, and claimed them as guerrilla casualties. A State Department official speaking on background said that the lack of aid to these brigades was an obstacle for addressing “our Venezuela problem.”

But the Colombian bases do form part of the Pentagon’s “comprehensive and integrated presence and basing strategy,” a long-term plan focused on establishing air base arrangements with “limited restrictions on U.S. freedom of action by partner nations.”¹⁸ Such an approach will provide the Defense Department with “an array of access arrangements for contingency operations, logistics, and training in Central/South America.”¹⁹ Lieutenant General Norman Seip, the outgoing commander of the 12th Air Force, which has responsibility for air operations in Latin America, told *Inside the Pentagon* that he supports establishing a series of small U.S. airfields throughout the region to conduct intelligence operations.²⁰ Such an arrangement is consistent with the plan to set up “lily pads,” or Cooperative Security Locations,

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as the Pentagon is doing in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Pacific, as an alternative to large, expensive, and politically vulnerable fixed bases. Part of the rationale of lily pads is that they provide the U.S. military the capacity to expand its presence on short notice, should a “contingency” arise requiring mobilization.

Some lily pads are civilian airports in nations where the Pentagon has negotiated landing and over-flight rights. It remains to be seen to what extent the Pentagon will obtain such arrangements in Latin America. Some countries are reportedly negotiating agreements to define what U.S. troops can and cannot do in their territories. These agreements may include lily pad arrangements for access and crisis response when Washington wants to intervene. But regional pressures against such arrangements could be strong, and UNASUR defense ministers also reportedly reached a consensus to disclose such agreements to each other.²¹

In short, the Pentagon seeks above all access, as described at length in an Air Mobility Command planning document in March.²² The military initiated talks with French Guiana—in part to facilitate refueling of heavy aircraft between the U.S. Atlantic Coast and Africa.²³ Meanwhile, a series of Latin American bases that predate the lily pad strategy remain in place. These include the notorious base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; the Soto Cano base in Honduras, which the administration apparently did not consider closing in light of the coup in that country; the Comalapa Air Base in El Salvador, unaffected by the left-wing FMLN’s rise to the presidency because, in addition to Funes’s pledge that he would not cancel the base agreement, it was renewed for another five years shortly before his inauguration; and the air force’s Forward Operating Locations at Reina Beatrix and Hato Rey in the Dutch-owned islands of Aruba and Curaçao, respectively, just off the Venezuelan coast.²⁴

Meanwhile the navy’s newly flagged Fourth Fleet has expanded joint exercises with Latin American navies and will reportedly have access to several naval bases on Panama’s coasts.²⁵ Despite the explicit prohibition on foreign troops in Panama’s 1977 Neutrality Treaty, a 2002 agreement allows the U.S. military to access the country’s ports and airports, and even to arrest Panamanians there.

THE INK ON THE BASE AGREEMENT WAS BARELY DRY before it caused tensions to flare again between Colombia and Venezuela. Chávez used the moment to urge military officers to “prepare for war.” Colombian leaders did not take the bait this time, but in the future could use the U.S. presence to escalate conflict with Venezuela or Ecuador,

knowing that Washington will back up Colombia. Besides the war of words and border tensions between Colombia and Venezuela, the base agreement also accelerates a nascent arms race in South America. Venezuela has purchased aircraft and tanks, in part, Venezuelan ambassador Bernardo Álvarez says, because of U.S. sanctions that prevent Venezuela from maintaining its fleet of F-16s.

“Colombians win with the base agreement because they don’t have to participate in the region’s arms race,” says former presidential adviser Armando Borrero.²⁶ But militarization in Colombia continues apace, with new Colombian bases, the growth of private-security companies, and the development of technology such as unmanned aerial vehicles.²⁷ In Obama’s first 10 months, moreover, the absence of an assistant secretary of state for Latin America gave the lead by default to the Pentagon in negotiating the base agreement and in responding to the Honduran coup. In

fact, the Democratic Congress elected in 2006 enacted more progressive change in Colombia policy than any introduced by the Obama team, when it shifted about 30% of overall assistance to Colombia from military to non-military programs, and changed the rules for passage of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. (Military aid was reduced by \$181 million in 2007, while non-military increased by \$102 million. Non-military aid must be examined closely, however, because much of it is under military control and used in the “Democratic Security Consolidation” policy.)

A handful of members of Congress in both the House and Senate have objected to the base deal. In the House, a September 15 letter from 16 representatives highlighted the failures of Plan Colombia, especially the drug war, while senators Dodd and Leahy, in their letter to Clinton, asked how the base agreement would affect the Colombian military’s political will to address civilian killings. They also sharply criticized the Obama administration’s failure to consult Congress or Colombia’s neighbors in negotiating the agreement.

Congressional Democrats have furthermore proposed establishing the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission to review the policy and its efficacy.²⁸ But with the base agreement already in place, the commission’s conclusions will not reshape this key piece of infrastructure for U.S. drug policy in the Andes. Nonetheless, it and other congressional initiatives could serve to put SouthCom on a short leash. To prevent the bases being used to tragic ends, leaders and grassroots activists from throughout the hemisphere will need to persist in making the bases’ harms visible, and in vigorously opposing them. **□**

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'A New Chapter of Engagement'

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