

Behind Negroponte's trip to Latin America

Mounting crisis in Yankee imperialism's 'back yard'

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The week-long trip to Latin America by US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte signals a turn by the Bush administration to addressing the mounting challenges facing American imperialism in a region where its dominance was once unchallenged.

From May 7 to 12, Negroponte visited Panama and three Andean republics—Colombia, Ecuador and Peru—for talks on issues ranging from trade and aid to US military operations in the region, one of the keystones of US security strategy.

A top foreign policy troubleshooter for the US government for more than three decades, Negroponte is very familiar with Central America and northwestern South America. He was US ambassador to Honduras during the Reagan administration, a period when the US organized, financed and armed the contra terrorists attacking Nicaragua's Sandinista-led government, mainly from bases across the border in Honduras. He had left the region by the time of the 1989 US invasion of Panama during the first Bush administration, but was undoubtedly involved in internal State Department discussions on the subject.

During the second Bush administration, Negroponte has been, in succession, US ambassador to the United Nations, US ambassador to Iraq and Director of National Intelligence, overseeing the entire US apparatus of intelligence gathering and covert action. During the period, Colombia has been the Latin American country given the most attention by US security agencies. Colombia is the fourth largest foreign recipient of US military aid, following only Iraq, Egypt and Israel.

The right-wing, US-backed regime in Bogota is waging a brutal counterinsurgency war against the peasant-based FARC guerrillas, and is caught in a major crisis sparked by new evidence of the close ties between right-wing death squads and President Alvaro Uribe. Hundreds of US military "advisors" work with the Colombian military's anti-guerrilla operations. The US also operates its only Latin American base at Manta, on the Pacific coast of Ecuador, less than 100 miles from the Colombian border, from which US spy planes overfly the combat zone in Colombia and the nearby jungle territories in Brazil and Ecuador.

US imperialism has two major concerns in the region: maintaining security of the Panama Canal, one of the most vital strategic chokepoints in world trade; and securing US access to local oil resources. Venezuela, at the northern end of the Andean chain, is the largest supplier of US oil imports, and both Colombia and Ecuador have significant oilfields, operated by American companies. The Andean countries also have significant mineral resources, including gold in Ecuador and copper and silver in Peru.

In an effort to forestall inroads by European competitors, China and Japan, US administrations, beginning with Clinton and continuing with Bush, have sought to tie the countries of the region closer to the US economically by means of "free trade agreements." As US job losses mount due to surging imports, winning congressional approval for such pacts has become increasingly difficult.

While his meetings in Panama and Peru were largely celebratory—congressional Democrats reached agreement last week with the Bush administration on approving the treaties with both countries—Negroponte's talks in Bogota took place under conditions of considerable crisis. The trade agreement with Colombia has been held up because of criticism of the human rights record of the Uribe regime and congressional demands for information on the connections between Uribe and the death squads.

The Clinton administration initiated Plan Colombia, under which the Colombian military and its death squad apparatus have been built up through a huge infusion of US aid and training, and this effort has been continued and expanded under the Bush administration. Both big business parties in the US are deeply implicated in the crimes committed by the Colombian regime, which has massacred peasants and assassinated union leaders on a scale unmatched by any government in the world in the past decade.

At a public appearance in Bogota, Negroponte praised supposed progress in restoring security and law and order and disarming paramilitaries. He particularly cited the increased extradition of drug traffickers to the United States since Uribe came into office, a practice that underscores the weakness and crisis of the Colombian state, since it is unable to enforce its own anti-drug laws and essentially contracts out the punishment to the American authorities.

Ecuador, the fourth country on Negroponte's itinerary, is viewed in Washington as a potentially even more serious problem. Its economy has been completely subordinated to the United States, to the point that a right-wing US-backed regime adopted the American dollar as the national currency in January 2000. But last December a left-talking bourgeois nationalist, Rafael Correa, won the presidential election, in part because of sharp verbal attacks on US domination of the country.

Correa has sought to take advantage of the conflict between the United States and the left-nationalist regime of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, aligning himself with Chavez in certain areas in order to give his government more room to maneuver. A US-trained economics PhD who served as economy minister in the caretaker government of interim president Alfonso Palacio in 2005, Correa

defeated billionaire banana baron Gustavo Noboa in the presidential runoff, making an appeal to the social and economic grievances of the working class and peasantry, particularly the oppressed Indian population of the highlands.

Since taking office in January, Correa has announced that he will not renew the agreement on US basing rights at Manta when it expires in 2009. Last month he called for the scrapping of a bilateral treaty on investments which has been used by US-based multinationals, particularly Occidental Petroleum, as a club against Ecuadorian efforts to take control of the country's oil resources. He has also indicated interest in rejoining the oil exporters' group OPEC, and last week expelled the regional representative of the World Bank for actions undermining Ecuadorian sovereignty.

At the same time, Correa has sought to keep any conflict with Washington within definite limits. He has not suggested abrogating the Manta basing treaty early, and he asked Negroponte, in their meeting May 9, to support extension of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA), which provides special trade and aid benefits for countries cooperating with the US-led "war on drugs."

Correa has been preoccupied with a power struggle with the old right-wing parties which dominate the Ecuadorian Congress, and which have frequently intervened, with or without constitutional sanction, to remove presidents from office. Ecuador has had eight presidents in the past 10 years, and none of them served out their constitutional four-year term.

In an effort to curb the powers of the right-wing establishment, Correa called for a constitutional convention that would rewrite the country's basic law and strengthen the powers of the executive against the legislature. This led to a month of political tension in Quito and Guayaquil, Ecuador's two largest cities, as pro- and anti-Correa legislators and demonstrators clashed repeatedly.

Even the judiciary was divided along factional lines, with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal acceding to Correa's demand for an April 15 referendum on calling a constitutional convention, while the Constitutional Tribunal, a higher court, initially sided with Correa's opponents in Congress. The congressional majority voted to remove the electoral judges, who retaliated by ordering 57 members of Congress, more than half, to be sacked.

The conflict was ultimately settled in Correa's favor, as the Constitutional Tribunal upheld the firing of congressmen, and the April 15 referendum produced a majority of more than 80 percent for the constitutional convention. The election of members of the constitutional convention is now set for August.

While the Bush administration's sympathies are clearly with the right-wing parties, Negroponte was careful, in his visit to Quito, to conciliate Correa and characterize the political turmoil in Ecuador as a manifestation of vigorous democracy. The State Department has clearly decided that Correa should be wooed at this stage, rather than demonized a la Chavez, at least until a more credible domestic opposition can be mobilized against him.

At a press conference in Quito, Negroponte recalled his service as a political counselor in Ecuador from 1973 to 1975 (a position frequently filled by the CIA station chief, working under diplomatic cover). He conceded that the Ecuadorian government had the sovereign right to make its own decision about the Manta airbase, although he claimed that the US base was "helping to protect the sovereignty of Ecuador, which is violated by these drug traffickers."

He declared his support for renewal of ATPDEA, which expires

June 30, and declined to criticize or even comment on Correa's rhetoric about "the socialism of the twenty-first century," saying, "with regard to the particular political orientation or social orientation, or economic philosophy, these are questions that have to be decided by the people and the government of Ecuador. This is not something that we have a view on." Behind the scenes, however, there is clear pressure for a tradeoff involving some extension of basing rights at Manta in return for renewal of ATPDEA.

The underlying tensions between the new Correa government and Washington are evident. Last week Correa announced his support for a Venezuelan-financed "Bank of the South" to provide loans to countries which reject US policy dictates imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. And just before Negroponte's arrival in the country, the US Southern Command abruptly shifted a regional naval exercise from Ecuador to Florida because of a dispute over the country's claims to a 200-mile maritime boundary. The US recognizes only a 12-mile limit. The annual exercise includes ships from Peru, Colombia, Chile, Panama and the US, and would have taken place in the Pacific Ocean between Ecuador and its offshore Galapagos Islands.

Correa has sought to walk a fine line, balancing between expectations of radical change on the part of the poorer sections of the population—workers, peasants, Indians—who brought him to power in last December's presidential vote, and the interests of the financial and landed oligarchy, backed by Washington and the big multinational companies, which dominate the Ecuadorian economy. He has engaged in populist gestures like an announcement in March suspending interest payments on government debts and ordering the money delivered to public hospitals instead, to expand medical services, in keeping with an election campaign pledge to put "life before debt." But he has not repudiated the debt or sought to halt payments of principal.

In the face of any direct challenge from below, Correa has shown himself more than willing to protect the economic and financial interests of ruling class and of the multinationals. The day after Correa's meeting with Negroponte, the Ecuadorian energy minister announced an agreement between the departments of energy and defense and the state-owned oil company Petroecuador to reinforce security at the company's facilities in the Amazon region, where most of Ecuador's oil is found. The minister, Jorge Alban, said the purpose of the agreement was "putting a stop to certain Amazonian communities' practice of forcibly taking over wells and halting production to demand social projects."

Military personnel will have the right to detain anyone attempting to attack oil facilities or disrupt production, and hold them for prosecution. Petroecuador has reported more than two dozen separate oil spills this year, most of them caused by local residents. Correa himself declared, "Anarchy must end in this country and the principle of authority must be respected."



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