

US Navy resurrects Fourth Fleet to police Latin America

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Washington announced at the end of last month that it is resurrecting the long-ago moth-balled Fourth Fleet to reassert US power in the Caribbean and Latin America. Created at the time of World War II to combat German submarines attacking merchant shipping convoys in the South Atlantic, the Fourth Fleet was seen as no longer necessary after the Second World War and was disbanded in 1950.

The Pentagon's a statement on the revival of the fleet gave a far vaguer indication of its new duties, saying it would "conduct varying missions including a range of contingency operations, counter narco-terrorism, and theater security cooperation activities."

"Rear Admiral James Stevenson, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command, said the re-establishment of the Fourth Fleet will send a message to the entire region, not just Venezuela," AHN news reported.

The "message" began to be transmitted just weeks after Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia came into sharp conflict over a border provocation caused by the Colombian military's bombardment of an encampment of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas inside Ecuadorian territory.

The Fourth Fleet will begin operations on the first day of July out of the Mayport US Naval Station, a nuclear facility in the state of Florida. The fleet, which will operate as part of the Pentagon's Southern Command, will be comprised of various ships, including aircraft carriers and submarines, and will operate from the Caribbean to the southern tip of South America.

While the new naval unit does not yet possess large numbers of arms and personnel, it will be equipped and granted similar importance as the Fifth Fleet, now deployed in the Persian Gulf, and the Sixth, operating in the Mediterranean.

The thrust of this decision is to give the US Navy a far

broader role than it currently plays in Latin America. While Washington can point to no imminent military threat in the region, the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet has a powerful symbolic significance, indicating a return to gunboat diplomacy.

It is a demonstration of US intentions to maintain absolute military dominance over the region, and in particular over those countries with large reserves of petroleum and natural gas, including those that are governed by supposed enemies of Washington, like the governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia.

The central objective of the Fourth Fleet will be to further the military and political "security and stability" of the region, according to the commander of naval forces for US Southern Command, Vice Admiral James Stevenson. The fleet will "certainly bring a lot more stature to the area and increase our ability to get things done," Stevenson told reporters.

"This change increases our emphasis in the region on employing naval forces to build confidence and trust among nations through collective maritime security efforts that focus on common threats and mutual interests," said Admiral Gary Roughead, chief of naval operations.

According to the official statement issued by the Pentagon, the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet "demonstrates US commitment to regional partners," among which Colombia stands out, given the billions of dollars of US aid granted its right-wing government to conduct the so-called "war on drugs" as well as its counterinsurgency campaign against the FARC, an organization that the US classifies as "terrorist," on the same level as Al-Qaeda.

Significantly, the officer tapped to head the new fleet is Rear Admiral Joseph Kernan, the current commander of the Naval Special Warfare Command, which includes

counterinsurgency units like the Navy SEALs, which are utilized in the so-called war on terror.

The Navy distributed a press release in which it enumerated more specific and immediate objectives for the resurrected fleet, including “acting together with the navies of allied nations on bilateral and multilateral training operations and operations against narco-trafficking originating in the region.”

According to the Pentagon, in recent years the Colombian drug cartels have gone so far as to utilize secretly built submarines to get their product to foreign markets.

But it is not merely the drug cartels that are in the Pentagon’s sights. The Venezuelan navy is also a potential target. In June of last year, President Chavez signed an agreement with Moscow to acquire nine Russian submarines at a price which is estimated at between one and two billion dollars. According to the Pentagon, the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet is also justified by this change in the correlation of forces in the region.

To lend this expansion of military power in the region a veneer of legitimacy in international circles, the Pentagon needs to promote the pretext that the Colombian FARC or the crisis-ridden government of Hugo Chavez represent a similar danger to the world and “democracy” as that which Washington has attributed to Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups in the Middle East.

As far as democracy goes, a far greater danger is posed by Washington’s closest ally, the government of Colombian President Álvaro Uribe, who is personally implicated in the operations of drug traffickers and right-wing paramilitary death squads which, with CIA and US military training, have specialized in the killing of trade unionists, peasants and university students.

The drive by the Pentagon to expand its military control over Latin America is not new. For a number of years, it has sought to establish new military bases in the region. The presence of drug trafficking - which has continued unabated despite the decades-old “war on drugs” - and Hugo Chávez and his “arms race” represent only most convenient pretexts for promoting this expansion.

The US appears likely to lose its only permanent military base in South America - located in Ecuador’s port city of Manta - when the Pentagon’s lease on the air force facility expires in November of next year. Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa has vowed not to renew it, while the country’s constituent assembly is drafting a new constitution that is to include a prohibition

against any foreign bases on Ecuadorian soil.

In the meantime, the American military is searching for other possible bases, including in Paraguay. “We’re always looking for opportunities for what I call lily pads — places we can go in for a week or two and then get out,” Lt. Gen. Norman Seip, commander of US Air Forces Southern Command told the US military newspaper *Stars and Stripe*. “It increases our presence, and makes us more unpredictable in operations.”

Reestablishing the Fourth Fleet, with its aircraft carriers as well as US Marine and Navy Seal contingents, provides a floating base for US interventions throughout the continent.

Behind the resurrection of the Fourth Fleet lie the same fundamental tendencies underlying the explosion of American militarism on a world scale. It is the attempt by US imperialism to offset its relative decline as an economic power by reliance on its continuing military supremacy. Europe and increasingly China are playing a growing role in Latin American trade and investment at the expense of US interests.

Trade between Latin America and China topped \$100 billion last year, a 46 percent increase over 2006. Meanwhile, the European Union, which is second only to the US in terms of Latin American trade and foreign investment, is increasingly outstripping Washington in the negotiation of free trade agreements on the continent. Today, the US accounts for less than 20 percent of the exports from Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Peru.

The one area where US imperialism can still demonstrate unquestioned superiority against its economic rivals is in the deployment of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and submarines, which is just what it is now preparing to do off the coasts of Latin America.



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