US military base plan fuels Latin American tensions

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5 August 2009

A plan unveiled by the US and Colombia to open up more Colombian bases for use by the US military has fueled growing tensions throughout Latin America.

Originally announced as a pact covering four bases, it was revealed Tuesday that US Army, Air Force and Navy forces would be granted access to a total of seven installations scattered across Colombia for a period of at least ten years.

The largest of these facilities is Palenquero Air Base, located north of the Colombian capital of Bogota. It is reportedly suitable for the landing of large troop and equipment carrying planes. Another is the air base in Malambo, near the Caribbean city of Barranquilla, not far from the Venezuelan border. The US Navy is being given access to two bases, one in the Caribbean port city of Cartagena and another in Bahia Malaga on the Pacific Coast. Another of the bases is in the southern city of Florencia, near the border with Ecuador.

Reports of the bases agreement-apparently hammered out between US President Barack Obama and Colombia's Alvaro Uribe during a White House visit at the end of June-have provoked protests and statements of concern from a number of Latin American countries.

Washington and Bogota have cast the agreement as a response to the shutdown of the US air base in Manta, Ecuador by the government of President Rafael Correa. That facility was ostensibly dedicated to anti-drug trafficking operations. The scope of the US-Colombian pact and both the number and location of the bases involved, however, indicate that Washington is pursuing far wider regional objectives.

The Bogota daily *El Tiempo*, pointed out, "The absence of an airfield close to the Pacific, through which the principal drug-trafficking routes pass is noteworthy." The Manta base was on the Pacific coast of Ecuador.

The US military already operates out of nine military bases in Colombia, with hundreds of US military personnel and military contractors providing aid to the Colombian military, which has fought a protracted war against the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla movement that has claimed the lives of some 40,000 people and displaced 2.5 million. Under Plan Colombia, initiated in 2000, the last year of the Clinton administration, Washington has poured approximately $5 billion in military aid into Colombia, making it by far the largest recipient of such assistance in the hemisphere.

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez charged that the bases were being set up to attack Venezuela. "They are encircling us with bases," he said last week.

Chavez, known for his sharp rhetoric against Washington, was by no means alone, however.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said that he would ask Obama directly about US motives for securing the new bases. "A new [US] base in Colombia does not make me happy," Lula said during a meeting last week in Brasilia with Chilean President Michelle Bachelet.

Returning to the subject later in the week, Lula expressed concern that the Colombian bases could be linked to the deployment of the Fourth Fleet (reactivated last year after half a century in mothballs to patrol Central and South American waters) "on top of" major new oil reserves recently discovered off Brazil's coast. Brazil has also expressed concern that military bases in the region could pose a threat to the Amazon, which because of its untapped resources is seen by the Brazilian government and ruling elite as a strategic question.

For her part, Bachelet described the base plan as "disquieting." To discuss the issue, the two agreed to convene a meeting of the South American Defense Council, an agency of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which was formed to promote Latin American integration, bringing together the Mercosur and Andean Community trading blocs, together with Mexico and several other countries.

Colombian President Uribe, however, announced that he would skip the UNASUR meeting, instead embarking on a Latin American tour aimed at meeting with the heads of state of virtually all of the union's heads of state except for Ecuador's Correa and Venezuela's Chavez, the two sharpest critics of the US-Colombian pact. A spokesman for the Colombian government said that Uribe intended to discuss the issue of "terrorism" in his country.

The pact also came under fire from Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim and his Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos.

The daily *Folha de Sao Paulo* quoted Amorim as saying that

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the Brazilian government is concerned that the base agreement appeared to involve US objectives reaching far beyond the internal situation in Colombia. He declined to comment on whether the agreement contradicted Obama's promises of non-intervention and demilitarization of US-Latin American relations made during the US election campaign.

Amorim made clear that the agreement was reached without any consultation with Brazil and said that "more transparency" was required. He pointed to the apparent contradiction between Colombia's frequent claims that the FARC guerrilla movement has been crushed and invoking it as a threat justifying a major increase in the US military presence in the country.

The Spanish foreign minister commented, "We must avoid militarism in Latin America. This is not the best response to regional problems."

The Obama administration dispatched US national security advisor Gen. Jim Jones to Brasilia for discussion on the bases agreement with Amorim and Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim.

Among the questions that the Brazilian officials were expected to pose to Jones was the significance of a US Air Force document issued in April that identifies the air base at Palenquero as part of a broader US strategy for extending American military power throughout the hemisphere.

The document, issued by the Air Mobility Command, notes: "Until recently, security concerns in South America have focused on the counter-narcotics mission. That mission has not required the use of strategic airlift in its prosecution. Recently, USSOUTHCOM has become interested in establishing a location on the South American continent that could be used ... as a location from which mobility operations could be executed."

It goes on to state that the Palenquero base had been identified for this purpose. "From this location, nearly half of the continent can be covered by a C-17 without refueling. Should suitable fuel be available at the destination, a C-17 could cover the entire continent, with the exception of the Cape Horn region in Chile and Argentina."

Moreover, as Gary Leech of *Colombia Journal* noted recently, under the Obama administration the composition of US military aid extended under Plan Colombia is changing sharply, indicating an escalation rather than a turn away from US militarism.

While the proposed aid package for 2010 represents a slight decrease ($518 million compared to $545 billion) from the amount extended by the Bush administration, the share that is being directed to the Colombian military has increased by 30 percent, while that destined for counter-narcotics and police units has been cut back by 13 percent.

Leech also notes that, while the US forces operating out of the Manta base in Ecuador were formally barred from aiding the Colombian military in its civil war against the FARC, there will be no such restrictions for US planes flying out of the new Colombian air bases.

"The Obama administration's aid package indicates that the new government in Washington is not only continuing the militaristic policies of the Bush administration in Colombia, but actually intensifying them," Leech concludes.

Accompanying the mounting controversy over the US base agreement with Colombia has been a geyser of mud from the right-wing Uribe government in Bogota. It has accused Ecuador's President Correa of accepting campaign contributions from the FARC and charged the Chavez government in Venezuela with giving arms to the Colombian guerrillas, pointing to the alleged discovery of decade-old Swedish missiles-originally sold to Venezuela-in an overrun FARC encampment.

In response, the Chavez government withdrew its ambassador from Colombia and has threatened to freeze trade between the two countries. Ecuador broke off relations with Bogota in March of last year after the Colombian military-aided by the Pentagon-carried out a cross-border raid against FARC forces that had taken refuge in Ecuador, killing 24 people, including the group's second-in-command, Raul Reyes, who was in the midst of negotiating a hostage release.

The *New York Times* fueled the Colombian campaign against Venezuela this week with an article by Simon Romero that included unsubstantiated assertions that Venezuelan officials had supplied arms and other aid to the FARC. The paper acknowledged that the story was based entirely on "material from an intelligence agency", presumably the CIA.

Clearly, the concern within ruling circles in Brazil as well as in Europe, China and other Latin American countries is that US imperialism is preparing to utilize its residual military might to offset its dramatic decline in influence and economic weight throughout Latin America. The Brazilian bourgeoisie, which has increasingly utilized its growing economic power to assert a hegemonic role in South America, has responded sharply because it sees its position and profit interests being threatened.

The escalation of the US military presence in Colombia combined with Washington's role in the June 28 right-wing military coup in Honduras both make clear that, behind Obama's rhetoric about "equal partnership" and "mutual respect", US imperialism is prepared to utilize the traditional methods of military aggression and counterrevolutionary violence to avoid ceding dominance in a region it has long regarded as its "own backyard".

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