

# Vice President Pence visits Latin America amid deepening Venezuelan crisis

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Amid deepening political crises in Venezuela and Washington, US Vice President Michael Pence traveled to South America last week to make clear that the Trump administration is not ruling out the use of military force in the region. His public statements were directed at a reassertion of the Monroe Doctrine in defense of US hegemony in the hemisphere and worldwide against social opposition and the growing influence of extra-continental powers, chiefly China and Russia.

He made his first stop in Colombia on August 13, just two days after Trump threatened to resort to a “military option” against the Maduro government in neighboring Venezuela. In response to the nearly unanimous opposition to a military intervention among Latin American leaders, Pence mentioned that a “peaceable” solution is preferred. “I’m here to build an unprecedented alliance to isolate Venezuela”, he stated but insisted that “all options are on the table”.

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) government has responded to US threats and sanctions by concentrating powers in its new constituent assembly. Last Friday, this PSUV-controlled body officially sidelined the US-backed opposition by granting itself full legislative powers.

Even more than a US intervention, the PSUV’s top concern is the prospect of social upheavals and an independent movement of the working class. In response, the constituent assembly has formed a “truth commission” to investigate and prosecute all opposition under the vague target of “expressions of hate and intolerance”.

Pence’s declarations in South America constitute a grave warning. Just as US threats of nuclear annihilation against the North Korean people have demonstrated that Washington will not be constrained by previous norms in pursuit of its interests, it will not be dissuaded by opposition among Latin American governments to a

“military option” if it sees no other way to install a regime fully submissive to the US and hostile to Chinese and Russian capital.

Last Thursday, Pence visited Panama, which broke diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of China earlier this year. Pence compared Trump’s “vision, energy, and can-do spirit” to those of Theodore Roosevelt, pledging to “rekindle the vision of our forebears... across the hemisphere.”

Pence’s message is that the US ruling class aims include not only challenging the growing trade and investments of its major rivals in Latin America, but also tightening Washington’s stranglehold and intensifying the US exploitation of the region’s workforce and resources.

During the dawn of the 20th century and of US imperialism, Roosevelt insisted that to secure its place as a global power, the US had to actively reaffirm the Monroe Doctrine by sweeping away any European control over Latin America and quelling all political and social opposition to the semi-colonial exploitation of the region by US capital. From 1901 to 1909, the Roosevelt administration oversaw Marine interventions in Panama, around the building of the Canal, as well as in Cuba, Honduras, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, inaugurating a century of bloody US imperialist repression.

In announcing his trip to South America at the Wilson Center on June 22, Pence placed it within the framework of US efforts to tighten its military and economic grip over Latin America as part of an expansion of the Obama-era Alliance for Prosperity of the Northern Triangle. “As we see widening asymmetrical threats developing around the world, we would do well to see to Central and South America,” he stated.

Pence outlined the deliberate steps the US will pursue as part of this “pivot to Latin America”. Speaking in Panama, he said the Trump administration hopes to

“unleash” the true potential of US-Latin America economic relations, indicating that already, “countries across this hemisphere are enacting bold reforms to unshackle their economies”.

This theme was expressed more fully during the US vice president’s visit to Argentina on Tuesday. Pence applauded right-wing president Mauricio Macri’s “bold reform agenda” of cutting social spending, violently attacking jobs, and feeding the most rapacious financial parasitism with high-interest bonds as “an inspiration across the wider world”.

Macri’s next big step is to push through a labor “reform” like that of Brazil, which attacks basic rights like collective agreements and even the 8-hour day. The influential US think tank Stratfor approvingly reported in an article last week that, the Brazilian law, “in the short term, will force Mercosur members [Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay] to try to implement similar proposals...”

In return for enforcing this race-to-the-bottom against workers’ social conditions across the region, Pence promised that “America first does not mean America alone”. Using this phrase selectively—so far, only when visiting US allies in Eastern Europe last month and in Latin America—he is calling on its partners to join the US campaign against its economic and military rivals.

On Wednesday in Chile, a day after Donald Trump expressed his support for the “fine people” among the white supremacist and Nazi demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia, Pence was asked whether he agreed with Trump’s comments. After a few uncomfortable seconds in silence and some insincere remarks about the “tragedy”, he stated: “I stand with the President, and I stand by those words.”

During its seven months in office, the Trump administration has greatly escalated the offensive against the democratic and social rights of workers across the continent and internationally, and has been facing growing social opposition everywhere. Pence’s unapologetic support for Trump in Chile and the lack of any criticism from regional leaders to Trump’s efforts to cultivate a fascist movement in the US demonstrate that plans are already underway to violently suppress workers who stand up for their social interests across the Americas.

Behind this protracted offensive, the US financial and corporate aristocracy demands further attacks against wages and jobs, social cuts to health care and education, mass roundups of immigrants and the militarization of

borders and cities all over the region. Moreover, the foreign policy and military establishment as a whole are encouraging a more assertive turn to Latin America.

The director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Moises Rendon, applauded Pence’s trip to South America in an article Thursday. He suggested that, in order to militarily intervene in Venezuela, Washington should employ the same pretext used for the murderous regime-change operations in Iraq, Syria and Libya: “the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”, referring to Venezuela’s supposed “willingness to engage in arms trade and nuclear cooperation with countries that do not align with US interests.”

As in the Middle East, such a war in Venezuela would exponentially deepen the social devastation and immigration crisis within the country and across the entire region. Nonetheless, the CSIS insists that Pence and the administration keep their eyes on the prize: “[T]he broader strategic threat to US interests from an anti-American Venezuela with the world’s largest proven oil reserves (25 percent of global reserves) cannot be ignored.”

Trump’s appointment as his chief of staff of former Marine general John Kelly, Obama’s head of the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), which oversees military operations in Central and South America, demonstrates that the White House agenda of domestic social reaction and militarization will be closely integrated with similar policies throughout the hemisphere.

Trump’s former director for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Craig Deare, who was fired reportedly due to conflicts with Stephen Bannon, argues in his recent book *Charting a Course* that hemispheric policy should aim towards this integration. He quotes former SOUTHCOM and NATO commander, Admiral James Stavridis, to explain what this means: “merge SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM into a single Americas Command. The artificial division of Mexico from SOUTHCOM hurts our unified purpose throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.”



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