Pentagon chief promotes anti-China agenda in Latin America

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US Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis wound up his first official visit to Latin America in Colombia and headed back to Washington on Friday, having used the four-nation tour to warn against growing Chinese influence in the region and press for closer ties between the US and Latin American military commands.

Three of nations chosen for the tour—Brazil, Argentina and Chile—have all seen changes of government that have brought in increasingly right-wing regimes more amendable to developing their collaboration with the Pentagon. All three were also ruled 40 years ago by fascist-military dictatorships backed by the Pentagon and the CIA that murdered, tortured and imprisoned hundreds of thousands of workers, students and others perceived as hostile to military rule.

The fourth and final stop on Mattis' tour was Colombia, long Washington's closest military ally in the region.

Mattis' visit comes less than two months after a similar trip to Latin America by Vice President Mike Pence. Like Pence, the Pentagon chief made threatening noises about "restoring democracy" to Venezuela, while claiming that this was not a "military question" and would best be left under the leadership of Brazil. This, despite a recent report by the Associated Press establishing that President Donald Trump repeatedly pressed his aides over why Washington could not invade Venezuela, as it did Grenada in 1983.

The central focus of Mattis' discussions—and of Washington's overall geostrategic objectives in the lands south of its border—was China.

US imperialism, which long referred to the region contemptuously as its "own backyard," has faced mounting challenges from Beijing to its historic regional hegemony.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has pledged to invest $250 billion directly into the region and generate $500 billion in trade between 2015 and 2019; it has already surpassed the US as the largest trading partner in two of the countries visited by Mattis, Brazil and Chile, as well as Peru.

Since 2005, lending from Chinese state-run banks to Latin America has exceeded the combined loans provided by the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the Corporacion Andina de Fomento (CAF), a Latin American development bank, reaching more than US$20 billion in 2015 and 2016.

While the US remains the largest source of Latin America's FDI (foreign direct investment), its share fell to 20 percent in 2016 from 25.7 percent in 2015, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile, China's has steadily risen over the past decade, increasing by US$70 billion since 2012. While US FDI is dominated by finance capital seeking super profits through emerging market investments, China's investment in infrastructure has vastly outstripped that of the US.

Mattis spelled out the purpose of his trip even before setting foot on Latin American soil. "There's more than one way to lose sovereignty in this world; it's not just by bayonets," he told reporters on the way down. "It can also be by countries that come in bearings gifts and large loans" that pile up "massive debt on countries, knowing they will not be able to repay it, or large projects where people don't get the jobs for them. Other countries bring in their own workers."

The reference to countries "bearings gifts and large loans" was clearly to China.

Mattis met with Brazil's defense minister, Gen. Joaquim Silva e Luna, on Monday for discussions that included the subjects of China and Venezuela, as well

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as proposals for the US to secure use of Brazil's Alcantara satellite launching center on the country's northern Atlantic coast, in the state of Maranhão. The location, just two degrees from the equator, provides significant advantage for launches.

In a speech delivered the next day to Brazilian officers at the country's war college, Mattis explicitly linked US interest in the site to Washington's preparation for war in space. He pointed to a more than decade-old incident in which China used a missile to destroy one of its own satellites in space.

"We understand the message China was sending, that they could take out a satellite in space," the defense secretary told his audience. "We don't intend to militarize space. However, we will defend ourselves in space, if necessary."

He went on to claim that the Pentagon wanted to make use of the Alcantara base "not because it lies along the equator, a happy accident of geography, but because we want to work with Brazilians - our hemispheric neighbors whose values we share politically, as well as your technological orientation."

To what political "values" was Mattis referring? Certainly they have nothing to do with democracy. The Brazilian regime of President Michel Temer, brought to power through the impeachment of his predecessor Dilma Rousseff on trumped up charges of budget mismanagement, is riddled with corruption and enjoys virtually no popular support. On the other side stands the administration of Donald Trump, who increasingly speaks for a faction of the financial oligarchy that wants to encourage the growth of a fascistic movement to confront the working class.

In reality, Mattis' appeal was predicated on Washington's calculation that it can leverage its military superiority and the cultivation of militarism within Latin America itself to counter the influence of China, as well as Russia, in the region.

The Pentagon chief's visit has come amid the growing influence of the military in political life in the region. In Brazil, the military has taken over domestic policing in Rio de Janeiro, while top generals have issued thinly veiled threats of military intervention in response to the crisis and corruption of the civilian government.

Similarly, in Argentina, the right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri recently issued a decree mandating the employment of the military in domestic policing, a highly controversial move in a country where the armed forces exercised dictatorial rule after a US-backed coup in 1976 and operated torture and extermination centers. Troops have also been sent to the impoverished north of the country on the pretext of combatting illicit trafficking.

Promoting closer ties between the US and Latin American militaries, Mattis told the officers at the Brazilian war college, "We want to be your partner of choice especially if trouble looms ... when threats to your sovereignty or way of life manifest."

Mattis did not spell out these coming threats to "sovereignty" and "way of life." There is no doubt, however, that he was referring, in the first instance, to a future military confrontation with China for dominance over Latin America. As for the "way of life" of Latin America, the most socially unequal continent on the planet, the region's financial and corporate oligarchs will understand very well the threat the US defense secretary has in mind.

As in the 1960s and 1970s, Washington and its military-intelligence apparatus are prepared to work with the armed forces of Latin America in arranging military coups and dictatorships to confront a rising revolutionary challenge from the working class.

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