Region: U.S. Testing New Military-Intervention Strategies in Latin America

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Progressive social movements’ consolidation within Latin American governments has forced the US to redesign its regional-control strategy through a new and camouflaged form of militarization that combines small military structures, training, and joint exercises with the US Army, both in the military realm as well as in civilian emergency assistance.

The US strategy of setting up large military bases to guarantee its spheres of influence seems to have effectively been discarded because of the impact of social movements mobilizing to block the presence of these facilities in their countries. Examples include the base at Manta, Ecuador, where US forces remained for 10 years but had to leave in November 2009, as well as Vieques, Puerto Rico, where in 2003 the US government had to resign itself to abandoning its naval base after six decades of huge demonstrations and massive civil disobedience by the population.

The US’s attempt to offset its strategic losses on the continent by occupying seven military bases in Colombia caused a controversy that went beyond Colombian society and was taken up by the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR). This regional body rejected the treaty and called on Colombia to guarantee that those facilities would not be used to attack other countries. It also considered "extraterritorial war," which the Colombian government used to justify military actions against irregular armed groups that had set up camps in border areas of neighboring countries, such as the bombing of a camp in the Ecuadoran Angostura area in March 2008, which led to a break in relations with Ecuador ((NotiSur, 2008-03-07)).

Colombian social organizations, including conservative sectors, have rejected the treaty authorizing US military presence in their territory, arguing that it is unconstitutional and violates national sovereignty and the principle of self-determination of peoples. Protests by Colombians against the US military presence mean that US personnel will not have a warm welcome in that country.

**Exercises and assistance in South America**

To avoid opposition to visible military bases, the US has begun a series of joint exercises and humanitarian-assistance programs in areas of high social tension, including in Peru, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

In Peru, since the election of President Alan García, eight treaties have been signed and laws have been amended to allow US troops to enter and remain in the country. In 2006, combined training and humanitarian-civic-action exercises called Nuevos Horizontes (new horizons) were authorized. In 2007, authorization was given for the entry of 17 war planes for the Halcón-Cóndor 2007 exercise, which the US said was aimed at strengthening regional cooperation. In 2008 and 2009, combat fleets arrived almost quarterly.

To make this influx possible, the foreign-troop authorization law (Ley de requisitos para la autorización y consentimiento para el ingreso de tropas extranjeras en el territorio de la república)
was broadened to include such functions as "civic-assistance activities, future military, academic instruction planning, or training exercises with Fuerzas Armadas Peruanas (FAP) personnel." An airfield was also built in Pichari, Ayacucho, the area where coca leaf is grown, as well as an access road to Peru's central jungle.

"If the actions are for humanitarian aid, why do the treaties center on the influx of warships and armed military personnel?" asked Guillermo Burneo, an activist with the Peruvian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Mesa por la Paz, la Desmilitarización y Solidaridad con los Pueblos.

Similarly, in Paraguay, the 2005 Law 2594/95 gives US troops broad powers to act in 18 planned military exercises. It was expected that these exercises would be limited following the election of President Fernando Lugo; nevertheless, military cooperation with the Nuevos Horizontes exercises has been maintained. The justification is the appearance of the small group Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), which defines itself as radical leftist.

In April, to combat the EPP, the Lugo administration passed Law 3994/10 declaring a state of emergency in the departments of San Pedro, Concepción, Amambay, Presidente Hayes, and Alto Paraguay and mobilizing 3,320 Fuerzas Públicas personnel, of which 2,000 were military and 1,320 police, most of them belonging to special-operations forces trained in the US at what was formerly known as the School of the Americas (SOA), now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC).

Lugo accepted the US cooperation to implement the "civic-medical action," in which US and Paraguayan military provide medical attention north of the city of Concepción, one of the areas where the EPP allegedly operates. The departments of Concepción and San Pedro have the highest number of mobilized campesinos, and the largest number of military exercises with the US have been carried out in them in recent years.

Regional training centers

The war against drug trafficking, promoted from the US, has brought a new form of militarization to countries such as Peru, Uruguay, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras, and through this militarization specialized civilian police battalions are being trained with a heavy military focus.

The Centro Regional de Capacitación para el Cumplimiento de la Ley (International Law Enforcement Academies, ILEA) has been operating since 2002 in Peru and El Salvador. Its mission is "to improve the capability and training of specialized police personnel from the region to confront organized crime, drug trafficking, and international terrorism." However, putting this struggle in the hands of the police has militarized them and led to police repression being equated with violence and death, since increasingly the police and military are allowed to freely use their weapons against demonstrators.

Counter-terrorism training also touches Ecuador, where the Escuela de Selva operates in the Amazonian city of El Coca, training US, Panamanian, Chilean, Colombian, Honduran, and Peruvian soldiers. They all attend a three-month course and obtain diplomatic visas to enter Ecuador. The school's main issues for analysis are "terrorist threats" and "drug trafficking," making it clear that the discourse of US militaristic policy has immense influence on those who attend the training.
courses. In military parlance, the name Escuela de Selva has gradually changed to Escuela de Antiterrorismo, although in public the formal name is maintained.

The school's existence violates Article 5 of the Ecuadoran Constitution, which says, "Ecuador is a territory of peace. The establishment of foreign military bases or foreign facilities with military purposes is not allowed. Ceding national military bases to foreign armed forces or security forces is prohibited."

The dispersion of military-training systems tries to hide the role of the infamous SOA, which trained the majority of Latin American dictators. After its facility in Panama closed, the SOA transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia.

**Digging trenches in Central America**

While the Consejo Suramericano de Defensa (CSD) is being set up in South America with the aim of avoiding US interference in the region's military planning, the US is looking for ways to take cover in Central America and build a strong military-control system on the isthmus from which to project itself toward South America, in case governments there turn more hostile to US economic and geopolitical interests.

With this objective, the US has obtained Costa Rica's approval of a treaty allowing 56 US warships and 5,000 Marines to enter the country, who would rotate, supposedly, to fight drug trafficking in Costa Rican waters.

US military are presently in Metetí, Darién, without public knowledge of their objectives or their authorizations.

Frank Mora, US deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Western Hemisphere, said that Panama needs to fight the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) because the war is not only Colombian but also Panamanian. Darién is adjacent to the border area in Colombia where the FARC operates.

The US is also strengthening its Soto Cano base in Palmerola, Honduras, which in 2009 was used to whisk the country's constitutional President Manuel Zelaya out of the country. Zelaya had said he planned to convert the base into a civilian airport.

Following the Honduran coup, the US began to tweak the treaties signed in 2008 to install military bases in the Honduran Mosquitia where it has operated radars since 2006. The US and Canadian Armies also negotiated with Honduras to install a theater of operations in the Llanos de San Antonio in La Paz department, where earlier the US-directed and financed Escuela de Montañas had functioned.

In the Caribbean, US actions following Haiti's catastrophic earthquake are viewed with skepticism. "They are here to prevent the refounding of Haiti because what we must do is refound the country, independently, and not just rebuild what was damaged in the earthquake," said Jerome Paul Eddy Lacoste, head of the social sciences department at the Human Sciences University in Port-au-Prince. "Militarization and imposition of force are the tools of an empire in decline, and there is much reason to fear them."
The new Latin American militarization process responds to the US's increasingly weak influence in Latin America, and the social movements, as well as governments in the region, should rescind the laws that facilitate foreign military intervention to finally build a region of peace, free of foreign military bases, such as is envisioned in the Ecuadoran Constitution.

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