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When in early June Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia and Rafael Correa of Ecuador were able to persuade the 33 Latin American members of the Organization of American States (OAS) to set a year-end deadline for analyzing what they called the "refounding" of the OAS, everyone thought that they were only adding a little spice into the boring OAS General Assembly being held at the time at the Universidad del Valle de Tiquipaya in the Bolivian department of Cochabamba (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

However, with their request to end much of the institutional structure of the OAS—the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR), the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR)—and the proposal to declare a ban on allowing foreign (US) military bases in Latin America, Morales and Correa were, as South Americans say, "stirring up a hornet's nest."

The two presidents said that the agencies were suitable for times long since past, a product of the now nonexistent Cold War, and that the bases go against the pacifist ideals of the peoples of the Americas. Certainly, beyond whatever the region's foreign ministers can agree to in December regarding reforms to the OAS, merely spelling out the criticisms led to information becoming known that was previously ignored or, in some countries, to decisions being made that either go against or are in sync with what was said in Cochabamba.

Some progressive governments unexpectedly give US green light

The first surprise came from Uruguay, where the historically progressive governing party, the Frente Amplio (FA), which has severely criticized the US, opened the doors to the US Navy's Sea, Air, and Land Teams—the SEALs—to give specialized training to members of the Uruguayan Navy's Cuerpo de Fusileros Navales (CFN).

It was soon learned that in Paraguay, following the June 22 coup against constitutional President Fernando Lugo, a traditional opposition party that today functions within the de facto government proposed to Congress making available a controversial base in the center of the country where the US Southern Command (SOUTCOM) could operate, "close to all the strategic targets in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela."

Then, Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner overruled a decision by Gov. Jorge Capitanich of the northern province of Chaco, forcing him to break a facilities agreement signed with the Pentagon (May 22, 2009). Finally, previously unknown aspects of agreements signed by Panama, Chile, Peru, and Colombia with the US armed forces were made public. Amid all this, a debate began at the continental level, which shed light on the new US military strategy in the region.

In mid-June, and only because of complaints from neighbors in the area where the training was taking place, it became known that a contingent of 15 Navy personnel from the US Fourth Fleet was giving training in "hostage-rescue operations" at the CFN facilities. Everything was planned surreptitiously.
The Uruguayan Ministerio de Defensa never announced these courses, the necessary legislative approval for foreign troops to enter the country was passed as a matter of urgency and without debate. Defense Minister Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro, a former Tupamaro guerrilla leader who was jailed for 13 years in various military facilities, refused to make a public statement.

When an opposition deputy in Congress asked what justified the entry of the SEALs into the country, Ivonne Passada, president of the defense committee and another former prisoner during the 1973-1985 dictatorship, called the question "inappropriate." Congress approved the agreement with the Pentagon with only vague and imprecise information and with a never-explained urgency, said the Uruguayan magazine Brecha.

Beyond these apparent inconsistencies of the Tupamaros and the FA government, criticism arose in Argentina, Ecuador, and Uruguay that the Uruguayan government had not informed the Consejo de Defensa Suramericano (CDS), as the foreign ministers had agreed at the 2010 summit in Quito, Ecuador. An Argentine diplomat told the magazine Miradas al Sur, "What we have just seen in Uruguay is a qualitative leap in US interventionism because the SEAL teams—the same group that in 40 minutes killed Osama bin Laden—operate outside military protocol, which allows them to carry out operations that go beyond the limits of international law."

Juan Castillo, a union leader and one of the two FA vice presidents, said that "the entry of the SEALs was never discussed in the FA nor was it made public in the legislative agenda. The government has made a serious mistake in making a deal with the US Navy because it injures the FA's historic Latin Americanist position." he said.

"The SEALs case is an example of the low level of political leadership that some defense ministries and national governments exercise over their armed forces, which continue managing their international relations, especially with the US, based on an outdated scheme appropriate in the time of the last dictatorships," an expert in defense matters from the private Universidad Arcis said in Chile.

Argentina’s president says no

On June 22, in Argentina, President Fernández de Kirchner blocked the entry of equipment, computers, radars, and the operating system that would have allowed a US base to begin activities in the northern province of Chaco (NotiSur, March 11, 2011). In so doing, she thwarted the agreement that Gov. Capitanich had signed with the Pentagon to install a base in the airport at Resistencia, the provincial capital.

The public had been given, but did not believe, the official version that it was a program to support official social programs, and citizens organized large protest marches. In reality, it was a covert military base set up in the installations of a modern civilian airport that could accommodate huge aircraft such as the Hercules C-130, the Globemaster III, and the C-5 Galaxy.

Two days later, in Paraguay, the rightist Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE), led by attempted-coup leader Gen. Lino Oviedo (NotiSur, Nov. 9, 2007), proposed offering SOUTHCOM the use of installations at the Base Mariscal Estigarribia (NotiSur, Dec. 17, 2010), in the west-central part of the country, a facility that can house 16,000 soldiers and has a 3,800-meter runway which could also accommodate those huge aircraft.
Gen. Oviedo said that Mariscal Estigarribia is "a unique enclave." It is close to the nerve centers of South America: São Paulo, Brazil (600 km), Formosa, Argentina (800 km), La Paz, Bolivia (1,200 km), Quito, Ecuador (2,700 km), and Caracas, Venezuela (3,300 km).

On Aug. 6, the ANSA news agency reported on the kickoff of the Panamax 2012 maneuvers, whose objective is the defense of the Panama Canal in case of a terrorist attack. The story said that, along with Panama and the US, participants would include the militaries of Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru.

That day the director of the US-based Fellowship of Reconciliation John Lindsay-Poland released a statement accusing the US of violating the pacifist spirit of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaties and, through private contractors, continuing to carry out military activities in the area of the canal. The Fellowship of Reconciliation says that, since 1999, the Pentagon has signed 715 contracts associated with Panama, when under the agreements it should have withdrawn all US military presence from the isthmus.

Shortly before that, the agreements were made public between SOUTHCOM and the administrations of Peruvian President Ollanta Humala and Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, giving the US a much-desired access to the Pacific Coast—the route of the drugs from South America that enter the US through California—through the construction of two military bases. One is in Piura in northern Peru; the other in Concón on the central coast of Chile.

The base in Concón supposedly would be used for training forces of peace. The only thing known about the Piura facility is that it will be in a strategic area where energy, oil, and mining multinationals have recently begun to operate.

In Colombia, opposition Sen. Jorge Enrique Robledo said that, despite the August 2010 decision by the Corte Constitucional (CC), declaring unconstitutional the agreement on the use of military bases that former President Álvaro Uribe signed with the Pentagon (NotiSur, Nov. 5, 2010), new contracts worth some US$103 million have been signed by which various US contractors will expand the Colombian military bases.

In an article in the Argentine magazine Miradas al Sur, David Vine, assistant professor of anthropology at American University in Washington, DC, says that there could be dozens of other secret installations in Latin America because the Pentagon's present tendency is to set up "a new generation of bases the military calls 'lily pads' (as in a frog jumping across a pond toward its prey). These are small, secretive, inaccessible facilities with limited numbers of troops, Spartan amenities, and propositioned weaponry and supplies."

Vine says that the days of huge bases, such as Ramstein Air Base in Germany—a real city inhabited by thousands of soldiers, with supermarkets, all kinds of restaurants, and even a local Pizza Hut—are now a thing of the past. "While the collection of Cold War-era giant bases around the world is shrinking, the global infrastructure of bases overseas has exploded in size and scope."

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