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Uruguay Strengthens Ties With U.S.

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News about military-cooperation programs between the US and Uruguay is making headlines, especially the political debates on the issue, in this small country with a long history of clearly anti-US sentiment. While the assistance plans, troop training, provision of materials, and even the possibility of building a military base have come into the spotlight in recent months, they have been developing since 2005, when, after nearly two centuries of institutional life, the left and political progressives took power for the first time, through the Frente Amplio (FA) and President Tabaré Vázquez (NotiSur, March 4, 2005).

The relationship with the "old enemy" has been strengthened during the second FA administration, led by President José Mujica, a former guerrilla, and a Cabinet filled in large part with other well-known ex-guerrillas—all former senior members of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T).

From the unsuccessful attempt to sign a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US (NotiSur, Oct. 27, 2006) and the current interest in joining the Alianza del Pacífico (AP) to Uruguay's offer to be the site for a training school for troops from the region participating in international peace-keeping missions and the US Navy's training of Uruguayan naval personnel (NotiSur, Aug. 24, 2012), "everything happening is so far removed from those times in recent history when these same guerrillas filled the walls with the classic 'Yankees go home!' slogan that became a true mark of the Latin American left of which the Tupamaros were a model," said Jorge Zabalza, another former guerrilla now distanced from the MLN-T.

While the details of a "framework defense agreement" that Mujica and US President Barack Obama will analyze during the coming year remain unknown to the Uruguayan public, and even to governing-party legislators and Cabinet ministers, general terms are known and refer to the "procurement of supplies and the reciprocal provision of military services."

**Agreement would reportedly facilitate 'reciprocal, logistical support'**

A May 17 story in the progressive Uruguayan weekly magazine Brecha said that the two sides are aiming "to facilitate reciprocal logistical support to be used primarily during joint exercises, training, deployments, landings, operations, and other activities, or in unforeseen circumstances in which one of the parties could require logistical support, supplies, and services."

The article by journalist Samuel Blixen says the scope of logistical support is practically all-encompassing because it requires deployment and operations services that go beyond the exercises and include "unforeseen circumstances," most likely military, and not precisely what Uruguay's pacifist and noninterventionist policies envision. "The lack of details about this 'mutual cooperation' could jeopardize Uruguayan sovereignty and make the country a partner in objectionable military adventures," said the Brecha article.

The agreement regarding the "procurement of supplies and reciprocal provision of military services" that Uruguayan Minister of Defense Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro signed on Nov.
12, 2012, with Gen. Douglas M. Fraser, then head of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM),
details the supplies and services that could be provided. The information obtained by Brecha
indicated that agreement excludes "weapons systems, guided missiles, navy mines and torpedoes,
nuclear weapons, guidance systems for bombs, chemical weapons or munitions, nuclear material or
radioactive sources, that is, any significant military material that could be used against the provider
or directed at some Third World neighbor."

The agreement stipulates that authorized items include "food, water, accommodations, transport
(including air transport), fuel, oils, lubricants, clothing, communications services, medical services,
munitions, and port services."

The Brecha article points out the ambiguous wording regarding "on-base support (and the
 corresponding construction of that support)." The article asks, "How is the support built without
building the base?"

The parties' "cunning" way of describing things, says Brecha, "creates the rumors always denied
about the intention to install a military base run by US personnel in the department of Durazno."

Days before the information became public in Uruguay, it was mentioned in the Argentine
magazine Miradas al Sur on April 30. "Given the striking openness by the administration of former
guerrilla José Mujica, the US decided to go even further: it asked for permission to install a base in
the strategic central department of Durazno and, in addition, asked Uruguay to participate in a new
UN peacekeeping mission, this time in Nepal."

Although other information about the matter is unknown, the Buenos Aires publication said that
"the Uruguayan Ministerio de Defensa rejected the two US requests in recent weeks."

**Details scarce**

Almost nothing is known about the "framework agreement" that the presidents will analyze when
Mujica visits Washington. What little is known surfaced by accident, when former President Luis
Alberto Lacalle (1990-1995), now an opposition senator, spoke about the agreement during a meeting
with the Senate Comisión de Defensa, assuming that everyone else knew about it. Lacalle told his
colleagues that he knew about the agreement—the original and a second version that included some
changes made by the Uruguayan government and accepted by the US—because William Owens,
political/economic counselor at the US Embassy in Montevideo, had given him a folder containing
all the documentation regarding what the two sides were negotiating.

What was known by political-opposition leaders—Sen. Gustavo Penadés also had a folder—was
not known by the Uruguayan public or by Mujica’s Cabinet, with the exception of the ministers
of defense, foreign relations, and economy—or by the governing FA legislators. The text that the
presidents of both countries will sign sometime this years will replace the Convenio de Asistencia
Militar, a mutual-defense agreement signed in 1953.

In the face of the Uruguayan government's silence, US Ambassador to Uruguay Julissa Reynoso
reacted to the information with irritation, sending a letter to Brecha and granting an interview
to Uruguayan newspaper La Diaria. In the letter to Brecha, in which the importance of the news
and the displeasure provoked by its dissemination were clear, the ambassador said the report of a
possible installation of a base in Durazno was "totally false."
In the interview, Reynoso engaged in an exchange of questions with journalists Natalia Uval and Marina González. "Ah, the famous bases," said Reynoso in part of the dialogue. "We have no plan, no intention, and no secret idea of putting any military base, none, zero, not a small, medium, or large one. Nothing."

The ambassador then asked the journalists where they had obtained their information, and, after the clear response that it came from a copy of a rough draft held by Sen. Lacalle, Reynoso said, "The supply agreement is the type of agreement that we use with dozens of countries throughout the world. It is not unique to Uruguay, and, if your government signed it, if it is uncomfortable with those terms, it can remove them." The attempted denial only confirmed the agreement's existence and its basic content.

The events that have enhanced the "dangerous relations" between the two countries, as Zabalza called them, began in 2006, when public reaction caused President Vázquez at the last minute to not sign an FTA with the US. That same year, then defense minister José Bayardi said that "the government is most interested in having a school built in our country to train military personnel from the region for peacekeeping missions." Later, Vázquez authorized SOUTHCOM troops to enter the country to build a polyclinic and educational centers on the outskirts of Montevideo.

Last year, Vázquez made some surprising comments in which he revealed that, in 2009, during a dispute between Uruguay and Argentina regarding the installation of a pulp mill near the Uruguayan border (NotiSur, Sept. 16, 2005, and Aug. 13, 2010), he had approached the US about providing Uruguay with military support in the event of an eventual military confrontation with Argentina (NotiSur, Oct. 28, 2011).

In June 2012, US instructors taught a commando-training course to Uruguayan marines. In November 2012, Fernández Huidobro and Fraser signed the agreement on supplies and provision of reciprocal military services. In April, despite low marks from humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), US personnel gave a two-week course in internal-security training for the prison system.

Finally, on June 3, Vice President Danilo Astori said that Uruguay has a strong desire to join the AP, an initiative of Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Peru (NotiSur, April 5, 2013), which the US supports and sees as a counterweight to the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the major regional political commitment (NotiSur, Jan. 7, 2011).