



## Militarizing Latin America Policy

By Adam Isacson, Center for International Policy

Deep within the Defense Department's civilian bureaucracy, the Clinton administration made a quiet shift in 1999 that speaks volumes about the current U.S. relationship with Latin America. The Pentagon's office for Inter-American Affairs was transferred from the Bureau for International Security Affairs—where it sat in the organizational chart alongside similar offices for Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe—into a bureau with the alarming name of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Under the reorganization, Latin America is the only geographic area assigned to an office that deals with issues like terrorism, drug enforcement, and other activities of Special Forces (defined as military units that specialize in “operations other than war”).

The shift at the Pentagon is emblematic of the militarization of U.S. policy toward Latin America since the early 1990s. Militarization is not a new tendency, of course—the United States has treated Latin America's many social problems as “special operations” (witness

the cold war emphasis on military aid instead of land reform or rural development). But militarization is intensifying, led by new antidrug initiatives and rapidly growing training and military engagement programs. Today, military contacts and activities are playing such a central role in bilateral relationships that they threaten to overshadow diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and democratic development.

The highest profile example is the drug war. In response to social problems—addiction at home and desperately poor peasants in Colombia—the

United States is sending Colombia's armed forces aid valued at \$1.5 million per day during 2001. But antidrug operations are just the beginning.

The U.S. military presence in the region rivals—and perhaps surpasses—that of civilian diplomats. The State Department has about 16,000 direct-hire employees at posts throughout the world; Latin America accounts for a modest fraction of that total (about 4,000). Meanwhile, the Southern Command, the unit responsible for U.S. military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean, has a staff of 800 military and 325 civilian employees at its Miami headquarters, while two of its components—U.S. Army South in Puerto Rico and Joint Task Force-Bravo in Honduras—combine for an additional 570 military and 1,390 civilian

staff. Another 107 officers work in Milgroups, managing security assistance programs at U.S. embassies throughout the region, and still more are assigned to Special Operations Command South in Puerto Rico and at “Forward Operating Locations”—support bases for U.S. counterdrug aircraft—in Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Netherlands Antilles. On temporary deployments, more than 55,000 military personnel, including National Guard troops and reservists, pass through Latin America in a typical year.

In contrast, economic assistance for the region has dropped sharply in the early 1990s. In 2000—for the first time since before John F. Kennedy's “Alliance for Progress” economic aid initiative—total security assistance to Latin America actually exceeded total economic assistance (roughly \$900 million versus \$800 million).

Beyond drugs, the main interest of U.S. military planners in the region is “engagement”—maintaining frequent contact with military counterparts everywhere in the hemisphere except Cuba. The main form of engagement is training—courses in the U.S. and overseas as well as dozens of yearly exercises and deployments—and such programs have expanded greatly since the early 1990s.

The United States trained some 13,000 Latin American military and police personnel in 1999, the last year for which data is available. At least two-thirds of those trained are instructed in their own countries by U.S. military Mobile Training Teams (MTTs) and during almost 200 yearly visits by U.S. Special Forces teams on Counterdrug Training Support (CDTS) and Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) deployments. In a typical year, Latin American trainees also take courses at over 100 military institutions on U.S. soil. This includes the 650 students trained in 1999 at the School of the Americas (recently renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) at Fort Benning, Georgia. Training also takes place through a robust program of about a dozen multilateral military exercises, regular exchanges, and courses offered at a new Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies in Washington.

Military-to-military engagement goes beyond training, however. Southern Command has increased its Humanitarian and Civic Assistance (HCA) program, in which U.S. troops build infrastructure or provide medical assistance (98 such projects took place in 19 Latin American countries in the region in 2000). And arms transfers are expanding, led by helicopters for Colombia and a likely \$600 million sale of high-tech fighter aircraft to Chile. The new Forward Operating Locations offer fresh opportunities for contact, as does an expansion in Foreign Military Interaction seminars, conferences, and other events, most of them financed through budgets at the discretion of the general who heads the Southern Command.

### Key Points

- The military is currently playing a major role in shaping U.S. policy toward Latin America, rivaling the role of diplomacy and economic assistance.
- The militarization of Washington's Latin America policy is being led by the drug war, training programs, arms transfers, and a wide array of “military-to-military contact” efforts.
- The U.S. military regularly “engages” with the armed forces of each country in the hemisphere except Cuba.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

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The Pentagon's role in policy design is increasing. Military engagement activities have been growing, while State Department and foreign aid budgets have fallen or stagnated. Although civilian officials and Congress still generally play the greater role in U.S. policymaking toward Latin America, they clearly do not have the greater momentum. Well-funded, frequent military engagement programs are outpacing or eclipsing U.S. diplomatic engagement with some countries while eluding effective civilian and congressional oversight. By forging relationships and incubating policy initiatives, these military activities are leaving the nondefense branches of government—including Congress—often struggling to keep up.

An important example is the three new counternarcotics battalions that the United States is creating—at a cost of over a half billion dollars—within the Colombian Army. The battalion idea first emerged publicly at a December 1998 meeting of the region's defense ministers, an engagement activity sponsored by the U.S. Defense Department. Training of the first battalion began in April 1999 using Pentagon counternarcotics funds, a budget category for which Congress did not get detailed reports. The first battalion got weapons and Huey helicopters through drawdowns and “no-cost leases,” mechanisms that do not require congressional approval. It was not until the spring of 2000 that the Clinton administration's \$1.3 billion aid proposal for Colombia moved the now-active battalion initiative beyond the Pentagon's discretionary funds and into State Department-managed aid programs.

Similar examples of Pentagon initiative abound. Today, the military component of U.S. aid to Colombia in 2000 and 2001—80% of the total—is in an advanced state of implementation, while the economic and social component is barely underway. Most members of Congress would be surprised to know that the Defense Department budget is helping to build barracks in Bolivia and the Navy-Police Riverine Training Center in Peru. In the wake of Hurricane Mitch, the U.S. military took the initiative to establish relations with Nicaragua's erstwhile Sandinista Army, with little public notice or debate. The Defense Department negotiated Forward Operating Location agreements to use airbase facilities in Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Netherlands Antilles, only checking in with Congress afterward to seek construction funds for the sites.

Often military activities pull official policies along in their wake, but in some cases it is simply hard to figure out how they relate to U.S. foreign policy goals at all. A quick look at activities in 1999 offers many examples. Why, for instance, did U.S. Special Forces need to train with Argentine commandos in mountain warfare techniques? Why did they train with 310 Belizean soldiers in small unit tactics, with 93 Dominican soldiers in riot control, or with 432 Bolivians and Uruguayans in air infiltration training? Why did the School of the Americas continue to offer a commando course in which students are “subjected to stressful conditions simulating combat”? Why did Southern Command offer Bolivia \$569,490 in infrastructure-building, medical, dental, and veterinary

services, when civilian U.S. agencies were perfectly capable of doing the same thing?

The stated purpose of the U.S. military's engagement activities is to promote democracy and respect for human rights, to modernize and professionalize security forces, and to strengthen regional security cooperation, often by developing relationships with key officers overseas. These are all understandable goals, but it is not clear how combat and technical training helps Latin America attain them.

The rise of military engagement may in fact be undermining these goals, since U.S. military initiatives frequently encourage Latin American personnel to take on roles that would be illegal in the United States. For instance, U.S. units cannot conduct domestically the types of counterdrug operations for which they train their regional counterparts. Barring extreme circumstances, the U.S. military does not keep public order, though Special Forces frequently teach “Foreign Internal Defense” and similar domestic-control skills overseas. Moreover, U.S. military personnel cannot build roads, bridges, schools, and wells at home, but they do so in Latin America, setting a risky precedent for militaries in fledgling democracies.

The Pentagon's enthusiasm for working with every military in the region often drowns out the warnings of human rights activists. Despite human rights protections in U.S. military aid law, the Pentagon's diverse military activities in Latin America can end up transferring weapons, skills, and abilities that might later be misused by abusive officials or units. Given the minimal tracking of trainees' careers and the feeble end-use monitoring of arms transfers, it is unclear exactly what military assistance is leaving behind. Meanwhile, military-to-military contact programs can have unintended political consequences. Visits, conferences, exchanges, and other activities that the U.S. Southern Command initiates can offer an inadvertent U.S. seal of approval to abusive military bodies, units, or individuals who are invited to participate.

The spread of freewheeling, unsupervised military programs—amid a decline in diplomatic contacts and economic aid—inclines Washington to choose military solutions to problems in Latin America. If a solid foundation for militaristic policy choices already exists, it can eclipse political approaches, such as peace processes or social assistance programs, which would have to begin from scratch with less-familiar civilian leaders. Latin American military leaders' analyses and recommendations often carry disproportionate weight, because of their superior access to U.S. policymakers. The resulting imbalance can lead Washington to neglect many civilian institutions that badly need strengthening in fragile Latin American democracies.

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## Key Problems

- The U.S. military's activities in Latin America at times outstrip official policy, leading Washington to choose military solutions to the region's largely social problems.
  - U.S. military engagement often seems to have little to do with official goals in the region and encourages Latin American militaries to take on roles that would be illegal in the United States.
  - Military engagement and training strengthen the region's militaries at the expense of fragile civilian institutions, often with negative human rights consequences.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

The militarization of U.S. policy toward Latin America is not the result of some sinister hidden strategy. More than anything else, it is a symptom of Washington's tendency to turn to the Pentagon because the money is there. Increases in defense spending are simply easier to attain than increases for almost any other priority. As a result, nondefense activities—such as diplomacy and drug policy in Latin America—get funded through the defense budget

## Key Recommendations

- Increase transparency of military engagement programs by improving congressional oversight, post-training tracking of military personnel, and end-use monitoring of arms transfers.
- Beef up human rights conditions on military programs in the region, increase the budget and power of the State Department, and shift the Pentagon out of counterdrug aid and development projects.
- Reforms must take place in the context of a fundamental rethinking of the Pentagon's relationship with Latin America.

and managed by defense officials. Challenging this tendency should be at the core of any long-term progressive political agenda. Meanwhile, the more specific task of demilitarizing Washington's Latin America policy can begin now.

The first step, and perhaps the easiest, is increasing transparency and educating the public. Military activities and influence in Latin America have flourished, because nobody has been watching closely. Only effective oversight will make an informed debate possible.

A report on all foreign military training activities, first required

by law in 1999, was a crucial improvement, revealing lists of courses taught and numbers of students trained in each country. This report must be strengthened by declassifying key information (e.g., students' military units, U.S. trainers' units, locations of training) and by requiring fuller descriptions of the courses offered and their relation to U.S. interests. Other engagement activities, such as military exercises and the panoply of Foreign Military Interaction events carried out with the Southern Command's discretionary funds, should also be fully reported to complete and clarify the often confusing picture of U.S.-Latin American military relations.

Transparency requires scrutiny of everything that military engagements leave behind. Until 2001, the Pentagon did not keep track of the future career paths of its trainees, leaving no record of whether trainees subsequently violated human rights or were transferred to units with very different responsibilities (such as shifts of counternarcotics trainees to counterinsurgency units). This year, Congress required the Defense Department to keep a database with this information for trainees funded by the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. But post-training tracking must go further; currently IMET monitors only about 20% of former U.S. military trainees in Latin America. Ongoing oversight must also

include more rigorous end-use monitoring of weapons given or sold to Latin America, including the small arms most often used to violate human rights or transferred via black market channels to conflict zones.

Beyond transparency, there is an urgent need for effective legal conditions. The Leahy Law, which prohibits aid to military units that violate human rights with impunity, must be clarified (by defining what a "unit" is, and delineating what circumstances trigger application of the law) and expanded to include military engagement activities and all weapons sales. Conditioning of military programs should also eventually extend beyond human rights performance. Conditions should apply to the types of military roles and missions that U.S. aid encourages in fragile democracies as well as the types of skills and weapons provided to countries with chronic histories of conflict and human rights abuse.

At the same time, the budget and power of the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development must increase relative to the Defense Department. The Pentagon should no longer be able to offer counternarcotics aid or carry out development programs on its own, with its own funds. The Defense Department's authority to use its own money to give counterdrug aid to foreign militaries—the section 1004 law, which must be renewed every few years—should be allowed to expire, and these programs should pass to the State Department, where they belong. The State Department must go beyond merely "signing off" on Special Forces deployments and military-to-military engagement activities in the region. Diplomats must begin actively questioning the Pentagon's choices of trainees, topics, and missions.

Several of these recommendations will be difficult to attain in the current political context. Bringing them within the realm of possibility will require a fundamental rethinking of the U.S. military relationship with Latin America. Some mechanism—perhaps a formal government commission, a series of congressional hearings, or a non-governmental education campaign—must question the purpose of the current expansion of U.S. military programs in the hemisphere for this rethinking to occur.

Military engagement for its own sake is no longer acceptable, and Latin America is not a "special operation." Serious thought is long overdue about what U.S. goals should be in Latin America and what are the best instruments, standards, and controls needed to achieve them.

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