

U.S. Military Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean

By John Lindsay-Poland | August 2004

The United States maintains a complex web of military facilities and functions in Latin America and the Caribbean, what the U.S. Southern Command (known as SouthCom) calls its “theater architecture.” U.S. military facilities represent tangible commitments to an ineffective supply-side drug war and to underlying policy priorities, including ensuring access to strategic resources, especially oil.

Much of this web is being woven through Plan Colombia, a massive, primarily military program to eradicate coca plants and to combat armed groups (mostly leftist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). In the last five years, new U.S. bases and military access agreements have proliferated in Latin America, constituting a decentralization of the U.S. military presence in the region. This decentralization is Washington’s way of maintaining a broad military foothold while accommodating regional leaders’ reluctance to host large U.S. military bases or complexes.

Key Points

- Military bases in Latin America and the Caribbean are an interlocking web that supports U.S. objectives for securing access to markets, controlling narcotics flow, and obtaining natural resources, especially oil.
- Although the United States has closed bases in Panama and Puerto Rico, it has opened an array of smaller bases throughout the region, including several that support U.S. operations in Colombia.
- Base operations and maintenance are increasingly being contracted to private companies.

After the U.S. military withdrawal from Panama in 1999, military troops and commands were reconcentrated in Puerto Rico, adding fuel to a nonviolent mass movement to throw the Navy out of its bombing range in Vieques, Puerto Rico. On May 1, 2003, the Navy vacated the Vieques range (though it remains in federal hands) and followed in March 2004 by closing the massive Roosevelt Roads Naval Station. Regional headquarters for the Army, Navy, and Special Forces

have moved out of Puerto Rico to Texas and Florida; headquarters of SouthCom (the joint command) is located in Miami.

The Navy continues to operate an “outer range” of nearly 200,000 square miles to practice high-tech naval maneuvers, an underwater tracking range for submarines, and an electronic warfare range in waters near Vieques. The ranges are used by the Navy and by military contractors to test sophisticated ships and weapon systems. The Army also has access to a large National Guard firing range, Camp Santiago, in Salinas, Puerto Rico.

In addition, the Pentagon is investing in expanded infrastructure in the region, with four military bases in Manta, Ecuador; Aruba; Curacao; and Comalapa, El Salvador, known as “cooperative security locations,” or CSLs. These CSLs are leased facilities established to

conduct counternarcotics monitoring and interdiction operations. Washington has signed ten-year agreements with Ecuador, the Netherlands (for Aruba and Curacao), and El Salvador and has funded the renovation of air facilities in Ecuador, Aruba, and Curacao. SouthCom also operates some 17 radar sites, mostly in Peru and Colombia, each typically staffed by about 35 personnel.

The CSL and radar facilities monitor the skies and waters of the region and are key to increased surveillance operations in Washington’s Andean drug war. “The majority of assets available to us are focused on the tactical fight in Colombia,” SouthCom chief General Hill said in March 2004. Approved by the short-lived government of Ecuadorean President Jamil Mahuad in November 1999, the base in Manta hosts up to 475 U.S. personnel.

All of the above is in addition to existing bases, including a missile tracking station on Ascension Island in the Caribbean, housing up to 200 U.S. personnel, and Soto Cano in Palmerola, Honduras, which since 1984 has provided support for training and helicopter sorties. Furthermore, the United States has small military presences and property in Antigua, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and on Andros Island in the Bahamas. The U.S. military had used offices in Venezuela for more than 50 years but was evicted from the site in May 2004.

Guantánamo Bay Naval Station, which enjoys a lease with no termination date, serves as a logistics base for counterdrug operations and, increasingly, as an off-shore detention center.

The Pentagon is moving to shift much of the operation and maintenance of its military bases to private, for-profit contractors. For example, the Air Force contracted the operation of its Manta base to Dyncorp, and even “host-nation riders” who accompany military flights over Colombia are “outsourced” to a private U.S. military contractor.

In Panama, all U.S. military forces left the country, and bases were closed at the end of 1999 in accordance with the Panama Canal treaties. But the Pentagon continues to enjoy access for military flights into and out of Panama on a contract to transport cargo and passengers daily between Honduras, Panama, and dirt strips in Colombia. In June 2002 the United States signed an agreement with Costa Rica for an International Law Enforcement Academy, but popular movements have so far prevented the pact’s ratification.

Bases belonging to Latin American militaries but built or used by U.S. soldiers, such as the Joint Peruvian Riverine Training Center in Iquitos, Peru, are not considered U.S. bases but often serve similar purposes. The up to 800 U.S. military and contract personnel operating at any given time in Colombia are also housed at nominally Colombian bases. The Bush administration in March 2004 announced its intention to increase the cap for such personnel to 1,400.

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Problems with Current U.S. Policy

The soldiers and contract employees that the U.S. military deploys to bases in Latin America and the Caribbean far outnumber the staffs of U.S. civilian agencies in the region. The presence of more than 10,000 U.S. personnel on military missions abroad sends a message that the United States prefers force over diplomacy to settle the region's problems, including problems that involve conflict with the United States. In addition to their role in facilitating military operations, U.S. bases are a symbol of Washington's history of armed intervention and of its use of local armies to control the region's people and resources. Several U.S. bases in the Caribbean were explicitly acquired, not by mutual agreement but through conquests in the 1898 Spanish-American-Cuban War.

Besides evoking the past, the bases are contracted into a future beyond any articulated military mission. Plan Colombia was originally envisioned as a two-year push into guerrilla-occupied southern territories, with vague plans for subsequent years. In contrast, the Pentagon has ten-year leases in Ecuador, Curacao, and Aruba and a presence in perpetuity at its naval base in Guantánamo. This permanent infrastructure generates inequitable relations and invites intervention instead of negotiation in a crisis situation, as it did in Panama and Puerto Rico (historically, the sites for other long-term U.S. bases in the region).

The cooperative security locations, purportedly created to monitor drug traffic, have no mechanism for transparency or monitoring by civil society in the host countries and are thus subject to other missions. This is especially disturbing in light of the expansion of U.S. objectives in Colombia to include "counterterrorism." As early as 1999, a State Department official said that "the new counternarcotics bases located in Ecuador, Aruba and Curacao will be strategic points for closely following the steps of the [Colombian] guerrillas." Aircraft from the Manta base were even used to locate and detain a fishing boat carrying Ecuadoreans who were suspected of planning to enter the United States.

Similarly, the mission for troops at Guantanamo Bay has morphed from orchestrating counterdrug operations to providing an off-shore jail for migrants and, since late 2001, prisoners of war. These operations have no accountability under U.S. or international law and undermine Cuba's sovereignty.

The dramatically increased U.S. military involvement in Colombia and the spillover of conflict in the border region have generated alarm among broad sectors of Ecuadorean society—including the military—over the potentially destabilizing role of the Manta base. One Ecuadorean officer points out that the base's electronic intelligence capability provides information that can be used by Colombian counterinsurgency units trained by the United States. Other opponents of the U.S. presence note that Ecuador's Congress never considered or approved the base agreement, as the Ecuadorean Constitution requires. Many also object to provisions exempting U.S. on-duty military personnel from Ecuadorean criminal jurisdiction.

The cooperative security location in Comalapa, El Salvador, operated by the Navy since 2000, has no limit on the number of

U.S. personnel, who have access to ports, air space, and unspecified government installations considered pertinent. In 2001, the opposition FMLN party argued that the agreement affects Salvadoran sovereignty and thus requires more than a simple majority vote by the legislature for ratification, but this claim was rejected by Salvadoran courts.

In Puerto Rico, the remaining military bases have additional political functions. On an island where the FBI has compiled 1.8 million documents based on surveillance of independence proponents and other political activists, the presence of U.S. military bases plays a significant role in enforcing Puerto Rican identification with Washington, thus contributing to continued colonialism.

Similar problems of sovereignty dog the proposed

International Law Enforcement Academy, which—despite its name—is designed to be completely under U.S. control. Costa Rica would have to give diplomatic immunity to academy staff at a time when the United States is aggressively opting out of the International Criminal Court. As Gustavo Cabrera Vega of Service for Peace and Justice, a Costa Rican human rights group, asks, "If the United States doesn't recognize the universal human rights conventions, with what authority will it train and give skills [to others] to combat international crime?" With Costa Ricans balking at agreement, Washington is considering other sites, including El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

The outsourcing to private companies of air transport, base construction and maintenance, the host-nation rider program, and other military activities overseas diminishes the information available to those who would monitor such activities and decreases the accountability for U.S.-sponsored actions abroad. Only after an enterprising reporter discovered an Internet-posted request for proposals did Panamanian civil society learn that the Pentagon had been using airstrips in Panama for "transportation services" into and out of Colombia, even after U.S. troops had left Panama. The 1997 contract tapped Evergreen Helicopters, a company with clandestine experience in the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama.

Many military bases in Latin America—like those in the United States and elsewhere—are leaving a devastating environmental legacy. In Vieques, studies have found high rates of cadmium, lead, mercury, uranium, and other contaminants in the soil, food

Key Problems

- Bases represent a commitment of resources that could otherwise be used for constructive social and environmental programs.
 - U.S. military installations operate in a legal limbo; military personnel are not accountable to local law, and there is little transparency. The United States is using its base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, to circumvent international law regarding prisoners of war.
 - Military bases overseas often leave behind ecological damage, since there are no mechanisms to require environmental cleanup.
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chain, and human bodies of the island's inhabitants. These toxins have lead to elevated rates of disease among Vieques residents, who have a 26.9 percent higher incidence of cancer than other Puerto Ricans. Despite Superfund designation, Vieques remains a very contaminated island. In Panama, the military left behind more than 100,000 rounds of unexploded ordnance on firing ranges in the canal area, despite a Canal Treaty provision for removing such dangers. Nearby construction of a new bridge and

road will bring an influx of workers and occupants, who will be exposed to these hazards.

Yet U.S. bases abroad present special problems for environmental cleanup, because sovereignty is always at issue. Once the Pentagon is gone, the United States abandons jurisdiction, thereby shirking responsibility for the contamination its military has caused.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

To live up to its democratic ideals, the United States should adopt a new security doctrine for relations with Latin America and

Key Recommendations

- The United States should adopt a doctrine of hemispheric relations that redirects resources from military installations toward social programs.
- Short of such a foundational shift, base agreements should require specific missions, fixed periods, discussion by civil society, and approval by U.S. and host-nation legislatures.
- Environmental justice requires assuming responsibility and dedicating funding for cleanup of contamination on U.S. bases abroad.

the Caribbean. Such a doctrine would value ties with civilians more than ties with the military and would promote civil society as the sphere where democratic decisionmaking must occur. This approach would dedicate more resources to addressing the economic causes of conflict rather than building installations designed for the use of force. It would also commit the United States to transparency about the purposes, activities, and effects of existing U.S. military bases in the region.

U.S. military facilities represent tangible commitments to underlying policies that are either outmoded, as in the case of Cuba, or perniciously expansionist. According to SouthCom, the command briefing guiding the Army's military presence in the region highlights access to strategic resources in South America—especially oil—as well as other issues with social and political roots, such as immigration and narcotics. A rational U.S. security doctrine would redirect resources invested in military bases to civilian agencies whose mandate is to address such social and political problems, including nongovernmental organizations, local and regional agencies of the hemisphere's governments, and programs of the United Nations. Such a focus shift would imply changes in U.S. drug policy and would redirect military and police assistance both toward alternative crop and other development projects in the Andes and toward drug treatment and health programs in the United States.

Short of such a re-examination of the policy foundations for military bases in the region, the United States should review existing agreements for foreign bases using democratic criteria. Bases should not be maintained or established without broad consultation with and agreement of the civil societies and legislatures of the countries in which the bases are located. Without such consultation and agreement, these bases represent a usurpation of demo-

cratic control within the host society. Objectionable contract provisions, such as broad U.S. military access to the host-nation's ports and air space, diplomatic immunity for U.S. military personnel, and prohibitions against access or inspections by local authorities, should be deleted. Bases should only be established for fixed periods of time, should have clearly defined missions, and should require renewal by both U.S. and host congresses.

The United States should also not attempt either to establish military access or to conduct controversial military missions through private contract outsourcing. In Panama, the United States should honor the substance of the Neutrality Treaty, which forbids stationing U.S. soldiers and bases in Panama, and should refrain from using local airstrips for military sorties by either U.S. military or contract aircraft.

To ensure transparency and accountability to host countries, base agreements should be amended to give both the public health and environmental officials of host nations and representatives of communities affected by U.S. bases the authority to inspect all base facilities on short notice.

To address environmental problems generated at U.S. military bases in Latin America as well as in other regions, the United States should recognize its responsibility, and Congress should establish an Overseas Defense Environmental Restoration Account. The account should provide for cleanup of both existing and former U.S. bases abroad—to at least the same standards established for domestic U.S. military bases—and should fund adequate study of contaminated lands and waters.

Regarding Vieques, Congress should appropriate enough funds for a complete cleanup. The Navy and the Environmental Protection Agency should implement a thorough cleanup of Vieques and of the former bombing range in neighboring Culebra, since both sites have been approved for inclusion on the Superfund National Priorities List. The Navy should also settle claims by island residents seeking compensation for damages to their health and environment. Similarly, policy-makers ought to heed the repeated appeals by Panama to remove the thousands of explosives left in firing ranges in the canal area. Such measures of environmental responsibility would demonstrate leadership that is sorely needed.

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Sources for More Information

Organizations

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Websites

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Major U.S. Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean	Number of military personnel
Guantánamo Bay, Cuba	8,100 (as of April 2004)
Soto Cano, Honduras	550
Manta, Ecuador	475
Aruba & Curacao	450
Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico	118
Comalapa, El Salvador	100

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