



Context Paper:

The Regional Implications of the New U.S.- Colombian Military Agreement

On July 20, 2009 Colombian President Alvaro Uribe publicly announced that Colombia and the United States would sign an agreement allowing U.S. military forces to use up to seven Colombian military bases, allegedly, for the fight against narcotics and terrorism. The announcement raised great concern amongst a number of South American nations, leading to an extraordinary presidential summit of UNASUR – the Union of South American Nations, a regional group – on August 28, 2009.

The concern expressed by the region over the use of seven Colombian military bases by U.S. forces should be understood by taking into consideration the following:

- The use of these bases marks an expansion of existing U.S military strategies in Colombia that have increasingly regionalized Colombia's internal armed conflict as military operations, refugee populations, armed combatants, and even herbicides used to eradicate coca crops have spilled across the borders of Colombia.
- Neither President Uribe nor President Obama can guarantee that deepening this military strategy will not increase the negative effects on other countries.
- The characteristics of the illicit drug market require a comprehensive approach to this problem. The current military-centered strategy cannot generate sustainable results and it is a source of instability in the region.
- What the region needs is peace in Colombia, not a spill-over of the war into the entire region. Mixing an anti-narcotics strategy with the strategies against insurgency has only exacerbated the Colombian conflict. As previous internal conflicts in the region have demonstrated, the solution for the last civil war remaining in the region is political not military.
- Venezuela has been the victim, not the aggressor. Except for Ecuador, Venezuela has been the country most affected by Plan Colombia. Venezuela has been the recipient of millions of displaced Colombians and has suffered

consistent violence along the border. Furthermore, Venezuela has been continuously attacked by the U.S. government and the Uribe administration over the last decade with false accusations of support for terrorist groups and participation in drug trafficking.

Regional Concern

The region has consistently expressed its dissatisfaction and concern with the Colombian decision. Ecuador called it “worrying,” while Chilean President Michelle Bachelet called the talks between Colombia and the U.S. “disquieting.”¹ In a press conference on July 30, 2009, Brazilian President Lula da Silva remarked, “An American base in Colombia doesn't please me.”²

During the UNASUR summit, the group unanimously stated, “The presence of foreign military forces – with their means and resources linked to their own objectives – cannot threaten the sovereignty and integrity of any other South American nation, and in consequence threaten the peace and security of the region.” Furthermore, as reported by the ANSA news agency, “The South American presidents decided that the agreement that allows for U.S. military to be stationed and operational in seven Colombian military bases be examined by the Council for the Defense of UNASUR.”³ Commenting on the summit, President Lula da Silva pointed out, “This debate will still continue, but the important thing was that we managed to sign an unitary document.”⁴

The concern over the bases has been echoed by academics, former Colombian government officials and human rights groups. According to University of Miami drug expert Bruce Bagley, “The bases, even if nominally under Colombian control, will deepen Colombian dependence on the U.S.”⁵ Former Colombian Defense Minister Rafael Pardo said of the arrangement, “[It is] like lending your apartment's balcony to someone from outside the block so that he can spy on your neighbors.”⁶



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) criticized the base negotiations, comparing them to “the disastrous rollout of the U.S. 4th Fleet, in which the United States, with little diplomatic preparation and without clear motives, announced that it was greatly enhancing its naval capabilities. Many, if not most, countries in Latin America took this as nothing less than a return to ‘gunboat diplomacy.’”⁷

One of the main problems expressed by the region is that Colombia cannot give guarantees that its cooperation with the U.S. military will be limited to its territory. In fact, in the past, Colombia’s strategy has been to direct aggression against her neighbors. Venezuela’s territorial integrity has been violated on numerous occasions by the Colombian government, such as when Colombian forces secretly apprehended Rodrigo Granda, the internationally recognized global negotiator of the irregular armed group FARC, in Venezuela. In another case, right-wing paramilitaries whose links to the Colombian government remain in question, were discovered in Caracas preparing to assault the presidential palace. Additionally, in 2008 President Uribe adopted the Bush doctrine of preemptive war when Colombia attacked Ecuadorian territory. An increased U.S. military presence in Colombia heightens the probability that the U.S. could get involved in acts of aggression against Colombia’s neighbors. An increased U.S. military presence in Colombia heightens the probability that the U.S. could get involved in acts of aggression against Colombia’s neighbors.

The level of concern by the region is evident – **this is the first time in South American history that a military cooperation agreement between two countries is being discussed multilaterally.** Hence, the Extraordinary Presidential Summit of UNASUR held in Argentina in August was tremendously important to begin developing a regional doctrine in this matter. As *Time* described, “One head of state after another grilled conservative Colombian President and U.S. Ally Alvaro Uribe on the details of the plan and why they weren’t better consulted about it.”

The UNASUR members found common ground on rejecting foreign threats against the sovereignty of the region’s countries and recognized the need for finding mechanisms to offer

transparency and security regarding the scope of military agreements with countries outside the region.⁸ To set the example, President Hugo Chávez offered to share with the UNASUR military council the information about all military agreements that Venezuela has with other countries, such as Russia and Iran.⁹

Insisting on a Failed Strategy

Concern has also been raised about the U.S. bases because they would mark the increased reliance on the use of military tools to fight illegal drugs, a policy that has long failed to curb drug production and trafficking and has had negative impacts on the region.

Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the Western Hemisphere. Plan Colombia, a U.S.-funded counter-narcotics and later counter-insurgency program, has been the main receptor and protagonist of U.S. initiatives in Colombia, pumping a staggering \$6 billion dollars into the hands of the Colombian government between 2000, when the program began, and 2008. Of that amount, only \$1.3 billion has gone to non-military aid, leaving close to \$5 billion for purely military activities.¹⁰

Plan Colombia’s efficacy in combating drugs remains in question, though. The U.S. Government Accountability Office has noted that “Plan Colombia’s goal of reducing the cultivation, processing, and distribution of illegal narcotics by targeting coca cultivation was not achieved.”¹¹ It has not produced a significant decline in the growing of coca or the production of cocaine, and there have been proportional increases in the production of coca in surrounding countries such as Peru and Bolivia, revealing the failure of a narrow approach in fighting drug production and trafficking. Moreover, according to the UN World Drug Report 2009, “Colombia remains the world largest cultivator of coca bush.”¹²

In relation to efforts to reign in irregular groups who have been engaged in a civil war against the Colombian state for more than 60 years, the Colombian government has only managed to make the guerrilla forces retreat. According to GAO, “Defense and Colombian officials caution that FARC remains a national security threat, exercising control over important parts of the country.”¹³



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

Additionally, as *Time* magazine points out, “If the war is being won, why then are so many terrified Colombians abandoning their farms in the hinterlands and crowding into the cities?”¹⁴ According to the Colombian-based NGO Human Rights and Displaced Office, in 2008 alone the number of displaced persons increased more than 20%.¹⁵ According to *Time*, analysts say, “Rather than winding down, the country’s 45-year conflict is evolving.”¹⁶ Some kinds of violence might be declining but new ones are appearing, the guerrillas have been retreating and some paramilitary forces dismantled, but tens of thousands of armed groups are occupying the vacuum left by them. “Human Rights groups also accuse these new militias of working hand-in-glove with legitimate businesses to take control of large swaths of land to mine gold, drill for petroleum and produce palm oil for Colombia’s booming biofuels industry.”¹⁷

Even worse, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, “Numerous Colombian lawmakers, including many from President Uribe’s own party, are under investigation for their alleged ties to paramilitary groups, which also happen to be deeply involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities.”¹⁸

Hence, **the real issues are the effectiveness and sustainability of Plan Colombia, the local and regional consequences of militarization** from the “war on drugs,” and its “fusion” with the internal fight against the insurgents rather than some short term gains.

The deal allowing the U.S. military to use seven bases in Colombia not only ignores these crucial issues while deepening the same failed strategies, but even contradicts the recommendations of the U.S. Congress regarding the need to nationalize Plan Colombia.¹⁹

Venezuela: A Scapegoat

With critical help from the Colombian government, the Bush administration and sectors of the right-wing U.S. political establishment continuously lodged a series of defamatory attacks against the Venezuelan government accusing it of harboring terrorists and providing safe haven to narco-traffickers.

One of the most outrageous examples of this was seen in the Boyer case of 2003 in which a man named Moises

Boyer allegedly gave himself up to Colombian intelligence agencies posing as a former member of Venezuela’s armed forces and a former pilot of President Chavez. He alleged that a leader of the FARC had been transported to Venezuela for medical treatment on the instruction of Venezuela’s Vice President.

Upon further investigation of his story, and after both Venezuelan and Colombian media outlets had reported the incident over and over, it was revealed that Boyer was neither a member of Venezuela’s military, nor was he a pilot and that the information had been provided to the weekly journal (*El Espectador*), who initially released it to Colombian military intelligence.

The case of Grannobles is another emblematic example. In March of 2001 the Colombian and Venezuelan media provided sensationalist coverage to the unverified reports that the government of Venezuela had transported to Cuba a guerilla member of the FARC named German Briceno Suarez, a.k.a. Grannobles, brother of one of the principle leaders of the organization.

Actually, what had occurred was that at the request of the International Red Cross, a severely injured member of the ELN (National Liberation Army) named Carlos Buenahora (not Grannobles) was airlifted from Colombia via Venezuela to Cuba. His transport was carried out with the full concurrence and collaboration of the three governments involved and in accordance with International Human Rights Laws.

In a more recent example, on July 26, 2009, the Colombian government lodged attacks against Venezuela, claiming that three anti-tank rocket launchers bought from Sweden 20 years ago were found in a FARC guerilla camp, and suggested that the current Venezuelan government had provided them.²⁰

According to the *New York Times*, the military equipment in question was found in October of last year, begging the question as to why the Colombian government withheld this information until this particular moment²¹ Moreover, on August 5, 2009, President Chavez reminded the public about a public document issued by the Venezuelan National Guard and shared with the Colombian government in 1995, clearly reporting the theft of five anti-tank rocket launchers



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

from a Venezuelan military installation during a FARC raid on Venezuelan territory, long before President Chavez was ever governing the country.²² The three mentioned anti-tanks rockets launchers were part of this group of stolen weapons.

The truth is that Venezuela has consistently condemned violent acts perpetuated by the guerrillas, as well as terrorism, and has worked tirelessly to support peace and reconciliation in Colombia. While testifying before the U.S. Congress in early April 2008, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza said, “Does Venezuela support terrorist groups? I don't think so. There is no evidence, and no member country, including this one [the U.S.] has offered the OAS such proof.”²³

Much of Colombia's 60-year-old conflict has had a detrimental effect on Venezuela, given that it shares a border with Colombia and is home to thousands of Colombian refugees who have fled the violence in their own country. Even the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized the effort Venezuela has made with its migratory policy to incorporate the Colombian refugees.²⁴ It should be remembered that it was President Chavez who, at the request of President Uribe in September 2007, initiated a successful process of humanitarian exchange that reinvigorated the peace process in Colombia and resulted in the release of prisoners being held by the FARC, including three American military officers.

Additionally, in contrast to the countless politicized reports from the U.S. and Colombia, **international organizations such as the United Nations paint a more balanced picture of Venezuela's counter narcotic efforts.** This year alone, Venezuela has honored 20 extradition orders with Colombia, the United States and other countries.²⁵ In the two-year period following the exit of the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) from Venezuelan territory due to spying, the United Nations found that Venezuela increased its cocaine seizures by a whopping 35%.²⁶

Conclusion

The projected U.S.-Colombia agreement granting rights to the U.S. military to use as many as seven military bases in Colombia shows that the U.S. policy toward the

Colombian conflict and the region continues to be driven by a “military doctrine” that has already failed and has had negative consequences in Colombia and the region.

As senators Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) suggested in a July 28, 2009 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the issue, there are serious implications for the United States as well as Colombian civilians. They write, “What are the implications of further deepening our relationship with the Colombian military at a time of growing revelations about the widespread *falsos positivos* (“false positives”) scandal, in which the Colombian military recruited many hundreds (some estimates are as high as 1600) of boys and young men for jobs in the countryside that did not exist and then summarily executed them to earn bonuses and vacation days?... What signal does a deepening of our partnership with the Colombian military send before investigations gain momentum and accountability for these atrocities is established? How, given these circumstances, would deeper institutionalized cooperation with the Colombian military fit in with our strategic interest in and commitment to human rights and the rule of law?”

Other congressmen have also expressed their concerns about the deal being worked out between Bogota and Washington. Representatives Tammy Baldwin, James P. McGovern and Jan Schakowsky stated in a “Dear Colleague” letter sent on September 4, 2009 to other members of Congress that “we are very concerned that increased U.S. military involvement in Colombia will exacerbate the failures of Plan Colombia and continue to overemphasize funding to Colombia's armed forces rather than needed development and rule of law efforts.”

Latin America and Venezuela need peace in Colombia. President Chavez even risked losing domestic support while trying to help forge a humanitarian agreement that ultimately led to the liberation of hostages in early 2008. Yet, lasting peace will be impossible until the Colombian and U.S. governments understand the incoherence of the so called “war on terror”, the need to change the strategy on the “war on drugs” and also acknowledge that the Colombian internal conflict has no military solution. The experience of civil wars in Central America demonstrates that the only path for a positive peace in Colombia is through negotiations. Insisting on a military strategy will



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only extend the agony of war and generate further instability in the region.

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September 8, 2009.

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