



Context Paper

The Regional Implications of the New U.S.- Colombian Military Agreement *New Developments after UNASUR's Meeting on November 27th*

On October 30, 2009, the U.S. and Colombia signed an agreement allowing U.S. military forces to use up to seven Colombian military bases allegedly for the fight against narcotics and terrorism. The agreement, which was publicly announced in July, 2009, provoked great concern in the region due to the lack of transparency with which it was negotiated and the impact it could have on expanding Colombia's internal conflict. Concerns were also expressed regarding the risks of U.S.-Colombian operations taking place beyond Colombia's borders.

The region's worries 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 a new phase in the expansion of U.S. military strategies in Colombia and the region. These strategies have increasingly externalized Colombia's internal armed conflict as military operations, refugee populations, armed combatants, drug production and trafficking, and even toxic herbicides used to eradicate coca crops have spilled across the borders of Colombia.
- The terms of the agreement, made public only after it was signed, confirmed that neither the Colombian nor the U.S. government could offer guarantees to the region that operations carried out from the bases would not violate the sovereignty of any other country. The agreement vaguely conforms to the principle of non-intervention in the internal matters of other countries, but it does not explicitly prohibit regional intelligence operations or the use of preemptive actions – which President George W. Bush was infamous for – in order to safeguard Colombia's "national security."
- A number of U.S. government documents made public confirm these concerns. In one document, the U.S. Air Force offers an alarming political justification to obtain funds for "military construction improvements" at Palanquero Air Base in Colombia – one of the bases in the agreement. Says the document, "Development of this CSL [Cooperative Security Location] provides

a unique opportunity for full spectrum operations in a critical subregion of our hemisphere where security and stability is under constant threat from narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-U.S. governments...."¹

- 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 its civil war into the entire region. Mixing an anti-narcotics strategy with the strategies against insurgency and terrorist acts has only exacerbated the Colombian conflict. As previous internal conflicts in the regions 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."²

On November 7, 2009, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said of the bases, "Dear friend Obama: we don't need U.S. bases in Colombia to combat [the] narcotics trade in South America. We can look after combating [the] narcotics trade inside our borders and you must look after your drug consumers. That way we'll have a better



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world.”³ Additionally, on November 18 President Lula and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner issued a joint statement expressing their concern over foreign troops in the region, pointing specifically to the U.S. bases in Colombia.⁴

The announcement of the agreement 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. 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.”⁵

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.”⁶ 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 a unitary document.”⁷

The UNASUR members have 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

On November 27, another extraordinary UNASUR summit was held with the purpose of discussing security policies in the region and remaining concerns over the deployment of U.S. soldiers in seven bases in Colombia. Also to be discussed was a proposal to designate South America as a zone of peace. At the very last-minute Colombia’s defense and foreign ministers decided not to attend, preventing a comprehensive discussion of the bases. However, the members of UNASUR agreed on an important resolution that sets the foundations for a South American defense

and security strategy, as well as mechanisms to guarantee transparency and cooperation amongst its members. This resolution also states that the defense agreements of its members will include a clause to guarantee the respect of the principles of sovereignty, territorial inviolability and non-intervention in the internal matters of other states. **Member-states also agreed to prohibit “the use or the threat of force, as well as any other type of military aggression or threats to the stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the other member states” and to request a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss the bases.**¹⁰

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.

There are also concerns in the US

Beyond regional leaders, a number of academics and think tanks have noted that the agreement could provoke concern and threaten U.S. standing in the region.

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.”**¹¹ 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.”¹²

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.’”¹³

On November 25, WOLA released a statement in which it outlined its concerns with the agreement. “This appears to be an agreement without borders, potentially allowing the U.S. military to conduct virtually any mission against virtually any perceived



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threat. The U.S. has said that it is not their 'intention' to go beyond Colombia's borders, but 'intentions' can change over a 10 year agreement, and other countries in Latin America know that, especially when considering the history of U.S. military intervention in the region. The agreement represents a bilateral military approach, which has the potential to increase tensions in a region that is sorely in need of multilateral U.S. diplomatic initiatives aimed at decreasing tensions."¹⁴

An independent Caracas-based security consultant interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* on the bases noted that they were likely to be used against Venezuela. "I imagine the bases will offer advanced monitoring technology and that they will use it to keep closer vigilance of Chavez," she said.¹⁵

Full-Spectrum Operations

One of the main problems expressed by the region is that Colombia cannot give guarantees that this new agreement with the U.S. military will be limited to its territory. In fact, in the past, U.S.-Colombian strategy has been to direct aggression against Colombia's neighbors. Venezuela's sovereignty has been violated both by right-wing paramilitaries and when Colombian forces have crossed into Venezuela to apprehend members of the FARC, who illegally entered the country themselves. In another case, Colombian forces secretly removed Rodrigo Granda, the FARC's internationally recognized global negotiator, from Venezuela. Additionally, in 2008 President Uribe adopted the Bush policy of pre-emptive war in its strike against Ecuador. 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 conditions of the agreement, made public only after it was signed, confirmed that neither the Colombian government nor the U.S. government could offer guarantees to the region that operations carried out from the bases would not violate the sovereignty of any other country. The agreement vaguely conforms to the principle of non-intervention in the internal matters of other countries, but it does not explicitly prohibit regional intelligence operations or preemptive actions in order to safeguard Colombia's "national security."

Worse yet, a number of public documents shed light on the agreement's real objectives. **In a document presented to the U.S. Congress in May 2009, the U.S. Air Force offers an alarming justification for expanding the use of the Palanquero Air Base in Colombia.** "Palanquero provides an opportunity for conducting full spectrum operations throughout South America," it says, which are "essential for supporting the U.S. mission in Colombia and throughout the United States Southern Command." The main revelation of this document is the clear allusion to the political objectives served by the Palanquero base. "Development of this CSL [Cooperative Security Location] provides a unique opportunity for full spectrum operations in a critical sub region of our hemisphere where security and stability is under constant threat from narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-U.S. governments..."¹⁶

On November 6, 2009, only days after this document was publicly criticized, the U.S. Air Force presented an "addendum" to Congress modifying the language used to justify the funds to expand the Palanquero base. Confirming the implications of the original justification, the new version of the U.S. Air Force's document mentions the respect for state sovereignty and deleted the references to "anti-U.S. governments" as principal motivations for the U.S. presence on the base.

But regardless of the changes made in the addendum, the document continues insisting that the base "enhances the U.S. Global Defense Posture (GDP) Strategy which includes development of a comprehensive and integrated presence strategy." This change in language, which was made after the signing of the agreement and after funds were approved for the expansion of one of its most strategic bases, only confirms the intent to avoid debate over an issue as important as is the deepening and expansion of militaristic U.S. policies towards the region. The newly enhanced policy not only relies on the re-activation and deployment of the U.S. Navy's Fourth Fleet to the region, but also on the virtual ceding of seven Colombian bases to U.S. military and intelligence personnel.

A U.S. Senate report on the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, apart from approving the requested funds, clearly connects this request for "military construction improvements" at Palanquero Air Base in Colombia with the new agreement. "The committee



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believes these funds should not be expended until the Commander of SOUTHCOM has secured terms that will permit the Command to perform its mission over a period of time that justifies the investment in military construction.”¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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.”**¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

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.”²¹

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?”²² According to the Colombian-based NGO Human Rights and Displaced Office, in 2008 alone the number of displaced persons increased by 24%.²³ A number of studies have found that up to 301 Colombians are now entering Venezuela on a daily basis, and unlike in the past, they are coming with their families.²⁴

According to *Time*, analysts say, “Rather than winding down, the country’s 45-year conflict is evolving.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

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.”²⁷

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.²⁸

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.



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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.²⁹

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 for nine months.³⁰ 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 from a

Venezuelan military installation during a FARC raid on Venezuelan territory, long before President Chavez was ever governing the country.³¹ The three mentioned anti-tanks rockets launchers were part of this group of stolen weapons.

There is also concern based on recent events that Colombian paramilitary forces are being used to act against the Venezuelan government. In October, two members of Colombia's security apparatus were detained for allegedly spying in Venezuela.³² And in November 2009, the Venezuelan National Guard detained a busload of 100 presumed Colombian paramilitary operatives in the state of Barinas, further provoking fears of possible plots that could be use as a pretext for an eventual U.S.-Colombia attack on Venezuelan soil.³³

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.³⁴ 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-narcotics efforts. This year alone, Venezuela has honored 20 extradition requests with Colombia, the United States and other countries.³⁵ 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%.³⁶

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,



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including this one [the U.S.] has offered the OAS such proof.”³⁷

The truth is that Venezuela has worked tirelessly to support peace and reconciliation in Colombia.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Colombia agreement virtually ceding to the U.S. military seven military bases in Colombia constitutes a new phase of the U.S. military doctrine in 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, this new agreement has 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 terrorism,” 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 only extend the agony of war and generate further instability in the region.

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December 3, 2009.

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