

Muscling Latin America

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In September Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, delivered on an electoral promise and refused to renew Washington's decade-old, rent-free lease on an air base outside the Pacific coast town of Manta, which for the past ten years has served as the Pentagon's main South American outpost. The eviction was a serious effort to fulfill the call of Ecuador's new Constitution to promote "universal disarmament" and oppose the "imposition" of military bases of "some states in the territory of others." It was also one of the most important victories for the global demilitarization movement, loosely organized around the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases, since protests forced the US Navy to withdraw from Vieques, Puerto Rico, in 2003. Correa, though, couldn't resist an easy joke. "We'll renew the lease," he quipped, "if the US lets us set up a base in Miami."

Funny. Then Washington answered with a show of force: take away one, we'll grab seven. In late October the United States and Colombia signed an agreement granting the Pentagon use of seven military bases, along with an unlimited number of as yet unspecified "facilities and locations." They add to Washington's already considerable military presence in Colombia, as well as in Central America and the Caribbean.

Responding to criticism from South America on the Colombian deal, the White House insists it merely formalizes existing military cooperation between the two countries under Plan Colombia and will not increase the offensive capabilities of the US Southern Command (Southcom). The Pentagon says otherwise, writing in its 2009 budget request that it needed funds to upgrade one of the bases to conduct "full spectrum operations throughout South America" to counter, among other threats, "anti-U.S. governments" and to "expand expeditionary warfare capability." That ominous language, since scrubbed from the budget document, might be a case of hyping the threat to justify spending during austere times. But the Obama administration's decision to go forward with the bases does accelerate a dangerous trend in US hemispheric policy.

In recent years, Washington has experienced a fast erosion of its influence in South America, driven by the rise of Brazil, the region's left turn, the growing influence of China and Venezuela's use of oil revenue to promote a multipolar diplomacy. Broad social movements have challenged efforts by US- and Canadian-based companies to expand extractive industries like mining, biofuels, petroleum and logging. Last year in Peru, massive indigenous protests forced the repeal of laws aimed at opening large swaths of the Amazon to foreign timber, mining and oil corporations, and throughout the region similar activism continues to place Latin America in the vanguard of the anti-corporate and anti-militarist global democracy movement.

Such challenges to US authority have led the Council on Foreign Relations to pronounce the Monroe Doctrine "obsolete." But that doctrine, which for nearly two centuries has been used to justify intervention from Patagonia to the Rio Grande, has not expired so much as slimmed down, with Barack Obama's administration disappointing potential regional allies by continuing to promote a volatile mix of militarism and free-trade orthodoxy in a corridor running from Mexico to Colombia.

The anchor of this condensed Monroe Doctrine is Plan Colombia. Heading into the eleventh year of what was planned to phase out after five, Washington's multibillion-dollar military aid package has failed to stem the flow of illegal narcotics into the United States. More Andean coca was synthesized

into cocaine in 2008 than in 1998, and the drug's retail price is significantly lower today, adjusted for inflation, than it was a decade ago.

But Plan Colombia is not really about drugs; it is the Latin American edition of GCOIN, or Global Counterinsurgency, the current term used by strategists to downplay the religious and ideological associations of George W. Bush's bungled "global war on terror" and focus on a more modest program of extending state rule over "lawless" or "ungoverned spaces," in GCOIN parlance.

Starting around 2006, with the occupation of Iraq going badly, Plan Colombia became the counterinsurgent marquee, celebrated by strategists as a successful application of the "clear, hold and build" sequence favored by theorists like Gen. David Petraeus. Its lessons have been incorporated into the curriculums of many US military colleges and cited by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a model for Afghanistan. Not only did the Colombian military, with support from Washington, weaken the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), Latin America's oldest and strongest insurgency, but according to the Council on Foreign Relations, it secured a state presence in "many regions previously controlled by illegal armed groups, reestablishing elected governments, building and rebuilding public infrastructure, and affirming the rule of law." Plan Colombia, in other words, offered not just a road map to success but success itself. "Colombia is what Iraq should eventually look like," wrote Atlantic contributor Robert Kaplan, "in our best dreams."

Traditionally in most counterinsurgencies, the "clear" stage entails a plausibly deniable reliance on death-squad terror—think Operation Phoenix in Vietnam or the Mano Blanca in El Salvador. The Bush administration was in office by the time Plan Colombia became fully operational, and according to the Washington Post's Scott Wilson, it condoned the activities of right-wing paramilitaries, loosely organized as the United Self-Defense Forces, or AUC in Spanish. "The argument at the time, always made privately," Wilson writes, "was that the paramilitaries"—responsible for most of Colombia's political murders—"provided the force that the army did not yet have." This was followed by the "hold" phase, a massive paramilitary land grab. Fraud and force—"sell, or your widow will," goes many an opening bid—combined with indiscriminate fumigation, which poisoned farmlands, to turn millions of peasants into refugees. Paramilitaries, along with their narcotrafficante allies, now control about 10 million acres, roughly half of the country's most fertile land.

After parts of the countryside had been pacified, it was time to "build" the state. Technically, the United States considers the AUC to be a terrorist organization, part of the narcoterrorist triptych, along with FARC and the narcos, that Southcom is pledged to fight. But Plan Colombia did not so much entail an assault on the paras—aside from the most recalcitrant and expendable—as create a venue through which, by defining public policy as perpetual war, they could become the state itself. Under the smokescreen of a government-brokered amnesty, condemned by national and international human rights groups for institutionalizing impunity, paras have taken control of hundreds of municipal governments, establishing what Colombian social scientist León Valencia calls "true local dictatorships," consolidating their property seizures and deepening their ties to narcos, landed elites and politicians. The country's sprawling intelligence apparatus is infiltrated by this death squad/narco combine, as is its judiciary and Congress, where more than forty deputies from the governing party are under investigation for ties to the AUC.

Plan Colombia, in other words, has financed the opposite of what is taking place in neighboring Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela, where progressive movements are fitfully trying to "refund" their societies along more inclusive lines. In place of the left's "participatory democracy," Colombian President Álvaro Uribe offers "democratic security," a social compact whereby those who submit to the new order are promised safe, even yuppified cities and secure highways, while oppositional civil society suffers intimidation and murder. Colombia remains the hands-down worst repressor in Latin America. More than 500 trade unionists have been executed since Uribe took office. In recent years

195 teachers have been assassinated, and not one arrest has been made for the killings. And the military stands accused of murdering more than 2,000 civilians and then dressing their bodies in guerrilla uniforms in order to prove progress against the FARC.

It also seems that many right-wing warriors are not cut out for the quiet life offered by the Paz Uribe. The Bogotá-based think tank Nuevo Arco Iris reports mini civil wars breaking out among “heirs of the AUC” for control of local spoils. Yet Plan Colombia continues to be hailed. Flying home from a recent Bogotá-hosted GCOIN conference, the former head of Southcom wrote on his blog that Colombia is a “must see” tourist spot, having “come a long, long way in controlling a deep-seated insurgency just over two hours flight from Miami—and we could learn a great deal from their success.”

Seen in light of his escalation in Afghanistan, Obama’s support for the Colombian base deal endorses the kind of elastic threat assessment that has turned the “long war” against radical Islam into a wide war where ultimate victory will be a world absent of crime—“counterinsurgencies without end,” as Andrew Bacevich recently put it.

Shortly after the fall of Baghdad, Washington tried to conscript all of Latin America in the fight. In October 2003 it pushed the Organization of American States to include corruption, undocumented migration, money laundering, natural and man-made disasters, AIDS, environmental degradation, poverty and computer hacking alongside terrorism and drugs as security threats. In 2004 an Army War College strategist proposed “exporting Plan Colombia” to all of Latin America, which Donald Rumsfeld tried to do later that year at a regional defense ministers meeting in Ecuador. He was rebuffed; countries like Chile and Brazil refuse to subordinate their militaries, as they did during the cold war, to US command.

So the United States retrenched, setting about to fight the wide war in a narrower place, creating a security corridor running from Colombia through Central America to Mexico. With a hodgepodge of treaties and projects, such as the International Law Enforcement Academy and the Merida Initiative, Obama is continuing the policies of his predecessors, spending millions to integrate the region’s military, policy, intelligence and even, through Patriot Act-like legislation, judicial systems. This is best thought of as an effort to enlarge the radius of Plan Colombia to create a unified, supra-national counterinsurgent infrastructure. Since there is “fusion” among Latin American terrorists and criminals, goes a typical argument in a recent issue of the Pentagon’s Joint Force Quarterly, “countering the threat will require fusion on our part.”

At the same time, schemes like the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project are using World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank financing to synchronize the highway, communication and energy networks of Mexico, Central America and Colombia, blending the North American and Central American free-trade treaties and, eventually, the pending Colombian Free Trade Agreement into a seamless whole. Thomas Shannon, Bush’s top envoy to Latin America and Obama’s ambassador to Brazil, called these initiatives “armoring NAFTA.”

“Fusion” is a good word for this integration, since the melding of neoliberal economics and counterinsurgent diplomacy is explosive. One effect of Plan Colombia has been to diversify the violence and corruption endemic to the cocaine trade, with Central American and Mexican cartels and military factions taking over export of the drug to the United States. This cycle of violence is reinforced by the rapid spread of mining, hydroelectric, biofuel and petroleum operations, which wreak havoc on local ecosystems, poisoning land and water, and by the opening of national markets to US agroindustry, which destroys local economies. The ensuing displacement either creates the assorted criminal threats the wide war is waged to counter or provokes protest, which is dealt with by the avengers the wide war empowers.

Throughout Latin America, a new generation of community activists continues to advance the global democracy movement that was largely derailed in the United States by 9/11. They provide important leadership to US environmental, indigenous, religious and human rights organizations, working to develop a comprehensive and sustainable social-justice agenda. But in the Mexico-Colombia corridor, activists are confronting what might be called bio-paramilitarism, a revival of the old anticommunist death-squad/planter alliance, energized by the current intensification of extractive and agricultural industries. In Colombia, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities fighting paras who have seized land to cultivate African palm for ethanol production have been evicted by mercenaries and the military [see Teo Ballvé, "The Dark Side of Plan Colombia," June 15, 2009]. From Panama to Mexico, rural protesters are likewise targeted. In the Salvadoran department of Cabañas, for instance, death squads have executed four leaders—three in December—who opposed the Vancouver-based Pacific Rim Mining Company's efforts to dig a gold mine in their community.

And in Honduras, human rights organizations say palm planters have recruited forty members of Colombia's AUC as private security following the June overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya. That coup was at least partly driven by Zelaya's alliance with liberation-theologian priests and other environmental activists protesting mining and biofuel-induced deforestation. Just a month before his overthrow, Zelaya—in response to an investigation that charged Goldcorp, another Vancouver-based company, with contaminating Honduras's Siria Valley—introduced a law that would have required community approval before new mining concessions were granted; it also banned open-pit mines and the use of cyanide and mercury. That legislation died with his ouster. Zelaya also tried to break the dependent relationship whereby the region exports oil to US refineries only to buy back gasoline and diesel at monopolistic prices; he joined Petrocaribe—the alliance that provides cheap Venezuelan oil to member countries—and signed a competitive contract with Conoco Phillips. This move earned him the ire of Exxon and Chevron, which dominate Central America's fuel market. Since the controversial November 29 presidential elections, Honduras has largely fallen off the media's radar, even as the pace of repression has accelerated. Since the State Department's recognition of that vote, about ten opposition leaders have been executed—roughly half of the number killed in the previous five months.

It didn't have to be this way. Latin America does not present a serious military danger. No country is trying to acquire a nuclear weapon or cut off access to vital resources. Venezuela continues to sell oil to the United States. Obama is popular in Latin America, and most governments, including those on the left, would have welcomed a demilitarized diplomacy that downplays terrorism and prioritizes reducing poverty and inequality—exactly the kind of "new multilateralism" Obama called for in his presidential campaign.

Yet because Latin America presents no real threat, there is no incentive to confront entrenched interests that oppose a modernization of hemispheric relations. "Obama," said a top-level Argentine diplomat despairingly, "has decided that Latin America isn't worth it. He gave it to the right."

The White House could have worked with the Organization of American States to restore democracy in Honduras. Instead, after months of mixed signals, Obama capitulated to Senate Republicans and endorsed a murderous regime. Washington could try to advance a new hemispheric economic policy, balancing Latin American calls for equity and development with corporate profits. But the Democratic Party remains Wall Street's party, and shortly after taking office Obama abandoned his pledge to renegotiate NAFTA. With Washington's blessing the IMF continues to push Latin American countries to liberalize their economies. In December Arturo Valenzuela, Obama's assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, caused a scandal in Argentina when he urged the country to return to the investment climate of 1996—which would be something like Buenos Aires calling on the United States to reinflate the recent Greenspan bubble.

The Obama administration could reconsider Plan Colombia and the Pentagon's base agreement. But

that would mean rethinking a longer, multi-decade, bipartisan, trillion-dollars-and-counting “war on drugs,” and Obama has other wars to extricate himself from—or not, as the case may be.

Unable or unwilling to make concessions on these and other issues important to Latin America—normalizing relations with Cuba, for instance, or advancing immigration reform—the White House is adopting an increasingly antagonistic posture. Hillary Clinton, following a visit to Brazil by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, warned Latin Americans to “think twice” about “the consequences” of engagement with Iran. Bolivia denounced the comments as a threat, Brazil canceled a scheduled meeting between its foreign minister and Valenzuela, and even Argentina, no friend of Iran, grew irritated. As the Argentine diplomat quoted above told me, “The Obama administration would never talk to European countries like that.”

Insiders report that high-level State Department officials are furious at Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who in recent months has been as steadfast as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez in opposing Washington’s ongoing militarism, particularly the White House’s attempt to legitimize the Honduran coup. Having successfully thwarted a similar destabilization campaign against Bolivian president Evo Morales in 2008, Brazil, according to Lula’s top foreign-policy adviser, Marco Aurélio Garcia, is worried that Obama’s Honduras policy is “introducing the ‘theory of the preventive coup’ in Latin America”—by which Garcia means an extension of Bush’s preventive war doctrine.

In a region that has not seen a major interstate war for more than seventy years, Brazil is concerned that the Pentagon’s Colombian base deal is escalating tensions between Colombia and Venezuela. The US media have focused on Chávez’s warning that the “winds of war” were blowing through the region, but Brazil’s foreign minister, Celso Amorim, places blame for the crisis squarely on Washington. Chávez, Amorim said, “had backed away from that statement. To talk about war—a word which should never be uttered—is one thing. Another is the practical and objective issues of the Colombian bases.... If Iran or Russia were to establish a base in Venezuela, that would also worry us.”

There are also indications that the White House is hoping an upcoming round of presidential elections in South America will restore pliable governments. On a recent trip to Buenos Aires, for instance, Valenzuela met with a number of extreme right-wing politicians but not with moderate opposition leaders, drawing criticism from center-left President Cristina Fernández’s government. In January a right-wing billionaire, Sebastián Piñera, was elected president of Chile. And if Lula’s Workers Party loses Brazil’s October presidential vote, as polls indicate is a possibility, the Andean left will be increasingly isolated, caught between the Colombia-Mexico security corridor to the north and administrations more willing to accommodate Washington’s interests to the south. Twenty-first-century containment for twenty-first-century socialism. Fidel Castro, normally an optimist, has recently speculated that before Obama finishes his presidency, “there will be six to eight rightist governments in Latin America.”

Until that happens, the United States is left with a rump Monroe Doctrine and an increasingly threatening stance toward a region it used to call its own.

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P.S.

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