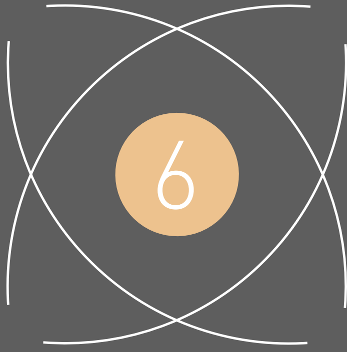

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A summer fling in South America: U.S. bases and a weapons race?

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"The winds of war are beginning to blow." With these words, controversial Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez set the tone for the summer season in Latin America; behind such declarations was the announcement of Colombia's intention to allow the U.S. military to use air and naval bases on Colombian soil, which ignited a general uproar and diplomatic firestorm among its neighbors, who fear the over-expansion of American influence and the possibility of an armed offensive against U.S. foes in South America.

In reality, the American presence in this part of the continent can be traced back to the late 1990s, when, forced to leave Howard Air Force Base in Panama in 1999, the Clinton Administration decided to negotiate 10-year agreements with El Salvador (Comalapa), Ecuador (Manta) and the Netherlands (Aruba and Curaçao) for new bases. From these so-called "Forward Operating Locations"/"Cooperative Security Locations", U.S. aircraft – piloted and maintained by military personnel and contractors – sought to identify planes and boats suspected of carrying cocaine to the United States.

The agreement with Ecuador however, soon proved to be politically unsustainable when a leftist politician and thus Chávez's natural ally, Rafael Correa, managed to win the presidency in 2006, defending the non-renewal of the agreement due to public outcry over allegations of "leasing" local sovereignty. The situation itself was aggravated after the Andean Crisis of March 2008, when a Colombian raid, just across the Ecuadorian border, killed more than 20 members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), including the guerrillas' second-in-command, Raul Reyes. According to Correa, U.S. military personnel stationed in Manta provided intelligence and support to the attack, which only strengthened his internal position, resulting in the approval by referendum five months later of a new Constitution explicitly prohibiting foreign military bases on Ecuadorian soil.

Therefore, despite the 822 counternarcotics missions that took place from Manta Air Base and resulted in the seizing of over 229 metric tons of cocaine (60 percent of drug interdiction in the eastern Pacific, with an estimated

value of U.S.$4.57 billion), the U.S. had to start searching for a new host country for its operations (with the last troops leaving Ecuador on September 18). Its sights were naturally set on Colombia.

As an essential player in the U.S. war on drugs, Colombia has been the largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the Americas, in the form of the so-called Plan Colombia, initiated in 1999 and designed to help the number one cocaine-producing nation in the world to eradicate local plantations. However, and although Plan Colombia includes components which address social aid and institutional reform, the initiative has come to be regarded by its critics as fundamentally a program of counternarcotics and military aid for the Colombian government, adding up to a sum of over U.S.$6 billion for the past ten years (and U.S.$527 million just in 2008). With Álvaro Uribe as President (elected for the first time in 2002 and currently seeking a controversial third term), relations with the U.S. deepened and so did military cooperation with the Bush Administration, who increased the funding for operations against the Marxist guerrilla insurgency campaigns (mainly funded through cocaine trafficking) of FARC and ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), ongoing for almost 40 years.

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In this context, Colombia appeared as a logical option for a more permanent U.S. presence in South America. Although negotiations began in late 2008, only in June 2009 did the first details surface, when leaks inside the Colombian Cabinet began selectively disclosing breakthroughs in the negotiations between the two countries. However, what surprised the public and political sectors was the intensity of the proposed new cooperation.

Under the new arrangements, the U.S military would be allowed to use a total of seven Colombian facilities, comprising three air force bases (Alberto Pouwels in Malambo, Capitán Luis Fernando Gómez Niño in Meta and Gérman Olano in Palanquero), two naval bases (Bahía de Málaga, in the Pacific coast and Bolívar, in Cartagena) and two army bases (where U.S. personnel are already assigned, Larandia and Tolemaida). Although the number of bases is relevant, the most striking point is the extension of the U.S. troops' mission, which will now go beyond counternarcotics to include "counter-terrorism" – presumably support for Colombian military operations against guerrillas – which prompted fears of new possible interventions on neighboring countries' soil (such as the one that triggered the crisis between Colombia and Ecuador in 2008).

In exchange, the U.S pledges, within a ten year timeframe, to invest at least U.S.$46 million (already requested in the Obama Administration's 2010 defense budget) in the improvement of the facilities in Palanquero Air Base (the country's largest one, with a 3,500 meter runway that will house American P-3 Orion and AWACS planes, previously flying from Manta), and also to give preferential treatment in future business deals regarding new military equipment for the Colombian forces.

Another significant issue is the number of U.S. personnel allowed to stay in Colombia. When Plan Colombia started, the U.S. Congress demanded a "troop cap", out of

concern that Colombia's internal situation offered a high possibility of "mission creep". Therefore, and despite the raise asked by the Pentagon in 2004 and authorized in 2005, it seems that any future arrangements between the two countries will continue to respect those limits, restricting U.S. presence to a maximum of 800 military personnel and 600 contractors (numbers not even approached under the previous cooperation agreement). However, there remains the possibility that this "cap" could be raised once more.

With news of the secretive negotiations leaking to the press, local reactions of protest soon followed, with internal opposition demanding the participation of the Colombian State Council and Congress in the ongoing process and raising the question of the constitutionality of the entire matter based on Article 173 of Colombia's Constitution, which appears to require that the Senate "permit the transit of foreign troops through the territory of the Republic."

Intending to stymie criticism, on July 15, Colombian Defense Minister General Freddy Padilla released a communiqué about the deal, shedding light on some issues: the bases in question will remain under complete Colombian sovereignty, with a local commander in charge of its daily operations (the only flag flying will be Colombia's); furthermore, Colombia will have a final say on every U.S. mission run from the seven bases, as well as on every person stationed there, and will have privileged access to any real-time intelligence gathered. On the matter of criminal immunities for U.S military and contractors (always a sensitive topic for the Pentagon), and despite previous treaties between the two countries from 1952 and 1974 that already recognized it, under the new arrangements, exceptions will be accepted whenever extreme gravity demands and Colombian authorities will be informed of every step of the eventual disciplinary/criminal process. Finally, the agreement also explicitly prohibited the troubling possibility of using Colombian soil for military interventions on third countries.

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However, these explanations weren't enough to reassure other Latin American leaders, who remained unhappy that the negotiations remained undercover for so long, with serious lack of transparency and without any kind of consultations with Colombia's neighbors. These perceptions of unilateralism and arrogance seriously compromised Colombia's status and credibility in the following months.

Outraged declarations soon followed, led by Hugo Chávez (who classified the deal as a potential "Yankee" beachhead in South America) and Bolivian President Evo Morales (who branded Colombians as "traitors" to the rest of the continent). In a move to calm the controversy, President Uribe traveled to seven South American countries at the beginning of August to explain the details of the accord, but only found explicit support in Peru and more serious concerns from moderate governments in Chile, Argentina and most importantly, Brazil. As an increasingly influential player in regional politics and the main military power in South America, Brazil's "judgment" on the under-the-radar base negotiations was

unavoidable, and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva demanded nothing less than formal and written assurances that U.S. personnel would never leave Colombian territory and airspace. In a bid to assure local leadership on the subject, Lula even proposed U.S. President's Barack Obama's presence in a UNASUR (the preferred intergovernmental forum for 12 nations in the region nowadays) meeting to explain the details of the proposed deal. Although he ultimately declined to attend the summit, Obama was quick to assure that "We have had a security agreement with Colombia for many years now. We have updated that agreement. We have no intent in establishing a U.S. military base in Colombia", and dispatched his National Security Adviser, Jim Jones, to explain the new accord first to Brazil and then to the other regional governments, in a recognition of Brazil's rise as a regional power.

Nevertheless, through UNASUR, several countries initiated a heated verbal storm, that failed (repeatedly at Quito, Ecuador and Bariloche, Argentina, and again at Quito this past August) to reach a consensus among the State members on how to approach and respond to the so-called "new U.S. interference" in Latin America, allowing the matter to gradually fade away, while the accord awaits the final signatures of Colombian and U.S. governments.

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A military spree

As declarations heated up, the continent soon faced another worrisome subject: a possible new arms race between Latin America countries, triggered (or allegedly, stimulated) by the U.S.-Colombia military deal.

On September 11, after a 10-day tour of Africa, Europe and Asia, Hugo Chávez disclosed the news that Venezuela had signed a new arms deal with Russia, concerning a U.S.$2.2 billion credit line to finance the purchase of military equipment, including 92 T-72 tanks, an indefinite number of Smerch multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), and a variety of air defense systems (varying from short-range Pechora, medium-range Buk-M2, and possibly the long-range advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile systems). However, this was just the latest act in a business relationship between the two countries that, since 2005, has surpassed over U.S.$4.4 billion worth of weapons contracts signed with Russia, including deals fo combat, heavy transport and multirole helicopters (10 Mi-35s, 50 Mi-28Ns, 3 Mi-26s and 40 Mi-17s), fighter jets (24 Sukhoi-30MK2s) and 100,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles. In fact, Venezuela has become the fourth-largest importer of Russian arms during the period from 2004 to 2008, and with its U.S.$3.3 billion defense budget (in 2008), it has used its tensions with some of its neighbors (especially Colombia, which discovered, also this summer, a cache of Swedish weapons sold to Venezuela in the 1980s that were in the hands of FARC), to further increase military spending and to encourage its allies to follow the same course of action.

One of these allies, Ecuador, recently announced that it is preparing to receive a Venezuelan donation of six Mirage-50 fighters, while also expecting a delivery of 24 Super Tucano turboprop combat aircraft (worth U.S.$280 million) purchased from Brazil, in addition to radar equipment, helicopters and unmanned aircraft for coastal patrol duties, all covered by a U.S.$1.36 billion defense

budget. Bolivia, on the other hand, considered one of the poorest countries in the world, is finalizing a U.S.$100 million loan from Russia to buy combat fighters, after the U.S. lobbied the Czech Republic to halt a potential deal involving the sale of Czech Alca planes and American Bell-UH helicopters to the Morales government.

And despite Colombia, with a variety of internal problems (from the leftist guerrillas to right-wing paramilitaries), spending a record part of its GDP in defense (around 6 percent), representing U.S.$6.6 billion last year, it's Chile who is unanimously proclaimed by analysts as possessing the most advanced and modern military forces in South America. Due to a 10 percent tax on all copper sales (Chile is the number one copper-exporter in the world) implemented in 1958 and reserved to military funding, the country has been able to purchase state-of-the-art Western military equipment, including 118 Leopard 2 tanks (from Germany, in 2006), 18 used F-16 aircraft (from Holland in 2005), and eight British and German frigates.

Nonetheless, September saw Venezuela meeting its match when it comes to military spending. On Brazil's Independence Day, Brasília and Paris stunned the southern continent with news of a U.S.$9.4 billion deal for the construction of five Scorpène attack submarines (one of them nuclear-powered, a first in the region) and a U.S.$2.6 billion agreement for the supply of 50 EC-725 Cougar transport helicopters, leaving the door open for a potential U.S.$7.2 billion purchase of at least 36 Rafale fighter jets (currently competing in a bidding process against Boeing and Saab). The helicopters and the nuclear submarine will be assembled in Brazil, revealing the importance of technological transference in a defense policy with a budget of U.S.$23.9 billion in 2009, by far the largest in South America. Reflecting the continuous struggle for increased regional and international influence, Brazil has taken advantage of the high prices of commodities in recent years, as well of recent huge oil discoveries in its coastal waters, to start investing massively in its military, as the new strategic defense strategy (outlined by the end of 2008) recommends. As Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue think tank notes, Brazil "is seeking to be a more cohesive national power, and that requires exercising full control over its vast territory and borders", which includes the expansive Amazonas river area (surrounded by problematic neighbors such as Venezuela or Colombia) and its 800 km^2 offshore oil reserves. The number one goal is, therefore, to position Brazil as a major political and military player in South America, intending to lead the continent's future integration (in the form of UNASUR, a project co-sponsored by Lula) and seeking greater representation in world politics (in the form of a UN Security Council permanent seat).

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Regardless, the continuous roll-out of military deals must be seen as part of a general pattern on the continent. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, South American military expenditures rose by 50 percent over the past decade, last year totaling U.S.$34.1 billion spent. Meanwhile the International Institute for Strategic Studies records a military spending increase of 91 percent between 2003 and 2008, which translates into a jump from U.S.$24.7 billion to U.S.$47.2 billion, if one takes into account all of Latin America and the Carib-

bean. But, while these numbers show a dangerous and worrying trend on a continent with so many social and economic disparities, they must also take in account the inglorious role that most armies had during the numerous military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s; due to those painful memories, most countries found their populations unreceptive to the need for military reform and upgrades, which led to armies with obsolete equipment trying to face never-ending threats, such as drug trafficking and guerrilla warfare. Therefore, taking advantage of positive economic results, many countries have taken the opportunity to modernize their military forces, which can explain the succession of deals in recent years.

However, and as Álvaro Uribe's speech at the sixty-fourth U.N. General Assembly recognizes, "We are concerned that instead of moving towards greater cooperation on security, peace and tranquility of the citizens of each country, an arms race is being accelerated by some who need to modernize their military equipment, while others confess their desire for war." While it is impossible to assign direct responsibility for the matter, such public discussion only arose after the inflammatory affair of the U.S. bases in Colombia and the potentially "threatening new foothold in America's backyard". In the end, questions remain: Will there be an increased U.S. presence in South America? Definitely, but not as a first-stage of invasion, as Chávez and others claimed. And is the continent facing a weapons race? It is not quite there yet, but continuous militarization paves the way for conflict and leaves future prospects for this particular part of the globe looking rather uncertain and unstable.

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