

Colombia: US Continues Mammoth Global Military Presence

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Colombia deal suggests unchanged U.S. policy to keep mammoth global military presence

by Yang Qingchuan

-After the U.S. military withdrawal from Panama in 1999, the Pentagon has been expanding the "cooperative security locations" in the region. The U.S. Southern Command also operates some 17 radar sites, mostly in Peru and Colombia. All of the above is in addition to existing U.S. bases in Latin America, including a missile tracking station on Ascension Island in the Caribbean, and Soto Cano in Palmerola, Honduras. Furthermore, the United States has small military presences and property in Antigua, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and on Andros Island in the Bahamas.

-Excluding huge presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are about 900 U.S. military facilities in 46 countries and territories, accommodating 190,000 U.S. troops and 115,000 civilian employees, according to official figures. However, some analysts say the real figures may be far greater.

-In the case of the latest U.S.-Colombia base deal, many Latin American leaders spoken out against such a move as a dangerous development that can lead to war in the region and act against Colombia's neighboring countries - Ecuador and Venezuela.

WASHINGTON: Despite protests and warnings from many Latin American countries, the United States is poised to sign an agreement with Colombia to expand military presence in that country.

Colombian officials said Wednesday that negotiations on the new pact could conclude as soon as this weekend.

The move has raised ire in the Latin America region where memories of U.S. military interventions are still fresh and seems to undermine the Obama administration's latest efforts to forge warmer ties with the region.

However, the implications of the controversy may go beyond the region and seems to suggest an unchanged U.S. policy to keep a mammoth global military presence despite the change of government, analysts said.

BASE WITHOUT FORMAL TITLE

Regional leaders have warned of the consequences of the deal.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez suggested that “the winds of war are blowing” while Argentina’s President Cristina Kirchner called the move “belligerent.”

It prompted Uruguayan President Tabar Vsquez to propose banning foreign military bases in the region and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva also expressed concern.

Confronting such concerns, Obama declared last Friday that the United States has “no intent in establishing a U.S. military base in Colombia.”

However, whether the bases in the deal will have the two letters of “U.S.” in their names, the reality is that U.S. military presence in Colombia will grow, said John Lindsay-Poland, a California-based researcher on U.S. military bases in Latin America.

According to U.S. media reports, the agreement involves the use of Colombian military bases by U.S. aircraft and troops engaged in counter-narcotics and counter-guerrilla surveillance programs.

They would make up for last month’s closure of a similar U.S. operation out of Manta, Ecuador.

U.S. officials described the Colombian bases involved in the deal as “Forward Operating Locations (FOLs)” for U.S. military.

“We’re not talking about U.S. bases at all ... We’re talking about access by U.S. personnel to existing Colombian bases,” a State Department official told Miami Herald on condition of anonymity.

However, according to the Pentagon’s descriptions, such FOLs is one of the three types of U.S. overseas facilities.

By the Pentagon’s definition, FOLs are “expandable warm facilities maintained with a limited U.S. military support presence and possibly prepositioned equipment,” such as the Incirlik Airbase in Turkey and the Soto Cano Airbase in Honduras.

The second type are “Main operating bases,” with permanent personnel, strong infrastructure, and often family housing, such as the Kadena Airbase in Japan and the Ramstein Airbase in Germany.

The third is “cooperative security locations,” which are sites with few or no permanent U.S. personnel, maintained by contractors or the host nation for occasional use by the U.S. military.

Some observers argue that the FOLs are de facto U.S. bases without a formal title.

AN EXPANDING WEB

Speaking to a group of Spanish-language reporters recently, Obama said the new deal with Colombia is an “update” of existing security agreement between the two countries and is a “continuation” of existing bilateral military cooperation.

However, some analysts pointed out that it signaled a continuous trend of expanding a web of U.S. military facilities and functions in Latin America over recent years.

“New U.S. bases and military access agreements have proliferated in Latin America,” U.S. analyst John Lindsay-Poland wrote in a research paper.

He pointed out that instead of operating large bases in the region, now Washington prefers smaller and “informal” facilities such as the FOLs, in order to maintain a broad military foothold while accommodating regional leaders’ reluctance to host large U.S. military bases.

After the U.S. military withdrawal from Panama in 1999, the Pentagon has been expanding the “cooperative security locations” in the region.

The U.S. Southern Command also operates some 17 radar sites, mostly in Peru and Colombia.

All of the above is in addition to existing U.S. bases in Latin America, including a missile tracking station on Ascension Island in the Caribbean, and Soto Cano in Palmerola, Honduras.

Furthermore, the United States has small military presences and property in Antigua, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and on Andros Island in the Bahamas.

In Panama, although all U.S. military forces left the country in 1999, the Pentagon continues to enjoy access for military flights into and out of Panama.

UNCHANGED POLICY

To maintain an unmatched military is always a national goal of the United States, thus continuing a policy of maintaining a far-reaching global military presence seems to fit that logic.

Obama made it clear in his inauguration speech that it is vital for the country to maintain the “strongest military on the planet.”

“Barack Obama shows no sign of scaling back the U.S. military presence in the world,” said Catherine Lutz, a professor at Brown University.

In fact, “many of the Obama administration’s diplomatic efforts are being directed towards maintaining and garnering new access for the U.S. military across the globe,” she pointed out.

Although Washington has been readjusting its global military presence since the Cold War, the global reach of U.S. military presence is still unparalleled.

Excluding huge presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are about 900 U.S. military facilities in 46 countries and territories, accommodating 190,000 U.S. troops and 115,000 civilian employees, according to official figures.

However, some analysts say the real figures may be far greater.

All together, the Pentagon owns or rents 322,000 hectares of land overseas, with an inventory of weapons worth trillions of U.S. dollars according to some estimate.

U.S. policymakers gave two sets of reasons for keeping such a vast network of global presence.

One is to enhance security of the world by deterring attacks from “rogue countries” and preventing unrest, and the other is to provide humanitarian assistance.

However, many in the world don’t see things in that way.

In the case of the latest U.S.-Colombia base deal, many Latin American leaders spoken out against such a move as a dangerous development that can lead to war in the region and act against Colombia’s neighboring countries - Ecuador and Venezuela.

Aside from political and economic consequences, the fact that U.S. military personnel in overseas facilities are not accountable to local laws have already infuriated local residents.

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