

Militarization of Central America and the Caribbean: The U.S. Military Moves Into Costa Rica

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Nestled between Panama to its south and Nicaragua to its north, Costa Rica is a Central American nation roughly the size of Rhode Island.

If another nation were to send Rhode Island a force of 7,000 troops, 200 helicopters, and 46 warships in an effort to eradicate drug trafficking, it is doubtful that the residents of Rhode Island would consider this offer “on-the-level.” Such a massive military force could hardly be efficiently used to combat drug cartels. The only logical conclusion is that the nation whose troops now are occupying this other country had another agenda in mind that it didn’t want to share.

In early July, by a vote of 31 to 8, the Costa Rican Congress approved the U.S. bringing into their nation the same military force described above, justified with the same dubious “war on drugs” rationale. According to the agreement, the military forces are supposed to leave Costa Rica by the end of 2010. This begs the question, however, if such an over the top display of military muscle is needed now to combat the drug cartels, what will be done in the next few months to make their presence unnecessary? The history of such U.S. military deployments around the world suggests a more credible outcome than what the agreement states. Once the U.S. moves such massive forces into a country, they rarely move them out.

When push comes to shove, the political machinery in Costa Rica is subservient to U.S. government and corporate interests. Nevertheless, there are many in Costa Rica who are declaring that the agreement is a violation of their national sovereignty and is unconstitutional. (In 1948 Costa Rica abolished its army, which was sanctioned in its constitution.) Legislator Luis Fishman has vowed to challenge the decision of the Congress in the courts.

Shifting Strategy and Tactics

The buildup of U.S. armed forces in Costa Rica is part of an escalating pattern that indicates a shifting of strategy and tactics for the U.S. in controlling what the Monroe Doctrine infamously described as the U.S.’s “backyard” — that is, all of Latin America. Since the U.S. government inspired covert coup d’etats and political reversals of popular governments and/or movements in Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador in previous decades, U.S. rulers had figured they had things stitched up to their liking in Latin America. The political elites in Latin America were uniformly in the pockets of the U.S. corporate empire and appeared to be more or less in control of their people. They commonly outlawed strikes and at times even trade unions, eliminated minimum wage laws, and gave enormous tax breaks to U.S. corporations.

Therefore, the U.S. Empire builders could use their political and economic might alone to subjugate these neo-colonies to a very profitable neoliberal agenda. This agenda included allowing U.S. corporations easy access to pillage these nations' public sectors through privatization, letting multi-national corporations overrun these nations' local markets and farms through the elimination of trade barriers, and increasing the exploitation of their workers and the devastation of their natural resources by tossing out national labor and environmental standards. Because of the profits enjoyed by a few as a result of these measures, they carried the day, though they, in turn, created a simmering spirit of rebellion in the semi-colonies' peasantry and workers that would inevitably find expression.

As the U.S. began to set its sights on and send its resources to other parts of the world, most notably the Middle East and Asia, the web they had wrapped around Latin America began to unravel. This was most apparent in Venezuela where a U.S.-backed coup attempt in April of 2002 failed because of the massive mobilizing of the Venezuelan people in defense of their democratic rights. All subsequent attempts of the Venezuelan oligarchy, in collusion with the U.S. State Department, to get rid of Chavez resulted in their humiliation because of the constant support and organizing of the country's lower classes. It became apparent to the U.S. ruling class that they could no longer rely on the Venezuelan oligarchy, which had lost direct control over the political situation. What is more, the popular upsurge witnessed in Venezuela in the past decade, opened up floodgates for anti-imperialist organizing across the continent, resulting in the election of a number of left-wing presidents.

Not only was the neoliberal agenda of the U.S. being blocked, an alternative to the U.S. Free Trade policies was being set up. The Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALBA), which was initiated by Venezuela and Cuba, began to build a trading block based on exchange according to different nations' needs rather than U.S. corporate profits. While ALBA needs to be more substantially developed in order to fulfill its promise, especially in regards to organizing grassroots control to determine its priorities, it is a challenge to U.S. corporate and political dominance in the region.

U.S. Military Moves

As a result, the U.S. government began to shift its reliance from solely economic and political means to control Latin America towards taking military measures, even while engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What have been some of these measures?

In 2006 the U.S. conducted military exercises off the coast of Venezuela called "Operation Partnership of the Americas." This exercise involved four ships, 60 fighter planes, and 6,500 U.S. troops.

In 2006 the U.S. State Department classified the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao, with their military bases jointly contracted to Holland and the U.S., as "The Third Frontier of the United States." U.S. aircraft carriers, war ships, combat planes, Black Hawk helicopters, nuclear submarines, and thousands of troops began to build up in Curacao in particular. In 2009 a U.S. military plane was intercepted in Venezuelan airspace that had flown from Curacao's base.

In 2008 the U.S. reactivated the Fourth Fleet to patrol Caribbean waters. This fleet had been out of commission since 1950. Now it operates with the potential of acting as a floating base for the U.S. to conduct military strikes throughout Central and South America.

In 2009 the U.S. made a deal with Colombia to build up its military personal in seven bases, from 250 to 800 American troops with 600 civilian contractors, effectively taking control over these installations. This was widely denounced throughout Latin America as an action aimed at intimidating Venezuela. In December of that year a U.S. drone plane flying from one of these Colombian bases violated Venezuelan airspace.

From 2009 to 2010 the U.S. worked behind the scenes to legitimize a military coup in Honduras against lawfully elected President Zelaya, who had aligned the nation with ALBA. Part of the U.S.'s motivation behind its actions was to maintain control of Soto Cano's Airbase, with its 550 U.S. troops and 650 U.S. and Honduran civilians. In the 1980's the U.S. had used this base for a training ground and launching pad for the Contra terrorists in Nicaragua and El Salvadorian death squads opposed to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). There is good reason for concern that this Airbase will again be used for similar operations today.

In 2009 the U.S. and Panama agreed to open up two naval bases in Panama, which will be the first time U.S. military forces will be based in this nation since 1999.

War on Drugs?

Most of these measures have been justified on the grounds of combating drug trafficking, including the military buildup in Costa Rica. However, they have not curtailed this problem at all. Such U.S. military buildups have generally been accompanied by an increase in drug trafficking, as has happened in both Columbia and Afghanistan. Based on this record it can only be concluded that the "War on Drugs" rationale is a red herring for public relations consumption, not the actual motivation.

This military build up in Costa Rica is the latest in a series of moves the U.S. has made in Latin America that seeks to use threats and arms to reverse the strength of popular anti-imperialist forces across the region. The U.S. is playing with the possibility of erupting a continental conflagration for the sake of corporate profits.

While it is doubtful that the U.S. wants to directly engage in a military conflict with, most likely, Venezuela right now, preparations for this possibility are being made. What is more likely in the short term is that the U.S. military will use its forces to engage in sabotage and intimidation in hopes of reversing support for the nations aligned with ALBA. It is also very possible that the U.S. military will help to support proxy armies, such as Colombia's, in military conflicts that align with U.S. interests. However, this is a dangerous game. Even in the short term, the U.S. ruling class may drag the nation into another direct conflict, in spite of their intentions, that could spread to involve numerous other nations.

Peace and International Solidarity

While U.S. workers are suffering from unemployment, insufficient health care, drastic cuts to education and social services, as well as environmental catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico created by the Obama governmental collusion with BP, the priorities of the U.S. ruling class are elsewhere. They are more concerned with pouring money into military buildups that threaten war. The target of such a war or wars would be the popular working class movements in Latin America, whose only crime has been to struggle to liberate themselves from super exploitation and political repression. It is the same economic and political elite in the U.S. that are denying U.S. workers what is rightfully theirs that are opposing the efforts

of workers and peasants throughout the continent to empower themselves.

It is the task of the anti-war movement not only to oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to prevent future U.S. wars in Latin America. Wherever anti-war activists seek to mobilize people against war, they should also seek to educate about the U.S. empire's military moves in Latin America.

Furthermore, it will require international solidarity to combat what the U.S. elite is doing in Central and South America. There was recently an event that could go some way towards preparing this solidarity. In Sanare, Venezuela, from June 21 - 25, a series of meetings were held entitled "Ecuentro of the Americas: Resisting Militarization and Promoting a Culture of Peace." It consisted of delegates of organizations from 19 nations across the continent, including School of the Americas (SOA) Watch of the U.S. You can read more about this at <http://www.soaw.org/>.

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