

The Expansion of U.S. Military Installations in Argentina and Their Implications for Argentine Sovereignty

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At present, the US maintains more than 800 military bases in over hundred countries, which cost in excess of \$100 billion annually to operate. That means the Americans currently have more military bases in foreign lands than any other nation or empire has ever possessed since the times of the ancient Greeks. America's global military dominance becomes more apparent when considering that Russia only has military bases in nine countries, many of which are former soviet republics, the UK has ten, France has nine, and China has just one. American officials justify their extensive foreign presence and the associated costs by claiming that the United States is an exceptional country that is committed to safeguarding world peace and security. That being said, specific pretexts do differ depending on region, with the War on Drugs being frequently cited in Latin America, protecting countries from Russian aggression constituting the dominant rationale in Europe, containing Chinese influence and North Korea representing the main motivations in the Asia-Pacific region, and combatting terrorism and containing Iranian influence among the objectives in the Middle East.

Argentina is currently among the countries considered likely destinations for new American military installations in the foreseeable future, despite the fact that such arrangements have been rejected by both the population and former leadership of the country in recent years. In fact, all military exercises between Argentina and the U.S. were suspended from 2007 to 2015, as the successive governments of Nestor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner sought to reorient Argentine foreign policy away from the U.S. in an attempt to combat imperialism and strengthen regional integration. However, that stance has effectively been reversed since the election of **Mauricio Macri** as President of Argentina in December of 2015. The Macri administration has prioritized strengthening diplomatic ties with Washington at the expense of regional cooperation, which entailed favouring pro-American foreign policies, while implementing neo-liberal economic reforms at home. This included signing security and defense 'cooperation agreements' with both the Obama and Trump administrations, permitting the U.S. to establish military bases throughout the country.

A number of US military bases have been established throughout Argentina since the election of president Macri. For example, a base was set up in Argentina's Salta province, located near its borders with Bolivia and Chile, on the pretext of combatting drug trafficking. Another base was established in Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego province, at the southernmost tip of the country, only a few kilometres from the NATO base on the Falkland Islands and close to an important source of fresh water. Researchers have estimated that Ushuaia

possesses the largest reserve of frozen fresh water in the world with enough capacity to meet the needs of the entire planet for next 200 years if properly managed.

Figure 1: Argentina's Provinces and Locations of American Military Bases



Note: Circles indicating location of US military installations and names of bordering countries added by author.

In early 2018, Macri's government also approved the construction of another American military base in the province of Misiones. This is a highly strategic position because the province is situated in the tri-border area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, which contains the Guaraní Aquifer, the largest subterranean drinkable and renewable fresh water reserve in the world. Specifically, of the 1.2 million square kilometers of land containing the Guaraní Aquifer, 850,000 square kilometers are in Brazil's territory, 225,000 square kilometers are in Argentina, 70,000 square kilometers are in Paraguay, and 25,000 square kilometers are in Uruguay.

None of the foreign military bases constructed during Macri's presidency were approved by Argentina's congress, which is explicitly required under Argentine law. This practice was defended by Argentina's Minister of Defense, **Oscar Raúl Aguad**, on the basis that congressional approval was not required for such joint military 'cooperation agreements', because American military forces were only providing technical assistance and military intelligence. More precisely, the Macri government claimed that joint military exercises with the Americans were necessary in the TBA to combat terrorism and limit the global trafficking of drugs and weapons of mass destruction in the region, while scientific research was the basis for the American presence in Ushuaia.

This sentiment was echoed by Argentina's security minister, Patricia Bullrich, who explained that the government was creating 'an analysis center with Paraguay and Brazil (and the U.S.) to figure out where, how and with whom narco-traffickers operate' in the TBA. In other words, the main objectives for allowing growing numbers of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and FBI agents to operate on Argentine territory in the TBA, in addition to an increased presence of American military personnel, are to reduce narco-trafficking and counter terrorism. Minister Bullrich further adds that part of the rationale for this decision is that Argentine law does not permit drug samples or materials related to terrorism to be sent abroad for analysis or investigation.

Figure 2: The Guaraní Aquifer



According to Bullrich, this close relationship with the DEA and FBI has already proven to be invaluable in terms of reducing the instances of drug-related offenses and limiting the presence of international terrorist organizations like Hezbollah in the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Her enthusiastic support for the strategy was evident in her 2018 statement that 'it's important for our government to collaborate (with the U.S.) and that they collaborate with us. We're going to work together at the triple border regarding terrorism. We think we'll have DEA and other agencies there to better understand what's happening in the region.'

There is little evidence to suggest that the increasing presence of foreign agents and soldiers is generating such enthusiasm among the Argentine populace and certain segments of its leadership. Meanwhile, the rationale put forth by the Macri administration to justify its agreement with the US, allowing for the establishment multiple foreign military bases throughout the country without seeking approval from the Argentine congress, has also been met with much skepticism. For instance, on July 10, 2018, a group of approximately 60 organizations, including 'political parties, social organizations, human rights groups, workers' unions', arranged a protest against the establishment of a US military base in Neuquén, Argentina. There are two large rivers situated in Neuquén, the Limay and Neuquén rivers, which are important water sources that generate approximately one-quarter of all hydroelectric power produced in Argentina. Additionally, the Neuquén Basin is home to Vaca Muerta, a 36,000 km² area that, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), represents the second largest non-conventional gas resource and the fourth largest shale oil reserve in the world. As such, it should come as no surprise that Vaca Muerta has garnered the attention of some of the most prominent oil companies in the world, including Chevron, ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, and U.S. oil. At present, YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales), an Argentine company that specializes in the exploration, production, refining and commercialization of petroleum, 'owns 42% of the area, GYP, a state company of Neuquen, has 12%, and the remaining 46% is distributed

among other companies that include ExxonMobil, Pan American Energy, Petronas, Pluspetrol, Shell, Tecpetrol and Wintershall, among others.’.

Figure 3: Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay



The Macri administration has already enacted measures that make it easier for large corporations to invest in Vaca Muerta. According to **Ernesto López Anadón**, an engineer and president of the Argentine Institute of Oil and Gas (IAPG):

Vaca Muerta has many players who are working and obtaining optimal results with very good productivity. The costs are being lowered and is already an asset that has gained international relevance. For those who are looking for business opportunities to develop reserves, Vaca Muerta represents that attraction. Why is there a hurry to enter? Because there are still opportunities, areas that were not awarded and possibilities of partnership with other companies. This will allow the investor to be one of the leaders. We have gone from the exploration stage to the development phase in almost all the companies that approached to this project and the tendency is the momentum for expansion. Later entry will also likely be possible, but at a higher cost.

The protestors did not believe claims emanating out of Washington and Buenos Aires that the facility in Neuquén was a humanitarian base as opposed to a military installation. This was evident in the official statement released by the protest group, contending that ‘the base is presented as humanitarian aid (to avoid) being called a military base, which would require approval of Argentina’s Congress.’

The TBA has long been regarded as a strategically important region by Washington, first being identified as such during the Reagan presidency. Subsequently, in early 2000, the Bush administration began fabricating stories about the presence of terrorist threats and fundraising activities for Islamic terror organizations taking place in the TBA, which were reported in the mainstream media. Among the claims made by officials was the notion that Ciudad del Este in Paraguay and Foz do Iguacu in Brazil were ‘a terrorist paradise’. American authorities also maintained that Al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and, more recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) had conducted training exercises and obtained a significant amount of financing within the region. Such stories about a significant terrorist presence in the TBA have allowed for an unprecedented expansion of American military forces in the region since 2000.

In actuality, no hard evidence has ever been presented to back claims of a significant terrorist presence in the TBA of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, which was used to justify

the establishment of a significant American military presence in the region. On the contrary, a report by the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering confirmed that while the TBA is in fact an important location for money laundering, there is no evidence to demonstrate that Islamist terror organizations have generated any funding there, or that the region has been used as a training ground for Islamist terrorists. As a matter of fact, the last Islamic terrorist attack to take place in South America occurred in 1994, when the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires was targeted in a bombing that killed 85 people. The persistence of fabricated stories about the training and funding of Islamist terrorists in the TBA, despite the complete lack of any tangible evidence, is likely to justify the continued presence of American military forces in the region. As for the Americans, they are likely using the pretext of terrorism as a false flag to conceal their real motivation for maintaining and expanding the presence of their military in the region. Considering the history of American interventions, the fact that the region is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas and, particularly, freshwater reserves, could represent the US with an enticing incentive to increase its influence in the TBA.

At present, almost 50% of the global population does not have consistent access to a safe source of potable water. This figure is forecast to rise going forward, as the effects of climate change are likely to exacerbate water shortages. This deplorable inequality in the distribution of global freshwater resources illustrates the growing strategic importance of significant water reserves like the Guaraní Aquifer and the freshwater sources in Ushuaia. These realities make it easier to understand why the Americans are so keen to establish military bases in these regions of South American that are particularly rich in water resources. While American politicians and officials have a reputation for climate change denial, the Pentagon has no reservations with including it as a key factor in future conflicts in its assessments of combat readiness. In fact, the Pentagon released a study at the beginning of 2018 stating that extreme weather linked to climate change 'endanger 1,700 military sites worldwide, from large bases to outposts', which 'run contrary to White House views on global warming'.

According to the World Bank, Latin America will play in increasingly important global role if water shortages significantly worsen moving forward, given that the continent possesses some of 'the largest freshwater reserves in the world'. There has already increased commercial interest expressed in the water reserves of the Guaraní aquifer, in addition to political debates between the governments of Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil. This has come from a number of prominent multinational companies involved in the water market including Monsanto, Thames Water, Bechtel Company, and Vivendi.

History has demonstrated that the real motivation for the global expansion of American militarization has always been to dominate and control the world's economy and natural resources, by influencing the political and market arenas of the host countries and their neighbours. Countries that resist or refuse to accept American hegemony often find themselves subjected to destabilization efforts directed by the US military aimed at overthrowing the incumbent government. The 20th and 21st centuries provides many examples of American military bases organizing, directing, and participating in interventions against the countries hosting them or other nations in the region. If and when a foreign intervention is deemed necessary by US officials, 'Somehow they always manage to find the necessary pretext'. Typically, such interventions have been justified on the grounds of national security, with recurring pretexts including the Cold War, the Global War on Terrorism, the War on Drug, and immigration control. To be more precise, during the Cold

War, the main impetus for the American military to establish foreign bases was the battle of ideologies against communism. Subsequently, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became the war on drugs and, more recently, the war on terrorism.

Other key US objectives for establishing permanent military bases in foreign territories include: repressing social movements opposed to neo-liberal economic policies; preparing for future wars in the region by establishing a dominant military posture; and creating regional conflicts. It is reasonable to suspect that the Pentagon has been manufacturing false narratives to justify an American military presence in the TBA of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, as this would allow them to gain control over parts of the Amazon rainforest, the freshwater reserves of the Guarani Aquifer, natural gas reserves in Bolivia, carbon deposits in Brazil, and even the largest proven oil reserves in Venezuela. If the relatively conventional notion that future wars will be fought over the control and distribution of increasingly scarce fresh water and energy resources turns out to be true, then the TBA region represents a very strategic location for the US and its rivals.

Macri delivered strategic territories of Argentina situated in both the north and south of the country to the American military despite an abundance of historical evidence demonstrating that the interests of the host nation are rarely among the priorities of US military bases. Perhaps president Macri feels that he may need some assistance in oppressing the freedom and self-determination of his own electorate, given that his administration has already experienced three national strikes against his neo-liberal economic reforms in less than three years. Many Argentines are likely becoming increasingly frustrated with the rapid deterioration of their economic circumstances and prospects since Macri assumed the presidency. Further strikes and protests might be expected in response to the recent agreement with the IMF that will provide Argentina with a \$50 billion loan, the largest in the institution's history.

The expansion of American military bases throughout South America will undoubtedly continue in the absence of significant pushback. That being said, Argentines need to realize that the recent military cooperation agreements signed between the Macri administration and the US have neglected their country's national interests. In particular, the agreement to permit the American military to establish permanent bases throughout the country is a matter national interest that should require some degree of public discourse. Furthermore, before permitting the Americans to take the lead in combatting terrorism in their country, Argentines should consider their previous performances in the Middle East, and North Africa. Similarly, they should also consider the poor track record of America's Drug Enforcement Agency in attempting to eliminate the illicit drug trade via interventions in Colombia and Mexico. If Argentines do not react soon, they could lose sovereignty, independence and self-determination over important parts of their country, while the Argentine Army becomes increasingly subordinate to US interests, as has been the case in many countries throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Any future government that seeks to reverse the present expansion of American military influence within Argentina should proceed with caution, as contemporary history includes many examples of countries being subject to military interventions for defying Washington's dictates, resulting in catastrophic outcomes. With this in mind, Argentines should take heed of Hugo Chavez's warning that: 'When imperialism feels weak, it resorts to brute force...Most governments in the United States in a hundred years have not respected the peoples of Latin America. They have sponsored coup d'états, assassinations.'

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Notes

1. Russia currently has 21 military bases, mainly in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Syria.
2. Before permitting the establishment of additional US military installations, Argentines should consider the American military's reputation of creating environmental disasters. For example, rocket launches and the detonation of bombs in free fire zones emit a variety of toxic substances. Each year, American military bases also burn thousands of tons of trash in open areas, including hazardous materials like poisons, plastics, chemicals, medical and human waste, batteries, and weapons. Among toxins released into the environment from such practices are dioxin, cadmium, lead, mercury, and uranium, among others, which often enter the soil, oceans and freshwater resources, and subsequently make their way into the food chain. Furthermore, American military bases have always managed to avoid legal consequences for their actions, even though they led to locals being evicted from their homes (i.e. Alaska, Hawaii, Panama, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, South Korea, etc.), and often conduct training sessions that disturb the daily lives of civilians.
3. On November 22, 2015, Mauricio Macri won the presidential election. He was inaugurated less than one month later, on December 10, 2015, in the Argentine Congress.
4. The American military organized a training session in a section of the Amazon rainforest in Tabatinga, Brazil, which contains large reserves of hydrocarbons, water, niobium, titanium, tungsten, petroleum, gas, and uranium, from November 6 - 13 in 2017, as a rehearsal of potential future military actions in Latin America. This was the largest military exercise ever orchestrated in the Amazon.
5. In 2006, George W. Bush purchased more than 100,000 acres of land in Paraguay's northern 'Chaco' region, which is situated near the Guaraní Aquifer and contains vast reserves of natural gas. Since then, thousands of mercenaries and hundreds of U.S. troops have been stationed in the vicinity and patrolled the area in order to protect Bush's property.
6. The Guaraní Aquifer represents the fourth largest water reservoir in the world.
7. Therefore, 71% of the biggest reservoir of fresh, renewable, and potable water in the world lies under land belonging to Brazil.
8. <https://www.telesur.tv/english/news/Argentina-Over-60-Social-Movements-Protest-US-Military-Base-20180712-0006.html>
9. Despite the benevolence of these stated objectives under the overarching theme of achieving world security, American military bases are often greeted with hostility and disdain by local populations. This is evidenced by the many protests that have been organized by residents of nearby communities in the vicinity of US military bases in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, often supported by social groups and human rights organizations. Common complaints by locals include the loss of access to land and fishing resources, the destruction and degradation of the environment, and soldiers not being held accountable for misbehaviour and serious crimes.
10. 'Capital attraction will be key to the development of these resources. It is estimated that Vaca

Muerta will require an investment of US\$ 120 billion up to 2030 (US \$ 8,000 million per year).'
(<https://www.pwc.com.ar/es/publicaciones/assets/vaca-muerta-energia-argentina-i.pdf>).

11. YPF was privatized in 1993, but 51% of the enterprise was renationalized in 2012 by President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

12. <https://www.pwc.com.ar/es/publicaciones/assets/vaca-muerta-energia-argentina-i.pdf>

13. 'The New Gas Plan that encourages investments in unconventional reservoirs in the Neuquen basin, guaranteeing for gas marketed in the local market a minimum price of US \$ 7.50 / MMBTU for 2017 and 2018, US \$ 7.00 for 2019, US \$ 6.50 for 2020 and US \$ 6.00 for 2021. Agreement with the Provincial Government of Neuquen, so that oil companies and unions would have greater competitiveness in Vaca Muerta and reduce labor costs. Project to reduce import tariffs of machinery used for the exploitation of hydrocarbons, which will have a 7% tariff'

(<https://www.pwc.com.ar/es/publicaciones/assets/vaca-muerta-energia-argentina-i.pdf>).

14. <https://www.pwc.com.ar/es/publicaciones/assets/vaca-muerta-energia-argentina-i.pdf>

15. History has shown that American military installations are characterized by a lack of transparency.

16. <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Argentina-Over-60-Social-Movements-Protest-US-Military-Base-20180712-0006.html>

17. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/31912.pdf>

18. <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/americas/11/07/inv.terror.south/>

19. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-climatechange-military/climate-change-threatens-half-of-u-s-military-sites-pentagon-idUSKBN1FK2T8>

20. In the subsequent decades following the Second World War, the US took measures and enacted policies to solidify and expand its dominance, as embodied by American diplomat and historian George Keenan when he stated 'we have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population...Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security'. The establishment of an excess number of permanent military bases in foreign territories could be regarded as a part of that strategy, as it allows American forces to quickly deploy to counter challenges from rivals to its hegemonic interests in all regions.

21. Washington has a habit of supporting military interventions to reverse revolutions and eliminate government that oppose American interests, regardless of whether or not they were democratically elected. Examples of countries currently facing threats of military intervention from the US include Iran, North Korea, Syria and Venezuela.

22. Fidel Castro at the United Nations General Assembly in 1960.

23. Some European and American industries have also been taking measures to alleviate the extraction of domestic water resources by moving water-intensive economic activities to Third World countries, particularly in the agriculture sector.

24. In rare instances where American pressure to station soldiers in a particular country is resisted, Washington will often retaliate by threatening to cut or reduce foreign aid to that country. For example,

in 2004, ten South American nations refused to guarantee immunity from prosecution for American soldiers in the event that they commit crimes while serving in their territories. The US responded by cancelling \$330 million in economic aid. Subsequently, Paraguay reversed its decision and signed an agreement with the US the following year, which extended the stay of American soldiers stationed in the country from 6 to 18 months, while the country's Congress passed legislation that protected American soldiers from prosecution for criminal activity.

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