

# US Strategic Interests in Latin America: The Militarization of Colombia

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It is not difficult to obtain information related to the many social movements and progressive political mechanisms working to implement social reforms throughout contemporary Latin America. Venezuela continues to experience support for the presidency of Hugo Chávez [1999-] and the changes therein via the Bolivarian Revolution; Bolivia has witnessed the successful promotion of nationalization projects through Evo Morales' Movement for Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS) [2006-]; and president Rafael Correa [2007-] has garnered significant applause for his administrations consistent denunciation of US intervention in the region, as shown through Ecuador's disallowance of Washington to resume activities at the port and airport in Manta. Alongside the aforementioned electoral shifts, the on-going civil war within Colombia has, contrary to state and popular media reports, seen the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas-Ejército del Pueblo, FARC-EP) remain a consistent threat to dominant political-economic interests in both Colombia and the United States (Brittain, 2010). For years the FARC-EP have been "the most powerful and successful guerrilla army in the world" leading it to be seen as "the most important military and political force in South America opposing imperialism" (Escribano, 2003: 299; Petras and Brescia, 2000: 134; see also Petras and Veltmeyer, 2003). A testament of their consequential Marxism, administration after administration in Colombia (and the United States) have diligently fought to halt the FARC-EP's struggle of emancipation fearing that the country's elite could lose their entrenched class dominance. If such events were to occur a further destabilization of domestic and foreign interests would subsequently arise within a region increasingly moving away from a well-entrenched conventional political-economic system dominated by the United States. While 2008 witnessed the insurgency implement a tactical withdrawal, the FARC-EP remains to be the largest and longest-established insurgency movement in Latin American history (Brittain, 2010; Petras, 2008).

To prolong influence over Colombia, every US administrations from Nixon [1969-1974] to Obama [2009-] embraced a 'war on drugs,' [1] or more recently a 'war on terror,' as a means to deploy counterinsurgency campaigns to silence antagonistic sectors of said population. It is increasingly clear, when concerning the recent actions of Bogotá and Washington to facilitate seven fortified bases controlled by the United States on Colombian territory, that both states have coordinated a strategic alliance to militarize the region, not simply one country. German Rodas Chavez (2007: 97) suggests that such activities are an attempt to enable the US to stabilize at least a portion of Latin America's territory. Securing some form of control over Colombia - and subsequently using the country as a centralized outpost - would assist the US to deploy 'sub-regional military operations' throughout the domestic and regional geography (Campos, 2007: 31). From this one can view Colombia as a strategic 'national security' case for Washington on three fronts:

First, the country's influential economic and geopolitical placement as the regions gateway to South America: bordering on the Panama Basin and Caribbean Sea, access to both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and neighbouring five nation-states (Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil).

Second, Colombia is one of the United States' most important Latin American and Caribbean energy suppliers in both present and future forms via extensive untapped oil/coal reserves and already established pipelines and open-pit mines.

Lastly, both states share a dual goal of eliminating the ideological significance and potential political-military threat of the FARC-EP from creating a successful revolutionary shift 'from below'.

Supporting such a scenario, John Perkins describes Colombia as the last bastion of US imperial power in Latin America. As a result of the country's tactical location Washington has attempted to financially and militarily sustain the basis of power in Colombia to ensure that a geopolitical opening remains in the grasp of the US - hence, the importance of the seven bases. [2] If the Colombian state can hold power than Washington still has a hope of regaining regional political-economic authority.

Colombia is the glaring exception to the hemispheric anti-corporatocracy movements. It has maintained its position as Washington's surrogate. Shored up massive U.S. taxpayer assistance and armies of corporate-sponsored mercenaries, as well as formal U.S. military support, it has become the keystone in Washington's attempt's to regain regional domination (Perkins, 2008: 149).

What is being witnessed in Colombia reflects what Marx (and Engels) alluded to when concerning the activities of ruling powers under ingrained capitalist conditions. While not apparently in their immediate interests, elites from various countries will periodically align when problematic conditions arise for the purpose of eliminating impediments to expansion. Hence, their historical statement, "in political practice ... they join all coercive measures against the working class" (Marx and Engels, 1976: 481, 508). In 1847, before a collective of workers in London, Marx highlighted how capitalists, without fail, would, across borders, support one another as a consequence of their class position.

A certain kind of brotherhood does of course exist among the bourgeois classes of all nations. It is a brotherhood of the oppressors against the oppressed, of the exploiters against the exploited. Just as, despite the competition and conflicts existing between the members of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class of one country is united by brotherly ties against the proletariat of that country, so the bourgeois of all countries, despite their mutual conflicts and competition on the world market, are united by brotherly ties against the proletariat of all countries (Marx, 1976: 388).

Recognizing the importance of regaining some form of hegemony, the Colombian state is willing to provide the United States carte blanche in tactics, methods, and campaigns over its sovereign territory and those living therein. Such immunity was recently witnessed when US Sgt. Michael Coen and a private military-based contractor César Ruiz were free to leave Colombia without trial after warrants for their arrest were issued related to the rape of a 12

year-old girl at the Tolemaida military base in Tolima (Martínez, 2009). Furthermore, upon returning to the United States, neither Coen or Ruiz were prosecuted for said crime even though Colombia's Prosecutor General's office concluded the youth had been sexually assaulted, had compiled evidence related to the sort, and had eye-witness testimony that decried the two as the violators (Alsema, 2009). Recognizing this as a violation of justice, one is burdened with the question as to how many more atrocities have gone unpunished over the last decade (and Plan Colombia, 1998/2000-2006)?

According to US ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield, "only six US soldiers committed crimes in Colombian territory in the last ten years ... in other words, more or less three cases for 10,000 people" (see Wecker, 2009a). Most disconcerting, however, were Brownfield's adamant comments that even if crimes had, were, or are committed, "[US] people have a right to privacy" (as quoted in Wecker, 2009a). Astonishingly, Colombia's foreign minister Jaime Bermúdez furthered this position when referring to US state forces operating from the proposed seven bases. On national media, Bermúdez commented that not only would foreign military personnel receive immunity while serving in Colombia but that this is a long continued practice (see Martínez, 2009; Wecker, 2009b).

Immunity for US forces in Colombia is not a recent phenomena but rather an ongoing foreign policy agreement between Bogotá and Washington. In 2002-2003, the Colombian state relieved any legal barriers to crimes committed against its citizens by US military personnel through Article 98 of the Rome Treaty of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the American Service-Members' Protection Act (APSA) (see Isacson, 2007). [3] For the greater part of a decade, officials in both Colombia and the United States have made sure that Colombian institutions cannot inhibit nor intervene in US operations (during or after the fact) under the guise of stabilizing the country (and region). Former secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld put it best when he said the United States' has "an obligation to protect our men and women in uniform from this court [ICC] and to preserve America's ability to remain engaged in the world" (as quoted in Stoner, 2004). John Negroponte, former US ambassador to the United Nations (UN), even threatened the UN when he stated, "should the ICC eventually seek to detain any American, the United States would regard this as illegitimate - and it would have serious consequences" (Negroponte, 2002: 1). In short, through these Immunity Agreements (IAs), US state forces have enjoyed relative invulnerability from the mayhem they have committed.

The basis for the IAs - and the most recent announcement of full-scale future immunity for US state forces on the seven bases - has partially been to insulate United States officials from again being embroiled in scandals related to structural human rights abuses. In 1986, the US was scolded by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when it determined Washington was involved in terrorist activities of war, working with paramilitary networks, and approving the mining of Nicaragua's Managua waterways as a means to destabilize the Sandinistas while in power (ICJ, 1986). What is interesting about today, however, is that the call from the Obama administration for immunity is welcomed by the Colombia state under Álvaro Uribe Vélez [2002-]. The reasoning: a dire need to prolong domestic sociopolitical stability and regain hemispheric economic control over a region that has experienced more than incremental amounts of economic, political, and social change, which could wet an appetite for more. As Lenin (1966: 241-242) recognized:

There has been a certain rapprochement between the bourgeoisie of the exploiting countries and that of the colonies, so that very often-perhaps even

in most cases-the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries ... is in full accord with the imperialist bourgeoisie, i.e., join forces with it against all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes.

The catalyst for the seven bases and IAs is due to the rise and increasing stability of progressive social movements – both within and outside Colombia – that demonstrate the vulnerability of the United States’ imperial project. To lose ground in Colombia would be not only lose the capacity to fiscally gain from the nation’s natural resources, cheap labour, and exportable commodities but it would further signal the ability of those ‘from below’ to continue building collective power through a united Latin America – a Bolivarian-like region that could withstand dominant monetary and militaristic imperial pressures. Instead of accepting the organic democratic principals of foreign countries and the majorities therein to create an alternative political model of representation and economic methods of development, the United States has and will continue to consciously work against self-determination.

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[1] Former US Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey expressed how the war against drugs in Colombia has, in fact, been a campaign to demonize Marxist-Leninist guerrillas rather than induce an attack against coca production (see Goff, 2004: 32). It has been argued that the United States has no intentions of curbing the global drug-trade due to the economic spin-offs created from it (Campos, 2007: 38-9; Scott, 2003: 89; Petras, 2001; Petras and Morley, 1995: 86).

[2] During Plan Colombia [1998/2000-2006], the US and Colombian state invested just under \$9 million (USD) a day in counterinsurgency efforts (Murillo, 2005; Latin American Press, 2004). By the mid-2000s, the United States had provided over \$7 billion (USD) in ‘aid’ (Campos, 2007: 38; Chavez, 2007: 96; Mondragón, 2007: 42).

[3] Under Article 98 and the Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Colombia Regarding the Surrender of persons of the United State of America to the International Criminal Court, criminal immunity was given to any US “official, employee (including any contractor), or member of the military, or any United States person” (United States Department of State, 2003: 2). This was, in part, possible through the ASPA where any US president has the capacity to suspend military aid to any country that does not exempt state forces from alleged or proven crimes committed on foreign soil (see Isacson, 2007; Stoner, 2004). For example, “nearly \$112 million of Colombia’s expected 2004 aid was contingent on the Bogotá government’s signing of an Article 98 agreement. Faced with the possibility of losing this assistance, the government of President Alvaro Uribe signed in September 2003” (Stoner, 2004). Richard Boucher (2003), spokesperson for the State Department, justified this position by arguing:

It’s an important principle for the United States that those who want to adhere to the Rome Treaty, who want to participate in the International Criminal Court, can do so. That’s their sovereign decision to do so. But they cannot implicate

others and pretend to carry out prosecutions against others who may not be participating, especially since we have our own legal system that deals with the same kind of crimes, and that we do deal with the same kind of crimes. We hold our military to the highest standards, and we don't think that we need to rely on prosecutors under this court to decide when that needs to be done ... So this has been a matter of principle to the United States and has been an important element of national policy. We have a law that was passed by our Congress that says that we won't provide military assistance to countries who put American officials and military personnel and others in jeopardy of this kind of prosecutorial discretion under this court.

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