

South America's New Militarism

Por Raúl Zibechi | July 18, 2005

South American societies are militarizing as a result of the regional superpower's intervention, which is undoubtedly a crucial factor on the continent, but also as a consequence of the profound economic and political changes we have come to call neoliberalism.

Several months ago, an official Brazilian commission visited Vietnam. With the goal of "sharing information about resistance doctrine," the commission composed of colonels and lieutenant-colonels visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Min City (formerly Saigon), and the Cu Chi Province, where 250 kilometers (150 miles) of underground tunnels constructed during the war with the United States still remain. On the Brazilian army's webpage, Gen. Claudio Barbosa Figueredo, head of the Amazon Military Command, asserts that Brazil will face actions similar to those that have taken place in Vietnam, and now in Iraq, should the Amazon come into conflict:

"The resistance strategy does not differ much from guerrilla warfare, and it is an option the army will not hesitate to adopt facing a confrontation with another country or group of countries with greater economic and military power." He added, "The jungle itself should serve as an ally in combating the invader."¹ The news had little impact on the media, but it demonstrates that Brazil's armed forces have their own strategic plans and that they see the United States as a potential military enemy.

Last December, Venezuela signed an agreement with Russia to purchase 110,000 Kalashnikov rifles; 33 assault, attack, and heavy transport helicopters, and 50 fighter bombers. It signed another with Spain to acquire naval aeronautical material, including four corvettes; and it signed one with Brazil for 50 training and combat jets. The purchases form part of "the constant updating of the Venezuelan armed forces, their high level of maintenance, and permanent plans for modernization and arms acquisition," the South American Military Balance study states.²

The news was received with strong criticism from White House Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and the Department of State calls it "the beginning of an arms race." For its part, the South American nation activated its reserve command last April, "which should reach 2 million members and is included in Venezuela's

new doctrine of defense."³ The decision was made on April 13, the three-year anniversary of the coup d'etat that drove Hugo Chavez from office during a period of several hours.

Media sources say that Peter Goss, director of the CIA, announced last February to a United States Senate commission that the agency has "evidence" of meetings between the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) and Osama Bin Laden's Islamic network to coordinate terrorist attacks in the region.⁴ According to this version, the "terrorist threat" looms large in Latin America, as evidenced by the attacks on the Israeli Embassy and the Jewish solidarity institution AMIA in Buenos Aires, carried out in the 1990s, in which hundreds of people died.

Taken out of context, these three pieces of news—and many others—could give the impression that South America is heading toward imminent military confrontation and that militarization is taking place a very rapid rate. The reality, however, is another matter. According to a study carried out by the *Military Power Review* in 2004, Venezuela, in spite of its revamped armed forces, is ranked just sixth for military strength in South America. Brazil ranks first (653 points), Peru is second (423), and Argentina is third (419), followed by Chile (387), Colombia (314), and Venezuela (282).

On the other hand, Latin America is one of the most stable areas in the world, and few of its resources from the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are dedicated to the military budget, a mere 1.5%. This figure contrasts with the 4% of GDP dedicated to military spending by the European Union, 3% for the United States (which accounts for 47% of total military spending worldwide), and 12% for the Middle East. A good part of the current purchases and investment in armaments by various South American countries will cover nothing more than the renovation of war materials acquired in the 1960s, which have become useless and obsolete.



Nonetheless, and though it may seem contradictory, there can be legitimate discussion of a growing militarization on the continent. But it is passing through new channels, which have little to do with previous military strategies. In broad terms, four reasons for the emergence of a new militarism can be established: Washington's new Plan Colombia strategy for the region, which includes combating drug trafficking, guerrilla warfare, and controlling the biodiversity of the Andean region from Venezuela to Bolivia; the new forms war has taken in the neoliberal era, that is, the privatization of war; and Brazil's new role on the continent, that of being the only poor nation of the South that has strategic military autonomy. The fourth factor is a consequence of the attempts of each country's elite class, driven by Washington, to contain social protest through the militarization of society and the criminalization of social movements.

Old Militarism, New Controls

With the goal of maintaining world dominance, the U.S. business community is seeking to control new sources of economic power (linked to biological diversity) while at the same time attempting not to lose control of the old (in particular, hydrocarbons). Ample archives and dozens of newspaper articles document the latter. The words of U.S. President George W. Bush, spoken in the year 2000, should suffice: "Never before in its history has the United States been so dependent on foreign oil. In 1973, the country imported 36% of its oil needs. Today, the country imports 56% of its crude oil." Venezuela is the fourth largest provider of oil to the United States, supplying 15% of its need, and Colombia is the fifth largest provider. Assuring control over South American oil resources requires intense territorial control over small areas with sites rich in natural resources.

On the other hand, economic dominance requires maintaining the lead on areas facing the possibility of economic recovery, and hence, profit recovery. This objective requires possession and control of so-called "complex territories," areas high in biological diversity where endemic species are generated, control over which would allow the superpower to compete with the Far East (China, India, and Japan). But monopolizing and profiting from biodiversity requires a presence in the vast terrain extending from the Amazon to southern Mexico, one of the most biologically rich regions of the planet.⁵

To confront these tasks, the White House appears to have given priority to the U.S. Southern Command

(Southcom), with headquarters in Miami. Its growing importance makes visible the degree of centrality the military dimension has taken in the post-Sept. 11 restructuring. This is part of what Brian Loveman calls "full spectrum threat dominance,"⁶ which implies a focus on principle events of society—from health and immigration to agriculture and the economy—as questions of security. According to some analysts, Southcom has become the primary interlocutor for Latin American governments as well as their liaison for U.S. foreign policy and defense in the region.⁷ Southcom has more employees working on Latin America than the combined departments of State, Agriculture, Commerce, Treasury, and Defense.

Military presence in this region has increased and diversified ever since the 1999 deactivation of Base Howard in Panama. Southcom now has responsibility for bases in Guantanamo, Fort Buchanan and Roosevelt Roads (Puerto Rico), Soto Cano (Honduras), and Comalapa (El Salvador); as well as for recently constructed air bases in Manta (Ecuador), Reina Beatriz (Aruba), and Hato Rey (Curacao). In addition, it runs a network of 17 land-based radar stations; three fixed ones in Peru, four in Colombia, and the remaining 10 mobile radars are guarded in secret locations throughout the Andes and the Caribbean.⁸ Colombia is now the world's fourth largest beneficiary of U.S. military aid, behind Israel, Egypt, and Iraq; the U.S. Embassy in Bogota is the second largest in the world following Iraq.

Several analysts maintain that Washington is pursuing the creation of a "South American armed force" or a "unified armed force," commanded by the Pentagon in order to confront new challenges.⁹ According to this interpretation, it is no longer sufficient to train soldiers at the School of the Americas, as it was during the 1960s and 1970s, or to create mercenary groups like the Nicaraguan *Contras* during the 1980s. Rather, it has become necessary to create a continental war device under a single command. This ambitious project can be interpreted as the military version of the "consolidated market" reaching from Alaska to Patagonia that would be created by the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

This militarization of relations between the United States and Latin America would, in addition, have the goal of combating present and future challenges in the region. Let us not forget that various conservative sectors of the American establishment believe in the existence of a regional "axis of evil," composed of Brazil, Venezuela, and Cuba.¹⁰

This unified armed forces project was already very advanced prior to the terror attacks on the World Trade Organization and Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001. Global changes, the United States' focus on Afghanistan and Iraq, and the new situation in Latin America, appear to have postponed its completion. But the project began to take shape in August of 2001, with the 2001 Cabañas operation carried out in the northern province of Salta, Argentina.

Operation Cabañas took place in the very spot where the most important routes of the *Piquetero* Movement were found. Over the course of several days more than 1,200 troops from nine countries (Argentina, United States, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay) participated in the maneuvers that were entirely financed by Washington, even to contributions of food rations. The troops entered the country without permission from Congress, as required by the Constitution. According to news sources, the maneuvers had the objective of "training Latin America soldiers in situations of popular unrest." But, even more interesting, is that the maneuvers gave rise to a national debate in which evidence surfaced that "the United States has plans to build three bases on Argentine soil: Anartida of the southern region, Delta of the central region, and Salta in the north."¹¹

One of the novelties that emerged is that a permanent military contingent could be maintained in operation as part of the strategy for the Piranha River Delta, which is a very short distance from the strategic Zarate-Brazo Largo Bridge and the principle industrial center of Argentina, the Zarate-Compana Complex. Moreover, in those critical moments for Argentina, the Brazilian news service *Agencia Estado* confirmed that Fernando de la Rúa's government was negotiating the country's total debt in exchange for military bases.¹² During those same days, the United States was negotiating with Brazil, then presided over by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the cession of the Alcantara military base in the Amazon, near the border with Ecuador and the Andean mountain range.

But the political changes that took place in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Venezuela during those years partially thwarted Washington's plans. Although the situation in Ecuador is still undefined, the resignation of Lucio Gutierrez implies an adverse change of course for Bush.

Privatization of War

In a way, the evolution of war has followed the industrial model. During the 1960s, assembly line factory production ("Fordism," popularized by Charlie Chaplin in the film "Modern Times") came into crisis when workers rebelled against the alienation created by monotonous work and against the excessive control of the foremen and managers. Employers managed to regain the shop floor initiative by creating flexible forms of work, introducing new technologies such as informed robots, reducing factory personnel, outsourcing tasks to third parties, and reinforcing management. On a societal level, the new forms of organizing production made state power less relevant and entirely privatized production and services. These are the policies promoted by the consensus in Washington, which have come to be called neoliberalism.

One of the most notable characteristics of the new production model is that, upon externalizing a good part of the tasks that had previously been carried out in the factory, social functions become part of the production chain. In this way, one could say that the entire society begins to function with factory logic as the new production model spills onto the whole of society.

Something similar is happening with war. In 2002, there were 43 conflicts worldwide, of which only one was a war between sovereign states, that is to say, a "classic" inter-state war. The reality indicates "that 'old wars,' carried out by national sovereign states and regulated by international law, are being substituted by 'new wars,' which are carried out by diverse non-state actors with absolutely no legal regulation."¹³ In many African countries, war has ceased to be the violent interruption of everyday life and turned into "an economy regulated by its own laws and oriented toward its own reproduction."¹⁴ The idea at its heart, according to Robert Kurz, is to maintain at a distance the great "superfluous" masses, so as not to interfere with the reproduction of the system. That excess population should be controlled and kept at bay, and the way of doing it is the militarization of migratory fluctuations and those social sectors considered to be marginal.

According to another specialist on the privatization of war, Darío Azzellini, coauthor with Boris Kanzleiter of the book *The Privatization of War*, this process began with the defeat of the United States in Iraq. "We are returning to something akin to the economic enclaves of the colonial period. It is no longer about territorial control or the

imposition of economic interests. In Iraq, it is very clear; they are only interested in controlling oil fields, like before when they controlled sugar plantations, mines, and other colonial enclaves.”¹⁵

An ever-closer relationship exists between state armies and multinational corporations, given that private armies work for both. Some businesses, like the well-known corporation Halliburton, own their own armies, and some military businesses have shares in private business, as is the case with mining in various African countries. One of the objectives that led to the creation of Private Military Corporations (PMCs) consists of eluding any type of democratic control. “If the United States sends 600 soldiers to Colombia, that decision must be passed by Congress. But if the sender of the soldiers is a private company, as a result of a contract signed by the Pentagon, Congress has nothing to say, not even if they find out what is happening,” Azzellini points out.

According to experts, there are three different types of PMCs: those that intervene directly on the battlefield, those that offer military advice and training but do not fight directly, and finally, those that offer only transportation, and logistical and technical support. In Iraq, all three types exist. In Latin America, only those of the second and third type exist, for now. But on this continent, all of the anti-narcotics programs are run by military businesses, and employees of private businesses run the radar stations controlled by Southcom. In Colombia, eight U.S. citizens have died in recent years, but because they work for private companies, the Pentagon evades all responsibility.

Colombia is a laboratory experiment for the new wars in Latin America. Last October, the United States Congress authorized an increase of 400 to 800 soldiers on Colombian soil, while there are 600 civilians employed by private military businesses, estimated by some sources at 1,000. One of the most important PMCs in the world, DynCorp alone manages 88 U.S. helicopters and light aircraft, and it has between 100 and 335 employees, a third of whom are U.S. citizens.¹⁶

Plan Colombia, so as not to repeat the failure in Vietnam (and in particular the scandal that produced the distribution of war news in American society) supports PMCs in a decisive way. From the very beginning, when former U.S. President Bill Clinton implemented the plan, the result was alarming: “It quadrupled the number of professional soldiers and multiplied 20-fold the number of army helicopters, inspection planes, and military

advisers, while the number of paramilitaries that welcomed the plan increased from 5,000 to 12,500.”¹⁷

On this point there appears to be a notable confluence between the activities of PMCs and those of the Pentagon. James Petras describes it like this: “The true preoccupation of U.S. Southcom is that Colombia’s neighbors (Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama, and Brazil), who are suffering the same adverse effects of neoliberal policies, will mobilize politically against military domination and the economic interests of the United States.”¹⁸ In his opinion, it is about militarizing a strategic region in order to control it.

Brazil’s Case

Brazil is the only Latin American country that has a strategic defense plan. It is also the only country in the region that has a business community with interests different from those of the rest of the world business community. It was this sector which, supported by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva’s government, managed to postpone the FTAA. Brazil as a nation holds weight in the world. It is the tenth-largest industrial power and it has managed to design its own military strategy for autonomous defense, which centers around controlling the Amazon (the world’s largest natural reserve and the foremost fresh water reserve). In short, we are dealing with a large country with defined strategic interests, and a business community and armed forces with a nationalist calling that are not about to be overpowered by any force.

To a large extent, the strategy is based on an important military industry; stated another way, the country developed a state-of-the-art military industry in order to ensure the defense of its interests. Brazil is the fifth-largest arms exporter in the world, if the European Union is considered as one entity. The aeronautics company Embraer is the fourth most important in the world; it distributes half of the air force’s aeronautical materials and manufactures fighter, training, surveillance, and anti-submarine war jets.¹⁹ The Brazilian military industry has constructed war ships and it is currently building a nuclear submarine.

Brazil opposes Plan Colombia. Its opposition does not stem from its current government, but rather, from Brazil’s strategic position on the continent. During the IV Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, held in Manaus in October of 2000, then-President Fernando Henrique Cardoso rejected the possibility of involving the

Brazilian army in the fight against drugs, as the Clinton administration was proposing. In response to Plan Colombia, Brazil put into place Plan Cobra (from the initials of Colombia and Brazil) in order to prevent the war from spilling into the Brazilian Amazon, and Plan Calha Norte in order to prevent guerrillas and drug traffickers from crossing the border.²⁰

During the Cardoso government, disputes with soldiers were frequent. Some were due to perceived low salaries, but in the year 2000, the president fired the commander of the air force in a dispute over Embraer's association with French investors, which endangered the autonomy of Brazil's primary weapons manufacturer. But there is more. In 2002, Sivam (Surveillance System of the Amazon) began operations, which had been called for by Brazil a decade earlier at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. The system monitors the entire 5-million-square-kilometer region, which encompasses 61 % of the national territory, 30 % of the biodiversity of the planet, and houses 12 % of the Brazilian population. In 1994, the bid for Sivan was won by the United States group Raytheon, in a process that was denounced as fraudulent. At the moment, the armed forces and Lula's government are committed to strengthening state control over the Amazon, and it is likely that such control will be exercised with Brazilian-made military hardware (especially airplanes).

An extensive, March 2001 report appeared in the conservative newspaper *Zero Hora* out of Port Alegre, illustrating the willingness of Brazil to fortify its military autonomy. "In the last two years, the United States has built on South American territory a "sanitary corridor" of 20 military garrisons, divided into aerial and radar bases."²¹ According to the report, the relationship between the Brazilian armed forces and the United States is one of "no cooperation," given that Brazil does not allow U.S. bases on its territory, does not participate in joint maneuvers with the United States, and receives practically no U.S. funds for fighting drug trafficking. Remember that during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985), the United States blocked arms sales to Brazil, but Brazil's military industry development afforded it "relative autonomy." In fact, today Brazil is "the only South American military force with the real capacity to intervene in other countries, with air-transport divisions." According to the electronic pamphlet *Defesanet*, the only country of the southern hemisphere that surpasses Brazil militarily is Australia.²²

Fernando Sampaio, vice chancellor of the Superior School for Geopolitics and Strategy, dedicated to the study of military issues, sums up in few words the prevailing vision in Brazil regarding Plan Colombia and the Pentagon's military deployment in the region: "It is a dispute for regional hegemony. Brazil does not want to be another satellite in this war constellation sponsored by the Americans."²³ In this effort, it appears to have noteworthy allies. A recent report from Argentine Brigadier Gen. Ruben Montenegro stresses the "depth and scope the relations have recently reached between the air forces of Brazil and Argentina," which are developing "cooperative security systems for the region," giving precedence to the Mercosur area.²⁴ The two countries' *Lazo Fuerte* exercises, started in 2001, seek to reinforce "a defensive alliance in order to confront an invasion of the sovereign territory of either one," and the Argentine armed forces have made a "firm bet on the process of integrating the two countries of the region, decidedly collaborating to create a space of lasting peace."²⁵

Finally, it should be noted that the presence of a power like Brazil is creating two apparently contradictory effects: on one side it hampers the military and political hegemony of the United States in the region; but, in order to stop Washington's deployment, Brazil should be fortifying its military apparatus and alliances in the region and with the rest of the world. It is a situation that is certainly paradoxical, and it could result in an arms and military race across the continent, in spite of the will of South American governments.

Latin America: Disputed Space

Since Plan Colombia was designed and the U.S. military deployment was set after the closing of Howard Base in 1999, many things have changed on the continent. The strategy of "spilling" the Colombian war onto its neighboring countries (Venezuela, Ecuador, and Brazil), which was supposed to destabilize them should they refuse to adopt the strategy laid out by Plan Colombia, has met growing difficulty.

In broad terms, the changes in the regional political scene have four causes: insurrections and popular uprisings, new governments in various countries, strategic alliances between countries of the region, and new realities concerning the national armies. These changes, which are still taking place, as shown by the recent change of presidency in Ecuador, conform to a fluid regional map, constantly changing, but with a tendency not to favor Washington's plans for the region.

Since the year 2000, uprisings have toppled the governments in Argentina (December 2001), Bolivia (October 2003), and Ecuador (April 2005), in addition to the popular movement that put an end to the coup d'état against Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (April 2002) and allowed him to win the recall referendum (August 2005). In addition to the Venezuelan case, the new governments of Lula in Brazil, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, and Alred Palacio in Ecuador, are distancing themselves from the Pentagon's plans.

To these changes, already important in and of themselves, must be added the "strategic accords" established by several countries in the region. The most significant, though not the only, was the one signed in February between Brazil and Venezuela. Some analysts maintain that it represents a "new geopolitical axis on the continent, a severe setback for George W. Bush, and historically, the largest isolation of Washington" in the region.²⁶ The agreements signed by Lula and Chavez cover a broad range of issues: from economic integration to military cooperation, all the way to joint undertakings on energy and petroleum, and the construction of highways and bridges. In any case, Chavez is no longer isolated from the United States and Colombia; and Brazil is currently the one taking the initiative in the region.

A third noteworthy aspect is connected to changes in the internal "map" of the armed forces. Rosendo Fraga, director of the Argentine Center for Studies for a New Majority, points out that globalization "has meant a profound crisis for the military, since the existence and *raison d'être* of the armed forces is intimately tied to the existence of the nation state."²⁷ From there, he points out some changes, with the Argentine military in mind, but which could extend to the continent's other militaries. "Nationalism and patriotism, which used to represent the symbolic wealth of oligarchies and the right wing, are now more represented by popular sectors and even the left," Fraga asserts.

On the other hand, the salary drop for military careers has made it less attractive to middle- and upper-class sectors, and the armed forces are recruiting more and more in the lower echelons of society. "Soldiers have lost the relationships that they have historically had with the dominant elite," he adds. In addition, the intellectual distance between officers and sub-officers has been reduced, given that the latter now tend to hold secondary educations, previously a privilege of the former. Seventy percent of officers in Argentina hold other forms of employment, and many military wives make more than

their husbands. To all of this, cultural changes should be added: "In military families, the husband is now helping with household tasks," as is the case with middle class families, "a phenomenon being repeated in other armed forces around the world," assures Fraga. The result is that a large part of soldiers in Latin America today "have low incomes, which make their social needs much more similar to those of the lower class."

In light of this analysis, we can conclude that the armed forces of Latin America are no longer docile entities manipulated by the local elites or by Washington. On the contrary, the aforementioned changes are pushing them to find their own route, discover forms of obtaining strategic autonomy, and recover the respect of the societies in which they exist. It is no longer just the Brazilian armed forces that are testing this path. The militaries of Ecuador, Venezuela, and perhaps Argentina, appear to be looking for their place in the world. In Venezuela a new doctrine of defense is taking shape in which the population is called to play a significant role by incorporating into the active reserve.

In future years, the crisis of unilateralism, which is making advances all over the world, will have important effects on Latin America. The displacement of the United States as the region's only superpower is provoking tensions that could result in an arms race and trigger militarism. But later on, when the geopolitical re-composition runs its course and is consolidated, perhaps it will be shown that multilateralism is a better guarantee for lasting peace.

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Recommended citation:

Raúl Zibechi, "South America's New Militarism," Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, July 18, 2005).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/165>

Production Information:

Writer: Raul Zibechi
Editors: Laura Carlsen and Talli Nauman, IRC
Translator: Nick Henry
Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC