

NATO's Growing Military Presence in Latin America and the Caribbean

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At present, it has become customary to speak of NATO's expansion "towards Eastern Europe", which, while effective, is a reductionist concept. The truth is that since the end of the bipolar world, the United States, believing itself to be the master of the world, has used NATO to expand throughout the planet. Proof of this is the signing of the AUKUS Treaty (Australia, United Kingdom and United States), the creation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) formed by Australia, India, Japan and the United States and the Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia) as instruments of NATO's military expansion in Asia and Oceania.

The same is happening in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the United States is initiating an aggressive expansion plan throughout all latitudes and longitudes of the region. The following three installments will provide data to confirm the above assertion.

Part I

At the end of last year, the United States had installed 12 military bases in Panama, 12 in Puerto Rico, 9 in Colombia, 8 in Peru, 3 in Honduras, 2 in Paraguay, as well as installations of this type in Aruba, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Cuba (Guantanamo), and Peru among other countries, at the same time that it is orienting its search for the total coverage of the land and maritime surface of the region.

In Argentine territorial waters and in the Malvinas Islands, which were usurped by the United Kingdom, there is a NATO presence integrated in a system formed by bases on the islands of Ascensión, Santa Elena and Tristán da Acuña which "guards" the entire Atlantic from the north to the Antarctic area.

According to a report of the US Department of Defense quoted by the Venezuelan portal Misión Verdad, since May 2022 the United Kingdom is forming a “strategic triangle of control” of the southern tip of South America. While south of the Malvinas, nuclear submarines are operating. In addition, “France and the United States regularly organize joint military maneuvers in the region”.



Richardson is presented her four-star flag by Army chief of staff General James C. McConville at her promotion ceremony, October 18, 2021 (Licensed under the Public Domain)

During the last few years, and especially after the arrival of Laura Richardson as head of the U.S. Armed Forces Southern Command in October 2021, the levels of Washington’s aggressive interference in the region have ostensibly increased. This coincided with the arrival to power of Joe Biden who has implemented an active policy of substitution of the traditional (and natural) protagonism of the State Department in diplomatic activity, which began to be occupied by the Pentagon, the National Security Council and even the CIA. An increasing number of officials from these agencies are occupying ambassadorial posts in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The U.S. strategy is aimed at strengthening its presence in the region. In perspective, the South Atlantic has become particularly important given its proximity to Antarctica, which is regulated by a treaty that ended in 1941, the Amazon, the planet’s main reserve of oxygen and biodiversity, and the triple frontier where the Guarani aquifer, the world’s largest water reservoir, is located.

This is what makes sense of the United States’ attempts to reinstate the cold war in the region, this time against China and Russia. This logic explains the decision to urge six Latin American countries to donate their Russian military equipment to Ukraine, excluding – of course – Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela from this request. Richardson warned that after China, Russia is the number two adversary of the United States in the region, stressing the great strategic value of the region for her country.

The U.S. general has called China a “malign state actor” after 21 of the 31 countries in the

region have joined China's Belt and Road initiative, at the same time as Beijing's investment in critical infrastructure such as deep-water ports, space research or telecommunications, with 5G networks and the company Huawei, has increased.

Richardson highlighted the "protective" role that the United States will play in the region because being good neighbors means "taking care of each other" which "obliges" Washington to take charge of fighting against organized crime networks involved in human trafficking, drug smuggling, unregulated logging and illegal mining and especially "because it is a region rich in resources and rare earths, with the so-called Lithium Triangle that has 60% of the world's reserves (in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile), a metal very necessary for technology".

In the same way, Richardson has said that the United States is interested in oil (given the large reserves found in Guyana and the largest in the world in Venezuela) as well as copper and gold in the region, and that the United States is also preoccupied by the fact that oxygen and 31% of the Earth's fresh water is found in the Amazon. For all these reasons - according to her- China, which has become the main trading partner of several countries in the region, must be kept at a distance.

This logic is part of the "integrated deterrence" strategy of the United States, a renewed form of the National Security Doctrine which proposes to bring together under the Pentagon's leadership "all the civilian and military capabilities of governments, businesses, civil society and academia of the United States and all its allies".

At the XV Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas held in Brazil in July 2022, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin presented this strategy to his peers in the region. Two months later, in September, Richardson insisted on it before 14 military chiefs at the South American Defense Conference.

The interest of the United States has a regional perspective based on the need for its control since 200 years ago when the Monroe Doctrine was enunciated. But in the global perspective, Latin American armed forces constitute a combative potential that cannot be underestimated. In 2018, Brazil had 334,000 active military personnel, Colombia had 200,000 and Argentina had 51,000.

NATO has 3.5 million active military and civilian personnel. According to the CELAG think tank, Brazil and Colombia alone would contribute more assets to NATO than the European members annexed in the 1990s. In this sense, it is worth making a comparison, considering that Argentina, for example, has assets similar to those of Bulgaria (24,800) and the Czech Republic (25,000) combined.

In order to better understand this situation and the intense imperial activity to control the Latin American and Caribbean space, it is worth reviewing the way in which the intervention of the United States and NATO has been materializing in some countries of the region:

Paraguay

The Master Plan for the Navigability of the Paraguay River is an initiative of the Paraguayan government to "maximize the use of this navigable waterway", but it was the U.S. Ambassador Marc Ostfield who made the announcement. The work is being supported by U.S. capital and will be carried out thanks to the services of the U.S. Army Corps of

Engineers, which generated great concern in Argentina, which considers that such a decision will mean a control of the territory by foreign forces. Needless to say, the importance of the area, which is part of the La Plata Basin, the fifth largest fresh water reserve in the world in terms of extension, is obvious.

Likewise, Washington does not cease in its long-standing intentions to install a military base in the Triple Border (Argentina-Paraguay-Brazil), with the excuse of combating international terrorism and drug trafficking. In this context, attempts to militarize the region and change the “rules of the game” so that the United States can establish territories under its permanent control are considered extremely dangerous in Argentina. Likewise, some local political leaders have expressed concern that their region is being drawn into a logic of confrontation between the United States and China.

Although the Paraguayan government has said that the project involves “cooperation with specialists from the United States” which will include the study of the rivers, but does not contemplate cooperation of a military nature, the total subordination of Asunción to the United States casts doubt on this assertion. In geopolitical terms, it is also considered that Paraguay is the only country in South America that does not have relations with China.

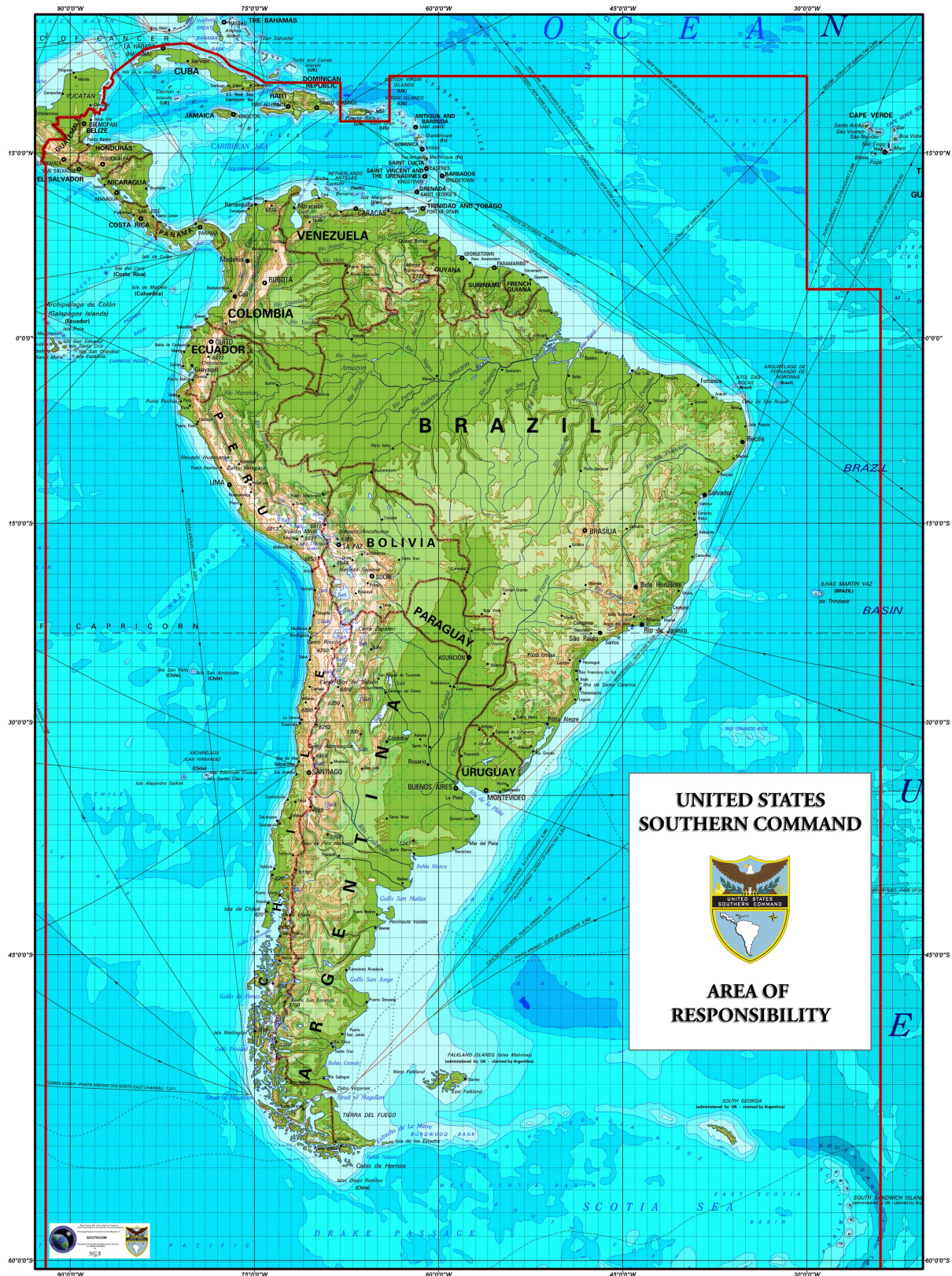
Argentina

From the Argentine perspective, Asunción’s decision to attract the U.S. armed forces to advance the navigability of the Paraguay River is related today to the growing food trade, which, in the context of the war in Ukraine, became strategic.

The purpose of the waterway is to allow the navigation of large vessels with large volumes of cargo 365 days a year, rectifying the route and eliminating islands and other obstacles. The presence of U.S. Army specialists gives the project a very different character from what was originally presented as a civilian project.

On the other hand, the United States has shown concern because the Argentine State intends to carry out a new bidding process for the dredging of the Paraná River (which receives waters from Paraguay) and some of the companies that will try to win it are of Chinese origin.

For the United States, the Triple Border between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay is of paramount importance. The Southern Command stated that it had identified sources of financing for “terrorist organizations” based in West Asia, mentioning the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas. To counter this alleged threat, a multilateral mechanism called 3+1 was created with the three South American countries and the United States.



Credit: [US Southern Command](#)

Washington has also shown great interest in Argentine Patagonia. In that framework last August 8, the US ambassador in the country attended in the city of Neuquén (located about 1140 km southwest of Buenos Aires) a meeting with representatives of the most powerful oil corporations in the world.

Four years earlier, in 2018, the construction of various facilities was announced, in a fiscal property under the direction and financing of the U.S. Southern Command. Although its embassy in Argentina hastened to inform that the works were part of a “humanitarian aid” project whose objective was to improve Neuquén’s capacity to respond to natural disasters, Neuquén’s civil society has rejected such an idea, since it has been characterized by secrecy, lack of information and absence of communication regarding what Argentina has obtained in exchange for the cession of such territory in an area that is considered of high strategic value.

The project, characterized as a “camouflaged military base” according to a report by journalist Ariel Noyola Rodríguez published in the RT portal, is part of a continent-wide strategy that has been characterized as a novel form of military intervention in the region: the “Humanitarian Assistance and Natural Disaster Response” program, sponsored by the U.S. Southern Command,

On the other hand, it cannot be ignored in this analysis that part of the Argentine territory is occupied by NATO forces. Between 1500 and 2000 British military personnel are stationed in the Malvinas, some of them permanently, as well as the latest generation of fighter-bombers.

Part II

Colombia

As a “global partner” of NATO, Colombia enjoys privileged attention from the war alliance. As an expression of this, in recent times, the United States is making great efforts to install a naval base on Gorgona Island in the Colombian Pacific, which are not stopped in spite of the great rejection of scientists and civil organizations in the region that intend to safeguard a set of rights that would be violated. These organizations consider that the U.S. agency financing the works of the base (U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) generates a loss of sovereignty since it would place the island under the power of another State.

According to the State Department, the Biden administration also contemplates the purchase of boat engines for an amount of 2.6 million dollars to improve the operational capacity of the Coast Guard on the island.

Piedad Córdoba, senator for the ruling Historic Pact, spoke out in early December against any U.S. interference in Colombia through the installation of military bases or through the deployment of its armed forces, and has asked President Petro to cancel the project. Córdoba has stated that it would be strange that the United States pays so much attention to a project like this, if it is not understood that for the United States the Pacific Basin region has a strategic character, which is “expressed through the deployment of the Fourth Fleet and the Southern Command with the installation of military bases, among them, the one on Gorgona Island”.

The senator also expressed the opinion that the concretion of the works in Gorgona, which in fact would mean the installation of the ninth U.S. military base in Colombia, could provoke similar damages to those occurred in the Philippines, Panama and Puerto Rico, where Washington has managed to install military bases.

Also in Colombia, at the beginning of December, the president invited the armed forces of the United States and NATO to the Amazon to cooperate in safeguarding the territory and combating drug trafficking. It was argued that the machinery, equipment and personnel brought in to carry out the work could be reused as “police to protect” the environment, changing the traditional logic of the fight against drugs. To this end, he proposed the use of U.S. Black Hawk helicopters to put out fires, arguing that such an action would symbolize a “complete change in what has always been U.S. military aid”.

In this context, at the end of August, during the government of Gustavo Petro, the armed forces of the United States and Colombia carried out joint exercises within the framework of NATO. In this context, Petro received General Richardson who made a five-day visit to the country. Richardson was full of praise for “our number one security partner in the region”, describing Colombia as the “hub of the entire southern hemisphere” which she said was “free and secure thanks to Colombia’s stabilization efforts”.

In this regard, Petro affirmed -whether with innocence or feigned ignorance is not known- that he had “achieved something: the conversation with NATO -of which we are members, although we have a very rare status, we are involved, I think we are the only Latin American country participating- to take this alliance to the care of the Amazon rainforest, providing technological collaboration in this”.

The struggle for the defense of the Amazon as a subject of military intervention

The idea of using the fight for the environment as an instrument of intervention is quite old. As early as 1989, Al Gore stated: “The Amazon is not your property. It belongs to all of us. In this vein, in 2019, in the midst of the fires in the Amazon, French President Emmanuel Macron called on the G7 countries to intervene: “It is an international crisis,” he said, which was echoed even by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, recalling his time as leader of a NATO member country. The Q&A social network Quora rhetorically queried, “Why doesn’t NATO invade Brazil to save the Amazon?”

But President Petro is not so naive as to assume that the U.S. and NATO have good intentions in the Amazon. He has publicly criticized the U.S. drug war policy by pointing out its obligations as the world’s largest consumer. Petro stated: “What I am trying to do is to take the dialogue with the United States to a different axis, which is the issue of the climate crisis and hence the importance of the Amazon rainforest. With the United States we have achieved the creation of the first military unit with Black Hawk helicopters”.

Richardson’s visit to Colombia was part of a tour of several countries in the region with the express purpose of counteracting the influence of China and Russia, and to promote the isolation of Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela.

In November Petro reported that French President Emmanuel Macron offered him “help” to preserve the Amazon. It should be recalled that France has an overseas department in French Guiana, bordering Brazil and just 500 kilometers from the mouth of the Amazon River. In this territory is located the launching base for spacecraft used by the country and by Europe. Without knowing the content of the offer or the counter offer to be granted by Colombia, the agreement between the two countries places France in a position of influence at both ends of the strategic basin.



Map of the Amazon River drainage basin with the Amazon River highlighted. (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ecuador

Last December, the United States approved a law aimed at strengthening cooperation with Ecuador in defense matters. This instrument, called the Ecuador-U.S. Partnership Act 2022, is part of the U.S. National Defense Spending Authorization Act and follows the recently approved open skies agreement, with a view to reducing tariffs, increasing travel and trade and stimulating job creation related to air bridges between the two countries.

All this is intended to be understood as a trade promotion strategy, but the resources committed by the United States (US\$858 billion) will be under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense, which clearly establishes its orientation.

Earlier, in September of last year, General Richardson also visited Ecuador where she met with President Lasso and led the South American Defense Conference Southdec 2022 for two days, in order to coordinate “mechanisms for the fight against organized crime and drug

trafficking”.

Uruguay

Last February 3, the outstanding Uruguayan political analyst Julián González Guyer published in the magazine Brecha de Montevideo an article in which he informed that the US Coast Guard Cutter (USCGC) Stone, the most modern vessel of the US Coast Guard would enter the port of Montevideo for 10 days.

According to the article, the US vessel would remain in Uruguayan waters for ten days under the argument of “carrying out training exercises in search and rescue operations at sea and control of jurisdictional waters with the National Navy”. But in reality the objectives of the USCGC Stone are different, namely “to obtain information about the South Atlantic and, in particular, the activity of Chinese fishing vessels in the area”.

This is the second trip of the vessel to Uruguay, after the first one, made two years before to carry out “patrolling and support activities for the interdiction of illegal fishing in the waters of Guyana, Brazil and Uruguay”, although the scheduled visit to Argentina was cancelled.

On this occasion, as on the previous one, the public explanation about the objectives of the visit has been surrounded by contradictions between what has been reported by the national government and the U.S. Embassy in Montevideo.

González Guyer concludes by pointing out that while the learning that the Uruguayan Navy could have obtained is insignificant, the US ship would have gathered “a significant volume of information about our coasts, jurisdictional waters and adjacent areas. Also, about our Navy and its officers”.

For several decades, the Uruguayan Navy has been trained by the United States to act as a force dedicated to “protect” the entrance to the Río de la Plata, giving privileged space to the U.S. Navy in this aspect. The two visits of the Stone to Uruguay in such a short period of time can be inscribed in this logic.

But along with this, the Stone developed patrol missions in the South Atlantic, together with three other ships, establishing in fact a greater control over a strategic triangle in the South Atlantic and the Strait of Magellan between Montevideo, Malvinas and the 3rd Naval Zone of the Chilean Navy based in Punta Arenas.

Part III

Guatemala

Although in 2021 the US Congress issued a decree prohibiting the delivery of funds to the armies of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras until there were improvements in the fight against corruption, the Department of Defence used a subterfuge to circumvent this decision by using an item that is not restricted.

Image source: [Dialogo Americas](#)



The donation of J8 military vehicles that the US gave to the Guatemalan government to combat drug trafficking was actually used to provide perimeter protection to private security agents who burned down peasant farmers' houses in El Estor, Izabal, in 2021. This donation was registered in the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programme, which is the largest military assistance programme approved by Congress. Likewise, in 2018, the government of Jimmy Morales used them to intimidate the US embassy itself and the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), which emerged from an agreement between the UN and the country's authorities.

A few years later, the US Congress limited donations of vehicles to the Guatemalan army, given the history of their use. In the current government of Alejandro Giammattei, nine Democratic congressmen asked the Biden administration for explanations, but the response was silence in the face of the US armed forces' decision to strengthen the Guatemalan army.

In this context, on 13 October, the US embassy in Guatemala City announced the donation of 95 vehicles, including trucks, vans and motorbikes, valued at US\$4.4 million. According to the website Prensa Comunitaria, the source of this money is a Department of Defense (DOD) budget line approved in 2019, during the administration of former president Donald Trump.

In a commentary written by researcher Adam Isacson on the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) website, he states that "the grant was funded through a DOD foreign military capacity building authority established in 2017 as Section 333 of Title 10 of the United States Code".

A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report dated March 2022 makes it known that "The FY 2021 operations budget prohibits aid to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, while conditioning 50% of other State Department security-related appropriations to these countries on their governments combating corruption, protecting Human Rights, and addressing other congressional concerns."

Isacson claimed that "a DOD programme was being used to provide a category of assistance that Guatemala cannot receive through the State Department's main military assistance programme", as an alternative budget was used to fund Guatemala's military by bypassing congressionally mandated limitations that the DOD disregarded and disregarded.

Panama

In October last year, General Richardson arrived in Panama on her second trip to the

country in less than five months. On this occasion, the reason for the visit was to hold a “bilateral security meeting”. On her first trip of the year, in June, the head of the Southern Command discussed security issues and the regional migration crisis with the Panamanian authorities. She also participated in the High Level Security Dialogue (HLSD) between Panama and the United States, which was held in that country.

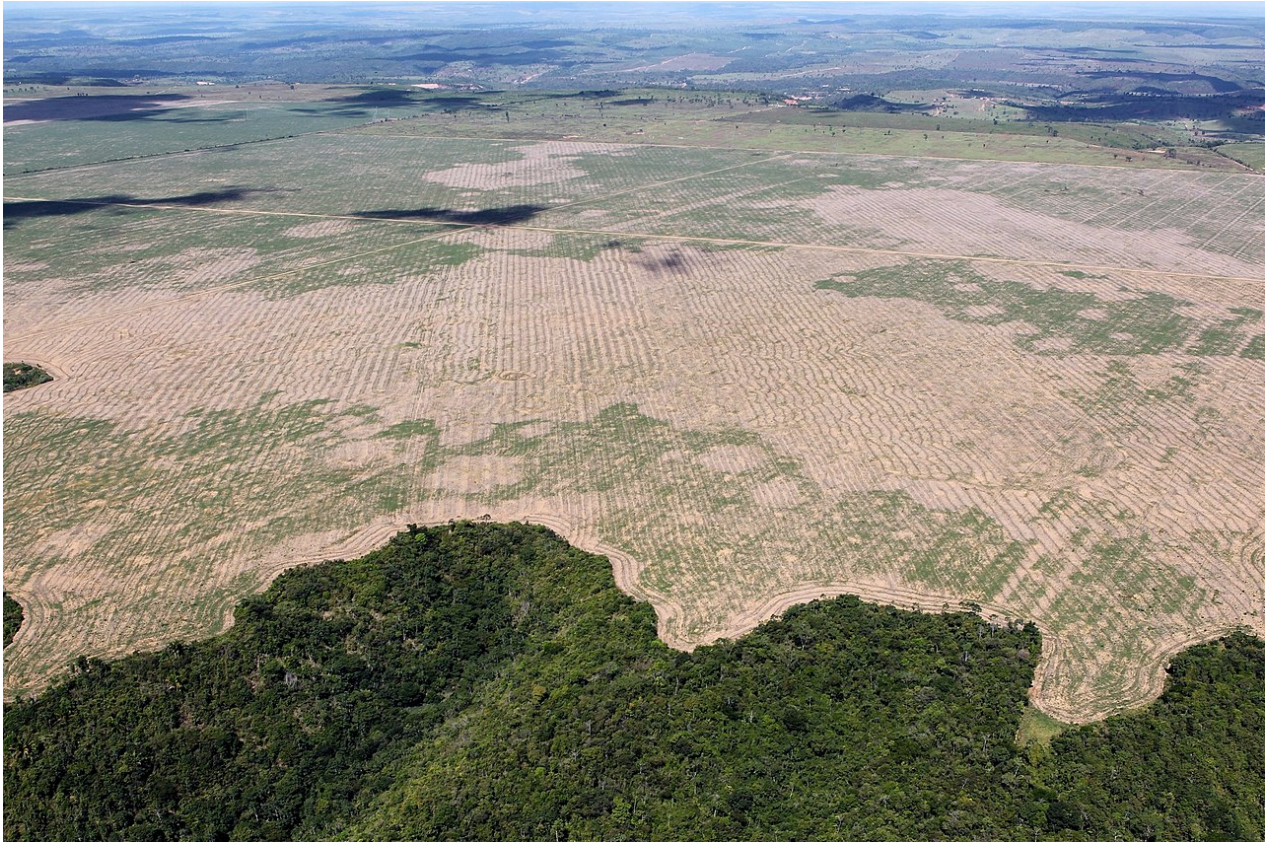
The migration issue was at the centre of the deliberations at a time when Panama was facing a migration crisis. In the context, only a few days earlier, a new policy had come into force in the United States that legalised the expulsion of Venezuelan nationals who attempted to enter through the land border with Mexico or who had arrived irregularly in Panama.

On this issue, the director of Panama’s National Migration Service (SNM), Samira Gozaine, reported that they were “clamouring to the US embassy to help us, to assist us economically as they do with other countries. For the US, the migration crisis generated by its own policies has become a great opportunity for intervention and “legal” interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region.

Brazil

During a visit to Brazil in September last year, General Richardson stated that there was an “outline” of a joint military force between her country and Brazil with helicopters to – allegedly – fight fires in the Amazon jungle.

According to Uruguayan analyst Luis Vignolo, “the information went unnoticed, perhaps not coincidentally, while the mainstream media looked in other directions”. But the truth is that there were strong military rapprochements between the two countries during the government of Jair Bolsonaro. Three months earlier, during the IX Summit of the Americas, held in Los Angeles, California, between 6 and 10 June, Brazil and the United States announced a bilateral rapid response group to combat deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, for which a high-level working group made up of authorities from both countries was created.



Deforestation in the Maranhão state of Brazil, 2016 (Licensed under CC BY 2.0)

By way of background, in August 2019, Donald Trump had designated Brazil as an “extra-NATO preferential ally of the United States” to the delight of Bolsonaro and his vice-president, retired general Hamilton Mourão. According to Vignolo, “Mourão referred in this context to the role of the Brazilian armed forces as a guarantee against the seizure of power by those he considers enemies, in what could be considered a warning against the opposition to the right-wing government”.

The violent eruption of fascist gangs a few days after Lula’s inauguration -just as had happened two years earlier in Washington with the prominence of Trump supporters- and the attitude of the armed forces to the event, seemed to set the tone for how the military would behave in the performance of Lula’s presidential duties, generating a threat accepted by the most reactionary sectors of the US establishment and by important sectors of its armed forces that consider their Brazilian counterparts to be important allies for the strategic control of the region.

Lula will have to confront US and European interests over the Amazon, especially now that his “shift” towards centrist positions has brought him closer to the Democratic Party that controls the US administration and European social democracy, which governs in countries like Germany and Spain, with whom he has established privileged ties that could facilitate the rapprochement of their armed forces to Brazil for a supposed “sustainable management” of the Amazon. In fact, Lula has already invited them to “invest” in ecologically sustainable projects in the region and has assured that this will be done with respect for Brazilian sovereignty. However, there is little detail on this.

The well-informed analyst and writer Andrew Korybko, who has done a lot of research on ‘hybrid wars’, has warned that ‘a fraction of the PT could be used by the US for its meddling purposes’. He has also expressed the view that US intervention in Brazil will not cease under

the new Lula government, but will change form, taking on a kind of “radical destabilisation” to provide pretexts for NATO to intervene and ‘save’ a politically handcuffed Lula”.

Korybko believes that “all the elements for a total destabilisation of Brazil are in place, given the structural problems of the economy, the low parliamentary weight of the ruling party and the serious polarisation on the streets between Bolsonaro’s supporters and Lula’s supporters”.

Bolivia

The secessionist plan in Bolivia is longstanding. It had a moment of realisation after the US-backed coup against President Evo Morales in 2019 and has recently resurfaced in the form of a violent “civic strike” organised by a fascist paramilitary group in the department of Santa Cruz which is part of the Bolivian Amazon that constitutes 43% of the national territory.

The main operator of US policy against Bolivia has been Mark Falcoff, the Bush administration’s Latin America adviser. In his article ‘Bolivia’s Last Days’, published in American Outlook in May 2004, Falcoff ‘predicted’ the ethnic division of Bolivia following the wave of popular uprisings that led to the overthrow of President Sánchez de Lozada in 2003.

In his article, Falcoff notes that: ‘... it is a fundamental fact about Bolivia to know that it is a society divided along two great fault lines: race and geography’. Falcoff contrasts the situation in “Andean, poor, drug-crop-producing, violent, underdeveloped and levantistic Bolivia with prosperous Santa Cruz, which generated 51 per cent of the country’s income and received only ‘a small percentage’ of the profits generated by oil and gas”.

Falcoff therefore recommended a new Constitution that should “remedy the need to decentralise authority and resources” accompanied by “a true attempt at a federal solution, with a regional redistribution of resources and a rational energy policy”.

The plan that led to the coup d’état against Evo Morales and the recent fascist attempt to repeat it were part of this logic, although operational modifications have now been made without changing the objective of overthrowing the government. In the Pentagon’s sights – as General Richardson has openly made known – are the gigantic lithium deposits, which are not in the country’s Amazonian region, but in the Andean highlands. The exploitation and subsequent industrialisation of lithium by non-US foreign companies is causing concern in Washington, which is not relenting in its attempts to destabilise the country.

Peru

On 18 January 2023, Peruvian President Dina Boluarte and Prime Minister Alberto Otárola sent a letter to José Daniel Williams, President of the Peruvian Congress, requesting approval to authorise “the entry of naval units and foreign military personnel with weapons of war into the interior of the Republic”. This should be read as the entry of US military forces at a time of large mobilisations against the government that has overthrown President Pedro Castillo and usurped power, which has been resisted by important sectors of the population who have been subjected to strong repression. These actions have had the open and clear support of the US embassy and government.

Mexico

At the last minute, as this work in three instalments was coming to a close, information arrived that two representatives of the US Republican Party, Dan Crenshaw and Michael Waltz, presented a document to their country's Congress to authorise the Armed Forces to carry out operations against Mexican cartels, without the acceptance of the US government.

In fact, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador rejected the possibility of the United States deciding "who is the good guy and who is the bad guy", assuming itself to be the "government of the world", with the power to intervene by force in any country on the planet.

Conclusions

To conclude, it is worth bearing in mind that the adoption by the United States of its new military concept of "integrated deterrence", in which it expresses supposedly "shared values" with Latin America that in reality do not exist, is aimed at incorporating the countries of the region into its global war against China and Russia.

This "integrated deterrence" is a sort of pooling of the resources of the countries of the Americas to fight a supposedly common enemy. Washington calls for "unity" to confront the enemy it has unilaterally defined as the enemy, which is not necessarily the same as Latin America and the Caribbean, which should rather opt for neutrality and the search for peace.

The head of the Southern Command said it very precisely in Ecuador when she stated that "China's advance is a national security problem". She added that the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean should "work together as a team, playing our respective positions in a harmonious and highly effective way to resolve this problem".

As has been seen, the instruments are varied, the actions manifest different dimensions and characteristics, but all aim to keep the region subject to Washington's strategic control.

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