

The Installation of a US Military Base in Paraguay: A Wedge in Mercosur

By [Raúl Zibechi](#)

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The mystery about the installation of a United States military base in Paraguay begins to clear: The purpose is to drive a wedge into the Mercosur trade bloc and to control the region, objectives that contrast with the passivity of governments that should have reacted long ago.

The diplomatic immunity granted by the Paraguayan parliament to the American troops set off an alarm. Speculation immediately arose that Washington was going to establish a military base in Mariscal Estigarribia, where in the 1980s U.S. technicians built a huge airport with a 3,800-meter landing strip suitable for B-52 bombers, and C-5 Galaxy and C-130 transport planes. The base has housing for 16,000 troops and is barely 200 kilometers [120 miles] from the border with Bolivia.

Despite the denials from Washington and Asuncion, the objectives of the northern superpower became clear with the passing of months. One of the most remarkable facts, one that showed the operation was part of a “hidden agenda,” was the manner in which the Paraguayan parliament’s decision to grant immunity to U.S. troops came to light.

On May 26, Congress approved the immunity, but the decision became public in mid-June, when the Argentine daily Clarín published the news (1). For sure, the news was not made public by the Paraguayan parliament or the Paraguayan media or the media in Brazil (a country that holds major interests in Paraguay.) Something important was beginning to happen and nobody seemed to be concerned.

Diplomatic and military detour

According to all indications, the administration of George W. Bush decided to alter its policy toward South America in early 2005. What happened at that time?

In February, the government of President Nistor Kirchner negotiated a pardon for 60 percent of Argentina’s foreign debt, but the decision had the support of the Bush administration and — despite straining relations with the International Monetary Fund — did not generate major problems.

Other events that did not seem to have played a decisive role in Washington’s detour were Brazil’s “friendly” separation from the IMF and the White House’s defeat in April, when it tried to impose its own candidate to the post of secretary general of the Organization of American States.

On the other hand, the Guayana Summit, held in late March in Venezuela, did not go unnoticed by the Bush administration. The meeting between presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and Prime Minister Josi Luis Rodrmguez Zapatero of Spain irritated the U.S. administration, which chose to openly criticize the sale of Spanish weapons to Venezuela, a transaction worth \$1.3 billion.

Venezuela already had bought 100,000 assault rifles and 40 combat helicopters from Russia. Now, Spain was supplying 10 transport planes, four corvettes and four coast-guard cutters.

"I'm concerned," said U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, adding: "It won't be good for the hemisphere." But that wasn't the United States' sole concern.

The Declaration of Guayana, signed by the four leaders on March 29, represented an endorsement of both the creation of the South American Community of Nations (which links the Mercosur bloc to the Andean Community) and Chavez's initiatives of Petroamirica and Petrosur, which propitiate the integration of the region's energy sources.

A greater political coordination, along with initiatives of economic integration with the participation of the two largest South American countries (Brazil and Argentina), threatened true isolation for Washington in a region that is key to his plans for world hegemony.

The response was lightning-swift. In less than one month, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a tour of the region, stopping in Brazil, Chile, Colombia and El Salvador. Around that time, the European press reported that the U.S. "is again directing its attention toward Brazil" to secure that country's support "in the stabilization of a region that is increasingly volatile." (2)

On the same day, The New York Times, pointed out that the Bush administration was studying "a long-range strategy that could mean the hardening of its position vis-`-vis Hugo Chavez, after concluding that it was impossible to maintain a pragmatic attitude toward him." The hardening toward Caracas was part of — and an excuse for — a change in course that seeks to involve the whole region.

According to other analysts, once the political crisis exploded in Brazil, the Bush administration cast aside its doubts about the ability of that country to carry out the "mandate" to stabilize the region issued by Washington and chose to take direct action on the matter.

Along the same lines, sectors in the regional elites maintain that "those who claim the government of George W. Bush does not have a policy toward Latin America are wrong. In reality, that policy exists, is healthy and continues to add new rungs to its project." (3)

The project consists of "trade and security" and, in the face of the failure of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, seeks private deals that accomplish the same goals. The analyst maintains that the inability of Argentina and Brazil — much too preoccupied with their own domestic woes — to install a "zone of democratic security" in the Southern Cone generates a vacuum that will be occupied by the United States when it picks Paraguay, "a key country, as the axis of a security plan."

Paraguay, the weakest link

Shortly after Rice's tour of the region, a series of events occurred: On May 5, the U.S. arranged for the Paraguayan Congress to approve an increase in the number of U.S. troops. That was done on May 26, under the strictest secrecy.

On June 10, Paraguayan Vice President Luis Castiglioni traveled to Washington, where he met with Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the then-Assistant Secretary of State for Hemispheric Affairs, Roger Noriega.

On July 1, the first contingent of 500 U.S. soldiers arrived in Paraguay, and on the 7th of that month, reacting to widespread alarm, the U.S. Embassy in Asuncion issued a communique stating that the U.S. had no intention of establishing a permanent base in the country.

Finally, on Aug. 16, Rumsfeld arrived in Asuncion for a brief tour that took him also to Peru, another country that's being pressured to grant immunity to U.S. troops.

Meanwhile, the prolonged and crushing political crisis in Brazil (instigated by the United States, according to local journalists (4), has paralyzed Lula's government for the past four months. According to the group Independent Journalists of Brazil (JIBRA, as it is known there), former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso traveled in February to Washington, where he maintains close relations with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Cardoso sent a message to Bush to the effect that he should be more attentive to the region and avoid the emergence of "new Hugo Chavezes" and, upon returning to Brazil in February, predicted that the country would undergo an institutional crisis. According to members of JIBRA, American Consulate officials have been seen visiting Cardoso's apartment in Sao Paulo.

In July, shortly after the arrival of the first contingent of U.S. troops, the Brazilian Army conducted war games simulating a defense of the strategic hydroelectrical dam at Itaipu.

On June 12, the Senate debated the topic at the insistence of Alvaro Dias of the Social Democratic Party, who said that "through the eyes of Roberto Jefferson [who had created a climate of crisis by charging the government with corruption] we are not paying attention to the situation in Paraguay."

He said more: "All around us, the military presence of the United States is widespread," referring to U.S. military activities in Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru. "This is not the first time we feel threatened, particularly under the pretext of combating terrorism that might concentrate in the Triple Frontier, as if it were an extension of Iraq." (5)

At the same meeting, Workers Party senator Jefferson Peres proposed that, just as the Mercosur countries signed a "democratic clause" that states no dictatorship may be part of the bloc, they should also approve "another clause stating that third countries [without naming the U.S.] may not establish permanent bases in any of the member states, without prior consultation and approval of all members" of Mercosur.

Despite the gravity of the topic, however, no other Workers Party senators took any action.

On the other hand, the neoliberal policy of Lula's administration seems to be particularly negative for the other countries in the region, including its closest allies on the Mercosur bloc. In addition to the constant trade clashes between Argentina and Brazil, an analyst says, both countries "have constantly underestimated Paraguay and Uruguay," particularly

the former, who would feel “slighted.” (6)

In reality, a policy based on free trade contradicts continental unity. Brazil, the only country capable of leading the unity movement, has opted — unlike Chavez’s Venezuela — to give priority to trade relations with countries that offer large markets to the exportation of its basic products, countries such as China, India, South Africa, the European Union and the United States.

In South America, relations are tinged with a certain economic expansionism (“imperialism”), while a quest is on to reach accords on infrastructure works, such as Bolivia’s corridor to the sea, that are to the exclusive benefit of the larger country.

A good example is the recent start of the Inter-Oceanic Highway. The 2,600-kilometer roadway, which in two years will join the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and connect three Peruvian ports with the Brazilian port of Santos, is budgeted at approximately \$1 billion. Brazil will contribute 70 percent of the cost, but will be its principal beneficiary, because it is increasing its trade considerably with Asian countries, particularly China. (7)

Under such conditions, it is impossible to generate a consensus to promote integration. Further, the policy based on free trade creates strains between countries that should be partners and allies. It also generates “cracks” that are used by Washington to introduce its policies.

A good example is the presence of the Brazilian company Petrobras in Ecuador, where it exploits wells in indigenous zones. Petrobras also participates in the exploitation of natural gas in Bolivia, a country where Brazilian enterprises control 20 percent of the gross domestic product.

The relationship between the U.S. and Paraguay does not merely or principally involve a military presence, because in the neoliberal mindset military affairs are subordinated to political affairs, which in turn are subordinated to economic affairs. What’s at issue is a long-range shift in regional alliances, the introduction of a wedge that threatens to crack the Mercosur bloc and endangers the foreign policy, based on regional unity, that seemed to be Lula’s best strategic bet.

In a situation like this, it should surprise no one that a small and weak country like Paraguay, which finds no solution to its problems in a paralyzed and crisis-ridden Mercosur, should seek alliances with the United States, with which it hopes to establish a bilateral free-trade accord. The policy of “trade and security” advances not only thanks to the ambition of the Bush administration but also to the inability of those who should confront the Empire to design genuine and generous alternatives.

[Razl Zibechi, a Uruguayan writer and journalist, directs the international section of the important Uruguayan weekly “Brecha.”]

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