

# US use of Colombian bases fuels regional tension: analysts

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, August 05, 2009

[AFP](#) 27 July 2009

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

An agreement allowing US forces to use three Colombian military bases for South American anti-drug operations has heightened tensions between Bogota and its neighbors, and highlighted Washington's diplomatic difficulties in the area.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that the US army has "plans to invade" his country from Colombia, where "a Yankee military force" is assembling. He earlier announced that he would review ties with Colombia over the base agreement.

Ecuadoran Security Minister Miguel Carvajal said Friday that "an increase in military tension" between Colombia and Ecuador was a possibility.

Colombia on July 15 announced that it would allow US forces to use the bases, in part to compensate for Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa's decision to ban the US military from Manta, on the Pacific coast, an important Ecuadoran military base for regional US anti-drug operations.

Relations between the populist Chavez and the staunchly pro-US government of President Alvaro Uribe in Colombia have been tense for years.

The two countries nearly went to war after Colombian forces bombed and raided a camp belonging to leftist guerillas with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) deep in the jungle just across the border with Ecuador in late March 2008.

Raul Reyes, one of the most senior FARC leaders, was killed in the attack. Colombian soldiers that entered the camp also recovered computer hard drives and flash drives with data they say links Chavez to both the leftist guerrillas and the illegal drug trade.

Colombia has long suspected that Chavez and Correa support the FARC guerrillas.

Quito and Caracas broke diplomatic ties with Bogota. Chavez has since restored ties with Colombia, but Ecuador has not.

"Colombia has emerged as the new US geopolitical pivot" in the region, said Juan Carlos Eastman, deputy head of the Institute of Geostrategic Studies at the Nueva Granada university.

He believes that it is essential for Washington to maintain both an anti-drug presence and "an effective military presence" in Latin America.

The US administration of President Barack Obama faces a dilemma in the region.

On one hand the US agreement with Colombia can be seen as part of Bogota's responsibility in the war on drugs: Colombia is the world's largest producer of cocaine, and the United States is the world's largest cocaine consumer.

And after all, Chavez has publicly announced that he would allow Russian warships to conduct maneuvers in its territorial waters and its warplanes to fly in Venezuelan airspace.

But the US use of the Colombian bases "renews antagonistic relations" between Washington and several leftist governments in Latin America — many sympathetic to Chavez — which Obama "was hoping to overcome," said Carlos Espinosa, an international relations professor at the Universidad of San Francisco de Quito.

Peter Hakim, president of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue, said he was "not very sure the highest levels" of the US government were involved in the decision on the Colombian bases.

"The bases do concentrate all US military activity in Colombia ... it makes Colombia isolated in the region," Hakim said.

"But does the US really need this base? Is the cost too high? In South America, we're not fighting Al-Qaeda," he said.

Washington "should give serious consideration" to ending the US military presence in the region, Hakim said. "The mistake is just assuming that you need a base," he said.

Hakim said that Ecuador has reasons to be concerned with Colombia after the 2008 raid.

As for Chavez, the Venezuelan regime has "come to believe their own propaganda" about the United States wanting to invade.

"It is largely part of Hugo Chavez using whatever initiative he can in order to raise the fears of the people," Hakim said.

"This circus atmosphere... is not good for Latin-America overall," he said. "These things can get out of hands — look at Honduras, nobody thought Honduras was a real crisis, he said.

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