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## Then we take Costa Rica...

The USA and the militarization of the Caribbean

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

July 18, 2010

**How can we understand the American presence in Costa Rica? The USA is in fact in the process of militarizing the whole Caribbean area, something which is crucial to the process of rebuilding America's dog-eared hegemony in Latin America. Indeed, this has been one of the key policy objectives of the Obama administration.**

On Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> July, the parliament of Costa Rica approved a US request for permission to station between 7,000 and 13,000 US troops (the precise number is still uncertain) on its territory. The troops will arrive in 46 warships. This request, backed by Laura Chinchilla's government and the parties who support her – the National Liberation Party (PLN), the Libertarian Movement (ML) and Costa Rican Renovation (RC) – would be covered under the Security Section of the Free Trade Agreement between Costa Rica and the USA which was signed despite significant popular resistance after a rigged referendum in October 2007<sup>1</sup>. The excuse being given to justify this extraordinary presence of US troops is the

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<sup>1</sup> On the referendum, see the article by José Julián Llaguno of the Circulo de Estudios La Libertad at: [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

fight against drug trafficking<sup>2</sup>, a sort of catch-all expression normally used throughout the region to justify any outrage against the local population or any interference that Washington feels the need to indulge in.

But is drugs really the issue at stake? Is this really a war against drugs? Let's examine the military equipment being employed...

“According to the Costa Rican press, most of the warships are frigates with a length of 135 metres, the capacity to carry two SH-60 Seahawk helicopters or HH-60B Blackhawks, as well as 200 marines and 15 officers each.

But other ships and aircraft carriers, such as the USS Making Island, have the capacity to carry 102 officers and nearly 1,500 troops, and are armoured and ready for intensive combat. They can carry 42 CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters, five AV-8B Harrier fighters and six Blackhawk helicopters.

Authorization has also been given for the arrival of fighter submarines, catamaran ships, a hospital ship and also amphibious combat and reconnaissance vehicles. Permission has also been granted for a littoral combat ship, the USS Freedom, which has anti-submarine capacities”<sup>3</sup>.

And it is the nature of all this military hardware which provides ample room for doubt about its true purpose.

How then can we understand the American presence in Costa Rica? The USA is in fact in the process of militarizing the whole Caribbean area, something which is crucial to the process of rebuilding America's dog-eared hegemony in Latin America. Indeed,

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<sup>2</sup> elpais.cr

<sup>3</sup> www.kaosenlared.net

region. We can only hope that the brave Tico [Costa Rican] people, i.e. those who mobilized and fought against the US FTA, take up the challenge and oppose the occupation.

www.anarkismo.net e “¿Insurrección en Honduras?” www.anarkismo.net.

distanced themselves from it in order not to suffer the same fate as Zelaya<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, we have the **Security Agreement between Colombia and Honduras**, which came into force in February this year, whose declared objective is the fight against “terrorism and drug trafficking” in terms that are no different to those coming from Washington<sup>13</sup>. It is clear that Colombia is acting as a “mediator” on behalf of the USA, which, even though the US openly supports the Porfirio Lobo regime<sup>14</sup>, would have produced quite a ruffling of feathers in Latin America, where most countries do not recognize the legitimacy of the new government in Tegucigalpa – for the US to strengthen its military ties directly with that country after the coup would have been too much a hard pill to swallow for the region. Thus, this agreement strengthens US hegemony in Central America, but is presented for public consumption as a South-South agreement<sup>15</sup>.

Add to that the multi-million boost to the **Mérida Initiative**, an initiative supposedly created to lead the “War on Drugs”, aimed at Central America and Mexico, and we have a complete picture of the increasing US military pressure on the region for its “anti-drugs fight”<sup>16</sup>.

This is the general scene which allows us to understand what is happening in Costa Rica and the seriousness of this “agreed” military occupation. Though nothing much is stirring, there have been small signs of concern from some quarters. Already people are talking about the serious threat that this new step means for the

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<sup>12</sup> Former TV journalist Mauricio Funes was the candidate for the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in the 2009 presidential election. Guatemalan president Álvaro Colom is the leader of the social-democratic National Unity of Hope party (UNE).

<sup>13</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>14</sup> Porfirio Lobo Sosa of the conservative National Party became Honduran president in November 2009 following the coup.

<sup>15</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

<sup>16</sup> [www.elespectador.com](http://www.elespectador.com)

this has been one of the key policy objectives of the Obama administration<sup>4</sup>. This is evident from the statements of ML deputy Carlos Góngora on the reasons for authorizing the US occupation: “because Venezuela is buying weapons from Russia, and to prevent drug traffickers selling drugs to kids outside their schools”<sup>5</sup>.

The USA’s loss of hegemony in the region, after its military adventures in the Middle East under Bush and the so-called “War on Terror”, facilitated the arrival of other economic interests in Uncle Sam’s traditional “backyard” (Europeans, the Russians, the Chinese as well as a multitude of South-South relationships with governments considered hostile by the US government, such as Iran); and of course wherever there is competition for markets, there is friction and conflict. Moreover, during the same period, there was a strengthening of mechanisms of regional economic and political integration (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America or ALBA, the Union of South American Nations or UNASUR), which is another scenario that threatens US hegemony, since any scenario of greater unity will produce different negotiating terms and a pole of development with a greater degree of independence, even though it does not go beyond the limits of capitalism<sup>6</sup>.

This latest threat, represented by growing Latin American integration and the more dynamic role of countries in the region (Brazil and Venezuela, for example) was identified in a US Air Force document dated May 2009, which analyzed the importance of the new bases in Colombia, particularly:

“[South America is a] *critical sub region of our hemisphere where security and stability is under constant*

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<sup>4</sup> See my article “Obama and Latin America: a friendly imperialism?” [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

<sup>5</sup> [elpais.cr](http://elpais.cr)

<sup>6</sup> This process of growing multipolarity was analysed in greater detail in the article “The Global Game”, by Seán Flood & José Antonio Gutiérrez, published in “Red & Black Revolution”, No.15, Spring 2009.

*threat from narcotics funded terrorist insurgencies, anti-US governments, endemic poverty and recurring natural disasters*<sup>7</sup>

After all, every relationship of hegemony or domination is ultimately maintained by force, or at least the threat of force. It is no coincidence that: in late 2008 the **Fourth Fleet was re-activated to strengthen the USA's Southern Command**, which oversees Latin America in case of "crisis"; in **Aruba and Curaçao**, two military bases were installed as Forward Operating Locations; in **Panama** in late 2009, the installation of 4 military bases was approved; in January, in the context of the tragedy unleashed by the earthquake in **Haiti**, the USA took the opportunity to occupy the country militarily, with 20,000 Marines, making it a de facto military platform (which incidentally also partially undermines the hegemony of Brazil, which had led the UN occupation of this republic, MINUSTAH); and finally, we have the agreement for 7 new US military bases in **Colombia**, together with access to that country's air land and sea space and to any other base on Colombian territory.

As we can see, the USA's military presence in the Caribbean is overwhelming. But what is the purpose of it? The answer can be seen in the military document quoted above:

*"[Development of this Cooperative Security Location] improves the U.S. ability to respond rapidly to crisis, and assuring regional access and presence at minimal cost (...) [Palenquero] will also increase our capability to conduct Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), improve global reach, support logistics requirements, im-*

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in "Las Bases Militares en Colombia", Diego Otero, Dossier de la revista Deslinde, Mayo-Junio 2010, p.6. Original in English at [www.centrodealerta.org](http://www.centrodealerta.org)

*prove partnerships, improve theater security cooperation, and expand expeditionary warfare capability.*"<sup>8</sup>

And apart from this massive military presence, we must also look at other processes that are associated with this struggle for hegemony even if they do not involve the direct participation of the USA.

First, we have the **Honduran Coup** on 28 June 2009, which shows that the old habit of sponsoring coups and strong-arm regimes to combat "communism" (ie, any force that might challenge US hegemony or pursue a too-independent policy) remains an alternative for the USA<sup>9</sup>. From unconvincing expressions of disapproval and the parody of negotiation, next came unqualified support for a regime that was imposed by a coup d'état. Even though they have denied it, US involvement in the coup is clear, because the army in Honduras never moves a finger without the prior permission of their American "masters" stationed at the Soto Cano base. In fact, the State Department acknowledged, prior to the coup, having discussions with the military in order to, they say, "defuse the crisis"<sup>10</sup>. We now know that the US embassy was fully aware of the plot<sup>11</sup>. In any case, the coup had the effect desired by Washington, which was not only to get rid of a Chavez ally such as Zelaya, but also to send a message to the whole region. Central America, which had started to lean towards the integration processes, has come back to following Washington discipline since the coup. Both Mauricio Funes in El Salvador and Álvaro Colom in Guatemala, who had expressed their intention to join ALBA several months earlier, have since

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> We analyse the Honduras process in greater detail in three articles written during the coup, "Coup in Honduras: the return of the gorillas or the tactics of attrition?" [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net), "Honduras: negociando la crisis a espaldas del pueblo"

<sup>10</sup> [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

<sup>11</sup> [resistenciahonduras.net](http://resistenciahonduras.net)