

## **THE UNITED STATES AND ITS MILITARY BASES IN LATIN AMERICA: SOVEREIGNTY, COOPERATION, AND CONTROVERSY**

*The United States has established military bases in Latin America since the 20th century, justifying its presence through the fight against drug trafficking, regional stability, and the control of strategic points. While this presence has strengthened defense cooperation, it has also sparked conflicts due to its impact on national sovereignty and a lack of transparency. Cases like Guantánamo, Manta, and Palmerola reflect these tensions. How have these bases influenced regional politics? Are they still necessary, or do they represent a challenge to the autonomy of host countries?*

By the mid-19th century, nearly all<sup>1</sup> European colonies on the American continent had gained independence. The first was Haiti, whose revolution for freedom against France began in 1791 (ending in 1804), and the last was Belize (formerly British Honduras), which gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1982. The six colonial powers in the Americas were: Spain, Britain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>, and finally, Denmark<sup>3</sup>.

However, many of these revolutionary movements that led to independence were inspired by the model of the thirteen British colonies' revolution—namely, the 1775 American Revolution. The United States' War of Independence, which began that same year and ended with British surrender in 1783 (Treaty of Paris), had a continental impact, sparking a sense of American identity and tension with European metropolises. This phenomenon would later be reinforced by the French Revolution (as a republican government model) and Napoleon's 1808 invasion of Spain, which undermined Bourbon monarchy control over Spain's American colonies. After a 19th century marked by civil and independence wars, the United States—by then the continent's most powerful nation—developed a series of geopolitical frameworks

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<sup>1</sup> Belize became independent in 1981, and many countries expanded their degree of independence during the 1960s and 70s.

<sup>2</sup> Suriname gained independence in 1975.

<sup>3</sup> The Danish Virgin Islands were sold to the United States in 1917.

asserting that the Americas should fall exclusively under U.S. influence, protecting it from former colonial powers. These principles became known as the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary.

The **Monroe Doctrine** was declared on December 2, 1823, by President James Monroe, with support from his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams. It outlined a geopolitical perspective whereby “America should be for Americans,” and any European intervention in the continent would be seen as direct aggression against the United States. The **Roosevelt Corollary**, announced in 1904, expanded the doctrine’s practical scope by justifying direct U.S. interference in regional affairs to preserve order and stability.<sup>4 5</sup>

The modern application of these perspectives shifted from being merely declarative to materializing through the creation of military bases in various Latin American countries<sup>6</sup>:

- **1903–1999**: Panama Canal Zone. After supporting Panama’s independence from Colombia, Washington secured the rights to build and control the Canal, managing it as its own in order to drastically reduce transit time for goods headed to the Pacific.
- **1903–present**: Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba. Built shortly after U.S. intervention in Cuba’s war of independence from Spain, this base provided a strategic naval presence in the Caribbean. It later gained global notoriety due to human rights violations reported at the Guantánamo prison, which houses high-security detainees such as terrorists and foreign spies.
- **1946–1984**: School of the Americas, Panama. Infamous for training Latin American military dictatorships. It operated until 1984, when it was relocated to Georgia, USA.
- **1999–2009**: Manta Base, Ecuador. Installed under a U.S.-Ecuador cooperation agreement in the context of the anti-narcotics “Plan Colombia.”
- **2000–present**: Comalapa Air Base, El Salvador. Also built for anti-narcotics operations, it conducts aerial surveillance and target designation for law enforcement.

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<sup>4</sup> National Archives (1905) – *Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine*. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/roosevelt-corollary>

<sup>5</sup> Office of the Historian / U.S. Department of State. *Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine*. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/roosevelt-and-monroe-doctrine>

<sup>6</sup> Alonso, C. (2019) – *What are the Latin American countries with the most U.S. military bases?* Available at: <https://cemerl.org/en/mapas/m-bases-militares-eeuu-americalatina-cu>

- **2009–present**: Multiple bases in Colombia. As part of anti-drug cooperation, Colombia allowed the construction of various bases to support the army's operations against the FARC<sup>7</sup> and ELN<sup>8</sup> guerrilla groups under the U.S.-Colombia bilateral strategy.

### **Controversies Surrounding the U.S. Military Presence**

The modern U.S. strategic perspective in these countries rests on two main pillars: the fight against drug trafficking (Ecuador, Colombia, Panama) and control over strategic transit points (Panama, Cuba). These bases were established, almost without exception, under voluntary cooperation frameworks<sup>9</sup>. However, the presence of U.S. troops has sparked various social, economic, and diplomatic conflicts in host countries, raising questions about their effectiveness and necessity. The following are some of the most controversial and illustrative cases:

- **Guantánamo Base, Cuba**: Built in 1903 under the Cuban-American Lease Agreement, which granted the U.S. rights to use the bay's territory in exchange for a symbolic annual payment. The treaty was signed when Cuba had only limited sovereignty; the **Platt Amendment**<sup>10</sup>, passed after the Spanish-American War (1895–1898), allowed U.S. intervention in the island. In 1959, after the Cuban Revolution, Havana declared the U.S. presence illegal and refused to accept payment, demanding the base's return. Washington maintains that its possession is legal and perpetual under the 1903 agreement. In 2002, the base was converted into an international detention center. Reports of torture, arbitrary detentions, and inhumane treatment sparked global outrage<sup>11</sup>.
- **Manta Base, Ecuador**: In 1999, Ecuador allowed the U.S. to use the Eloy Alfaro Air Base in Manta for ten years, as part of **Plan Colombia**. Reconnaissance missions targeting drug crops and insurgent groups<sup>12</sup> in the Peruvian Amazon were launched from the base. However, criticism arose when certain U.S. operations were not

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<sup>7</sup> Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

<sup>8</sup> Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).

<sup>9</sup> With nuances, as in some cases there was political and economic pressure from the United States to allow the installation of these bases.

<sup>10</sup> Signed in 1902, when the island was under U.S. military occupation, and repealed in 1934.

<sup>11</sup> CEJIL – *Close Guantánamo with Justice Now*. Available at: <https://cejil.org/comunicado-de-prensa/close-guantanamo-with-justice-now/>

<sup>12</sup> FARC and other drug trafficking-related groups.

disclosed to Ecuadorian authorities, raising suspicions of illegal espionage. In 2008, President Rafael Correa declined to renew the agreement, citing violations of sovereignty<sup>13</sup>.

- **Palmerola Base, Honduras:** Also known as Soto Cano Air Base, it was built 80 km from Tegucigalpa in the 1980s by the U.S. to exert influence during political turmoil in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In 2009, President Manuel Zelaya was arrested by the military and reportedly taken to the Soto Cano base before being exiled to Costa Rica. This raised suspicions of U.S. complicity in the coup, although Washington denied involvement. The base remains under U.S. control, despite being legally Honduran territory.
- **Bases in Colombia:** In 2007, President Uribe authorized the use of seven military bases by the U.S. as part of anti-drug cooperation<sup>14</sup>. Colombia, a top producer of narcotics, also faced guerrilla threats from FARC and ELN. Venezuela and Ecuador denounced the agreement, citing threats to sovereignty. Colombia's Congress did not approve the pact, and in 2010, the Constitutional Court declared it unconstitutional. Nonetheless, U.S. operations in Colombia continue under earlier bilateral agreements.

### **Weighing the Benefits**

While each country has its own reasons rooted in history and internal realities, allowing a U.S. base on sovereign soil is not just a military act—it is also social, political, and economic. Militarily, U.S. bases have notably enhanced host nations' tactical capacity in fighting drug trafficking. Between 2000 and 2007, Colombian authorities reported that kidnappings and drug-related homicides fell to a third of previous levels, along with a significant drop in pipeline attacks<sup>15</sup>. Cooperation includes not just logistics and tactical support, but also intelligence (e.g., satellite imagery), joint exercises, disaster relief, and access to U.S. arms and ammunition. For Washington, this provides both strategic and commercial benefits.

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<sup>13</sup> Ikeda, A. (2018) – *Exploring a Civil Resistance Approach to Examining U.S. Military Base Politics: The Case of Manta, Ecuador*.

<sup>14</sup> The following bases: Palanquero, Apiay, Malambo, Tolomaida, Larandia, Tres Esquinas, Bahía Málaga.

<sup>15</sup> Pipeline attacks dropped significantly, from 263 in 2001 to 103 in 2004.

Socially, hosting a U.S. base may signal the government's commitment to combating crime<sup>16</sup>, acknowledging local limitations and bringing in a neutral third-party actor (at least initially). Politically, it signals a strong geopolitical alignment with Washington. Financially, the host country often receives defense investments (e.g., between 2001 and 2008, Colombia received \$5.525 billion in U.S. military and economic assistance).

However, these benefits must be weighed against the negative consequences. Lack of transparency, increased corruption, and human rights violations compel a reassessment of whether sovereignty should be ceded.

### **Future Projects**

Currently, there are no concrete plans for new U.S. military bases, but some leaders have expressed interest in renewed cooperation.

Ecuador is a notable example. As mentioned, the Manta base was closed in 2009 due to irregularities. However, President Daniel Noboa has shown openness to allowing U.S. forces back, citing the worsening drug violence. The violent events of January 2024—presidential candidate assassinated, criminal gang leader's escape, and cartel-linked terrorists seizing a TV station—exposed serious deficiencies in Ecuador's security forces.

Argentina offers a different case, more geopolitical than criminal. President Javier Milei's 2023 inauguration marked a drastic shift in foreign and domestic policy, especially in alignment with the U.S. In April 2024, Milei announced the construction of an Integrated Naval Base in Ushuaia (Tierra del Fuego) with U.S. collaboration. Although officially intended for scientific and logistical support in Antarctica, the base could also supply military vessels. Governor Gustavo Melella rejected a visit from U.S. Southern Command General Laura Richardson, citing concerns over foreign troops in the region.

### **Conclusion**

The presence of U.S. military bases in Latin America has reflected both Washington's strategic interests and host nations' security needs. While these bases have supported anti-

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<sup>16</sup> "May" because Latin America has a historically complex relationship with the United States, due to this country's interventionism in dictatorships and invasions, especially during the Cold War and the late 20th century.

narcotics efforts and defense cooperation, they have also raised sovereignty and transparency concerns. Cases like Guantánamo, Manta, and Palmerola exemplify such tensions, keeping the debate open on whether U.S. bases are still justified. As Ecuador reconsiders its stance and Argentina moves ahead with a new project, Washington's influence in Latin America continues to evolve and redefine regional geopolitics.