

Aggression or Diplomacy: United States to create new Security Bases in Argentina

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### **What is the Purpose?**

On May 18, 2016, the Argentine government and the U.S military reached an agreement, which granted the United States permission to build two new bases in the *Tierra del Fuego* region and on the triple border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. While many officials are asserting that the *Tierra del Fuego* base would be used mainly for scientific work, the U.S. strategy actually has two main objectives. First, Washington is creating National Security Bases (NSB) for defense and strategic purposes. Secondly, the United States is establishing stations for joint military exercises, which are providing security resources and conducting training operations not only for Argentina, but for the rest of Latin America as well. However, the installation of these bases is inherently controversial. The head of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), Ernesto Samper has called for the U.S. military bases to “leave the continent.”<sup>i</sup> Instead, Samper is seeking improved U.S-Latin American relations through diplomacy and dialogue, but building military strategic bases is nothing new to U.S. foreign policy. As noted by Aliana Navarez, a writer for *Pulsamerica*, “US bases installed in Central America and the Caribbean, added to those in Colombia, Peru, Chile and Paraguay, plus NATO in the Falklands and the British detachment in [South] Georgia Islands, all host multiple benefits to North America and its local allies.”<sup>ii</sup> For example, in 2009, the Colombian government and the U.S military signed the 2009 Defense Cooperation Agreement to build land bases in Tolemaida and Larandia, as well as sea bases in Cartagena and Bahia Malaga. Opposition to this agreement was immediately raised in South America, even though the United States claimed that their purpose was to facilitate anti-drug operations in the area. In Colombia, the United States has continued to cooperate with the Santos Administration on bilateral security issues related to the recently-ended Colombian armed conflict with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – FARC) and Ejercito de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army – ELN).

Argentina’s defense relationship with the United States had become increasingly tense due to the shift in Argentine policy under the Kirchner administration (2003-2015) towards greater regional integration in Latin America. Shortly after current Argentine President Mauricio Macri came into office in 2015, he promised to rekindle relations with the United States, while simultaneously cooperating with regional allies, such as Colombia, Brazil, and Uruguay. Still, the Obama Administration’s decision to set up military bases in Argentina is seen by many as an act of aggression and violation of sovereignty against the Argentine people, despite the United States’ claims that curbing the movement of drugs and controlling sea routes can bring much needed stability to

Latin America. The Argentine people have good reasons to suspect that the ulterior motives for the bases are not necessarily in the best interests of the nation, nor the region.

### **Geopolitical Strategic Location**

The Argentine province of *Misiones* is located on the triple border with Brazil and Paraguay. This region has increasingly caught Washington's attention because it contains the Guaraní Aquifer, holding some of the world's most significant water resources. The Guaraní Aquifer is the largest water reserve in Latin America and has been the source of great political controversy. There are growing concerns over the impact of a new American base and its negative effects on the indigenous Guaraní people. With a new military base, the access of indigenous communities to a clean water supply will be restricted, as well as the effect on fishing and freedom of movement within the area.

Publicly, the United States claims that its interest in the region is to prevent drug-trafficking and international terrorism. However, Carlos Aznárez, a writer for *The Dawn News*, warns that these ostensible objectives may harbor less benevolent intent. "In fact," says Aznárez, "there are already several 'observers' of the US Southern Command and the National Security Agency who are touring the area and apparently believe that *Puerto Iguazú* (on the border with Brazil) is the right place to install this interventionist stronghold."<sup>iii</sup> The United States has carried out this suspicious form of interventionism by setting up radar stations and observation bases without informing the public; "And in other occasions, they open, as they have already done 36 times, military bases (there are 761 worldwide) with airports for bomber aircrafts and presence of uniformed and armed troops."<sup>iv</sup> This U.S. habit has manifested itself across all of Latin America. Last year, the Argentine public opinion of the United States was divided. Approximately 43 percent of the Argentine public had a favorable attitude towards U.S. foreign policy, which represented a 7 percent increase from 2014.<sup>v</sup> However, with the construction of United States bases, the public opinion of the Argentine people, especially of the people of *Misiones*, might abruptly change. This is a great concern for the U.S. military, as the goal of U.S. foreign policy is to expand its presence for economic and national security purposes.

Jose Luis Garcia, a former Colonel and founder of the Center of Military for Argentine Democracy argued that Macri's policy, "wants to consolidate the international establishment".<sup>vi</sup> During the Alfonsín Presidency (1983-1989), the Argentine army was reduced to making decisions on policy, promotions, and other issues in Argentine society. But now, Macri has given more autonomy back to the military, mimicking an ominous feature of the 1984 dictatorship.

### **Tierra Del Fuego: The End of the World**

*Tierra Del Fuego* is an archipelago of closely knit islands. Its geostrategic location lies in its geographic value to the *Malvinas* Islands, numerous Antarctic islands, and access to valuable water supplies. The *Tierra Del Fuego* is also strategic for its new navigation

routes for ships, hydrocarbons, minerals, and other natural resources. The Argentine government called the proposed U.S. installation in the city of Ushuaia; “a logistical base to support scientific work in Antarctica.”<sup>vii</sup> But according to Elsa Bruzzone, an expert on geopolitical and defense strategy at the Argentina Military Center for Democracy, Washington’s actions, “use various altruistic rationalizations [like] humanitarian aid, support against disasters, combating drug trafficking and [providing] support for the development and scientific research - to install military bases written off on a scientific basis”.<sup>viii</sup> As Antarctica possesses the largest fresh water reserve in the world, Chile, Argentina, the United Kingdom, and now the United States have been discussing the possibility of creating a new base in Ushuaia, the capital of *Tierra del Fuego*. This base in *Tierra Del Fuego* would pursue American and European interests at the expense of Argentine public concerns.

Hydrocarbon resources play an important role in the economies of both the Argentine and Chilean sides of the archipelago. Numerous oil and gas fields will be exploited in the region, both on land and offshore, particularly in the northeastern sector of the island. Nearly all of the Argentine oil and gas is sold to Chile. The *Tierra Del Fuego* is known for its vast amounts of petroleum and the rocks in this area are important for seabed mining.

However, the problem in *Tierra Del Fuego* is not necessarily about the existing bases in Antarctic scientific research. Although, there are a number of research bases in the Antarctic, the sea lanes and applicable laws to the freedom of navigation appear to be significant for ship passage and trade. One of the reasons why the United States, unlike a number of Latin American nations, such as Argentina, did not sign the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea treaty (UNCLOS) is because of their objection to the treaty's provisions on deep seabed mining, in particular towards natural resources. Since the United States did not ratify UNCLOS, it claims to establish its own guidelines in order to protect their own economic interests. In addition to their interest in natural resources, the United States wants to control the sea-lanes in the region. According to UNCLOS Article 53, ships in archipelagic sea lane passages, “shall respect applicable sea lanes and traffic separation schemes established in accordance with this article.”<sup>ix</sup> Many nations are concerned about the proposed U.S. base in the region because it limits other nations from accessing shipping routes for trade, commerce, and transportation. Far from being a humanitarian and scientific mission, the U.S. military presence could restrain the legitimacy of UNCLOS.

### **U.S. Intervention on the Triple Frontier: The Guaraní Aquifer**

In addition to creating a military base in *Tierra del Fuego*, the United States is also establishing a facility in *Iguazú Falls*, a city situated on the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. According to W.T Whitney Jr., a writer for the *People’s World*, the Triple Frontier is a region with so much strategic value that the U.S. could strengthen its presence in the area; “The giant Itaipú hydroelectric dam is located near the confluence of the Iguazú and Paraná rivers. And the area overlies the Guaraní aquifer, the world’s largest reservoir of drinkable fresh water.”<sup>x</sup>

Nevertheless, the Guaraní Aquifer is a controversial political and economic issue facing the *Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR)* countries. “The four countries above the Aquifer are developing rapidly and will increasingly experience demand from private companies as well as public bodies to extract water from the Aquifer.”<sup>xi</sup> In a landscape of increasing global security, and political conflict about water, the Guaraní Aquifer is a very complex issue for sustainable management. Due to this high demand for water, International Atomic Energy Agency scientists are using the Guaraní Aquifer as a link between science and diplomacy “to preserve and use the resource sustainably”.<sup>xii</sup> The Triple Frontier countries have used information-sharing techniques to create policies on how to preserve the resources in the Guaraní Aquifer area without interfering with the indigenous populations that live nearby. The United States does not have a general understanding of how this base will affect the indigenous populations of the Triple Frontier, but they need to take this into consideration. In addition, the United States should recognize that water scarcity is a problem for the Triple Frontier. The water cycle is growing less predictable as climate change impacts temperature patterns around the world. The United States must also make certain that everybody has access to this vital source of fresh water instead of solely pursuing to advance their economic interests. As countries look to alternative sources of water to alleviate shortages, the Guaraní Aquifer will be high on the list.

### **The Result: Aggression or Diplomacy?**

Obama’s decision to create two military bases in Argentina is creating controversy and opposition among the Argentine people, many of whom view it as a form of imperialism and a violation of international norms. This is a highly sensitive issue, especially in a country that has had an excruciating history of democratic transition dating back to 1983. The United States 2016 presidential election will be critical for Argentina’s future, considering that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have interventionist postures towards the region and around the world. Clinton, who wants a strong militaristic presence in the world, and Trump, who simply wants to increase the notion of American Exceptionalism are both likely to continue Obama’s policies in the region. Even though the United States believes that controlling sea-lanes and preventing the movement of drugs can bring stability to Latin America, other countries might not agree with this logic. Instead, the United States might want to focus on maintaining peace and good relations policy with the people of Latin America, not on building bases for imposing its power and authority by diktat.

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