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*Quasi-Bases: The US military and Domestic
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Quasi-Bases: The US military and Domestic Politics in Latin America*

*Sebastián E. Bitar***

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of US quasi-bases in Latin America, which are semi-formal agreements that grant the US military tacit access to local military bases without a formal lease. While the importance of formal US bases in the region has dramatically decreased, a network of quasi-bases provides critical support for US anti-drug operations from Central to South America. The paper builds on Alexander Cooley's theory of base politics (2008) to explain why formal bases are more difficult to open and maintain as democracy expands in the region, and categorizes previously unstudied quasi-base arrangements. Democratic expansion affects foreign military bases in three ways. Formal base negotiations are likely to succeed if the benefits of hosting foreign bases are not only perceived by the local government but also by the opposition. Conversely, when the benefits are concentrated in the government and its clients, excluded political groups are likely to oppose the base. The electoral strength of the opposition and the existence of institutional mechanisms autonomous of the government increase the chances that the opposition will succeed in blocking the base negotiations. However, when formal basing agreements fail, or when the type of operations requires secrecy and informality, interested governments may still negotiate alternative arrangements, such as quasi-bases, which are more difficult for the opposition to contest.

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1. Introduction

In 1999 the US military lost the Howard base in Panama, one of its most valuable operating locations in Latin America, as a consequence of the Torrijos-Carter treaty, which returned US possessions in Panama 100 years after their installment.

Soon after, the US formally leased four new bases in Latin America to replace the lost forward operational capabilities in the region. Two opened in the Caribbean Dutch territories of Aruba and Curaçao; one more opened in Comalapa, in El Salvador, and the last one opened in Manta, Ecuador.¹ The new bases in these countries were significantly smaller than the ones in Panama, as most existing operations were transferred to the continental US and Puerto Rico. The size of the new US bases in Latin American countries decreased in comparison, and one of these bases was lost when Ecuador terminated the lease of its base in Manta to the United States.

Using US formal bases as a proxy for US military engagement in the region would lead students of US-Latin American relations to believe that security operations have decreased. On the contrary, the United States military has increased its military presence in the region through permanent or temporary informal access to bases in Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Peru, and has access to airports in Panama, Ecuador, and elsewhere. A traditional approximation to US bases would obscure the fact that the United States has opened informal and secretive base-like arrangements in almost every country in the Pacific coast of the Americas. Heavily armed US operations against drug-traffic are supported by this network of quasi-bases from South to Central America and the Caribbean, such as the Operación Martillo and Plan Colombia.

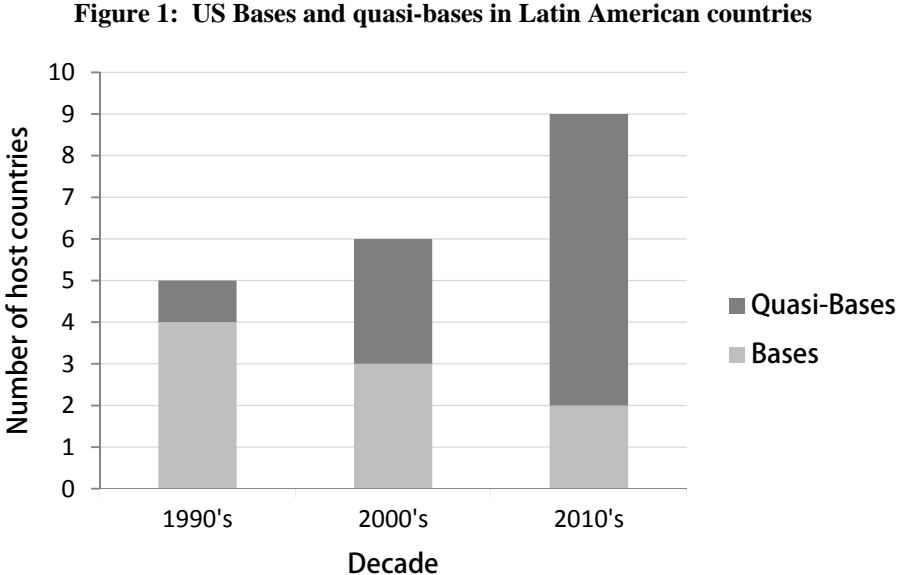
When describing US global military presence and capabilities, scholarship has traditionally concentrated on the network of formal US bases around the globe.² These bases include a number of US military installations in US territories beyond the continental US, and also a number of basing agreements between the United States and

¹ Lindsay-Poland, 2009

² Cooley, 2008; Calder, 2007

host countries in every corner of the world. Despite the importance of formal bases for the US projection of power, a growing number of quasi-bases, semi-formal agreements that grant tacit access to local military bases without a formal base lease, are providing essential access to US forces to carry security operations around the globe. Through these quasi-bases, the United States has acquired access to critical locations in Latin America, where US military operations continue to support president Obama’s security and anti-drug policies in the region.

Figure 1 shows the number of countries in Latin America that hosted US formal bases in the last three decades, and the number of countries that have engaged in quasi-base arrangements. Formal bases are counted as those backed by a formal lease, contract, or treaty, while quasi-bases are counted as informal arrangements that allow US access to facilities in the country for security operations without a base lease. Informality has displaced formal basing agreements as the form of hosting US military operations in the region.



Source: elaborated by the author.

In Latin America, as in other regions, formal US bases are in decline. During the twentieth century the US had heavily manned, town-sized, formal military bases in

Panama, Guantamo, and Puerto Rico, and after the closure of bases in Panama in 1999 the US managed to negotiate the lease of four new ones. But after the electoral victory of the radical left in Ecuador, the new government expelled the US from the base in its territory, forcing the United States to initiate exploratory basing negotiations in Peru, Colombia, and Panama. Of these three, only Colombia accepted to move to formal negotiations, and despite the government's willingness to grant access to seven military bases in the country, the constitutional court ruled the new agreement unlawful and terminated the US's last hopes for new formal military bases in Latin America. After Colombia's defection, the only independent countries in Latin America that officially host a US military base are El Salvador, where a minuscule annex to a local airport hosts a radar and serves as parking and fueling station for US airplanes, and Cuba, where the government opposes US occupation of the naval base of Guantanamo. While this appears to be the end of the story for new formal US bases in the region, the parallel history of growing quasi-bases is striking.

Through informal negotiations, tacit agreements, and obscure appendixes to previous military cooperation treaties, the US managed to gain access to local military bases in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras. In Peru and Ecuador (after the closure of the Manta base), the US established access to local airports to land and refuel the airplanes that are supporting US anti-drug efforts in the Andes. More than 17 US radar sites spread between Peru and Colombia.³ In Colombian bases, the US maintains a permanent force of around 300 US troops, which could potentially be raised to 800 if needed. None of these countries has formally leased base space to the United States, yet the US utilizes and partially controls several military facilities in each one of them. In practice, these military installations, or quasi-bases, function similarly to formal US bases, but their existence is legally ambiguous, and their future is uncertain. Yet it is largely through these alternative arrangements that the US is fighting drug-trafficking and countering security threats in Latin America.

Increasingly, formal bases are almost too difficult to open and maintain because they are likely to become trapped in political struggles between the host government and its

³ Lindsay-Poland, 2009, p.72

domestic opposition. In contrast, quasi-bases are negotiated with host governments with little publicity and made effective with little congressional oversight or civil society participation.

This paper differentiates between formal US bases, including Main Operating Bases, Forward Operating Locations, and Cooperative Security Locations, and quasi-bases, including secret bases and those where no formal lease authorizes the use of a local base by the United States military. In practice, these bases all operate in similar ways, as they all provide physical space overseas for US military operations. The paper describes the use of quasi-bases in Latin America, a strategy that has replaced US formal military presence in the region. While in the past the United States used formal agreements to lease bases, the facilities used in today's US operations in the region are increasingly supported by tacit arrangements and secretive deals with Latin American governments.

In the following sections, the paper presents the different aspects of this phenomenon and its implications for US security interests and US – Latin American relations. The next section deals with the evolution of the US overseas basing strategy. During the second half of the 20th century, the United States installed large and fixed bases in foreign territories, but since the start of the 21st century the Pentagon has preferred smaller, more flexible bases, which can be expanded if needed. This evolution helps understand the size of contemporary bases in Latin America – all of them small and flexible – although it does not fully explain the informality of them. The following section seeks to explain informality, not as a preferred option derived from a coherent basing strategy, but as the result of the impossibility of formal bases due to the high risk of politicization and domestic opposition in the host nation.

Sections 4 and 5 provide evidence of quasi-bases in Latin America and propose a categorization of the types of arrangements in which they operate. The last two sections discuss the stability of these arrangements, as opposed to formal agreements, and the implications for contemporary and future US operations in the region and its relations with Latin America.

2. The evolution of the US overseas basing strategy

Two major evolutions in the strategic vision of the US affect its bases overseas. One of them is the result of a public debate about the transformation of US global strike capabilities from a network of military bases both in the US and in foreign territories towards a larger-range capacity that can be operated from the United States with fewer and smaller bases overseas. The second one is a more concealed reaffirmation of US secretive engagements in foreign nations. Covert operations and unsupervised deployments in informal bases encircle the planet in secrecy, while citizens, both in the United States and in host countries, are ignorant of them.^{4,5}

The global reach of US military capacity is not sustained only from its overseas bases. In the very first moments of the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the US military sent B-2 stealth bombers based in Missouri more than 7,000 miles away to destroy the Taliban's air capacity and communications systems⁶. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UVAs), such as the Global Hawk, can perform strikes and surveillance operations up to 33 hours of uninterrupted flight without landing in overseas bases.⁷ The outstanding capacity of the US military to operate from the country's mainland and own territories overseas has led some, like William E. Odom and Robert Dujarric, to argue that the United States can reduce its military presence in the rest of the world, and especially does not need to continue to pay the legitimacy costs of maintaining a network of bases in foreign nations.⁸

The US military developed its capacity to operate from its homeland into distant territories since the Cold War, and in its aftermath it has continued to strengthen its long range options. Bombers, UVAs, satellites, naval deployments, and communications systems continue to be developed by different agencies and the branches of the US military. Maritime deployments, consisting of US Navy vessels in

⁴ Chalmers Johnson, "Garrisoning the planet." TomDispatch.com, Jan. 15th, 2004.

⁵ David Vine, "US Empire of bases grows." TomDispatch.com, July 15th, 2012.

⁶ Calder, 2007, p.211

⁷ According to data from the security equipment manufacturer Northrop Grumman available at <http://www.northropgrumman.com/Capabilities/GlobalHawk/Pages/default.aspx> (Last accessed April 19th, 2013)

⁸ Odom and Dujarric, 2005

international waters, seem to be an alternative to land bases in foreign territories under the strategic concept of “Sea basing.” The general trend in US strategic thinking, it would seem, favors a long-range and automated strike force to eliminate the need for US permanent deployments of troops in foreign territories.⁹

Opponents of US military bases overseas in US policy circles argue that they are expensive, erode US legitimacy, and do not serve to achieve this century’s security goals. In fact, after the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States vacated around 60% of its foreign bases.¹⁰

Permanent, town-sized, and heavily manned bases appear to be a less attractive option to the US military, as smaller, more flexible and often temporary installations have spread throughout the regions where the United States carries security operations. Latin America is not an exception. The large bases in Panama gave way to smaller, yet more numerous, bases at different times being used in almost every country in Central America and in the Andes. The Colamapa air base in El Salvador, for example, is a tiny annex to a civilian airport that serves the capital, San Salvador. This base hosts a radar, a few hangars for US planes, and minimal installations for a few personnel that do not engage in combat operations.

Large bases, called Main Operating Bases (MOB), are still important albeit less numerous. The bases built and operated by the US military overseas in the last few years include both large and small bases. Some bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the United States opened 505 military bases from 2003 to 2011, are as large as US towns, with up to 27-mile fortified perimeters, fire departments, bus routes, fast-food restaurants, and internet cafes.¹¹

In Vicenza, Italy, where the Camp Ederle base already exists, the United States is enlarging its Dal Molin base, capable of hosting more than 2,000 soldiers. In addition, the US continues to operate large bases in Germany, Japan, South Korea, and elsewhere.

⁹ Calder, 2007, p.214

¹⁰ David Vine, “US Empire of bases grows.” TomDispatch.com, July 15th, 2012.

¹¹ David Vine, “US Empire of bases grows.” TomDispatch.com, July 15th, 2012.

In addition to MOBs, the United States has increased the creation of “lily pads,” smaller bases like Forward Operating Locations (FOLs) or Cooperative Security Locations (CSLs), which are formally recognized by the United States and the host government, and other informal bases which are not.¹² At a cost of \$140 billion in 2012, the cost of US bases overseas indicates a massive US investment in expanding the network of operating locations abroad.¹³ The strategic shift towards smaller bases has been accompanied with the pursuit of more secretive bases, including lily pads, which has created new forms of operations and engagements for the US military overseas. The goal of this new strategy is to avoid publicity and opposition, both from the local population and from US citizens.¹⁴ The goal of reduced publicity has certainly been achieved, notes David Vine, as Congressional oversight over these bases has been minimal and has received almost no media attention. The result of this unsupervised strategy, Vine continues, is the US involvement in new areas of the world and new conflicts, with potentially disastrous consequences, from Djibouti to Honduras.¹⁵ Secret US operations in the last few years include drone missions in Pakistan and Mexico, anti-drug operations in Honduras, and tens of millions of dollars for civil wars in Africa.¹⁶

Bases and quasi-bases are not fundamentally differentiated by their size either. Some formal US bases in Latin America are very small, like the Forward Operating Location in El Salvador, while some quasi-bases are larger and strategically more important, like the Soto Cano base in Honduras, where the Southern Command deploys its Joint Task Force Bravo. Bases and quasi-bases differ, however, on the contractual validity of formal bases, which quasi-bases lack, and this makes a difference on the politics of bases and in their long-term stability. This differentiation is explored further below.

In Latin America, the United States has pursued both formal bases and quasi-bases. In the last decade, the United States negotiated successfully the renewal of the FOL

¹² As David Vine notes, the name of these bases recalls a frog jumping across a pond toward its prey. See David Vine, “US Empire of bases grows.” TomDispatch.com, July 15th, 2012.

¹³ David Vine, “Picking up a \$170 billion tab,” TomDispatch.com, Dec.11th, 2012.

¹⁴ Gillem, 2007

¹⁵ David Vine, “Picking up a \$170 billion tab,” TomDispatch.com, Dec. 11th, 2012.

¹⁶ Turse, 2012

in El Salvador and sought to pressure Ecuador to renew another one. After failing to maintain its presence in Ecuador, the United States explored the possibility of a new formal base in Peru, and of several Cooperative Security Locations in Colombia. After these negotiations failed, the US accepted to operate from quasi-bases in each of these countries. In addition, the United States successfully managed to operate from secretive quasi-bases in Guatemala and Costa Rica, and continued to occupy the Soto Cano base in Honduras.

The shift in US strategic basing explains why the United States has sought to open quasi-bases all over Central America. What this shift does not explain, though, is why the United States failed to open formal military bases in Colombia and Peru, and failed to renew its base in Ecuador, even when it actively pursued formal agreements with each country. In these cases, quasi-bases were not the preferred option, but an alternative when formal bases were not possible. The next section explores how domestic politics in Latin America is making it more and more difficult for the United States to open or maintain its formal bases, and how this is contributing to the spread of quasi-bases.

3. Why do formal base negotiations fail?

US military bases overseas sustain the projection of US power on a global scale. Ranging from full size towns with multiple facilities to minimal installations for pieces of strategic equipment, US military bases around the globe serve as multipliers of the capacity of the United States to act as the only global power in the international system.¹⁷ But in order to sustain a network of bases, the United States has had to establish different forms of legal and semi-legal arrangements where the host nation permits the use of a part of its territory for US installations. In many cases, these arrangements are not problematic, but in other cases they become major problems for the US military. First, host nations might demand increasing rents or benefits from the United States in order to open a new base or maintain an existing one, and the possibility of eviction is always present. Second, even when governments in the host nation are willing to maintain a US base, the domestic opposition might turn it

¹⁷ Lutz, 2009

into a political issue and challenge the government on the grounds that it is compromising the sovereignty of the country.

Alexander Cooley's *Base Politics*¹⁸ has already explained when basing agreements are likely to become politicized and their stability weakened. Rulers in host countries have to evaluate the consequences of opening foreign bases in their territories in terms of their own political survival. While in different cases studied by Cooley the local ruler's political stability was enhanced by US military bases, as was also the case in El Salvador, increasingly basing negotiations are difficult to "sell" to domestic audiences. Even when the host government is willing to open a military base, congressional support might be limited, and in the case of strong executives overpassing congressional ratification, the existence of domestic veto players, such as independent high courts, can limit the capacity of the government to grant bases to the United States. On the US side, as a former Foreign Relations Committee's western hemisphere specialist noted, the US does not benefit from formal contracting where the domestic political debate might jeopardize the existence of the base, or the local government might use the terms of the agreement to extract more benefits in the long run.¹⁹

It has already been established elsewhere that domestic politics are potentially destabilizing for foreign basing agreements.²⁰ When formal basing agreements are too difficult to open or maintain for domestic political reasons, quasi-bases take place as informal options that provide secrecy and make politicization more difficult both in the United States and in the host country. The process of democratization in Latin America, as elsewhere, is one of the major causes of the increased difficulty to negotiate formal basing agreements. As democracies consolidate, political opportunities are greater for civil society groups to "penetrate" the state and influence state decisions even in the realm of national security.²¹ Three specific dynamics associated with democratic consolidation limit the ability of host governments to open formal basing agreements with the United

¹⁸ Cooley, 2008

¹⁹ Interview with Fulton Armstrong, former Foreign Relations Committee's western hemisphere specialist and former adviser to President Clinton. Washington DC, October 26th, 2012.

²⁰ Cooley, 2008; Calder, 2007

²¹ Yeo, 2011, 21

States: the benefits perceived by the opposition, the electoral challenges from the opposition, and the consolidation of institutional independent veto players.

3.1 Gains for the opposition

Gains from accepting foreign military bases can be concentrated in the government and a small group of political allies, or they can spread to different political groups even if they are not participating in the ruling coalition. In some situations, the benefits of US bases benefit political groups regardless of their connections to government officials. In contrast, and more often, the political benefits of foreign bases are concentrated on the ruling coalition, or even the leader and his or her family and close political allies. When basing negotiations benefit all or most politically relevant groups, including the opposition, one should not expect US bases to become highly politicized issues, given that losing the base will act against the interest of most politically relevant groups. One could even expect the basing agreement to be openly debated in the legislative body of the country, including participation of the opposition, and in this way gain the legitimacy of congressional ratification.

But when the benefits are offered to, or concentrated in, only the ruling elite, basing agreements are more difficult to “sell” to the public. Authoritarian regimes do not often worry about political gains for the opposition, but democratically elected leaders depend on support from the electorate, and they fear that if the opposition is not benefited from basing agreements, these excluded groups might mobilize the population against them. Formal base negotiations are still possible in non-authoritarian regimes, but only when the opposition is too weak to contest them or when the opposition perceives the possibility of political gains from accepting the base.

3.2 Electoral challenge

As explained before, if the domestic opposition perceives political gains from basing agreements, these are more likely to be successful and stable. But when US bases benefit only the government and its clients, the opposition is likely to oppose the base and seek political advantages from challenging the legitimacy of the basing agreement.

If this is the case, two new mechanisms related to the strength of the opposition play a role in explaining when agreements succeed or fail. First, the opposition might attempt to block the base agreement in Congress if it has sufficient votes, or impeach ministers or even the president if the agreement is not sent in for congressional approval. This of course requires that the opposition is widely represented in the legislature, and that it can rally enough votes. If it is not, the opposition can still appeal to the electorate and seek either a referendum or support in general elections.

Common electoral tactics for the opposition include accusing the government of compromising the sovereignty of the country and mobilizing nationalistic and anti-US sentiment in the country. However, if the opposition is not strong enough to pose a political or electoral challenge for the government, this mechanism does not work, and the government can still approve a formal basing lease that concentrates its benefits in the government and its clients. If this is the case, one might expect the agreement to be implemented by the government but not put to a vote in Congress, where the opposition could magnify its political power by exposing the contents of the agreement as violations of the state sovereignty.

3.3 Institutional veto players

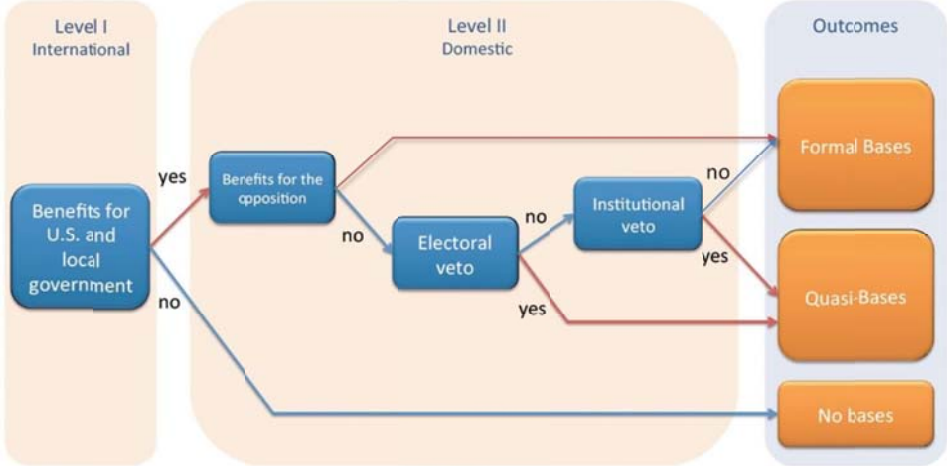
The second mechanism that can help the opposition block the agreement is the use of the country's institutions to challenge the validity of US bases. In more consolidated democracies, independent courts will have the final say about the legality of a basing agreement, and their rule is to be accepted by governments despite their political dominance. In particular, when basing agreements are not ratified by the legislature, the opposition is likely to make the case that new treaties need to be ratified before they acquire legal validity. If strong independent institutions exist in the country, the validity of basing agreements might be questioned and the bases rejected even if the opposition is not strong electorally or politically. However, the consolidation of Latin American democratic institutions is uneven. In many cases, governments are able to manipulate high courts and other institutions to force them to abstain from reviewing basing agreements or they can ignore their rulings. If no independent institutions can “veto”

the government’s actions, this mechanism fails to magnify the claims of the opposition and formal basing agreements are likely to succeed even if they are opposed by political groups and their legality is questionable.

In the case of Latin American politics, opposition forces are likely to mobilize successfully against US military bases given the population’s widespread concern about US interventionism and a cultural shared idea about the importance of sovereignty for Latin Americans. Opposition forces in Latin America are very likely to attempt to politicize any basing agreement with the United States.

An ideal typical path of base negotiations through the two levels described before is illustrated in figure 2. This model adapts Cooley’s theory of base politics (2008) to reflect the domestic mechanisms that this project has identified as key in explaining the emergence quasi-bases in Latin America.

Figure 2: Bases, quasi-bases, and domestic politics



Source: elaborated by the author.

The loss of the US formal base in Manta, Ecuador, followed one of these paths as the electoral challenge of an anti-base coalition that was able to defeat the traditional pro-US ruling parties. The Manta base was open when Ecuador favored a strategy of dependent association with the United States. But a series of major political crises from 2000 to 2006 led to the electoral victory of a candidate who openly rejected this

strategy, and who consolidated his domestic political power through, among other things, a clear rejection of US interests in Ecuador. The Manta base was one of the icons of Ecuador's subordination to the United States, and thus became a major target of President Correa's anti-US rhetoric. He was able to capitalize the nationalistic sentiment, together with the widespread sensation of betrayal among the Ecuadorian public towards the traditional political parties. The possibility of reelection for Correa meant that campaign promises had to be kept, if he was to win a second time. Correa was unequivocal about his intention to terminate the base, and announced the official termination as a triumph of Ecuador's sovereignty, even before he formally notified the US embassy. In 2009 the base was transferred to Ecuador, and it remains under control of the Ecuador military.

In the case of Colombia, both the United States and the local government benefited from a formal base agreement, and they concluded one in 2009. But in late 1999, two Colombian NGOs challenged the constitutionality of the DCA at the Colombian Constitutional Court.²²

For the petitioners, the new base agreement created new obligations and exceeded the scope of previous bilateral agreements, and thus needed congressional ratification as a new treaty. The Constitutional Court had previously refused to accept petitions challenging the constitutionality of "simplified agreements," and the Colombian government hoped the Court would consider this agreement a simplified one.²³

But in August 2010, just three days after Uribe's Defense Minister became president of Colombia; the Constitutional Court ruled against the DCA and left it with no legal standing. The Court considered that the new agreement incorporated new obligations for Colombia and modified previous treaties in such an extensive way that it had to sort

²² Revista Semana, Abecé de la decisión de la Corte sobre las bases militares August 18th, 2010. Available at <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/abece-decision-corte-constitucional-sobre-bases-militares/120684-3> Accessed August 6th, 2012.

²³ US Embassy in Bogota, Cable 10BOGOTA291

the process of a new treaty, including congressional ratification.²⁴ The court did not rule, however, against the constitutionality of an agreement granting US broad access to Colombian military bases, as the petitioners had hoped, and with this ruling the government could still save the agreement if it was presented to Congress for ratification. The new Santos government had the necessary votes in Congress to get the agreement ratified, but in a surprising move the administration decided not to submit it and allowed the DCA to perish after the ruling at the Constitutional Court.

After denying formal military bases, both Ecuador and Colombia offered quasi-bases to the United States. While President Correa did not accept formal US military presence, he sought to receive the benefits of cooperating closely with the United States in its anti-drug strategy, and offered to allow US planes to land and refuel in Ecuador's airports and bases. Similarly, after the constitutional court vetoed the agreement of the formal bases, the Colombian government also offered wide informal base access to the United States, which continues to this day.

4. Quasi-bases in Latin America

Although they vary widely in size, scope, and the type of operations, all quasi-bases in Latin America have arisen from two common scenarios. First, as discussed in the previous section, quasi-bases might be the result of a failed negotiation over formal bases. Domestic politics increasingly make it too difficult to open or maintain US military bases in Latin America, and since the start of the twenty-first century all negotiations to open new formal military bases have failed. But the governments of countries where negotiations have failed, and those where formal bases were not renewed, moved to allow US access to their military bases without a formal agreement or a formal lease. In these cases, even though formal bases were the preferred option, quasi-bases presented a second-best option that allowed the US military to pursue its security goals in the region bypassing the obstacles of domestic politicization.

²⁴ Revista Semana, Abecé de la decisión de la Corte sobre las bases militares August 18th, 2010. Available at: <http://www.semana.com/nacion/abece-decision-corte-constitucional-sobre-bases-militares/143211-3.aspx> Accessed August 6th, 2012.

The second scenario involves the use of military bases in Latin America for covert or semi-covert operations, where the US military seeks to escape the limitations and oversight of formal military bases. In these situations, quasi-bases provide access to local military installations including airstrips, communications facilities, training camps, and accommodation for US personnel, which function practically as bases but are not recognized as such by US officials. Formal military bases are not preferred in these cases, as they would imply the risk of politicization and involve extended oversight both in the host country and in the United States.

In contemporary Latin America, quasi-bases have arisen from failed negotiations over formal military bases in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. In contrast, quasi-bases have served as the preferred option for US operations in Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica. With the exception of El Salvador, the United States seems to prefer quasi-bases in Central America, where a heavy portion of the current war against drugs is taking place, whereas in the Andean countries of South America it preferred (and failed to obtain) formal bases.

Quasi-bases, which are not approved by local legislatures and are not open for citizen oversight, provide a better tactic option for US secretive operations in these countries. While the US does not count with formal leases and legal standing for its operational facilities in these countries, through quasi-bases it has been able to carry out secret operations such as the training of Contras in Honduras and the failed invasion on Cuba. After the Cold War, the US reduced its military presence in Central America, but increased it again in the late 2000's as part of a number of anti-drug operations resulting from shifting smuggling routes to the Pacific and Central America.

Instead of an exhaustive history of US military operations and bases in Latin America, this paper describes and classifies a number of quasi-bases installed in the region, which provide evidence of the phenomenon of alternative basing arrangements and illustrate the different ways in which they arise.

5. Types of quasi-bases and US military presence in Latin America

5.1 Gas and go

Gas and go agreements lie at the lower end of US access to military bases overseas. These agreements allow the United States to land and refuel planes in the host country military bases and/or civilian airports, and grant permission for their operators to rest overnight in nearby facilities, but prohibit the stationing of troops or equipment from the United States in the country. Despite its limitations, these minimal access agreements allow the US to deploy surveillance planes in the region, which are critical for gathering intelligence and spotting maritime and terrestrial vehicles for drug transportation and human trafficking. Evidence from Ecuador and Peru illustrates how this type of arrangement emerges.

5.1.1 Peru

While Colombia tried to persuade the United States to move its Manta operations to a base in Colombia back in 2006, Peruvian officials also courted Washington. Peruvian President Alan García sent his Defense Minister to Washington to start a conversation about increasing security cooperation between the two countries, and to offer a Peruvian location for US operations after Manta.²⁵ President García himself reiterated Peru's willingness to host US operations, argued that the base agreement in Peru would counter Chávez's influence on the region.²⁶ After popular unrest followed a flurry of news articles suggesting the US was considering moving Manta operations to Peru, García warned, as the Colombians had, against the use of the term "bases" and about the politicization of an agreement if it had to go through Congress ratification.²⁷

While also negotiating with Bogotá, in 2007 the US Department of Defense started exploring the possibility of moving operations from Manta in Ecuador to Piura in the north of Peru, close to the border with Ecuador and about 1000 kilometers north of

²⁵ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA994

²⁶ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA1271

²⁷ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA2181

Lima. Peru's Defense Minister, Allan Wagner, visited US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in Washington in March 2007 to discuss the new security agreement, while also pushing for the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Peru in the US Congress. As Wagner visited Washington, Peru authorized US troops to enter the country to give training to the Peruvian military and carry joint military exercises in the north of Peru.²⁸ At the time, Ricardo Soberon, expert in security and drug issues in Peru, who later became antidrug tsar in the Humala government, declared he had received information about the strong interest of the United States in a military base in Peru, which would host operations over Colombian territory, but warned against the risk of Peru's engagement in the Colombian conflict.²⁹ According to Soberon, the US Southern Command commander, James Stavridis, initiated negotiations with the Peruvian government in February 2007 about a base in the Piura region.³⁰

After the Argentinian newspaper Pagina12 revealed the intention of Wagner's visit to Washington, the Minister of Defense denied any talks about opening US military bases in Peru.³¹ Peruvian officials understood the potential damage of the leaked information, and asked their US counterparts to frame this agreement, like Colombia eventually would, as a continuation of previous military cooperation agreements and not as a new base accord. The United States wanted to have an explicit SOFA language (as in the case of Colombia, SOFA granted US personnel extended immunity in Peruvian territory), but Peru feared this language would make it clear to the public that this was a new agreement with new obligations for Peru.³² The US embassy in Lima expressed concern about domestic opposition to the new base in Piura in the most illustrative way in a cable to Washington in June, 2007: "The Peruvian Government sees an opportunity in the post-Manta environment, but to avoid counterproductive blowback we need to be extremely careful in framing this issue, particularly in our public interventions."³³

²⁸ Pagina12, Una Manta para Alan García. March 31st, 2007. Accessed August 15th, 2012.

²⁹ Pagina12, Una Manta para Alan García. March 31st, 2007. Accessed August 15th, 2012.

³⁰ La República (Perú), Sigue polémica por base militar de EEUU. April 30th, 2007. Accessed August 15th, 2012.

³¹ El Diario. EE.UU. trasladaría la base aérea de Manta a Piura en el Perú. April 5th, 2007. Accessed August 15th, 2012.

³² US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA994

³³ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA994

Peru's president, Alan García, had a strong interest in a US base in his country to reinforce Peru's animosity toward Chávez. In a meeting with US Treasury Secretary, Henry Paulson, in March 20th 2007, García argued that Chávez was a major problem in the region, and his "toehold" in Ecuador and Argentina was worrisome. García wanted to show that the Chavista path was "uselessly confrontational" through a strong relation with the United States. García declared that Peru would not hold back on its relation with Washington, and declared "If Ecuador doesn't want the base in Manta, we will offer one here to fight drugs and to show that Chávez is wrong."³⁴

Negotiations continued in July 2007, discussing the details of US operations in Peru. By this time it was clear that the agreement was to be presented as US operations originating from a Peruvian base in Piura, without any form of base lease. García feared the opposition (which was strong enough to win the presidency a few years later) would benefit from a public debate about military bases in Peru, and decided to turn instead to an informal gas-and-go agreement, allowing surveillance P-3 flights from Piura.³⁵

The surveillance agreement became a second-best option for the US after Peruvian officials sought to eliminate any language and formal procedures for extended control over a Peruvian base, in the style of Manta, or any new agreements that would need congressional ratification of public debate. However, the Peruvian president told CNN in 2010 that he would gladly accept the presence of US military troops in his country in order to fight against drug-trafficking:

In all the topics that are human and universal, I don't make them as issues about sovereignty and patriotism. I mean, if the Americans would want to install training troops, just as they have here helicopters and satellite and communications trainers, they're welcome. Washington could collaborate technically and militarily as long as they are under Peru's command.³⁶

At the time, Peru received about US\$37 million per year in US aid plus 23 helicopters for the war on drugs.

³⁴ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA1271

³⁵ US Embassy in Lima, Cable 07LIMA1267

³⁶ AFP. 2010. Alan García dispuesto a aceptar más ayuda militar de EU. El Nuevo Diario, September 6th. <http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/internacionales/82850>

According to the local press, in May 2012 the regional government of Piura handed two hectares to the US Southern Command to build a Center of Emergency Operations (COER in Spanish).³⁷ A few days later, the Congress Commission of Defense, Alternative Development and War on Drugs (Comisión de Defensa, Orden Interno, Desarrollo Alternativo y Lucha Contra las Drogas del Congreso de la República) approved a bill that allows the entry of foreign military forces in national soil without mentioning foreign military bases.³⁸

5.1.2 Ecuador

At the peak of FARC violent activity in Colombia in 1999, the US Southern Command Special Operations Forces stationed US troops in the Amazon jungle region of Ecuador and Peru, near the border with Colombia, in two temporary bases financed by the US Department of State. With 21 operations against the FARC in the northern border of Ecuador in one year, the Department of State sought to formalize the US presence near Colombia through a formal lease of a section of the Eloy Alfaro Airport and military base in Manta. The US already had an Advanced Observation Post for regional anti-drug Operations in that airport, and wanted authorization for ten years to station 200 US nationals including Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents, and troops from the coast guard and the US army.³⁹

During the 10 years of its presence in Ecuador, the base enjoyed support from the local population and political figures in Manta, including Mayor Jorge Zambrano, who saw positive economic effects on the region. The US built a highway connecting the airbase and the maritime port (also used by Ecuadorians for civilian purposes), expanded the airport runway, and updated the fire-fighting capabilities, all of which upgraded the attached civilian airport to meet the requirements of an international airport.

³⁷ Radio del Mar. 2012. Otra base militar estadounidense se instala en Perú. Radio del Mar, May 20th. http://www.radiodelmar.cl/rdm_2012/index.php/internacional/88-latinoamerica/730-otra-base-militar-estadounidense-se-instala-en-peru.html

³⁸ InfoRegin. 2012. Aprueban ingreso de tropas estadounidenses al Perú. InfoRegión, May 31st. <http://www.inforegion.pe/portada/135759/aprueban-ingreso-de-tropas-estadounidenses-al-peru/>

³⁹ Latin American Weekly Report, “US military are engaged in containment of the conflict.” August 10th 1999. Available at <http://latinnews.com/media/k2/pdf/historical/wr-99-31.pdf> Accessed April 25th, 2013.

But since his presidential campaign, President Rafael Correa was unequivocal about his intentions not to renegotiate the Manta Base agreement after its expiration in 2009. The formal base was thus handed back with all its improvements to the Ecuadorean military in 2009.

Despite the hostile atmosphere, the US assessed the loss of the airbase pragmatically, and understood that Correa's opposition to US troops in Ecuador responded to "a sovereignty-based position linked to domestic politics, rather than an indicator of weakening commitment to broader counter narcotics efforts or bilateral military cooperation."⁴⁰ At the same time, the United States had its mind on a new, much larger basing agreement with neighboring Colombia, which would have extended US formal military presence to seven bases in that country. Correa stated in private he was thoroughly committed to cooperating with the US in counter drug operations, but that the massive opposition to foreign troops in Ecuador made the Manta renewal impossible.⁴¹ Correa's commitment to anti-drug cooperation was clear, however. The US and Ecuador signed a new agreement on security cooperation just after the base was closed,⁴² and, as an alternative to the formal base, Ecuador and the US agreed to allow US planes to refuel in Ecuador's military and civilian airports, without stationed US personnel, under a gas-and-go scheme. This alternative benefited Correa, because it did not include permanent US troops in Ecuador and allowed him to grant the US the access it wanted for surveillance flights. Such an agreement gave almost no publicity to the (now unconstitutional) continued presence of US military personnel in Ecuadorean airports and bases.

5.2 Temporary ground access

The United States has reached agreements with different countries where US troops and operations are allowed in local military bases, without a formal lease, but with an agreement that specifies the time lapse before the bases have to be vacated or their access

⁴⁰ US embassy in Quito. Cable 08QUITO53

⁴¹ US embassy in Quito. Cable 08QUITO158

⁴² Latin American Weekly Report, "Anti-drug accord sealed with US" September 17th 2009. Available at <http://www.latinnews.com/component/k2/item/6258-ecuador--anti-drug-accord-sealed-with-us.html>
Accessed April 26th, 2013

renewed. These agreements lack the specifications of a formal base lease, such as a clear understanding about uses of the assets in the base, which are usually negotiated secretly and informally with the local government. These agreements usually specify the maximum number of US troops allowed, but often refer to a total number in the country without specifying the actual occupation of the base. While still controversial, temporal access to local military bases is often the product of a concrete security concern from the local government, which makes it easier to “sell” to the local population.

5.2.1 Guatemala

As part of the Operación Martillo, the US sent 171 Marines to the Guatemalan Base Aérea del Sur near the Pacific Ocean, in August 2012. The government denied it had allowed the US to operate a military base in the country, and instead argued the operation was a continuation of previous agreements on the “free transit of air craft” signed with the United States. Far from an aircraft transit operation, the US personnel in Guatemala was granted permission to engage in anti-drug military operations, operate heavy armed helicopters, occupy a part of the Base Aérea del Sur, and build military facilities in it through US contractors.⁴³ The agreement is set to expire after 120 days, but its renewal does not require more than the President’s authorization that made it effective in the first place. In this way, US access to Guatemala escapes the constitutional requirement for congressional ratification of any agreement that allows foreign troops in the country’s soil.

The US presence in the Base de Sur is supported by the nearby base of Colamapa in El Salvador and the Soto Cano base in Honduras. US troops are supposed to only find drug-laden planes and boats along Guatemalan coastlines. However, domestic forces will supposedly be doing the fighting, according to Obama administration spokesmen, who alleged that U.S. forces would only be allowed to defend themselves if fired upon.⁴⁴ However, as shown by a recent Univision documentary, US troops engage in military

⁴³ Siglo XXI, “Dan marcha a segunda fase de Operación Martillo” August 20, 2012. Available at <http://www.s21.com.gt/node/265871> . Accessed Oct 19th, 2012.

⁴⁴ The New American, “Critics Slam Obama Deployment of U.S. Troops to Guatemala for Drug War” Available at <http://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/foreign-policy/item/12749-critics-slam-obama-deployment-of-us-troops-to-guatemala-for-drug-war> Accessed Oct 19th, 2012

operations against boats that carry drug shipments in the region.⁴⁵

The most intense armed operations against drug-traffic in Latin America are carried out by marines stationed in Guatemala, with support from the heavily armed fourth fleet. Out of the coast of Guatemala, several frigates, like the US Navy USS Nicholas, use war equipment to capture drug traffickers and seize shipments. About a thousand tons of cocaine are shipped from Latin America to the United States, 80% through sea routes near Guatemala and Honduras, and the rest through the territory of these same countries.⁴⁶

5.2.2 *Costa Rica*

Costa Rica, a country without an army of its own, invited the United States military to patrol its coasts in 2010. Framed as an agreement to fight drug-trafficking in the country's seas, the invitation was backed by both the government and the legislative. The agreement allowed the deployment of 7.000 US troops, 46 warships, 42 helicopters and five planes.⁴⁷ The terms allowed US operations in Costa Rica for six months, starting in January 2011, and are to be renewed every six months. The agreement does not lease any military base or port to the United States, and instead vaguely allows the United States to use ports and installations, including the naval base outside of Liberia in the north of the country, near the border with Nicaragua.

The United States has upgraded the installations in the base and installed a radar to monitor aerial traffic in the region.⁴⁸ The US presence in the base in Liberia and other installations is surrounded by strict secrecy, due to the high sensitiveness of the Costa Rican public, who praise the lack of a standing military of their own, against foreign military bases in its

⁴⁵ Univisión, “Operación Martillo (parte 1): la Marina de EEUU y su misión en la guerra contra las drogas” Available at <http://noticias.univision.com/noticiero-univision/videos/video/2012-07-10/busqueda-de-narcotraficantes-en-altamar> Accessed Oct 19th, 2012

⁴⁶ Univisión, “Operación Martillo (parte 1): la Marina de EEUU y su misión en la guerra contra las drogas” Available at <http://noticias.univision.com/noticiero-univision/videos/video/2012-07-10/busqueda-de-narcotraficantes-en-altamar> Accessed Oct 19th, 2012

⁴⁷ El País, “El aumento de ayuda militar estadounidense divide a Costa Rica.” July 10, 2010. Accessed Jan 14, 2012. Available at

http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2010/07/10/actualidad/1278712801_850215.html

⁴⁸ Anep. “EE.UU reactivara radar y financiara base en Costa Rica” Available at <http://www.anep.or.cr/article/eeuu-reactivara-radar-y-financiara-base-en-costa-r/> Accessed October 22, 2012.

territory.⁴⁹ Even so, the US Base Structure Report of 2012 lists one unnamed US installation in Costa Rica.

5.3 Long-term or indefinite ground access

Long-term or indefinite access to local military bases is the closest form of arrangement to a formal military base. However, long-term quasi-bases still lack the specifications of a formal lease, and instead depend on ambiguous agreements and appendixes to previous military cooperation treaties. The expectation of a long-term occupation of the base allows more US investments and developments, as well as longer operational capacity transferred to the base. At the same time that this gives continuity to the base, it also raises the risk of new governments seeking to benefit from the base and its assets, which lie in a legal void given the absence of a formal agreement.

5.3.1 Honduras

Since the mid twentieth century, the United States had conducted occasional operations in Honduras, and after the Sandinista toppled the government in neighboring Nicaragua, the pro-US government of Honduras sought help from Washington to contain the spill over effects of the Nicaraguan revolution. The US welcomed the Honduran invitation, and extended their presence in Honduras as a platform to intervene in Nicaragua through a proxy war. The military installations used in Honduras for the Contras operation included the Soto Cano airfield, and other minor bases used in previous US operations, such as the Swan Islands, or Islas Santanilla, used to support the failed invasion of Cuba from the Bay of Pigs.

US presence in Honduran military bases was a top priority for both the Honduran and US governments. Declassified documents from the Reagan government show the commitment of his administration to preserving access to bases in Honduras during the Contras operation and the concern of the Honduras government about a reduction in US military assistance after the US Congress started to question the secret operations carried from

⁴⁹ Interview with Hector Silva, former Deputy Chief of Mission at the El Salvador Embassy in Washington, D.C., Washington DC, October 2012.

Honduras.⁵⁰

After the Contras and other anticommunist operations in Central America, the Soto Cano base has continued to support US military presence in the region, although today it serves a different purpose. The US' Southern Command installed one of its two task forces, U.S. Joint Task Force-Bravo, which combats drug traffic in Central America, in the Honduran military base of Soto Cano. It hosts approximately 550 US military personnel and more than 650 US and Honduran civilians. The US upgraded the base with a "unique" all-weather C-5 runway to support operations in Central America.⁵¹ The US has upgraded Soto Cano and other dozen of bases in Honduras with complete secrecy, as David Vine notes, "Many of these facilities have been built or upgraded without public notice, at times through exercise related construction, recalling the frequent use of secrecy and military exercises to evade congressional authority over base construction in the 1980s."(Vine, 2013).

According to the Southern Command website, the personnel in the base serve in infrastructure and social programs, such as dental care for the poor and disaster relief. But beyond this humanitarian mission, the base is one of the main centers of operations of the "Operación Martillo", a heavily manned military operation against drug traffic through sea routes between South America and the United States. The Department of Defense spends around US\$90 million a year in contingency operations in the Soto Cano base.⁵²

But instead of a formal agreement leasing bases or parts of bases to the United States, the Honduran government opted for an informal permission to use its bases, without much specification of the limitations or terms of that use. The US presence in the Soto Cano base is supported by a 1982 appendix to the 1954 military assistance agreement, that

⁵⁰ A collection of these documents, related to bases in Central American and the Contras operations is available through the National Security Archive. Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/index.htm>

⁵¹ United States General Accounting Office, "HONDURAS Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical," February 1995. Available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-39/pdf/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-95-39.pdf> Accessed October 19th, 2012

⁵² OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, Fiscal Year 2013 President's Budget: Contingency Operations Base Budget. February, 2012. Available at http://comptroller.defense.gov/defbudget/fy2013/FY2013_OCOTF.pdf Accessed October 19th, 2012.

unlike the original document, instead of getting congressional ratification became effective after the US Department of State and the Honduran Foreign Office simply exchanged diplomatic notes. In the new appendix,⁵³ the Honduran government granted the US the right to use the Honduran military bases of Palmerola (Soto Cano), Goloson and La Mesa, plus any other airstrip or installation agreed by the two governments. Another extension of the agreement also allowed the US to build or upgrade the installations in those bases. More recently, the US started training Honduran personnel and upgrading the facilities at the Naval BASE in Barra de Caratasca on the north coast.⁵⁴

These extensions differ from the basing agreements in El Salvador and in Ecuador in that it does not specify a time lapse for the termination of the bases. As a result, the bases are theoretically leased indefinitely, which should guarantee more stability to them, but unlike Ecuador, in the case of a politicization of the basing agreement there would not be a pre-arranged termination date that would force the Honduran government to maintain the base until its completion. But the United States seems comfortable with this risk, given the importance of the base for Honduras. As drug related crime increases in the country, US anti-drug operations are critical for the government. On the other hand, formalizing the Soto Cano base agreement could politicize US-Honduras security cooperation at a time when domestic opposition is strong and the government weak. As expressed by Fulton Armstrong, “politically, do you have to have a public contract, do you need to have a public debate? In the case of Honduras the answer is no.”⁵⁵

Politicization of its most important base in Central America concerned the US in 2008. After the US refused to allow commercial use of the installations attached to the airstrip,⁵⁶ the center-left elected president Manuel Zelaya ordered the military to build a civilian air terminal in the Soto Cano base in 2008. The facility was to be paid with Venezuelan funds

⁵³ The full text is available at <http://old.latribuna.hn/2009/09/13/anexo-al-convenio-militar-entre-honduras-y-los-estados-unidos-de-america/> Accessed October 19th, 2012.

⁵⁴ US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Cable 08TEGUCIGALPA165, 2008-02-26

⁵⁵ Interview with Fulton Armstrong, former Foreign Relations Committee’s western hemisphere specialist and former adviser to President Clinton. Washington DC, October 26th, 2012.

⁵⁶ Despite claiming support for the commercialization of the airstrip, leaked cables show the US interest in blocking Zelaya’s attempts to build a civilian airport in the base. See US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Cables: 07TEGUCIGALPA1678 2007-10-19, 08TEGUCIGALPA165 2008-02-26, 08TEGUCIGALPA527 2008-06-02, and 08TEGUCIGALPA541 2008-06-10

through the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA, the Venezuela led regional organization that opposes US influence in the region),⁵⁷ arguing that the airbase, equipped with the best airstrip in the country, belonged to the people of Honduras. Zelaya had joined the ALBA and its oil cooperation body, Petrocaribe, and increased anti-US rhetoric signaling the US that its historical ally was moving away from Washington.⁵⁸ Even the US ambassador was put through a humiliating delay for a week before accepting diplomatic credentials, in solidarity with anti-US Bolivia's decision to expel the US ambassador in La Paz.⁵⁹ At the same time, following the steps of Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa, Zelaya sought to initiate a new constitutional assembly, which in the case of Ecuador led to a constitutional ban on foreign troops in the country. To Washington's relief, two weeks after the announcement of the construction plans, the military broke into Zelaya's presidential palace, escorted him at gunpoint to an airplane while he still wore his pajamas, flew him to the Soto Cano air base for re-fueling, and then out of the country into Costa Rica. The military coup was condemned internationally, and the US Department of State denies US involvement in the operation. President Zelaya, however, claims that Honduran soldiers were following orders from the United States.⁶⁰

5.3.2 Colombia

From 2006 and 2009, the Uribe administration and the United States negotiated a formal agreement to open seven formal US military bases in Colombia. But despite the mutual agreement between governments, the Constitutional Court of Colombia ruled the agreement unlawful and practically terminated the hopes for new formal US bases in the country. Just a few days into his presidency, Uribe's successor Juan Manuel Santos

⁵⁷ Kozloff, Nikolas. "Zelaya, Negroponte and Controversy at U.S. Air Base of Soto Cano (Palmerola)" Available at

http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=view_all&address=405x19601

Accessed October 19th, 2012

⁵⁸ Latin American Weekly Report, "Honduras to opt for Alba?" August 21st 2008. Available at <http://www.latinnews.com/component/k2/item/5298-honduras--honduras-to-opt-for-alba?.html> Accessed April 26th, 2013

⁵⁹ Latin American Weekly Report, "New US ambassador kept waiting for a week" September 25th 2008. Available at <http://www.latinnews.com/component/k2/item/5394-honduras--new-us-ambassador-kept-waiting-for-a-week.html> Accessed April 26th, 2013

⁶⁰ Democracy Now, "Exclusive Interview with Manuel Zelaya on the U.S. Role in Honduran Coup, WikiLeaks and Why He Was Ousted" May 31st, 2011. Available at http://www.democracynow.org/2011/5/31/exclusive_interview_with_manuel_zelaya_on Accessed October 19th, 2012.

accepted the ruling of the court and decided not to attempt to revive the agreement through congressional consideration. He understood that security agreements with the United States did not have to be formal or public to have the effects both parts desired. Colombia continued to hold US operations in its territory, under previous military cooperation agreements, including military training, drug interdiction, communications, surveillance, etc. All this without the hassle of new bilateral agreements and the potential political backlash of formal US bases. At the same time, the United States understood that the agreement that the Colombian constitutional court stroke down is not likely to be revived anytime under the Santos administration. The United States, according to this official, decided to let the agreement perish, and instead sought to strengthen military cooperation through previous agreements, and eventually accepted their limitations. According to the US Department of Defense 2012 Base Structure Report, the US still operated in 2012 from seven military facilities in Colombia, where it owned 51 buildings and leased 24.

With the fall of the agreement, the US also got rid of a dangerous informal commitment to support Colombia in the case of a conflict with Venezuela. The so-called Track II negotiations did not materialize into an anti-aerial defense system and assurances of access to US arms, systems, or technology, as President Uribe had hoped. Despite the secrecy of national security issues, evidence suggests that a potential war with Venezuela was more likely to come from Uribe's personal aspirations and not from Chávez's initiative. In a recent statement, President Uribe declared he had already planned a military operation against the FARC in Venezuelan territory, which according to Chávez would have sparked a war between the two countries. Uribe revealed he had received information about military camps of the FARC in Venezuela, and he just did not have enough time before the change of administration to carry out the attack.⁶¹

6. Bases and quasi-bases: analytical differences

Bases and quasi-bases are very similar in their operational dynamics, as both can host US military personnel, equipment, and operations. But they differ in some key aspects. First,

⁶¹ Revista Semana, Chávez dice que a Uribe le faltaron cojones para emprender una acción militar en Venezuela. August 15th, 2012. Available at <http://www.semana.com/politica/chavez-dice-uribe-faltaron-cojones-para-emprender-accion-militar-venezuela/182705-3.aspx>. Accessed August 15th, 2012.

formal bases are supported by base leases or agreements that define the terms of the use of the bases, including a time period before which the base cannot be legally closed. This is the case of the Colamapa base in El Salvador and it was the case of the Manta base in Ecuador. As most international contracts, these agreements provide semi-legal guarantees of the stability of the bases that in theory must be respected by the signing parties even if a change of government makes the agreement unwanted by one of them. Even though such legality is soft at best, given the lack of an international body capable of enforcing international contracts in the realm of security, breaking the terms of an existing contract is problematic. The case of Ecuador is illustrative. Even when president Correa won the election in 2006 on nationalistic and anti-US bases platform, he had to allow the Manta base to operate until late 2009, when the initial terms of the base lease expired. On the other hand, quasi-bases do not need to specify the temporary terms of the bases, or the type of operations and the number of personnel. While these aspects might be regulated through other formal or informal agreements (for example, the US Congress has set a maximum cap for US soldiers in Colombia), quasi-bases offer flexibility to increase or decrease the size of operations as needed. The stability of quasi-bases depends, however, on a continuous collaboration with the host government. In cases of changes of government, or radical changes of the foreign relations of the host country, the bases are automatically at risk. Since no agreement exists to provide legal standing for quasi-bases, expulsion of US personnel can come at any time after political changes in the host country.

The parallel between Honduras and Ecuador is revealing. Ecuador opened a formal US FOL in 1999, while Honduras had granted access to the United States to the Soto Cano base on a quasi-base type agreement since 1983. Both countries welcomed US troops when their governments were friendly to the United States, but eventually the opposition replaced them through electoral victory. Although the new elected leader of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, did not voice a clear anti-US rhetoric during his campaign, he grew increasingly closer to Hugo Chávez to the point of joining the anti-US ALBA alliance. At this point, Zelaya decided to intervene in the Soto Cano military base to build a civilian airport using the US controlled airstrip. Even though the United States had controlled this facility since 1983, the lack of a formal lease contract allowed the new president to challenge the exclusive authority of the US over this key installation. In contrast,

president Rafael Correa of Ecuador ran a campaign based on anti-US rhetoric which specifically used his opposition to the US base to court the support of nationalistic factions in the country. Once in office, Correa proceeded to inform the US embassy of his intention to not terminate the base agreement. However, because the base specified a 10 year lease before the base could be unilaterally terminated, president Correa had to wait for three years after his inauguration for the terms of the lease to expire, and finally fulfill his election promise of expelling US troops from Ecuador.

The infamous Guantanamo base in Cuba is another example of the importance of formal leases for the stability of basing agreements. The United States signed an agreement with the first government of Cuba in 1903, leasing the naval installation in the bay of Guantanamo to the United States perpetually, although the territory remains under the formal sovereignty of Cuba. After the revolution, the new government denounced the agreement, arguing that it was illegitimately signed under US occupation. The United States responded arguing that since the Castro government had cashed one of the checks that the United States sends to Cuba as rent for the base, it had endorsed the agreement fully. The Castros still claim that the check was cashed by mistake, amidst the confusion of the first days of the revolution. Since then, the United States has never failed to send a monthly check to Havana, which the government keeps uncashed. The power disparity between Cuba and the United States is clear, and in the absence of a formal lease for Guantanamo, the United States would probably resort to coercion and threats to maintain its base, but the apparently silly argument about the only check cashed supports US' contractual authority over Guantanamo and prevents the issue of the base from escalating to a military confrontation.⁶²

As a result, neither bases nor quasi-bases are necessarily more stable, but their stability depends on different variables. While bases depend on the stability of the terms of their lease, and can endure changes of governments, the stability of quasi-bases is closely linked with the continuity of friendly governments in the host country.

⁶² See Cooley and Spruyt, 2009; Lake, 2009

Bases and quasi-bases also differ in the level of political debate around their establishment, and in the level of secrecy and possible oversight from local institutions and civil society organizations. Formal US bases (and a few quasi-bases that have been in operation for long enough) are at the center of the criticism of a transnational movement opposed to foreign military bases, and are also the target of criticism from officials and scholars around the globe who denounce the negative social consequences of hosting foreign military bases and the consequences for the sovereignty of these countries. Environmental concerns, rape and other types of crime and vulnerability of the local population are some of the main criticisms.⁶³ Quasi-bases, on the other hand, escape political oversight and civil society criticism due to their secrecy and the lack of official recognition of the existence of bases. In this environment, it is only when the media and opposition leaders gather enough information that quasi-bases receive the fate of bases as targets of transnational mobilization.

Apart from their own stability challenges, quasi-bases can themselves be a source of regional destabilization. The presence of foreign troops is already a common tension in regional politics around the world, but unofficial base-like agreements are potentially even more destabilizing. As no formal agreement is available, the hosts of US base-like arrangements are likely to send ambiguous signals to their neighbor countries and regional powers and provoke anxiety and mistrust among them. When a significant US deployment arrives in a country without previous congressional debate or other form of public deliberation, uninformed neighbors of the country, especially those not aligned with the United States, are likely to suspect that their security could be compromised. Foreign troops are closer to their borders, and high tech equipment could be used to monitor their activities across the border; and since no formal agreement stands, these destabilizing activities could already be allowed in an informal agreement between the US and the host government. Even if the US and the host country make assurances to the region that the US force and equipment shall not be used against them, rational

⁶³ See Yeo, 2011; Lutz, 2009; Hohn and Moon, 2010

political leaders in neighboring countries could suspect that just the availability of those troops and equipment might break regional balances of power.

7. Quasi-bases and the continued US military presence in Latin America

Failed negotiations to open or renew US formal bases are not the end of the story. Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru offered the US a different option when formal bases were out of the picture. They offered to grant access to the US military at different local bases, without a formal contract or base lease. These bases, formally in control of the host country, also host US airplanes, civilian and military personnel, US equipment, and in several cases their infrastructure has been developed with US funds by US contractors. To most students of US bases, these qualify as such. But to the host government and to the United States, these bases are not counted as US military installations, and are only acknowledged as minimal security cooperation.

In Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, formal US bases were never the first option. Instead, in these countries the US managed to open operating locations and engage in operations through obscure additions to previous security agreements. Even when foreign military presence and bases are required to be authorized by congress, little political unrest accompanied this new US military engagement in the region. In Honduras, the Soto Cano base has been operating as a quasi-base since the early 80's. In Guatemala and Costa Rica, new temporary arrangements have allowed the United States to deploy hundreds of US soldiers in local bases. This way, the United States has bypassed the obstacles of formal basing negotiations and has managed to continue to pursue its security interests in Latin America.

Historically, the United States has relied on imposing bases in weaker states or negotiating leasing agreements.⁶⁴ But today both these possibilities are

⁶⁴ Harkavy, 2007

increasingly difficult in a time of democratization and condemnation of US interventionism in Latin America. While a number of governments have worked around the limitations of domestic politics and opened US quasi-bases in their territories, not all governments facing complex security situations and drug-related threats have allowed the United States to operate from its territory. Figure 3 shows the countries that host US bases and quasi-bases in Latin America. They have been divided into three levels of closeness or “alignment” with the United States, using two revealing, although imperfect, proxies. In the first column appear countries that have a free trade agreement with the United States, as a proxy for their alignment with the United States. In the third column appear countries that have joined the Venezuela-led Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), which openly contests US military presence in the region. In the middle column appear countries that are neither align nor oppose the United States.

Figure 3: US alignment and presence of bases and quasi-bases

		US ally	Neutral	Opposed
		FTA with US		Member of ALBA
Bases		El Salvador, Ecuador**		Cuba
Quasi-bases	Long-term	Honduras, Colombia		
	Temporary	Guatemala, Costa Rica		
	Gas and go	Peru, Panama, Chile		Ecuador**
No bases		Mexico, Nicaragua*	Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay	Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua*

*Nicaragua signed an FTA with the United States as part of the CAFTA-DR in 2004 under the US-aligned Liberal Party. In 2007 the opposition Sandinista party replaced the liberals in power and joined the ALBA group.

**Ecuador advanced negotiations for an FTA with the United States, but these broke in 2005. In 2009 Ecuador evicted the US from its base in the country and in the same year it joined ALBA.

Source: elaborated by the author.

As we would expect, a cluster of countries in the north-west corner of figure 3 indicates that countries that are aligned with the United States through free trade

are also more likely to offer bases or the quasi-bases alternative to their northern neighbor. In contrast, all the countries members of ALBA are reluctant to offer access to the US military to their bases and territories. Ecuador compromised after it evicted the US from its base in Manta, and allowed a gas and go program. The US formal military base of Guantanamo is officially within Cuban territory, but the Cuban government firmly opposes US presence on the island and has called for the withdrawal of US troops and the termination of their questionable activities in the base. However, the existence of a formal contract containing a perpetual lease to the United States, and not only its military might, allows the United States to claim the authority to stay in Cuban territory.

Further research is needed to explore the magnitude of the phenomenon of quasi-bases in other regions of the world. Some evidence indicates that informal or secret bases are spreading around the globe, and might even been one defining characteristic of what Nick Turse has called “The changing face of Empire.”⁶⁵ While this project restricted its scope to Latin America, a natural continuation of this line of research would be to expand the analysis to other regions and document other types of arrangements that populate the world of foreign military presence.

8. Conclusion

Foreign military presence in Latin America is widely contested, especially that of the United States.⁶⁶ Latin American governments must take into consideration the risks of widespread political opposition when they negotiate new bases or base renewals with the United States. While in the past governments were able to get away with opening US military bases, stronger mechanisms of democratic participation have empowered opposition parties and civil society organizations to block basing agreements, either through electoral victory or through independent courts. This dissertation presented the case of Ecuador, where the

⁶⁵ Turse, 2012

⁶⁶ Yeo, 2011

election of an alternative government inspired by nationalistic rhetoric meant the termination of the Manta Air Base agreement. It also showed the case of Colombia, where a very powerful government with a wide majority of popular support could not materialize its intention to open several formal US military bases when a civil society organization brought the case to a strong and independent constitutional court that ruled the agreement unlawful. In Peru, the government did offer a formal base and started preliminary negotiations, but the fear of political trouble made the negotiations stall.

The ruling elites in Colombia, Peru, and Panama did not fear losing sovereignty to the United States, nor did they fear US military presence in their territories. They did fear, instead, an organized domestic reaction against their governments, costing them political support and eventually even the stability of their rule. And this they communicated to the United States in each of their negotiation processes. The results were mixed, with Colombia going all the way through a negotiation process for new bases, of Cooperative Security Locations, while Peru and Panama opted for more discrete arrangements where no formal agreements were needed.

Quasi-bases are a major security issue in Latin America. The core of the US Southern Command's Operación Martillo is a network of quasi bases in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, and elsewhere, where the US operates war vessels, equipment, and aircraft. Unlike the formal base in El Salvador, which is regulated against armed operations, the unregulated quasi-bases in the rest of Latin America provide safe spaces for the US military to engage in interdiction and combat against drug traffickers and organized crime. With the support from the fourth fleet, these quasi-bases are critical components of the US contemporary version of the war on drugs.

Both the United States and the governments of Central America gain politically when they overlook the constitutional requirement of congressional ratification for the establishment of new bases. In this manner, the establishment of these bases is protected against politicization, as opposition forces are unable to

generate open debates against the bases in the legislature. Military operations from these bases are subject to less scrutiny, and legal action against the bases is unlikely to succeed.

Quasi-bases are more important than formal bases in Latin America for US security operations. With the exception of El Salvador and Cuba, no other independent Latin American country hosts a formal US military base such as a Cooperative Security Location, or Forward Operating Location. In the last few years, most of the military operations of the US’ “war against drugs” are supported by quasi-bases in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. Even the Joint-Force Bravo, one of the two South Com’s principal divisions, is hosted in the Soto Cano air base in Honduras, a country referred as “USS Honduras” given its historical strategic support for the US military in Central America,⁶⁷ but where no formal lease exists for US bases. Hundreds of marines have been deployed to Guatemala and Costa Rica, and they have been granted access to local military bases, all outside of proper base agreements. In contrast, the US Forward Operating Location in El Salvador, where the US signed a proper base lease, does not host US ground operations, and instead serves as a radar location and a space for US planes to refuel.

Studies about US military bases overseas have trouble dealing with quasi-bases. Some studies ignore them, because the lack of a base lease makes quasi-bases less suitable for comparison. Other studies treat bases and quasi-bases instinctively, without accounting for the different dynamics that give rise to quasi-bases and the distinctive character of their sustainability. Andrew Yeo’s and other analyses of the anti-base movement, for example, would benefit from a deeper understanding of quasi-bases and the particular challenges they pose for civil society oversight.⁶⁸ This paper has attempted to conceptualize the phenomenon of quasi-bases, and has advanced a preliminary discussion about the distinctive political dynamics that surround them. First, quasi-bases arise in contexts where domestic politics make it too difficult to establish formal military

⁶⁷ Vine, 2013

⁶⁸ Yeo, 2011; Vine, 2011; Lutz, 2009; Lindsay-Poland, 2009

bases, and thus from their inception they are surrounded by an aura of secrecy and lack of oversight. The expansion of democracy throughout Latin America, as elsewhere, is empowering opposition parties and civil society organizations to challenge the legitimacy of basing agreements. As a result, the United States has failed to open any formal bases in Latin America since the start of the century. But even if formal bases are no longer welcomed by Latin Americans, US operations in the region have been supported by an exponential rise in the number of countries that host quasi-bases.

The stability of quasi-bases is a challenge for US security policy. On the one hand, the secrecy and informality of quasi-bases helps maintain the bases outside of the domestic political arena, allowing the host government to extract benefits from allowing US operations in the country with minimal oversight from the local opposition. But on the other hand, the lack of a formal lease makes quasi-basing agreements depend on the continuity of friendly host governments and their political allies. If a radical faction of the opposition manages to win a presidential election, all informal agreements from the previous administrations are immediately in danger. As the cases of Ecuador and Cuba showed, formal leases serve as semi-legal protections against arbitrary (or even justified) expulsions in the context of changes of government, at least until the initial terms of the base lease expire. While no contract is unbreakable in international relations, formal lease agreements carry much more legal weight than the ambiguous informal arrangements that support quasi-bases.

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