

Aug 11 2010

The US in Costa Rica: the price of Latin American exceptionalism?

LSE Ideas

By Guy Burton

During the current Venezuela-Colombia spat, one particular comment by the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, was particularly striking – although not necessarily for the reason he gave. During a speech commemorating Venezuela's founder and his political hero, Simon Bolivar, Chavez highlighted the passage of 46 US warships, 200 helicopters and 7000 marines into Costa Rica since the beginning of July. Along with four bases that Panama has made available to Washington, Chavez portrayed the move as growing military pressure and potential aggression by the US against himself.

Leaving aside Chavez's rhetoric, which was designed to rally his supporters at home and abroad, the presence of American troops in Costa Rica is significant. First, it heralds an extension of the American counter-narcotics campaign. While Washington's 'war on drugs' has been fought in two main theatres – through its military presence in Colombia and support in kind to the Mexican authorities – the inclusion of Costa Rica reflects the increasing regionalisation of the strategy, enabling Washington to engage directly in the disruption of the drugs' transit from its source in the Colombian borderlands through Central America to the US.

Second, the surge in Washington's military presence is notable given Costa Rica's history. The country is exceptional in Latin America, having abolished its army in 1948 and experienced one of the most sustained periods of democracy since. The army's removal occurred in the wake of a civil war and ensured that competing factions in Costa Rica's elite would be unable to settle their differences militarily. Instead of an army the country has a small public security-oriented force which has participated on international peacekeeping missions as well as combating the drug trade.

However, the agreement reached with Washington reflects growing concerns among Costa Rica's leaders over the potential for greater lawlessness and criminality stemming from the drug trade. Laura Chinchilla's election as president last February was helped in part by her commitment to take a stronger line on this front. At the same time, opinion within Costa Rica is divided. There has been mounting public opposition by political parties and civil society against the agreement, which has apparently baffled the American ambassador. She argues that there is no change in the nature of US-Costa Rican affairs and that the current agreement echoes those from earlier years.

By contrast the domestic opposition, claim that under the previous 1999 US-Costa Rica Maritime Cooperation Agreement, American coastguard vessels could only enter Costa Rican territory in pursuit of suspects. The recent agreement constitutes a break by dramatically increasing the size of the US presence to one that seems far larger than necessary for the task. Moreover, it has been agreed for a period of five years rather than being subject to renewal every year. The public furore has been such that Costa Rica's Supreme Court has decided to rule on the agreement.

That the US and Costa Rica have been cooperating militarily for more than a decade raises serious questions about the sustainability and credibility of the 'Costa Rican' brand. Its non-military status and democratic credentials have provided it with a measure of independence. Historically, this was evident in two important ways: one, by encouraging it to avoid conflict where possible; and two, by using that approach to play the role of honest broker in the various conflicts in Central America during the 1980s.

By contrast the US-Costa Rican arrangements since the 1990s and their expansion with the current agreement appear to point in a different direction to the image carefully cultivated over past decades. Even if the perceived threat from the drug trade is as great as the Costa Rican leadership assumes it is, by opting to outsource their military operations to Washington will effectively weaken the country's freedom to manoeuvre internationally. This would not only undermine Costa Rica's claim to a distinctive foreign policy, but also challenge national sovereignty. More specifically, it would no longer have a monopoly on the use of coercion within its territory – one of the central tenets of statehood.

At the same time Costa Rican democracy could take a battering. Increased criminality associated with the drug trade and non-accountable US military power may challenge both the practice and culture of democracy. The experience of Colombia and

Mexico may be relevant in this regard: the collapse of the rule of law and the exercise of power by armed men (whether guerrillas, gang, enforcement agencies or paramilitaries) in the peripheries has effectively marginalised ordinary citizens and undermined democracy and accountability.

All this suggests that the impact of an expanded US military presence in Costa Rica – assuming it gets the go-ahead from the Costa Rican Supreme Court – could have more far-reaching consequences than the country's leadership anticipates. While Costa Ricans may continue to emphasise their political distinctiveness from other Latin American countries through the absence of an army and a strong democratic tradition, these could eventually turn out to be little more than rhetorical devices that mask a darker reality of dependence on Washington, growing public insecurity and social fragmentation. To forestall such an outcome might the solution for Costa Rica be the paradoxical one? That is, in order to retain its Latin American 'uniqueness' of independence, non-intervention and pacifist foreign policy, it may have to change tack and adopt a more 'normal' Latin American trajectory (at least historically), by building up its own military capacity.

Guy Burton is a research associate for the Latin America International Affairs Programme at the LSE Ideas Centre.

This entry was posted in [Costa Rica](#), [Horizonte](#), [US-Latin American Relations](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).