

THE U.S. STILL NEEDS MILITARY BASES IN PANAMA

On March 29, 1995, the Clinton Administration announced the transfer of America's military headquarters in Latin America, Southern Command, from Panama to Miami, Florida. This decision fulfills the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty's commitment that all U.S. troops be evacuated by December 31, 1999. It also reflects the Clinton Administration's view that the Canal can be defended without the presence of U.S. forces in Panama.

This viewpoint is mistaken. President Clinton's decision could lead to the permanent loss of valuable military assets and seriously weaken America's ability to defend the Panama Canal. The treaties with Panama give the U.S. the option of continuing a military presence in Panama after 2000. This option should be exercised.

The 104th Congress could force a reconsideration of President Clinton's decision by passing a sense of the Congress resolution that the U.S. needs to retain a military presence in Panama after 2000. Such a resolution, while non-binding, would urge the Administration to negotiate an extension of base rights in at least some of the 14 U.S. military installations in Panama, helping to ensure a measure of power projection capability in an area of vital national interest to the United States.

U.S. Treaty Rights

Under the terms of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty, the United States must evacuate its troops from Panama by December 31, 1999. Under the companion Treaty of Permanent Neutrality, which becomes effective when the Canal Treaty expires, the U.S. retains the right to protect and defend the Canal after 2000. The U.S. instrument of ratification accompanying the Neutrality Treaty allows both sides to negotiate an extension of the agreement giving the U.S. the right to station troops in Panama and enjoy basing rights there. The government of Panama agreed to these terms. Thus, both countries agreed explicitly to the right of U.S. forces to remain in the Canal Zone after 2000.

The extension of U.S. base rights also is consistent with the intent of Congress. The 1979 Panama Canal Act, which incorporated the treaty into U.S. law, included a sense of the Congress resolution that the "best interests of the United States require that the President enter into negotiations with the Republic of Panama for the purpose of arranging for the stationing of United States military forces after the termination of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977."

The Need for a U.S. Presence

Southern Command, with a current strength of 8,800 troops, has been based in Panama since World War II. It coordinates all military and anti-drug operations in Latin America and is responsible for protecting the Panama Canal. Although the traditional threat of a foreign naval attack on the Canal Zone has virtually disappeared, the United States still needs to be able to project military power in the Southern Hemisphere. The worldwide upsurge in political instability and state-supported terrorism that has followed the end of the Cold War makes it necessary to provide rapid troop and logistical transit between the oceans. The need to conduct surveillance or to pursue actual and potential adversaries also requires immediate access to both oceans. Such possibilities make it essential that the U.S. retain a measure of conventional military power in the Isthmus of Panama.

There are other reasons for the U.S. to retain a military presence in Panama:

Efficiency and low cost. The U.S. conducts a number of important non-military missions, including humanitarian and civil-military programs, throughout Latin America. These missions would benefit materially from the lower transport costs and greater efficiency afforded by centralized logistics bases inside Panama, especially Fort Kobbe, where the Theater Equipment and Maintenance Site (TEAMS) is located. This facility supports disaster relief missions and other civic and humanitarian services.

Intelligence and counter-drug operations. Panama is located in the center of a major drug transit area. U.S. facilities there are well-situated for collecting intelligence on drug trafficking and for supporting interdiction efforts. Anti-drug operations will remain a critical feature of U.S. policy in Latin America. The secure airport at Howard Air Force Base is available for logistical infrastructure and support for airborne operations. Other facilities in Panama, especially the electronic capabilities at Galeta Island, give the U.S. a unique capability to conduct surveillance of maritime traffic, drug smuggling, and potential terrorist activities in the region.

Unique training facilities. The Jungle Operations Training Center at Fort Sherman provides unrivaled facilities for training in low-intensity warfare, and the adjacent naval base provides training for small craft navigation. Assistant Secretary of Defense Frederick C. Smith has stated that these sites "will be difficult to replicate elsewhere."

Panamanian public opinion. Polls taken in Panama over a period of years indicate strong and consistent pluralities in favor of a continued U.S. presence after 2000. As the staff of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere reported on March 9, 1995, "Recent public opinion polls in Panama suggest that 82% to 83% of Panamanians would like the United States to keep some sort of military presence in Panama."

Time Is Running Out

While the expiration date for the Panama Canal Treaty is over four years away, there is not much time to plan and negotiate for a continued U.S. military presence.

A sense of the Congress resolution urging the President to negotiate a new base rights agreement with Panama has been introduced in the Senate by Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms (R-NC). Such a new agreement would take effect immediately after the Panama Canal Treaty expires on December 31, 1999.

In any such resolution, however, Congress must bear in mind three principles:

- ① The U.S., not Panama, should initiate negotiations.
- ② An agreement should have the status of a business arrangement between equals. Panama would be the owner-landlord, the U.S. a tenant-operator.
- ③ Not all 14 U.S. military installations in Panama need be retained. Most of these bases can be turned over to Panama. Among the most important to retain would be Howard Air Force Base, Fort Sherman, Fort Kobbe, Galeta Island, and Rodman Naval Station.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War has led to a U.S. withdrawal from many foreign bases, particularly those that are no longer needed. Certain bases in the Isthmus of Panama, however, continue to serve America's interests. The decision to move the headquarters of Southern Command to Miami is irrevocable, but the decision on whether to withdraw all military facilities from Panama is still open. Retaining these bases would be a statement that the United States remains determined to safeguard its interests in the region. Congress should press the Administration to maintain a U.S. military presence in Panama.

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