

Manta, Yes or No: An Ongoing Debate Revolving the Issue of a Foreign Military Presence in Ecuador

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The former Forward Operating Site (FOS) at Eloy Alfaro Air Base in Manta, Ecuador, is still a subject of national debate in the South American country. The discussion revolves around whether it is likely to re-open a U.S. military base in Manta, or any other place on the national soil. This debate was triggered when a new cooperation agreement for border protection—focused on countering drug-trafficking and transnational crime—was signed between the two governments in April 2018. From 2007 to 2017, former President Correa’s rhetoric was all about Ecuadorian anti-imperialism and anti-foreign occupation of sovereign soil. Conversely, current president Lenin Moreno is showing signs of realignment with the U.S. government while defining ways and means to face common security challenges.

Even though there was a sensible change in the Ecuadorian regime—from left(Correa) to center-right(Moreno)—a hypothetical agreement to reopen a U.S. military base involves other factors beyond the approval of the Ecuadorian government. This paper argues that the eventual re-opening of FOS Manta (or any other site) would be based not exclusively on an Ecuadorian national government's decision but also—and fundamentally—on the local government support to this decision because of the perceived benefits a U.S. base would bring to the local area. This argument assumes an intrinsic correlation between what local governments’ officials say, negotiate, or decide, and the desires of the local population—the formers being the legitimate representatives of the latter. These perceived benefits include firsts, an improvement of the

national and local security environment, second, an opportunity for economic growth, and lastly, an improvement in the quality of life of the local community.

Historical background: The Origins of FOS Manta

The U.S.'s influence in the politics and defense issues of Latin America traces its roots back to the second half of the 19th century, right after the central and south American nations fought and won their independence wars. As a result, the new-born countries sought support from “the big brother of the north” to solidify their political existence and to gain recognition from the international community.

However, the case of the U.S. influence in Ecuador is a singular one because, as Erin Fitz-Henry portrays, this country has had a relatively limited intervention from the U.S. in contrast to other countries like Argentina, Chile, Panama, or Nicaragua.¹ Still, the importance of Ecuador's geographic position for the U.S. to provide security to one of the most sensitive spots in the world—the Panama Canal—required an American base near in the Pacific waters. As a result, in the early 1940s, talks between both governments regarding U.S bases in the coastal city of Salinas, and the Galapagos archipelago started to gain traction. Eventually, both bases were built in 1942, but the internal politics in Ecuador changed rather quickly, and the agreement ended in 1946.²

Still, throughout the rest of the 20th century mutual interests to address common security issues—mainly related to drug-trafficking—set the tone for an ongoing U.S. presence in Ecuadorian territory. According to Sebastian E. Bitar, by 1999 the U.S. Southern Command stationed several Special Operations units in the border between Ecuador and Colombia. Those

units conducted operations against the “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)” terrorist group, heavily involved in the drug trafficking business. Consequently, 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.”³ In November 1999, after a brief period of negotiations, the right-wing government of president Jamil Mahuad signed an agreement with the U.S administration. The terms agreed to a 10-year permission to operate a FOS in Manta for the U.S. Air Force and other agencies such as the DEA (Drugs Enforcement Agency). In exchange, the U.S. government primarily committed to refurbishing the existing facilities at the base, to building new ones, and to expanding the runway.

The political scenario in Ecuador radically changed eight years after, when left-wing Rafael Correa took office as elected President in 2007. He re-assessed the issue of FOS Manta—what he strongly argued was an outrageous violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty—and decided to comply with the original agreement, but closed any option of further extension. As a result, in November 2009 the U.S. military left FOS Manta for good. Although Bitar claims that “during the ten years of its presence...the base enjoyed support from the local population and political figures in Manta, including Mayor Jorge Zambrano, who saw positive economic effects in the region.”⁴ There is no evidence that the president consulted with the local government in Manta or its general population before making the decision.

Basing decisions at the national level and the fundamental need for local governments’ support

Alexander Cooley’s *Triangular Politics* concept regarding the Okinawa and Azores cases, argues that the “base politics of these islands have been mediated by an additional factor—the political relation between the regional [local]...government and their respective national

governments.”⁵. Although Cooley writes about island governments, this argument is not exclusively related to bases located in insular areas. In many other cases, including the Ecuadorian one, local host governments played a vital role in the acceptance of a foreign base. For instance, although Fitz-Henry says that there were many factors that anti-base movements in Ecuador used to argue against the existence of FOS Manta, there were also factors that withdrew popular support to these movements. Paradoxically, the local government and population argued *in favor* of the permanence of the base.⁶ This local support came from *perceived benefits* that the U.S. presence brought to the community. What follows, is the analysis of these perceived benefits, being the first of them an improvement of the national and local security environment.

The end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War set a new paradigm on national security issues, not only for the U.S. and the Soviet Union but also for the countries aligned on each side of the equation. The cases of Germany and Japan are examples of how some nations based their security and defense postures on the presence of a foreign power’s (U.S.) military bases on their soil. A more recent scenario reflects how Poland, feeling anxiety about a possible offensive move from Russia, believes that a permanent presence of U.S. troops in Polish soil, via the establishment of a U.S. Army base will solve its dilemma. A document released by the Polish Ministry of Defense in early 2018 outlines a “clear and present need for a permanent U.S. armored division deploy[ment]” in response to an “increasingly emboldened and dangerous posture [from Russia] that threatens Europe.”⁷ In the same way, some local authorities in Ecuador currently believe that a renewed presence of the U.S. military (the re-opening of Manta or any other site) would help to address security threats, particularly the nocive influence of narco-terrorism coming from the border with Colombia.

A terrorist attack in January 2018 in the municipality of Esmeraldas—attributed to a narco-trafficker and former member of the FARC—provoked a new debate about how a U.S. base would improve the security in the region. Jaime Nobot, Mayor of Guayaquil (the largest and most important city in Ecuador) believes that a U.S. base, on the one hand, does not affect the Ecuadorian sovereignty, and on the other hand, is an effective way to mitigate what he thinks is a lack of an effective national security policy.⁸ In sum, some local officials and at least part of the population support the idea that a U.S. military presence improves the security in the area.

A second perceived benefit of having a U.S. base—and perhaps one of the elements that the local community in Manta would favor the most while supporting a reopening of the FOS—is the notion that the facility brings economic prosperity to the city. In developing countries where indexes of poverty, unemployment, and corruption are high, and the quality of life does not meet the minimum standards, the arrival of any form of developed-country presence (e.g., a military base, an embassy, a consulate) usually creates the perception that dollars will follow that presence. On the one hand, the interaction between the supply of goods and services from the local markets, and the potential demand from the new foreign customers theoretically brings the locals an increase in their income. On the other hand, jobs on-base offered to the locals and contracts with local business are expected—correctly or not—to be paid in dollars or local currency in the amount equivalent to the foreign prices. David Vine, when discussing his case of the U.S. base in Vicenza (Italy), exemplifies how the housing market in the city was artificially affected by an increase in rental prices for landlords due to the presence of foreign troops—or better said, potential foreign tenants.⁹

Finally, the third perceived benefit is the improvement of the quality of life for the local population. This comes from what Fitz-Henry identifies as the U.S.'s *Lexicon of Benevolence*

through humanitarian outreach: “[In Manta,] between 2004 and 2008, this outreach included donations to the burn center at the local hospital...; building repairs at the Angelica Florez School...; English language courses for fourth and fifth grades...and training and equipment for local firefighters.”¹⁰ The perception of a local population is that when a U.S. presence is established nearby, the well-proclaimed values of the U.S. society—including prosperity and the American way of life—come along with such presence. Most likely, the local population expects that the establishment of a U.S. installation must be accompanied by U.S. major investments to improve the quality of life at the local level. Most of the time, this is expected as a form of direct (local) reimbursement, first, for the right to use the land, and second, for the intangible benefits of the deal: the increase U.S. national security, for example.

The Way Ahead

There are many factors involved in a sovereign country’s authorization for the United States to open and operate a U.S base on its soil. Base politics, as defined by Kent E. Calder, is the collection of those factors that serve as a framework of “interaction between ‘basing nations’ and ‘host nations’ on the matters relating to the status and operation of local military facilities in the host nation.”¹¹ Those factors include politics, geography, economy, and sociology, among others.

Certainly, all those factors were involved in the 1999 authorization of the Ecuadorian government to allow the U.S. to open and operate the FOS in Manta. Undoubtedly, all those factors also influenced its closing in 2009. Nowadays, as both governments start new talks about future cooperation, the issue of Manta or any other site could rise again. In that event, a hypothetical negotiation toward the re-opening of a FOS would not solely be based on the Ecuadorian national government's decision. A major legitimizer of such an arrangement would

be the support from local governments on behalf of its populations, and these voices ought to be heard. In that case, most likely these local governments would support that decision because of the perceived advantages this kind of deals brings to their communities: among them, an improvement of the national and local security environment, economic growth, and quality of life improvement.

The issues just analyzed are not exclusive to the Latin American scenario. As the 2012 U.S. Department of Defense “Joint Operational Access Concept”¹² presents it, global basing still constitutes a key element of the U.S defense strategy to face future anti-access and area-denial security challenges. In fact, the concept of basing is considered, on the one hand, a *principle* “to achieve operational access in the face of armed opposition.” On the other hand, it is a factor that must be carefully considered given several trends of change in the operational environment, one of those “a decreased support abroad for an extensive network of U.S. military bases around the globe.”¹³

Given the contemporaneity of the subject discussed in this paper, further discussion and analysis of the phenomenon of U.S. basing are worth advancing in the military academic environment. As future agreements whether in Ecuador, Poland, or any other place are real possibilities, the parties involved must seek for fair agreements—ones that bring real benefits to the locals, not just perceptions. It should not be a zero-sum deal. Everybody could win.

Words: 2,054

ENDNOTES

¹ Fitz-Henry, *US Military Bases and Anti-Military Organizing*, 27.

² Fitz-Henry, 32.

³ Bitar, *US Military Bases, Quasi-Bases, and Domestic Politics in Latin America*, 76.

⁴ Bitar, 80.

⁵ Those two elements, in addition to the U.S. military authority, forms the Triangular politics. Cooley, *Base Politics*, 137.

⁶ Fitz-Henry, *US Military Bases and Anti-Military Organizing*, 16.

⁷ National Ministry of Defense , Republic of Poland, "Proposal for a U.S. Permanent Presence in Poland," 3.

⁸ "Vuelve Debate de Base Militar Para Control Del Narcotráfico, Tras Atentado En San Lorenzo | Ecuador | Noticias | El Universo."

⁹ Vine, *Base Nation*, 281.

¹⁰ Fitz-Henry, *US Military Bases and Anti-Military Organizing*, 117.

¹¹ Calder, *Embattled Garrisons*, 65.

¹² DoD, "DoD Joint Operational Access Concept 2012," iii.

¹³ DoD, 11.



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