
Mulino, Under the Orders of the Empire

By: Arnaldo Musa / Cubasí
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The arrival of more US troops in Panama, the intensification of their training in the Darién jungle, and Washington's demand that the government of José Raúl Mulino strictly comply with the recent agreement signed between the two countries has unsettled public opinion in the Isthmus, while the president maintains that he has nothing to do with any US aggression against Venezuela.

"Regarding Venezuela, we have nothing to do with it, nor is Panama lending its territory for any kind of hostile act against Venezuela, or against any other country in the world," President Mulino emphasized.

"The United States' problem with Venezuela is completely unrelated to us in terms of involvement. This military cooperation," Mulino stressed, "is fundamental for the comprehensive safeguarding of the interoceanic canal, a strategic entity that requires the coordination of all the world's police and military forces."

Military exercises between Panama and the United States have been frequent since the 1989 U.S. invasion. Last April, both countries renewed their security cooperation through a memorandum of understanding that allows for a greater U.S. military presence.

The Darién Gap, the dense jungle bordering Colombia, is a suitable and ideal location for this type of training due to its geographical conditions, although it's not the only area. Mulino recalled that Panama, which has lacked its own army since 1990, regularly hosts multinational military exercises such as Panamax, which brings together security forces from various nations.

However, Mulino has not been convincing in explaining why a monument to the Chinese community, which has been in Panama for over 170 years, was destroyed. He attributed the demolition to a mayor who, under cover of darkness, unexpectedly ordered the friendly symbol torn down—something the president distanced himself from, or at least tried to distance himself from.

Remarkably, during separate visits by U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco

Rubio, both expressed their displeasure with the construction of a purely civilian structure that symbolized the brotherhood between the Chinese and Panamanian communities.

Hegseth celebrated the signing of the three-year military memorandum and stated at President Trump's cabinet meeting that the United States is "taking back the Canal. China has had too much influence. Obama and others let them in. We, along with Panama, are expelling them, sir."

For his part, the US president stated: "We have moved many troops to Panama and occupied some areas that we no longer had, but now we do."

In turn, Mulino said that "not an inch of our sovereignty" had been ceded, but the United States is already considering creating a new military base in the supposedly neutral Panamanian territory. This is part of the obsession of the bellicose US president, who since his return to the White House has stated that his administration will "take back" the canal, which was returned to Panama in 1999.

In short, the military agreement allows the US military to increase its presence in the Central American country and includes the use of Panamanian security facilities by US troops.

The 22-point memorandum of understanding establishes a framework for cooperation that allows the U.S. military to deploy troops to the Central American country for training purposes and to use Panamanian government facilities.

Rosman Naval Base, Howard Air Force Base, and Fort Sherman, which houses a training and drill site, were made available to the U.S. military.

This joint statement sparked controversy because, according to the Panamanian newspaper La Estrella de Panamá, the U.S. government, in its English version, omitted a phrase stating that "Secretary Hegseth recognized Panama's leadership and inalienable sovereignty over the Panama Canal and its adjacent areas."

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According to a report by NBC News, one of the objectives was to increase the U.S. military presence. The report also stated that the Department of Defense did not rule out the use of force as a last resort. Furthermore, under pressure from the White House, Panama has accused the Panama Ports Company of breaching its contractual obligations and has pressured it to withdraw from the country.

The ports' parent company, CK Hutchison, announced last month an agreement to sell 43 ports in 23 countries, including the two Panama Canal ports, to a consortium led by the US asset manager BlackRock for \$19 billion.

RUBIO, THE MASTER OF THE GREATEST SELLOUT

Let's remember that Panama was the first country visited by the Trump administration's foreign minister, and the man so beloved by Trump and his entire family got whatever he wanted from Mulino. From that moment on, he expressed his displeasure with the civilian monument, a reflection of the actions he was already preparing against the People's Republic of China.

RUBIO, THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE GREATEST SELLOUT Barely a blink had passed since a visit that had swept everything away, and Mulino, without hesitation, broke the 2017 agreement that would have made Panama part of the Belt and Road Initiative, championed by Beijing and highly beneficial to the participating nations.

With a touch of irony, the decidedly un-blond president didn't even mention Trump's ambition to seize the Canal, but he paved the way for an increased US troop presence and even greater concessions to the United States in bilateral trade.

This was something Trump coveted, and since his return to the White House, he has been weighing options to increase his presence in Panama and secure preferential treatment in the Canal. Rubio conceived of this and it was expanded in the already negotiated and subsequent military agreement:

"U.S. personnel and U.S. contractors... may use the authorized locations, facilities, and designated areas to provide training, conduct humanitarian activities, carry out exercises, conduct visits, store or install U.S. property, and for any other activity."

But that's not all: Marco Rubio also managed to expand an agreement allowing the United States to use Panama to deport undocumented migrants from other countries, a project for which the Panamanian government will receive six million dollars from Washington.

"I have offered the area of the Nicanor airstrip in Metete, Darién province, so that the repatriation process for people from different places such as Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, among other nationalities can be carried out from there," Mulino said at a press conference after meeting with Rubio, who, before leaving, warned the president of Panama of "measures" from the United States if there are no "immediate changes" in the canal.
