

SAFEGUARDING U.S. SECURITY IN PANAMA

The continued rule of Panamanian strongman General Manuel Antonio Noriega threatens American lives, United States security interests, and democracy in Panama. At stake is the future of the Panama Canal and the prospect of another pro-Cuban U.S. adversary gaining a foothold in the strategic Caribbean Basin. The events of the past couple of years, culminating in last week's violence unleashed by Noriega after his allies lost the Panamanian presidential elections, have prompted George Bush to take tough action. His first steps are welcome; more should follow. It is clear that it may be up to the U.S. to restore an order to Panama that offers its people democracy and economic prosperity, and the region stability, while ensuring that the Panama Canal remains open.

There is much at stake in Panama for the U.S. There is growing concern that Noriega may be trying to take Panama into what is rapidly becoming the "Warsaw Pact of the West," expanding security ties to Cuba and Nicaragua, and importing Soviet bloc weapons and equipment possibly to be used against U.S. interests in the region. Noriega also has been expanding relations with such U.S. adversaries as Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and the Soviet Union. He has accomplished this, all the while sustaining his very close and long-time friendships with Latin America's drug and terrorist organizations.

Immeasurable Importance. Also at stake is the Panama Canal, this hemisphere's strategic equivalent of Gibraltar, through which almost 13,500 ships pass each year. The Canal is a military asset of immeasurable importance to the U.S., allowing U.S. Navy vessels to move swiftly between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and avoid the three-week 13,000-mile trip around Cape Horn. The Canal also enables commercial shipping to move quickly and inexpensively between the east and west coasts of the U.S. Approximately 15 percent of all U.S. imports and exports pass through the Canal annually.

Last Thursday, May 11, George Bush announced a set of policy options to help remove Noriega from power and bring democracy to Panama. These proposals include sending U.S. troops to Panama, relocating some U.S. civilians to "secure zones" in Panama, recalling U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis for consultations, and maintaining economic sanctions against Panama.

These and other steps by Bush are only a start. What is now needed is a clear ladder of escalation that takes advantage of the current environment in Panama. The goal should be to oust Noriega, establish democracy in Panama, and protect the Canal and U.S. security interests. To do this, Bush should:

- 1) **Continue recognizing opposition candidate Guillermo Endara's election victory and step up U.S. financial and political support for the democratic opposition.** The U.S. must maintain cordial relations with what may become the future democratic government in Panama.

2) Complete the movement of U.S. citizens in Panama either to secure zones on the U.S. bases or out of the country entirely. This will prevent continued harassment and intimidation by pro-Noriega forces, and will prevent possible U.S. casualties.

3) Work closely with the Latin American democracies like Venezuela to put pressure on Noriega. Tomorrow, the OAS convenes to denounce Noriega and demand that he leave Panama. These measures should be strongly supported by Washington.

4) Help create and identify anti-Noriega factions within the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) willing to stage a coup against Noriega. Bush already has called upon the PDF to oust Noriega; the U.S. should assist possible pro-democratic elements in the PDF by providing them with intelligence information and diplomatic support.

5) Remind the American people and stress to U.S. allies and the international community the geo-strategic importance to the U.S. of the Panama Canal and that the U.S. Southern Command is based in Panama. Clearly state that the U.S. cannot allow the Canal and military bases to be turned over to an international drug dealer like Noriega who will be unable to protect the Canal in a manner required by the U.S. and guaranteed by the Panama Canal Treaties.

6) Declare that Noriega is violating the Panama Canal Treaties. The treaties clearly are not working as their proponents envisioned a decade ago. Noriega systematically has violated many of its key provisions: by harassing U.S. citizens and failing to provide for the proper safety and protection of U.S. personnel in Panama; by disrupting the efficient functioning of the Canal and failing to provide such proper Canal-related services as issuing license plates to Panama Canal Commission employees; and by threatening to evict the U.S. Southern Command, which coordinates all U.S. military activity in Latin America, and oversees essential training and intelligence gathering functions. Bush thus should advise the international community that the very security of the Canal now seems in doubt.

7) Recommend that Noriega be removed by force if all peaceful efforts fail to dislodge him from power. Under Article 4 of the Panama Canal Treaties and the 1978 DeConcini treaty reservation, the U.S. has the permanent right to intervene with military force if the Canal is threatened. To protect the Canal, restore democracy, and safeguard the lives of U.S. citizens in Panama, the U.S. cannot rule out using military might if all else fails. If such a move is taken, Washington should seek the support and help of the Latin democracies.

8) Once Noriega is gone and civilian democracy is established, the U.S. should insist on renegotiating the Panama Canal Treaties to recognize Panama's sovereignty over the Canal and to ensure that the Canal never again can be jeopardized by a Noriega. A revised treaty thus should: address the issue of Panama's sovereignty over the Canal; reassert that the U.S. has the right to protect, by any means, including military action, the Panama Canal; and establish that to secure this right, Washington must keep troops in Panama as long as the Canal is in operation. This would revise the current treaty provisions requiring that full operation of the Canal be turned over to Panama and that U.S. troops leave on December 31, 1999.

The immediate crisis in Panama involves Noriega, a dictator and drug trafficker; Panamanians deserve a better government. The longer, more important crisis involves the security of the Canal. George Bush's actions must address both crises.

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