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Amembassy BOGOTA, LIMA, RIO de JANEIRO,  
USCINCSO/POLAD

FROM : Amembassy QUITO

DATE: 5 September 1970

SUBJECT : Ecuadorean Perceptions of External Threats.

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### Introduction

The preoccupation of Ecuadorean governments with the threat of possible dismemberment or loss of territory dates from colonial times and is firmly rooted in Ecuadorean history. In recent years this preoccupation has been subordinated to the more pressing domestic problems of economic and social development, but nonetheless it continues to influence Ecuadorean attitudes.

At present the possibility of eventual attack from Peru or Colombia, or conceivably even Brazil, against Ecuador's Oriente in the Amazon Basin, the site of rapidly developing oil fields, is being expressed by influential members of the Ecuadorean military, who are reportedly arguing that the purchase of sophisticated and up-to-date military equipment is necessary to defend Ecuador's frontiers.

This paper examines the basis for Ecuadorean fears regarding their neighbors; the extent to which such fears are held by members of the government; and the appropriateness of the reported proposed military purchases as a response to the possible threats.

### Background

In one of the few authoritative books written on

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Ecuador (Ecuador, Country of Contrasts; 1954), Lilo Linke provides a capsule commentary on Ecuadorean foreign relations, as follows:

"Ecuador's foreign policy has one paramount object: the defence of her national territory. It is perhaps her greatest tragedy that in pursuit of this object she has continuously been thwarted. Ecuador in principle has always maintained her rights to the area which once corresponded to the Presidencia of Quito. Yet gradually this area has been reduced from an estimated 400,282 square miles to a little over a quarter (of that area)..."

The North American observer may tend to underestimate the extent of popular awareness and sensitivity regarding this facet of Ecuadorean history, and it is instructive to review the doleful tale, step-by-step.

The area of the Presidencia of Quito, as determined in 1740, was about 400,282 square miles. Much of this territory lay in the Amazonian Basin, where boundaries were uncharted and geographical references ambiguous, if they existed at all.

After secession from Great Colombia, and with the boundaries agreed in 1832 with the Republic of Colombia, Ecuador claimed 272,516 square miles. It should be noted that much of the Amazonian territory within Ecuador's boundaries was unexplored, uninhabited, and beyond effective administration from Quito.

Eventually settlers from Colombia made their way into some of these areas, bringing about in time the extension of de facto Colombian jurisdiction.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the border dispute with Peru posed the greatest threat, and Ecuador made strenuous efforts to placate both Brazil and Colombia, in order to gain the support of these countries against Peru. Boundary treaties were signed with Brazil (Treaty Tobar - Rio Branco, 1904) and Colombia (Treaty Muñoz Vernaza - Suárez, 1916). The practical result of these agreements was to reduce Ecuador's territory still more, from 272,516 square miles to 182,423 square miles.

The last and most traumatic loss occurred following the Peruvian attack in 1941. As a result of the Protocol of Rio de Janeiro (1942), mediated and guaranteed by Argentina,

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Brazil, Chile and the United States, Ecuador gave up nearly two-thirds of the Oriente. The national territory was reduced from 182,423 square miles to 111,168 square miles, which figure is accepted as only provisional by Ecuador.

An important element in the dispute with Peru, and to a lesser extent in the earlier one with Colombia, is that because of the difficulty of communications in the Oriente and the lack of Ecuadorean settlers, the authorities in Quito had little influence over large areas of the Oriente. Consequently, Peruvian economic and political influence grew largely unchecked and Ecuador lost effective control of portions of her territory.

Another point, not lost on the Ecuadoreans, is that Peru was able to obtain large concessions in 1942, not so much because of Peruvian conquests in the Oriente, but because of the rapid Peruvian advance in wealthy El Oro Province. In effect, Peru traded withdrawal from El Oro for concessions in the Oriente.

#### Recent Concern Over Borders

During the past ten years or so, Ecuadorean concern about the Peruvian border was greatest around 1960, with a steady downward drift thereafter, although punctuated by occasional rises. President Velasco Ibarra was largely responsible for reawakening public concern, using the border dispute and especially the Rio Protocol as important campaign issues in the 1960 elections. Following his election, he declared in his inaugural speech that the Protocol was void.

This unilateral action was rejected publicly by the Guarantors of the Protocol, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and the United States. Velasco's declaration and subsequent statements from government spokesmen naturally provoked a reaction from Peru, which insisted on the validity of the Protocol and criticized Ecuador for trying to stir up trouble over a settled question. The rebuff by the Guarantors and Peruvian criticisms stimulated patriotic responses from many sectors of Ecuadorean society and for awhile the border issue dominated local politics.

Following this flare-up, the border issue receded from public debate, though not from public awareness, as the Velasco government (and most of its successors) used as an inscription on official correspondence the

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slogan, "Ecuador has been, is, and will be an Amazonian country."

In 1967, the boundary dispute was taken up again by interim President Otto Arosemena. Relations with Peru were strained to the point that their Ambassadors were withdrawn; agreement was reached several months later to exchange Ambassadors again.

Since 1967, relations with Peru have been correct and increasingly cordial. Ecuador and Peru are members of the Andean Pact; Foreign Minister Valdivieso visited Lima in November 1969 (the first such visit of an Ecuadorean Foreign Minister in thirty years); Ecuador and Peru signed several bilateral agreements in the past few years; the two countries are cooperating in the fisheries discussions with the United States. In March 1970, the Peruvian Ambassador to Ecuador was moved to say privately that, despite traditional problems, relations were the best they had been in thirty years.

With regard to Colombia, relations have been good for many years, with no reference to border problems. In fact, even earlier than the Andean Pact arrangements now being worked out, Ecuador and Colombia reached a bilateral agreement in 1964 on border integration questions, with a view to developing closer economic cooperation in the areas on both sides of the border. The single tangible cause for Ecuadorean concern regarding Colombia stems not from a border dispute, but rather from the presence of Colombian workers and settlers in the Oriente, especially around the oil fields. This situation has arisen because of the relatively easier connections between parts of Colombia and nearby areas of the Oriente, compared to access to these areas from more settled areas of Ecuador.

#### Present Fears and Perceptions

In recent months there have been reports that high-ranking military officers and the Minister of Defense have expressed concern over the possibility of attacks by Peru or Colombia on the Oriente and its oil.

On the evidence available, it seems to be clear that members of the military are now talking about this possibility and are using it to justify new purchases of modern military equipment. There does not seem to be a corresponding concern on the part of the civilian leaders of the government, with the exception of the Minister of Defense and possibly the Minister of Foreign Relations. There are no indications

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that this possible threat is being discussed by political leaders outside the government.

The extent to which this fear is genuine cannot be judged precisely, but there are several factors which should be considered. First, the border dispute with Peru has been dormant since 1967 and relations with Peru have been improving. However, the humiliating memories of the 1941 attack are not forgotten, certainly not by the older members of the Armed Forces. And now, of course, the Oriente is a far more valuable piece of real estate since the discovery of oil.

Second, professional military planners must weigh and take account of a variety of contingencies. In the case of Ecuador, the fundamental, if not only, responsibility of the Armed Forces is to defend the national territory, and the only avenues of land attack are from Peru or, less likely, Colombia. Accordingly, the Ecuadorean military, aware of the up-grading that has taken place in the Armed Forces of Peru and Colombia, have felt the need to improve their own capabilities. This is not to suggest that the Ecuadoreans believe that they must match the capabilities of their larger neighbors, but that they wish to avoid a deterioration in their relative position.

Against this felt need to keep up should be balanced the fact that the Embassy can find no evidence that the Ecuadoreans have acquired any information on possible Peruvian or Colombian plans for military action against Ecuador. Embassy assessments of March 1969 (A-69) and February 1970 (Quito 621) indicated that many Ecuadorean officers thought that Peru had probably abandoned its pretensions to Ecuadorean territory, and therefore the threat of armed attacks was being given less weight in Ecuadorean planning.

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Another consideration to be borne in mind is the awareness of many Ecuadoreans that in the event of a successful surprise attack, they could expect little outside help before a fair amount of time had elapsed. What with the publicity given the Israeli success in 1967, there is wide recognition given to how much territory can be taken in a short time, and to the difficulty of dislodging the

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occupying troops, even when the shooting has stopped and the weight of international bodies brought into play. The lack of US or other support to Ecuador in 1941 has not been forgotten either, and it seems unlikely that the Ecuadorean military leaders would put much faith in the OAS or the UN.

In the same vein, the El Salvador-Honduras dispute has probably illustrated for the Ecuadoreans the dangers of allowing migrants to cross borders and settle sparsely populated areas. This has not been a problem on the Peruvian border, but the Ecuadorean Minister of Defense estimates that there are already some 3,000 Colombian settlers in the Oriente, near the Santa Cecilia oil fields. The Ecuadorean response so far has been to step up the colonization program in order to increase the number of Ecuadorean settlers. Current plans call for some 1,000 Ecuadorean families to settle in the Oriente in the next year or so. (It should be noted that some of these "settlers" may be vagrants or otherwise undesirable elements conscripted by the Armed Forces for a stint of healthy labor in the jungles.) In the longer run, however, the Ecuadorean military may fear that the presence of so many Colombians would lead the Colombian government to take a more active interest in that area, thus increasing the possibility of a dispute.

Finally, there are two practical aspects of the expressed concern regarding military threats and the need to buy more arms. First, there have been reports that the Minister of Defense and some military leaders may have business connections with foreign arms manufacturers. Second, it may be that the Minister of Defense and the high command are interested in keeping their subordinates satisfied and loyal, and are using arms purchases to keep up morale in the officer corps.

Based on the above considerations, it appears that there may be some officers who believe that Peru or Colombia pose a military threat to Ecuador. However, the majority of those officers who are expressing concern about an external threat probably have in mind a more diffuse and long-range possibility of attack, rather than a current, tangible threat. Further, the felt need for Ecuador to be able to defend herself, rather than relying on outside help, is translated in operational terms into a need to improve Ecuadorean military capabilities in rough proportion to the improvements already made by her neighbors.

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Suitability of Reported Arms Purchases

At present the composition of the reported Ecuadorean shopping list is not known, but it does/<sup>not</sup> seem likely that new major weapons systems would be of much help in defending against a direct attack in the Oriente. The difficulties of ground or air operations and of logistics would increase the importance of well-trained ground units, rather than require sophisticated new equipment.

On the other hand, sophisticated equipment would be more useful if the strategy assumes that the aggressor would not choose to attack the Oriente directly, but would instead attack and seize some more accessible area, such as El Oro Province, to be held, as in 1942, as a bargaining counter for territory in the Oriente. In that kind of conventional warfare, modern armaments would be much more useful.

Finally, even though the size and composition of Ecuadorean arms purchases might not produce a force structure that could credibly defend all of Ecuador, it may be felt by the Ecuadorean military that such acquisitions would increase the military cost to a possible attacker and thus act as a deterrent.

Conclusions

1. There is an undertone of Ecuadorean concern, derived from Ecuadorean history, regarding the possibility that one or more of her stronger neighbors will grab Ecuadorean territory.
2. In recent years this concern has been diminishing, as relations with Peru have improved and those with Colombia have remained good.
3. Despite improvements in Ecuador's relations with her neighbors, the professional Ecuadorean military planners, in examining and preparing for military contingencies, have considered the possibility of attacks by Peru and perhaps Colombia, for which Ecuador would be ill-prepared.
4. The military officer corps, aware of the relative obsolescence of Ecuador's military equipment, is very interested in updating and expanding its inventory.
5. In order to justify the heavy expenses necessary to modernize the Armed Forces, certain military officers and

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the Minister of Defense have linked the possibility of armed invasion to the historic Ecuadorean fear of loss of territory. The widely-recognized importance of the oil of the Oriente increases the emotional impact of this argument.

6. Depending on the composition and magnitude of the arms purchase, there could be public opposition to the acquisition on economic grounds, but the appeals to patriotism and the memories of past losses will work in favor of the military.

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