

# The camouflaged U.S. invasion of Panama

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April 13, 2025



Demonstrators hold banner reading "Southern Command out of Panama." Panama City, April 8.

Panama's opposition parties accused the U.S. of launching a "camouflaged invasion" amid escalating tensions over the U.S. military presence in the country. Following U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's recent visit, President Donald Trump confirmed troop deployments, stating, "We've moved a lot of troops to Panama."

Hegseth cited the need to "secure" the Panama Canal from Chinese influence, announcing increased U.S. military activities at four former bases vacated in 1999 under the Torrijos-Carter treaties, which stipulated the canal's neutrality and prohibited foreign (i.e., U.S.) military installations.

### **'Without firing a shot'**

Opposition leader Ricardo Lombana condemned the U.S. actions as an invasion "without firing a shot."

On April 4, the National Front for the Defense of Economic and Social Rights (FRENADESO) denounced the large-scale operation in Panama that the U.S. is orchestrating.

The week before Hegseth's arrival, military forces from Panama and the United States began conducting the joint exercise Panamax 2025, with "protection" drills for the interoceanic canal "against possible threats."

### **Memories of 1989 U.S. invasion**

The military exercise involves the arrival of members of the U.S. Armed Forces, who participate in joint tactical and operational training activities. This U.S. military operation evokes painful memories of the 1989 U.S. invasion, Operation Just Cause, causing widespread concern among Panamanians. A separate agreement granting preferential canal fee reimbursements to U.S. Navy vessels has raised further controversy, seemingly violating neutrality provisions.

Demonstrations across the country against both U.S. policies and Mulino's administration are expected on April 12, highlighting widespread discontent and the deepening crisis surrounding Panama's sovereignty.

The U.S. operation is meant to reassert control over the Panama Canal with a military occupation at four bases in strategic locations: Colón's Coco Solo and Rodman, Balboa, Howard, and the Darién Gap — a critical migration route.

### **FRENADESO condemns concessions**

FRENADESO says Mulino's administration has capitulated to U.S. demands, citing concessions such as migrant detention policies, the sale of Balboa and Cristóbal ports to U.S.-based firm BlackRock, cybersecurity collaboration with U.S. Southern Command, and the withdrawal from China-linked agreements like the Belt and Road Initiative. The group also warns of a classified U.S.-drafted defense pact, written exclusively in English, bypassing Panama's constitutional requirement for legislative approval.

"This government has subordinated itself to U.S. interests, from immigration to infrastructure," FRENADESO stated, condemning the incremental arrival of U.S. troops and equipment, including advanced weaponry and aircraft.

### **Protests against austerity**

Hegseth's visit followed a 48-hour teachers' strike and construction worker protests against austerity measures, with unions now vowing to rally against the "sell-out" to "U.S. imperialism."

The United People's Alliance of Panama stated: "The country is being handed over with the four military bases that have been talked about. We cannot accept that. In this country, several generations of Panamanians fought for the sovereignty of the country, and today the dictator [Mulino] wants to hand over the sovereignty of this

country and that cannot go unnoticed.”

“We request international solidarity from peoples around the world and progressive, democratic, and revolutionary governments. We call for struggle and popular mobilization in defense of our national sovereignty. We reject Pete Hegseth’s presence in Panama.”

