

The Ecuador – U.S. arms deal and Ukraine

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March 2024

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*In January 2024, the first Latin American weapons shipment from Ecuador to Ukraine was announced. In this analysis, we will seek to outline the story of the deal, highlighting the tools and goals of regional American foreign policy, the causes of the failure, and the systemic consequences of the U.S.-Ecuadorian agreement, especially regarding the attitude of Global South states in the new Cold War.*

I. Introduction: A Half-Baked Weapon Deal

In early January, news of the first Latin American arms transfer deal to Ukraine broke. Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa announced on local radio that Ecuador would swap Soviet-made “scrap” weapons for brand-new armaments from the USA.[[1]](#endnote-1) It was clear that the destination of the Ecuadorian “waste” was Ukraine, where the struggle against the Russian invasion consumes weapon systems and ammunition at immense rates. In turn, the U.S. would have provided new equipment to Quito, which would have constituted a significant upgrade in quality for the Ecuadorian army, which faces a bitter internal conflict with drug syndicates. On February 23, the plan was at least partially scrapped,[[2]](#endnote-2) but open-source intelligence indicates that at least a planeload of weapons reached Ukraine.[[3]](#endnote-3) The failed Ecuadorian weapons swap story highlights U.S. aid methods to Ukraine and the changing nature of Global South foreign policy priorities.

II.  The Post-Cold War Disarmament and Soviet-made Weapons in the Global South

Today, many Global South countries have potential resources for the Ukrainian war effort. Ironically, these are Soviet-made arms, well-suited to equip the Ukrainian army. Many countries which now have these weapons received them as direct Soviet aid before the fall of the Communist empire in 1991. Another type of buyer country capitalized on the end of the Cold War and the disarmament process of the 1990s when many post-Soviet countries sold their surplus weaponry. Ecuador was a benefactor of this second type of post-Soviet military exports. The country had an extant border conflict with Peru for a long time, which continued and even escalated into the 1990s. Consequently, the country rearmed in the early 1990s, purchasing arms from post-soviet sources.

The subsequent military defeat of Ecuador in 1995 notwithstanding, the arms purchased because of the conflict opened the gate to “follow-up” purchases.[[4]](#endnote-4) By the 2010s, Ecuador’s armed forces used weapons systems originating from post-Soviet states and thus constitutes a potentially suitable supplier for Ukraine’s armed forces today.

III. The environment of the deal: Latin America and the Ukraine War

By and large, Latin America took a non-aligned stance on the Ukraine war. No country in the region sent arms to support Kyiv, and the area's major players, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, characterized the supply of arms to Ukraine as contradicting the goal of (vaguely defined) neutrality.[[5]](#endnote-5) This non-aligned stance was strengthened by the election of Inácio Lula da Silva in November 2022 in Brazil. Brazil pushed for negotiations in the conflict instead of supporting Ukraine recover territories held before 2014. Brazil considers the West responsible for the war, pointing out earlier supposed international rights abuses by the West and Ukraine as an active agent in the prolongation of the war.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Elsewhere, however, some Latin American states have somewhat different and pro-Western political affinities. Ecuador is an excellent example. While it was part of the “Pink Tide” of the early 2000s with the election of Rafael Correa in 2007, by the 2020’s a significant part of the electoral base was fed up with the corruption and authoritarian leanings of Correa and his allies. As a result the conservative Eduardo Noboa won a surprise victory in the presidential race runoff on October 15, 2023.[[7]](#endnote-7) This change in leadership brought with it a reordering of foreign policy priorities. The election of Noboa, suggested that the violence of drug cartels was the most significant issue in Ecuadorian politics. Presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio had been gunned down on August 9 by hitmen after repeatedly attacking the perceived power of organized crime groups across Ecuador. Other political candidates were assassinated, too, and several journalists had to flee the country in the face of death threats. The conflict escalated further with the escape of a high-profile gang leader following the government crackdown on loosely controlled prisons.[[8]](#endnote-8) The Ecuadorian army is now deployed in a full-scale operation against the cartels. The war so far is going reasonably well for Noboa, with mass arrests, and generally enhanced control over the country. However, he still needs a lot of support. In the field of heavy weaponry, it means mostly more modern and capable transport and operational-level surveillance capabilities, which are not cheap, off-the-shelf equipment.

In the fight against drug gangs, Washington is a natural ally for Ecuador. Ecuador can also directly support its northern neighbor’s foreign policy goals with a weapons swap deal to provide Ukraine wth military aid.

IV. The U.S. Ring-Trade Deal

One of the Biden administration’s current foreign policy priorities is finding new ways to equip the Ukrainian army. The Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives has blocked new funding for Ukraine since the autumn of 2023, dening President Joe Biden’s attempts to continue to aid Ukraine. The bill was tied to funding border security on the U.S.–Mexico border and the debate has dragged on with no compromise in sight.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thus, the U.S. is unable to fund new weapon supplies directly for Ukraine.

However, the US can incentivize third countries to ship armaments to Ukraine. This circumvents the process of directly approving Ukraine's aid by delegating shipments to third countries.[[10]](#endnote-10) Of course, these countries also need to profit from the deal. The primary method to incentivize them is weapons shipments to replace lost equipment. This approach was applied first in Ecuador. Noboa, somewhat naively, gave away this swap arrangement in an early January radio interview. He announced that Ecuador was getting new defense equipment for Soviet-made “scrap.” The Soviet made Mi-17 transport helicopters of the Ecuadorian army were to be replaced with American equipment, like the latest variants of the UH-60 Blackhawk utility helicopter. Other tools, like the swap of anti-aircraft weaponry, would have been longer-term investments, not covering the immediate needs of the internal conflict.

The fact that the trade became publicly known was a significant blunder. Noboa may have hoped for a quick popularity boost for publicizing his new weapons deal in the face of a full-blown war with Ecuador’s cartels. But it also meant that the deal was exposed to public scrutiny, which drew the ire of Russia. First, the Russians complained that the Russian-sourced weapons could not be shipped elsewhere without Moscow’s consent. Russia also resorted to economic sanctions. Moscow blocked the importation of Ecuadorian bananas, one of the country’s most important exports. A quarter of Ecuadorian banana exports go to Russia annually. Russia sources 90% of its banana imports from the South American country. Thus, the ban constituted a severe blow.[[11]](#endnote-11) Given its vulnerable economic position, Ecuador backed down. On February 23, Daniel Noboa announced that he would not go ahead with the US arms deal, claiming that he did not know that the destination of the scrapped Soviet weaponry would be the Ukraine. He noted, somewhat implausibly, that Ecuador did not want to become a “party” to the war and thus would not supply the scrap weapons to Ukraine.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Russian pressure aside, the stance of major Latin American powers undoubtedly contributed to this policy reversal. Significantly Brazil offered Ecuador security assistance in its internal conflict on January 24, shortly after the the US arms deal was announced .[[13]](#endnote-13) Russia even offered technical help to service Ecuador’s old Soviet-origin weapons .[[14]](#endnote-14) Moreover, the U.S. still provided military aid despite the failure of the weapons deal. In this sense, Ecuador achieved several new sources of military support[[15]](#endnote-15) despite the collapse of the ring trade deal between Ecuador, Ukraine and the U.S.

Notwithstanding this, the deal was , to some extent, fulfilled. A heavy transport plane of the Ukraine Armed Forces flew from Quito to Ukraine on January 24, despite the botched announcement of the deal.[[16]](#endnote-16) One of the most critical terms of the original agreement was the supply of Osa anti-aircraft missile launchers and ammunition. It is possible that these anti-aircraft launchers did indeed become the first and only Latin American weaponry shipped to Ukraine in January 2024.

V. Ecuador, the Global South, and the New Cold War

The fate of the Ecuadorian arms deal shows the difficulty of potential future deals by Global South states in new conflicts. Ecuador pragmatically calculated that direct and readily available U.S. assistance benefited it more than sticking with the Latin American security consensus on Ukraine. It found an open door in Washington, where the President sought to circumvent the control of Congress over aid to Ukraine. However, in the case of Ecuador, the deal wasundermined by a mixture of political incompetence and pragmatic realism. The danger of openly abandoning the Latin American consensus made it impossible for Quito to follow through on the deal. Latin American countries in this environment of geopolitical tension with regionalramifications will have to carefully address the problem of dealing with the new great power competition and learn again the lessons of Cold War small state diplomacy and statecraft.

In the new Cold War environment, the Ecuador-U.S. arms deal is a good example of the attitudes to be expected from Global South states. The struggle for emancipation from the liberal rule based international system and the delineation of sovereign foreign policy objectives are common themes in the statecraft of the postcolonial world. However, in strengthening the “anti-Western” consensus in Latin America, it is important to point out that, in many states, “anti-Western” forces are just another part of the political establishment. Thus, radical pro-Western swings based on anti-establishment feelings, in the current fragmented political environment, cannot to be ruled out. Noboa’s win can be cited as an example, along with the new Argentine government. Moreover, shifting political alignments notwithstanding, the process of harnessing the unused resources of Global South states in new global conflicts will once again assume the importance they played during the Second World War and throughout the Cold War.

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