

**STATEMENT OF**  
**GENERAL LAURA J. RICHARDSON**  
**COMMANDER, UNITED STATES SOUTHERN COMMAND**  
**BEFORE THE 118<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS**  
**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**MARCH 8, 2023**



Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished committee members, 2022 marked two important milestones for U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM): the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our move from Panama to Miami in 1997, and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Human Rights Initiative. For a quarter of a century, the brave women and men of USSOUTHCOM have called Miami home, while working with allies and partners to improve security, advance democratic ideals, and promote peace and prosperity throughout our shared neighborhood.

At the end of the Cold War, the United States, its allies, and partners believed that democracy would displace authoritarianism around the globe. Twenty-five years later, the strategic environment in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has changed significantly. The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) states, in no uncertain terms, that “autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy.”<sup>1</sup> We see this right here in our own hemisphere that external malign actors like the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia are aggressively exerting influence over our democratic neighbors.

The NSS also states “no region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>2</sup> Presence and proximity absolutely matter, and a stable and secure Western Hemisphere is critical to homeland defense. After traveling across LAC and meeting our partners face to face, I can confirm our security at home is directly impacted by the challenges facing this strategic region.

Our adversaries use a multidisciplinary and multidomain approach to counter democracy and SOUTHCOM, our allies, and partners must use the full weight of integrated deterrence, leveraging the whole of government, industry, private sector, and academia, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

effectively respond. With shared purpose and mutual trust, we must collectively act with a much greater sense of urgency to ensure this hemisphere remains a stronghold for democracy.

Today, the PRC has both the capability and intent to eschew international norms, advance its brand of authoritarianism, and amass power and influence at the expense of the existing and emerging democracies in our hemisphere. This is a decisive decade and our actions or inactions regarding the PRC will have ramifications for decades to come.

While the PRC remains our pacing challenge, other malicious actors erode regional security. Russia continues its extensive disinformation campaigns and bolsters authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) spread violence and corruption throughout the region and beyond. These TCOs traffic drugs that contribute to the deaths of thousands of Americans in cities and towns across the country, from Alabama to Washington, from Rhode Island to Mississippi and everywhere in between. TCOs foment violence and instability that contribute to irregular migration, forcibly displacing hundreds of thousands of people who risk their lives to reach U.S. territory each year. TCO corruption creates insecurity, deteriorates rule of law, and leaves partner nations susceptible to the actions of malign state and non-state actors.

We aren't alone in our efforts to create a stable and peaceful hemisphere. Integrated Deterrence includes campaigning with our partners and allies as force multipliers for achieving success in this resource-constrained reality. With our partners and allies from the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and the Netherlands, we recently adopted the Framework for Western Hemisphere Collaboration. The framework commits us to more frequently share information, and work more closely together on our aligned strategic interests.

Our USSOUTHCOM lines of effort in the face of these challenges are clear: by **strengthening alliances and partnerships**, collectively **countering threats**, and **building our team**, we are working to preserve democracy in our shared neighborhood. While doing so, we are pioneering ways to outcompete even our most innovative adversaries and address these transnational challenges.

### **Expanding Challenges in the Region**

#### **Strategic Competition with the People’s Republic of China – A Decisive Decade**

When regional leaders and experts discuss the PRC’s engagement in the Western Hemisphere, they focus largely on trade and investment. In 2002, PRC trade with Latin America and the Caribbean was just \$18 billion; in 2022 it ballooned to \$450 billion. That number is expected to increase to \$700 billion by 2035. Conversely, current U.S. trade within the region amounts to \$700 billion, which suggests that the United States’ comparative trade advantage is eroding.<sup>3,4</sup>

What concerns me as a Combatant Commander is the myriad of ways in which the PRC is spreading its malign influence, wielding its economic might, and conducting gray zone activities to expand its military and political access and influence in the AOR. The PRC is investing in critical infrastructure, including deep-water ports, cyber, and space facilities which can have a potential dual use for malign commercial and military activities. In any potential global conflict, the PRC could leverage strategic regional ports to restrict U.S. naval and commercial ship access. This is a strategic risk that we can’t accept or ignore. These activities are heavily subsidized through PRC state-owned enterprises (SOE), allowing them to underbid

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/china-lac-trade-four-scenarios-in-2035/>

on infrastructure projects, quickly displacing local and international competitors. SOEs are developing deep-water ports in seventeen countries, particularly around strategic maritime chokepoints in this region. In Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, PRC SOEs abused commercial agreements by conducting military functions at host-country ports. What's to keep them from doing the same right here in this hemisphere?

In Panama, PRC-sponsored companies are engaged in, or bidding on, several projects related to the Panama Canal - a global strategic chokepoint. These projects include port operations on both ends of the canal, water management, and a logistics park. Meanwhile, in Argentina, a PRC SOE is attempting to secure the rights to build dual-use maritime installations near the southern port city of Ushuaia, which would support sustainment and power-projection while providing proximity to the Strait of Magellan, Drake Passage, and Antarctica. This would be a potential game-changer for the PRC, dramatically improving its access to Antarctica.

The PRC also sees this region as key to expanding its space domain awareness and improving its military space capabilities. There are at least 11 PRC-linked space facilities across five countries in this region, more than any other geographic combatant command's AOR, that provide Beijing with space tracking and surveillance capabilities. This includes a joint space-monitoring facility in Chile and a deep space station in Argentina that is managed by an agency subordinate to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>5</sup>

Our nation's leaders have expressed concern about the insidious nature of the PRC-sponsored 5G technology providers for years now. In our region alone, five countries adopted Huawei's 5G technology, and 24 countries have existing Chinese telecommunication infrastructure (3G/4G), increasing their potential to transition to Chinese 5G. There are also

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<sup>5</sup> <https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-ground-stations-space/>

twelve countries using PRC-created Safe City programs that provide persistent surveillance and give PRC SOE technicians access to government networks. These actions, among others, create a potential counterintelligence threat to the U.S. military, our civilian personnel, and our regional partners. The proliferation of this technology has also led even more partner nation military personnel to travel to China to receive training on cybersecurity and military doctrine.

The PRC relies heavily on resources, including food sources and minerals from the USSOUTHCOM AOR. This region is one of the richest in the world in critical rare earth minerals. The PRC's efforts to extract South America's natural resources to support its own population of 1.9 billion people are conducted at the expense of our partner nations and their citizens. These actions have the potential to destabilize the region and erode the fundamental conditions needed for quality private sector investment.

Environmental crimes such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF), illegal logging, and illegal mining continue to have devastating impacts on the region and the PRC is the largest perpetrator of these biodiversity crimes. Every year, there are between 350 and 600 Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-subsidized vessels fishing off the coast of South America. These vessels severely deplete fish stocks, disregard environmental safeguards, destabilize the economies of coastal states, and exacerbate security challenges at a cost of nearly \$3 billion in lost revenue annually.<sup>6</sup> When I meet with our partner nations, IUUF, along with transnational criminal networks and cyber security, is consistently among their top national security concerns. As a result, their militaries are increasingly being asked to play a leading role in combating this illegal activity.

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<sup>6</sup> (U) Online Publication: American University Center for South America and Latino Studies; 12 July 2022; (U) Latin America-Caribbean: Illegal Fishing is Environmental Security Challenge; <https://aulablog.net/2022/07/21/latin-america-caribbean-illicit-fishing-is-environmental-security-challenge/>

## **Russia as an Acute Threat**

The impacts of Vladimir Putin's illegal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine reverberated around the world, worsening a global energy and food crisis. The USSOUTHCOM AOR has not been spared. Families across the region are struggling to put food on the table and gas in their cars because of the sharp rise in prices, compounding the negative impacts in this region from COVID-19.

Through military engagements and gray zone operations, Russia colludes with authoritarian regimes in the region to undermine U.S. influence. In the past year, Russia continued its military engagements with both Venezuela and Nicaragua. Last year Venezuela hosted *Sniper Frontier 2022*, a shooting competition and subcomponent of Russia's International Army Games. Nicaragua has publicly supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine, voting – along with only North Korea, Syria, and Belarus – against a UN resolution condemning Russia for its invasion. These engagements increase Russian influence with nations who are destabilizing forces in the region.

Russia uses disinformation to further its malign influence, sow instability and undermine democracy in the region, activities that promote Russian geopolitical goals and undermine U.S. national security interests. For example, Russia spreads false narratives about its invasion of Ukraine through its Spanish-language media arms, RT en Español, Sputnik Mundo, and its various social media sites. RT en Español's Facebook page has 18 million followers, more than its English-language site or even CNN's Spanish-language channels.<sup>7</sup> Despite efforts by Facebook and Twitter to take down accounts spreading disinformation, Russian operators continue to generate bot accounts to spread falsehoods quickly. We are in a constant fight to

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/business/russia-propaganda-spanish-social-media.html>

counter and remove the disinformation spread by fake accounts and correct the misperceptions this disinformation propagates. It is in our interest to help develop our partner nations' knowledge and understanding of these tactics and false information before this malign activity permanently erodes this hemisphere's confidence in democracy.

### **Transnational Criminal Organizations**

Although many partner nation leaders recognize the threats the PRC and Russia pose to democracy in the region, they see TCOs as their primary security challenge. The number one cause of death among citizens ages 15-49 years old in Latin America and the Caribbean is violence and more than 60% of the world's most crime-stricken cities are in this region.<sup>8</sup>

USSOUTHCOM estimates that there are 200 TCOs and four terrorist groups operating throughout the region. TCOs such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel in Mexico are spreading their reach to the region. The National Liberation Army (ELN), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), Segunda Marquetalia, and Sendero Luminoso continue to operate along primary cocaine trafficking corridors. First Capital Command (PCC) operates in Brazilian urban streets, the Amazonian jungle, in neighboring Paraguay, Bolivia, and in the United States. In Haiti, gangs control roughly 60 percent of the country, blocking roads for much-needed food and fuel.

TCOs are engaged in a wide variety of illicit activities, including drug smuggling, arms dealing, illegal logging and mining, human trafficking, IUUF, and manufacturing counterfeit goods. They are also invested in numerous legitimate enterprises, including, but not limited to, commercial banking, manufacturing, agriculture, consumer sales, and real estate. Their diverse

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.maplecroft.com/insights/analysis/latin-america-hosts-over-60-of-worlds-most-crime-stricken-cities-global-ranking/>



activities amount to a war chest of roughly \$310 billion annually, five times the combined military budgets of every nation in Latin America and the Caribbean. TCOs are better funded, equipped, and manned than the security forces trying to fight them and increasingly rely on PRC-connected criminal organizations to launder billions of dollars around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Drug trafficking originating from this region contributes to the deaths of more than 100,000 Americans every year. Interdicting the flow of drugs directly saves lives by removing product from the pipeline. It also reduces TCO revenue. The type of contraband or destination is irrelevant as the money remains in the Western Hemisphere and TCOs use their illicit funds to exacerbate regional corruption, insecurity, and instability. This in turn disrupts legitimate economic opportunity, compromises the rule of law, allows malign state actors the opportunity to make inroads, and drives irregular migration. TCOs victimize migrants, by extorting them, forcing them into human trafficking, and saddling them with debt. The human toll TCOs cause is heartbreaking.

## **Iran**

Iran is focused on rebuilding its economic and diplomatic ties in the region and pursuing opportunities to circumvent U.S. sanctions. Tehran's intelligence and security activities continue to be a concern and over the past two years Iran has increasingly used Venezuela to assert its presence in the region.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/china-cartels-xizhi-li-money-laundering>

## **Regional Humanitarian Crises**

***Fragility.*** The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean, driving 170 million people into poverty.<sup>10</sup> Countries in the region suffered disproportionately from the pandemic. While accounting for only eight percent of the world's population, Latin America and the Caribbean suffered nearly 29% of the world's COVID-19 deaths. Fragility and instability drive irregular migration and create an environment ripe for corruption and exploitation.

***Haiti.*** In recent years, Haiti has suffered an onslaught of setbacks including corrupt leaders and political assassinations, rampant gang violence, disease, and devastating natural disasters. Violence in Haiti is at its worst level in decades, according to the UN, characterized by gender-based violence, homicides, and kidnapping for ransom. Civil unrest, inter-gang fighting, and road blockages hinder commerce and humanitarian access. Today, Haitian citizens are suffering, and its government faces a myriad of challenges to include insecurity, limited governance capacity, and health concerns. The chaos caused more than 69,000 Haitians to seek refuge in the United States in fiscal year 2022.<sup>11</sup>

***Nicaragua.*** President Daniel Ortega's regime continues to detain and prosecute political opponents, even targeting clergy and shutting down hundreds of civil society organizations and independent media outlets.

Since switching diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to the PRC in December 2021, Nicaragua has engaged with the PRC in bilateral talks for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. In September 2022, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Nicaraguan Foreign

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bloomberglia.com/english/number-of-latin-americans-living-in-poverty-expected-to-surpass-one-third-of-total/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

Minister Denis Moncada on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, highlighting that the new bilateral relationship has already yielded “early harvests.”<sup>12</sup>

**Cuba.** President Miguel Diaz-Canel’s government continues to repress all Cuban citizens critical of the regime. The government engages in arbitrary detention, including children, and limits access to information and freedom of expression, and incarcerates political dissidents. The Cuban government’s oppressive tactics have forced more than 230,000 Cubans to seek refuge in the United States in fiscal year 2022.<sup>13</sup> In September 2022, Hurricane Ian struck Cuba, devastating homes, causing flooding, and knocking out power to many communities.

**Venezuela.** The humanitarian crisis caused by the Maduro regime in Venezuela remains one of the most severe in the world. President Nicolas Maduro’s regime and security forces continue to target and deny access to critical services to any citizen who speaks out against them. His regime continues to engage in extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, and prosecution without due process. The International Criminal Court is currently investigating possible crimes against humanity in Venezuela.

The Maduro regime’s oppressive tactics and gross economic mismanagement have caused more than seven million Venezuelans to seek refuge elsewhere, causing instability and deepening challenges for those nations that have welcomed them. U.S. Customs and Border Protection statistics show that more than 187,000 Venezuelan migrants were encountered at the U.S.-Mexico border in FY 2022.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202209/t20220921\\_10769061.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202209/t20220921_10769061.html)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters>

## **Levers: Overcoming Threats and Challenges in the AOR**

The pervasive threats and challenges highlighted above pose significant risks to U.S. and regional security interests. We cannot accept such risks so close to home and we confront them by strengthening partnerships, countering threats, and building our team.

### **Strengthen Partnerships**

As the Secretary of Defense said, “you can’t surge trust at the eleventh hour; trust is something you have to work on every day.”<sup>15</sup> We need to continuously engage our partner nations to build and sustain that trust and be their preferred partner. As we campaign in strategic competition to enable integrated deterrence and build enduring advantages, our engagements, presence, and policies must be flexible, consistent, and responsive to counter malign influence in the region.

The best way to outcompete our adversaries is to help partner democracies deliver for their populations at the speed of relevance. We achieve this by improving partner nation capability, capacity, and resilience through security cooperation, exercises, and training programs while upholding democratic values to ensure malign influence and autocratic alternatives do not further take root in this region.

The main priority in our USSOUTHCOM Campaign Plan is to expose and mitigate PRC malign activity. Ultimately, strategic competition with the PRC is an ideological one between democracy and authoritarianism. Presently, the majority of nations in the Western Hemisphere are democracies, and eight of the 14 nations that still recognize Taiwan are located in

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<sup>15</sup> Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, speech to U.S. and NATO troops in Bulgaria, 18 March 2022.

USSOUTHCOM's AOR. Beijing is seeking to reduce that number and increase influence throughout the region while putting the defense of the U.S. homeland at risk.

***Security Cooperation.*** Building Partner Capacity (BPC) programs are my main lever for engaging partners in this posture-limited theater. These programs allow us to be on the field and engaged, to strengthen our partnerships, and develop military capabilities to counter a broad spectrum of threats and challenges. From high-end technical training that keeps partner intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets in the air, to building institutional capacity that develops logistics and lifecycle management disciplines, to professional military education, we are developing trust and interpersonal linkages. USSOUTHCOM's BPC programs aim to make our partners resilient to the adversaries operating in this hemisphere.

Our embedded Ministry of Defense Advisors and field service representatives within partner nation security ministries, such as those in Colombia, support modernization and innovation efforts in such areas as personnel, defense intelligence, and doctrine development to help our partners meet threats to their national security.

The U.S. Colombia Action Plan enables Colombia to provide training and readiness directly to several countries, including Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Paraguay in Spanish, and at a fraction of the cost of U.S.-provided training. We really appreciate congressional support of this program.

These security cooperation programs offer a huge return on investment as they build trust and enhance capabilities and security throughout the region -- a little goes a long way here.

***Department of State Security Assistance.*** State security assistance programs increase interoperability with our partners while meeting their individual security requirements. Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and Excess Defense Articles (EDA)

programs produce an exponential return in this AOR. Brazil recently made an FMS purchase of \$15.8 million of 12 Joint Light Tactical Vehicles as part of the Brazilian Marine Corps modernization plan, strengthening its ability to counter threats and enhancing interoperability with U.S. forces. The former U.S. Coast Guard cutters Albacore, Cochito, and Gannet were delivered to Uruguay on November 12, 2022. These ships greatly enhance the maritime security of Uruguay and demonstrate that the United States is the preferred partner in the region. The Colombian Army received 86 armored vehicles in 2022 via the EDA program, giving Colombia a more modern capability to counter threats facing the country.

USSOUTHCOM executes State's International Military Training and Education (IMET) program that provides professional military education to personnel from 28 countries in the region. In 2022, USSOUTHCOM countries were allocated \$13.9 million for the IMET program. On average, this allocation provides professional military education for approximately 800 international students in U.S. schools. The IMET program is one of USSOUTHCOM's strongest levers for countering the PRC and other malign actors in the region by acquainting international students with democratic ideals and professional military doctrine. Partner nation personnel who attend these schools often go on to become senior military leaders in their countries. The relationships built at these schools last a lifetime.

***Joint Exercise Program.*** Our Joint Exercise Program continues to provide an outsized return on investment not only in building readiness, but also in strengthening partnerships that allow us to counter malign influence. In 2022 we had over 11,000 participants from 34 nations take part in our exercises, demonstrating once again that the United States has the convening power to bring nations together. These complex training events were multi-domain in nature and

provided us year-long engagement opportunities across the AOR, to include engagements with key leaders.

USSOUTHCOM's exercise program in the counter-TCO realm also brings together the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security (including the U.S. Coast Guard), along with partner nation and allied military forces to enhance readiness, interoperability, and domain awareness, and to increase intelligence and information sharing.

Additionally, our exercises include training on human rights and on Women, Peace, and Security, which helps to enhance professionalism and advance democratic principles.

***USNS COMFORT.*** The USNS COMFORT hospital ship deployed to five countries in the region from October to December 2022 – Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti – taking part in a humanitarian assistance, readiness building, and goodwill mission. The USNS COMFORT's crew included military and civilian personnel as well as personnel from non-governmental organizations and partner nation militaries. Since its inception in 2007, the Continuing Promise mission has treated more than 580,000 patients overall and conducted over 7,000 surgeries. The USNS COMFORT mission to the USSOUTHCOM AOR historically lasts approximately 159 days, but even during this year's reduced mission of 52 days, the COMFORT managed to treat over 30,000 patients, conduct 350 surgeries, and positively impact 100,000 people with its outreach activities. This tremendous soft power asset will have lasting effects not just on the individuals who were treated, but also on the entire region.

***Operation Health Engagement Assistance Response Team (HEART).*** During Operation HEART, a team of 34 medical professionals and 17 support personnel conducted orthopedic,

ophthalmology, and dental surgeries in Guatemala and Honduras. In just 56 days, Operation HEART treated 993 patients and conducted a knowledge exchange with medical residents and doctors from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

***Key Leader Engagements.*** Since I last addressed this committee, I have visited 13 countries and conducted over 90 key leader engagements with ministers and chiefs of defense. Increasingly, I have also met with heads of state and vice presidents as the appetite grows amongst our partners to engage at senior levels with the United States. To date, I have engaged eight presidents, three vice presidents, and two prime ministers, and I have a full calendar of engagements planned throughout 2023. Establishing and cultivating these relationships is vital and we must step up our presence in the region to maintain relevance. Relationships absolutely matter, and our partner democracies are desperate for assistance from the United States, but if we're not there in time, they have no choice but to take what's available, creating opportunities for the PRC to expand its influence. Just like with the COVID-19 vaccine, they wanted a U.S. vaccine, but some partner nations had to take the Chinese Sinopharm or Russian Sputnik vaccines at 50-60% effectiveness because we weren't there with our Pfizer or Moderna vaccine.<sup>16, 17</sup>

***U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.*** Infrastructure is one of our partners' critical needs, and the PRC is leveraging that need to achieve influence overmatch in the region. We need to step up with much greater responsiveness in our processes if we want to address our partner nation requirements and outcompete the PRC in this domain. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) works with USSOUTHCOM and partner nations to advance security, preserve

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<sup>16</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/china-gao-fu-vaccines-offer-low-protection-coronavirus-675bcb6b5710c7329823148ffbf6ef9>

<sup>17</sup> <https://absolutelymaybe.plos.org/2022/04/20/did-we-ever-find-out-how-effective-sputnik-v-vaccine-actually-is/>



environmental sustainability and climate resiliency, and protect at-risk indigenous populations. USACE is providing technical support to the Panama Canal Authority to help ensure the canal operates successfully for the next 50 years. It also supports Ecuador to mitigate the negative effects of a substandard PRC construction project at the Coca Coda Dam. In January 2023, at the request of the embassy and the government of the Dominican Republic, USACE assigned a subject-matter expert embedded within the Dominican Republic's Agency of Mines and Minerals to assist with developing efforts to preserve rare earth materials.

From a defense and security cooperation perspective, USACE's recent agreement with the Peruvian Navy to build out Peru's port facilities, and its continued construction efforts on Tolomaida Air Base in Colombia, facilitating the development of the largest rotary wing training and maintenance facilities in the region, will increase our partners' capacity to counter TCOs in the region.

***State Partnership Program.*** Through the State Partnership Program (SPP), the National Guard continues to develop relationships with our partner nations. Eighteen U.S. states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia have active partnerships with defense and security forces from 30 nations in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. By providing long-term and consistent support and building trust and teamwork, National Guard servicemembers give us the presence on the field that is so critical. For example, this year, the South Dakota National Guard worked with its partner Suriname to renovate a school for 450 children and provide medical and dental care to three separate rural and underserved communities, impacting approximately 2,500 civilians. This year, the Regional Security System (RSS), consisting of seven Eastern Caribbean nations, conducted 25 events across the RSS and in the continental United States.

SPP's success is enhanced through National Guard participation in partner nation exercises like those in Brazil and Colombia. The National Guard also provided medical service members from Puerto Rico, Louisiana, Arkansas, and South Carolina to our successful Continuing Promise operations through the USNS COMFORT deployment.

***Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HA/DR).*** Latin America and the Caribbean are susceptible to hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, and other extreme natural disasters. The United States is there with assistance before, during, and after disaster strikes. USSOUTHCOM engages our partner nations regularly, encouraging and assisting them to take positive steps toward disaster risk reduction, mitigation, preparedness, and resiliency. Several of our annual exercises, including TRADEWINDS and CENTAM GUARDIAN, have a HA/DR component to help build resiliency and readiness related to climate change and natural disaster response.

A recent example of our support is our response to Haiti's widening political and humanitarian crises. Supporting a whole-of-government effort led by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department, USSOUTHCOM delivered thousands of gallons of much-needed fuel and 300,000 cholera treatment packets to Haiti. This operation relieved strain on the local healthcare system and enabled the U.S. Embassy to remain open to facilitate life-saving assistance.

Humanitarian assistance activities also address basic needs of the population and build partner capacity to maintain a healthy population. Activities emphasize public health capacity building, such as improving medical facilities, disease surveillance systems, and providing basic medical equipment, education, prevention, and training. Basic infrastructure activities focus on building partner capacity to provide essential services, like potable water. Finally, we recently

joined with 12 other countries to identify logistics processes, procedures, and protocols that are required to improve the military logistics support to HA/DR activities in the Western Hemisphere.

***Confronting Climate Change.*** This is one of the regions most impacted by climate change. Hurricanes, rising sea levels, flooding, and drought are causing grave harm to the region's health, food, water, energy, and socioeconomic development. Extreme weather events impact our partners' national security, displacing populations and increasing irregular migration already accelerated by TCOs and insecurity.

These calamities know no borders. In 2022, Hurricane Fiona slammed into the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, Hurricane Ian ravaged western Florida and Cuba, and Hurricane Julia caused landslides and wiped-out crops in Central America. To help address threats from climate change and support humanitarian assistance, USSOUTHCOM works to strengthen our partners nations' ability to address more demanding disaster response roles, mitigate the effects from climate change, protect the environment, and enable the transition to clean energy through subject-matter expert exchanges and by incorporating energy security scenarios in exercises. Successfully confronting this complex issue requires a true integrated approach. For example, USSOUTHCOM partners with the Pacific Disaster Center in Hawaii to facilitate disaster response training and conduct National Disaster Preparedness Baseline Assessments with our partner nations. These assessments promote a multi-agency approach to disaster risk reduction and national disaster preparedness, in collaboration with partner nations' national disaster management agencies.

## Countering Threats

*Countering PRC malign efforts.* In alignment with the 2022 National Defense Strategy's integrated deterrence approach, we strive to use all levers through campaigning to deny the PRC the perceived benefits of aggression. USSOUTHCOM leverages the expertise of the Executive branch, to include the Departments of State and Commerce, to improve partner nations' knowledge of effective legal frameworks to develop reliable and secure telecommunication infrastructure and cyber resilience, while highlighting state-of-the-art substantive alternatives to counter PRC state-owned enterprise expansion in the region.

By methodically identifying and synchronizing separate initiatives, from building cyber capability to exposing PRC malign activities, we can strengthen critical infrastructure to improve our collective ability to operate in the face of multi-domain threats posed by the PRC. Information sharing with our partners on the malign activities of the PRC in other nations and regions that have undercut sovereignty is critical to ensuring our partners can make informed decisions on their engagements with the PRC. However, information sharing alone is insufficient. Collectively, in a whole-of-nation integrated approach, we must also provide viable alternatives for partnerships and offer significantly more incentives through campaigning for critical infrastructure investment and port development in the region.

While the PRC consistently works to expand its network of military space infrastructure across the AOR, we are focused on strengthening relationships with our allies and partners through sustained engagement and investment with what we currently have, including by assisting our partners to build capability to conduct space operations to meet their needs. By focusing on strengthening relations, the United States demonstrates what a true partner looks like, which stands in stark contrast to the transactional nature of PRC engagements. This

strategy, coupled with continued exposure of the military purpose of the PRC's scientific or academic space sites in the region, may slow and possibly reverse the expansion of the PRC's space network in our neighborhood.

***Illegal, Unregulated, Unreported Fishing.*** IUUF is another area where we must leverage diverse capabilities and authorities. We have teamed up with the Department of State, partner nation stakeholders, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, and an interagency team of U.S. government experts to confront this issue head on. The U.S. Coast Guard is conducting various IUUF missions in the AOR, and USSOUTHCOM has four ongoing IUUF initiatives that are complementary in nature.

Enhanced Domain Awareness is a secure, unclassified, virtual environment where USSOUTHCOM, interagency, and foreign partners can leverage commercially and publicly available information and analytics. This allows us to collaborate on diverse security challenges including strategic competition and IUUF as well as issues like migration, human trafficking, and illegal mining.

USSOUTHCOM has signed a memorandum of understanding with Global Fishing Watch and has a longstanding relationship with Florida International University through which we partnered to create the Security Research Hub—a virtual research community that brings together the United States, partner nations, academic institutions, civil society, and the private sector to foster shared understanding of the most pervasive security issues, to include IUUF.

USSOUTHCOM is also exploring areas of cooperation and opportunities to provide technical assistance and support to the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor, a voluntary regional cooperation mechanism created by the coastal states of Ecuador, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Panama.

Finally, working with 14 partner nations and the National Maritime Intelligence-Integration Office, U.S. Navy South leads the way for an intergovernmental approach to information-sharing efforts. When fully implemented, they will collectively foster timely, actionable information sharing, multifunctional collaboration, and multinational trust. This collaboration will illuminate nefarious actors negatively impacting our partner nations' economies and populations.

***Countering Russian malign influence.*** USSOUTHCOM is postured to compete with Russia through the coordination and application of information-related capabilities. While Russia may seem distant, its presence and influence is felt in our hemisphere, actively undermining the security and stability of our partner nations. Our multifaceted approach aims to bolster partner efforts and expose malign activities, with the goal of blunting Russian exploitation in the information environment.

Our partners are inclined to support efforts that impose costs on Russia. Some are willing to exchange their Soviet-era equipment for NATO-interoperable, U.S.-made equipment. However, as our partners agree to support efforts against Russia, the United States must have responsive mechanisms in place to rapidly provide replacement assets to maintain partner nation readiness – if not done right, we could lose this opportunity.

***Cyber.*** Cyber is an all-encompassing domain capable of affecting every sector of society, not just defense. USSOUTHCOM partners with other U.S. agencies and organizations such as the Departments of State, Commerce, Homeland Security, and Justice along with U.S. Cyber Command, our National Guard SPP teammates, and the U.S. Coast Guard, to deliver the right support at the right time to assist our partners with their cyber-related challenges.

Through our cyberspace advise and assist efforts, including subject-matter expert exchanges and leveraging the expertise of our Joint Combatant Command Cyber Assistance Teams, we support our partners' efforts to advance their defensive cyber capabilities and develop cyber resiliency. These programs are enablers that help our partners tactically defend against the threats posed by Russia and its proxies in the cyber domain. However, with the significant increase in nation-state cyber attacks and hacktivist attacks in the region, our partner nations are struggling to protect their citizens in the cyber domain, and we are in a race to help them protect their cyber assets before they choose competitor solutions.<sup>18</sup>

***Competing in the Information Space.*** Additionally, our information operations team shapes pro-U.S., pro-democracy narratives, counters disinformation by promoting fact-based information, and works aggressively to reduce U.S. adversary influence in the information environment. This team highlights democratic ideals such as respecting human rights and protecting the rule of law. This capability is postured to provide accurate, timely, and valid information to support reasonable decision making, resulting in better outcomes and ultimately decreasing the effectiveness of propaganda.

***Agile Processes.*** To outcompete our adversaries and win through campaigning, we need to be agile and support our partners at the speed of relevance. While we are committed to transparent processes, we must be faster and more innovative to outcompete our adversaries. Right now, our partner nations are quickly losing confidence in the U.S.'s ability to deliver capability. At a recent event when I spoke about what I call "Team Democracy," a term I use to describe integrated deterrence and working together to counter adversary malign activity, a head of state responded that there aren't very many on "Team Democracy" anymore, citing multiple

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.recordedfuture.com/latin-american-governments-targeted-by-ransomware>

examples of countries turning away from democracy because the U.S. overpromises and underdelivers. FMF, FMS, and Security Cooperation are great levers that can make huge inroads in the AOR when delivered at the speed of relevance for our partners. However, these programs are only as good as the processes by which we execute them. While a little goes a long way in this AOR, we need to do better to support and react at the speed of need, armed with the capabilities our partners can implement quickly and sustain for the long term. When we don't support our partners at the speed of need, our competitors willingly fill the gap.

To help improve processes, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy has established two working groups to break down barriers to our success. The Campaigning in the Western Hemisphere Group brings together entities within the Department of Defense that play a role in building partner capacity, and the Defense Opportunities Group convenes interagency partners that have a stake in a stable and secure Western Hemisphere. We aspire to quickly gain efficiencies across the U.S. Government so we may apply all levers of national power in this vital strategic competition.

***Countering TCOs.*** Our Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S) conducts the statutorily-directed mission to detect and monitor illicit drugs transiting toward the United States in the maritime and air domains, delivering a high return on modest investments. In Fiscal Year 2022, JIATF-South facilitated the disruption of 371 illegal smuggling events, including a total of almost 300 metric tons of cocaine and over 140,000 pounds of marijuana, with a combined wholesale value of \$7.5 billion and saving an estimated 2,976 American lives. In addition to saving U.S. lives and reducing TCO revenue, JIATF-South-facilitated drug trafficking disruptions produce evidence in the form of contraband, detainees, and other information. Our



interagency and international law enforcement partners use this evidence, to help affect judicial end states that degrade and dismantle TCOs.

I want to highlight our international partners' participation in these operations, as they are key to overall mission success. Our international partners participated in 76% of the JIATF-South-facilitated disruptions (up from 62% last year) and were responsible for removing 475,000 kilograms of transit zone cocaine headed toward the United States. This is a testament to their commitment to support this regional effort and build their capability and capacity.

U.S.-led, multinational counternarcotics operations ultimately result in our international partners taking the lead on their own operations, as Colombia does via their Operation Orion. Colombia executed two iterations of Orion in 2022, leading a coalition of 41 countries, resulting in the disruption of more than 180,000 kilograms of cocaine and seizing dozens of conveyances. This is an excellent example of integrated deterrence return on investment – gained by combining willing and able international partners with a committed U.S. presence in the Western Hemisphere. Each of these operations was only successful because of the U.S. investment to train and equip our Colombian military and security partners.

Notwithstanding our significant achievements over the decades in this mission space, there is still more to do. As U.S. resources against this threat decline, we will continue to innovate – both in strategy, like re-examining current authorities, and unconventional resourcing, like contract assets, commercial data, and artificial intelligence and machine learning.

***Combating Money Laundering.*** Systemic political corruption and lack of strong anti-money laundering policies make the region a permissive environment for illicit financial activity. USSOUTHCOM continues to identify TCO financial support networks, providing direct analytic support to U.S. Treasury Department and other interagency partners that facilitate sanctions,

arrests, and prosecutions against TCOs. Recently, USSOUTHCOM supported Treasury's designation of Ecuadorian national Wilmer Emilio Sanchez Farfan, one of the most significant drug traffickers in the world and a major cocaine supplier to the Sinaloa cartel.<sup>19</sup> While continued disruptions of illicit drug movements toward the United States remain critical, to truly disrupt these billion-dollar conglomerates, we must also support interagency efforts to follow the money.

***Coast Guard Support.*** The U.S. Coast Guard is one of USSOUTHCOM's strongest partners, with its National Security Cutters and Fast Response Cutters providing the bulk of our counterdrug forces. U.S. Coast Guard assets enhance operations with unique capabilities and authorities which, when used in conjunction with the U.S. Navy and partner nation platforms, maximize the effectiveness of a variety of missions. The Coast Guard is executing its largest fleet recapitalization since World War II. These recapitalization efforts will provide capabilities that support three USSOUTHCOM strategic initiatives: enhancing Theater Security Cooperation, countering IUUF, and combating TCOs. Additionally, the Coast Guard provides valuable humanitarian mission support across the region, saving lives and delivering much-needed aid when natural disasters suddenly strike the region.

### **Building our Team – People First**

***Housing.*** Our service members and families are our strength and foundation. While having our headquarters and two subordinate commands in South Florida offers a great synergy with our AOR, our team faces extraordinary pressures with the expensive, competitive, and volatile housing market. In September 2022, Secretary Austin announced immediate and long-

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<sup>19</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0592>

term actions to help strengthen the economic security and stability of service members and their families. We benefited with automatic increases in the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for the Miami-Dade and Broward County areas that have carried forward in the Calendar Year 2023 BAH rates. We are seeking similar relief for the Key West area. We are also continuing our work with the Department of the Army and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) on a housing solution to address servicemember concerns about cost and availability of housing in the Miami area.

***JIATF-South Resiliency.*** JIATF-South is currently operating out of 70-year-old facilities that are severely degraded. We received full fiscal year 2023 planning and design funding to complete the design for a new command and control facility. We appreciate this continued support as we look to finalize the design and request the military construction funding to construct a resilient facility for this critical mission for the nation.

***Women, Peace and Security (WPS).*** At USSOUTHCOM, we deliberately integrate gender perspectives throughout all ranks into our operations, activities, and investments, exemplifying a truly diverse joint force and encouraging our partner nations to do the same. Our main objective is to maximize the talents of the force through recruitment, retention, training, and advancement. We also highly encourage partner nation leaders to increase their numbers of women who participate in IMET and other special programs. We are seeing results. In August 2022, the Florida National Guard and Guyana's Defense Force hosted the first Caribbean Regional WPS conference with leadership from 12 partner nations – including Guyana's First Lady Arya Ali and the AOR's first female Chief of Defense, Jamaica's Staff Rear Admiral Antonette Wemyss-Gorman, advocating for gender inclusivity and advancing regional influence in ways that our adversaries cannot. In September 2022, Colombia appointed its first female

Senior Enlisted Leader of the Colombian Military Services, Command Sergeant Major Consuelo Diaz Alvarez, and in October 2022, for the first time in its history, the Colombian Navy promoted two female Navy Captains, Beatriz Helena Garcia Restrepo and Carolina Gomez de Castillo, to the rank of Rear Admiral. Although much work remains, these are just a few of the examples that demonstrate USSOUTHCOM and its partners' commitment to provide opportunities for women to become leaders in the defense and security sectors.

***Total Force.*** The United States military is the most powerful in the world, and USSOUTHCOM leverages all available personnel, making us flexible and agile to counter any challenges we may face. Of the service members at USSOUTHCOM, up to 20 percent at any given time are Guard or Reserve members conducting operations in more than 20 locations throughout the AOR.

One such total force mission has been ongoing for a decade. Since 2003, Air National Guard Airmen have supported JIATF-South's detection and monitoring mission through the Host Nation Rider Program. This program provides technical language support and translation/interpretation that has been instrumental in achieving successful detection and monitoring of air operations within the AOR. In fiscal year 2022, this program was involved in the seizure of over 49,000 kilograms of cocaine, 24,000 pounds of marijuana, and the apprehension of 154 detainees.

The Reserve Component is a force multiplier used in a cyclic manner to provide predictability, operational capability, and as a strategic force, providing depth to support a full spectrum of conflicts. Guard and Reserve support is critical to USSOUTHCOM's mission continuity and success.

## **What Resources Does USSOUTHCOM Need?**

In this region, a small investment – whether in time, physical resources, funding, or collaboration – goes a long way. We don't have to outspend the PRC to outcompete, but we must be present on the field and deliver at the speed of relevance. This requires having a timely budget – continuing resolutions are disruptive to U.S. and partner nation efforts to defend against threats. If we don't, China and Russia will fill the void.

*Security Cooperation* is our main tool for building the capability of our very willing partners. These partners take our small investments and immediately employ them against the threats and challenges that affect our entire hemisphere. Our partner nations are a force multiplier in a posture-limited theater. The support Congress provided for the fiscal year 2023 budget toward making our partners more capable makes us all stronger. We look forward to putting those funds to good use to support both our fiscal year 2023 and fiscal year 2024 programs for security cooperation in our region.

*Security Assistance* goes hand-in-hand with security cooperation. The security assistance we provide to countries like Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama is a game-changer for our partners who are working every day to counter illicit trafficking, address irregular migration, and secure our region. However, in contrast, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are currently not eligible for FMF. We will work with the Department of State to consider tailored solutions to advance regional policy goals.

*Domain Awareness* is key to countering PRC, Russia, and TCO malign activities that threaten hemispheric security, as well as assisting our partners during disaster relief. Air, maritime, land, space, and cyber domain awareness projects in the region fill debilitating coverage gaps and enable our partners to counter drug smuggling, IUUF, money laundering,

human smuggling, weapons trafficking, and illegal trade in natural resources. These projects reveal shared problems, illuminate opportunities, foster enhanced collaboration, and enable us to export security regionally. The ability to sense, make sense, and share data with our partners is critical. Maintaining a comprehensive threat picture with our allies and partners through our Enhanced Domain Awareness platform enables us to react quickly to threats and to collaborate in real time as we engage in combined operations and activities. Critical to building this shared picture is commercial imagery, open-source intelligence, and off-the-shelf bulk data analytics that allow us to harness this data in the public and commercial space to address critical gaps.

Aerial ISR is also paramount to maintaining domain awareness. To stay ahead of the growing pernicious threats that state and non-state actors pose, we require long-range, long-dwell, next-generation aerial ISR, such as solar-powered aircraft with a greater range and time over target. Aerial ISR aircraft have been critical to our ability to detect and deliver actionable information to other U.S. agencies and partner nations that enable their counternarcotics and counter-TCO operations. In fiscal year 2022, information provided by airborne ISR assets operating overland accounted for the seizure of 322 metric tons of cocaine and deprived TCOs of over \$9 billion in profits. To further enhance our ability to enable counternarcotics and counter-TCO operations, we are pursuing ISR technologies with a greater ability to detect active drug production laboratories. When deployed, this capability will allow us to collect over a 4x larger area with twice the sensor resolution of any comparable platform in the U.S. Government's inventory.

The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) also remains a key intelligence provider in meeting U.S. Southern Command's priorities. Warning decision-makers of the breadth and depth of challenges in the Western Hemisphere requires geospatial analysis at speed

and scale. We appreciate Congress's continued support for NGA's budget request and for their personnel supporting the Combatant Commands.

***Innovation, Science, and Technology.*** Today we face a more level playing field in technology, and we need to rapidly adjust how fast we get technology to the warfighter to maintain dominance and confound the adversary. The USSOUTHCOM AOR provides a permissive environment that has a high tolerance for technology experimentation, willing partners, and diverse climates and geography, all close to the U.S. homeland. This affords us great opportunities to conduct innovative activities with our partners that help gain and maintain a strategic advantage over the PRC, Russia, and other malign actors.

We take every opportunity to capitalize on these benefits. We are developing green energy capabilities, working on the first unmanned persistent solar-powered aircraft with a 300-pound payload, creating small-scale autonomous low-profile vessels, and developing laser communications systems with a low probability of detection and faster speeds than conventional solutions on the market.

A good example of this innovation is our collaboration with the Office of Naval Research, which has designed an experimentation series known as SCOUT. SCOUT's inaugural cycle automates antiquated processes and places capabilities into warfighters' hands faster. The SCOUT team, comprised of warfighters, engineers, academia, and industry partners, executes small-scale, discovery-focused events that provide multiple opportunities to test and measure technologies. This year we will conduct our first main event in JIATF-South to integrate prototype solutions focused on enhancing counternarcotics operations.

***Information Related Capabilities.*** To compete in the information environment, USSOUTHCOM needs an adequate force structure with the requisite skills to counter the

overwhelming threat from malign state actors in the information domain. Our adversaries are dedicating significant effort and resources with unrestrictive policies to undermine democracy in this region. We must do better to keep pace with them and outcompete them.

**NAVSCIATTS.** While considering modern warfare, we tend to focus on five domains: the high seas, inland regions, air, space, and cyber. However, littorals and rivers are the lifeblood of maritime commerce, large population centers, and bustling seaports for most of the 31 LAC countries. Ensuring security in these vital areas is essential to good governance, economic growth, and long-term prosperity. Malign state and non-state actors know the significance of littorals and rivers and routinely use them to transport bulk currency and illegal drugs, smuggle people and a vast array of illicit commodities, and enable illegal mining and logging activities that imperil the environment.

We appreciate the support Congress offered last year for the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School (NAVSCIATTS) in Stennis, Mississippi. The maritime training and education programs at NAVSCIATTS generate outsized return on investment, providing invaluable opportunities to military and law enforcement personnel from the United States and our allies and partners, most of whom operate smaller craft. Expertise shared at NAVSCIATTS generates reciprocal trust, shared knowledge and understanding, collaboration, and multifaceted technical skills that enable integrated deterrence against the PRC and other malign actors. They also reduce environmental damage and protect natural resources.

**Ambassadors.** We truly appreciate Congress's efforts to confirm additional ambassadors in the Western Hemisphere last year. Having a confirmed ambassador in country is critical to maintaining strong relationships and, conversely, not having one in place can have a detrimental



effect and opens the door to our adversaries in the region. We look forward to Congress's continued support in the effort to strengthen diplomatic ties in our neighborhood.

### **Conclusion**

The defense of the U.S. homeland is directly linked to the resilience, stability, and security of the Latin America and Caribbean region. Proximity places us on the frontline of strategic competition, as we share transboundary challenges and global threats. This requires the USSOUTHCOM team to be a trusted partner and pursue efforts that meet our partners where they are, maximizing our efforts where their priorities align with our own national interests. Meeting these challenges requires campaigning through an integrated approach to utilize all available levers across the DOD, U.S. interagency, Allies and Partner Nations to establish the desired conditions of security, peace, and prosperity throughout our neighborhood.