



In September 2018, U.S. C-130 Hercules pilots conduct low altitude flying maneuvers over Colombia during the Colombian-led search and rescue exercise Angel de los Andes. (U.S. Air Force/ Angela Ruiz)

The U.S. Military in Support of Strategic Objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean

By R. Evan Ellis

Since the end of the Cold War, Latin America and the Caribbean have received a relatively minimal portion of personnel and resources allocated globally by the U.S. military.¹ Such allocations are understandable, given that there are no major interstate wars or state rivals in the region presenting a conventional or nuclear threat to the United States.² Yet the absence of such challenges has led to an unfortunate paucity of thinking about the strategic roles and potential contributions of the U.S. military in Latin America, and other regions where the threat of major armed conflict is limited or absent.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union arguably reduced the strategic significance for the United States of Marxist insurgencies such as those in Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, and the associated importance of helping governments in the region to combat them. The evaporation of ideologically-based state funding for such groups, and their increasing reliance on drug and other criminal revenues enabled by their control over territory, redirected the U.S. military focus in the region to a struggle against narcotrafficking that was far removed from missions that had traditionally defined the size and structure of U.S. forces, even as the U.S. military wrestled to “transform” in the post-Cold War context.³ The Global War Against Terrorism with substantial military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, further decreased attention from U.S. military thinkers to challenges in Latin America, as the focus of combat units, and associated planning, intelligence, training, and materiel requirements shifted to the Middle East. Later the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the “Pivot Toward Asia” diverted even more of the U.S. military’s attention from Latin America.⁴

That there has not been a major U.S. military intervention in the Latin America and Caribbean region for 24 years, since Operation *Uphold Freedom* in Haiti in September 1994, has further compounded neglect.⁵ There are few serving U.S. military personnel with experience in, let alone charged with, planning for a major force deployment and the conduct of kinetic operations in the region. Indeed, apart from the remote possibility of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela, it is difficult to imagine a justifiable near-term scenario for such operations.⁶

While the absence of major interstate conflicts and near-term military threats from regional competitors is a bright spot in the context of the challenges of criminal insecurity, corruption, and inequality that plague

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Latin America, from a U.S. military perspective, such good news has translated into a relative lack of thinking among security planners regarding the role of U.S. armed forces in the region, and in other regions like it, where the prospect of large-scale combat operations is relatively slim.⁷

This lack of recent experience is consistent with the region's often unrecognized strategic importance to the United States. Yet no other geographical region is as directly tied to U.S. security and prosperity than Latin America and the Caribbean, considering the intimate bonds of geography, commerce, and family.⁸ As seen by the U.S. domestic political discourse over immigration, Central American street gangs, and the risk of terrorists entering the United States across the nation's southern border, while Latin America may not receive priority as an "international relations" issue, the dynamics of the region are so important that they regularly play a decisive role in U.S. domestic politics.⁹

The region's under-recognized strategic importance adds gravity to the relative absence of strategic thinking by military planners about the region. And because, in the short term at least, major conventional military operations are highly unlikely in the region, there is little incentive to dedicate limited analytical resources to the potential strategic contributions of the U.S. armed forces to integrated engagement in the region.

Even merely discussing a strategic role for the U.S. military in the region evokes discomfort among our regional partners. On the other hand, the types of activities that the U.S. military can and regularly does conduct in Latin America (such as training and medical missions, engineering, and other civil affairs work), are often regarded by the mainstream U.S. military as secondary to more "serious" military activities in other theaters such as the Middle East and Asia.

This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the role that the U.S. military plays, and can play, in advancing U.S. strategic objectives in the region, with

a focus on security cooperation and administration of security assistance efforts, as part of a coordinated whole-of-government approach. It argues for greater U.S. military attention to the development and application of strategic concepts built around strengthening governance, as the approach that is both appropriate to sensitivities and limitations regarding the employment of U.S. armed forces in Latin America, and as an effective bulwark against the cycle of criminality, corruption, and populism that opens the door for significant strategic threats against the United States. These include authoritarian anti-U.S. governments that serve as enablers for widespread criminality, terrorist threat networks, and collaboration with hostile extra-hemispheric state actors such as Russia and the PRC.

The Role of the U.S. Military in Latin America

Given the absence of a near-term military threat from a peer competitor in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in the context of historically-rooted sensitivities regarding direct military action by U.S. forces, the optimal U.S. military activity for achieving national objectives in the region has generally been security cooperation and civil affairs activities, and the administration of Department of State (DOS)-funded security assistance. It is thus imperative for American analysts and policymakers to understand the strengths and limitations of these tools in the Latin American context if they are to be employed in an optimal manner.

For the purposes of this article, *security cooperation* corresponds to the broad array of activities described by Joint Publication 3–20:

all Department of Defense (DOD) interactions, programs, and activities with foreign security forces . . . and their institutions to build relationships that help promote U.S. interests; enable partner nations to provide

*the United States access to territory, infrastructure, information and resources, and/or to build and apply their capacity and capabilities consistent with U.S. defense objectives.*¹⁰

By contrast, *security assistance* refers to a broader set of programs or activities generally involving the “providing of defense articles, military training and other defense-related services” (to include initiatives to reform or improve a partner nation’s security sector).¹¹ By law, security assistance is funded and controlled by the DOS, but may be administered by DOD in-country consistent with the partner country’s security expertise and capabilities; it thus also may be considered part of the legitimate, albeit not widely recognized, uses of the military instrument in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The most important characteristics of security cooperation and security assistance in determining its effective use in Latin America and the Caribbean (and elsewhere) are the balance between its relational effects and indirect action, and the distinction between near-term and long-term strategic effects.

Relational Effects vs. Indirect Action

While not often thought of in such terms, security cooperation, security assistance, and other non-traditional military activities discussed herein have two complementary, but distinct channels for achieving effects: relational and indirect action.

Relational effects refer to the contribution of working together, or providing benefits to the partner military, in building bonds of goodwill, trust, influence, or gratitude. By doing something for (or with) the partner, the U.S. military hopes that the partner will behave in some desired fashion. This might include cooperating with respect to something that the U.S. military wishes its partner to do, including providing U.S. military forces use of partner nation facilities, sharing intelligence, or alternatively not cooperating with entities hostile



In September 2018, a landing craft utility prepares to land on the beach in Cartagena, Colombia for a humanitarian assistance training exercise during UNITAS—a longstanding multi-national maritime exercise conducted annually in Latin American and the Caribbean to enhance security cooperation and improve coalition operations. (U.S. Navy/ Colbey Livingston)

to U.S. interests (such as the Chinese, Russians, Cubans, or criminal groups).¹² America’s use of terrain in Honduras for Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) and part of the airfield at Comalapa, El Salvador are examples of relational effects.

With respect to indirect action, through the United States providing intelligence, equipment, training, or other benefits, the partner is able to perform some particular activity or function that benefits U.S. objectives, without the U.S. having to do so itself. The contribution of Colombia to the training of Central American security forces through the Colombia Action Plan is one example of indirect action.

Working through partner nations is inherently less predictable than acting directly. Moreover, the determinants of success in achieving effects through relational channels, vice indirect action are different. In the relational sphere, achieving effects depends on the degree to which the partner is motivated to cooperate (whether through expectation

of continuing benefit, affinity, or fear), rather than whether the cooperation provided actually benefits the partner's institution, although providing real benefits is generally a reliable way to secure a partner's cooperation, and engagement which does not provide enduring benefits (such as bringing partner nation officers to the United States for an attractive trip to attend a military education event that is often of poor quality) may eventually backfire.

By contrast, the effectiveness of security cooperation and assistance as indirect action depends on the quality of the benefit, such as training a competent partner nation force which can prevail against insurgents or terrorists, or combat drug traffickers, relieving the United States from having to conduct such action on its own (avoiding the politically sensitive issue of operating on the partner nation's soil).

While good security cooperation and assistance ideally achieves both relational effects and indirect action, in structuring a program, it is useful to be clear on the mix of objectives to make appropriate choices about difficult tradeoffs. If the strategic goals of the cooperation are mostly relational (e.g. base access, Organization of American States voting, intelligence-sharing, or blocking partner cooperation with China), it is arguably more important to be liked (or feared) than to have truly useful programs. Indeed, analysts often miss this distinction when dismissing Chinese security cooperation programs in the region because they do not seem to be particularly useful, but miss the impact of offering Latin American officers' lucrative trips to Beijing and Shanghai with good food, side trips to the Great Wall, and other perks.

Near-Term versus Long-Term Effects

Beyond the distinction between relational effects and indirect action, it is important to distinguish between near-term effects of security cooperation and assistance on the partner nation unit being trained or supported, versus the more diffuse, longer-term

impacts on the partner nation's institutions or its strategic or political orientation more broadly. While most security cooperation and assistance involves both, measures of program completion and success generally focus on near-term effects (persons trained, competence demonstrated), or at the least, do not credibly measure the long-term benefits (such as partner nation senior officials who believe in the merit of a U.S.-style approach involving rule of law and transparent processes, corruption free institutions, a relatively secure, prosperous country), which may represent the far greater strategic payoff of such cooperation.¹³

In U.S. joint doctrine, the effects of security cooperation are discussed in terms of building partnerships, building partner capacity, and gaining and maintaining access to the theater for U.S. forces; yet for the purpose of formulating effective whole-of-government strategic concepts, it is important to recognize the important albeit indirect ways in which such activities contribute to specific U.S. national security interests.¹⁴ Specifically:

- blocking a conventional threat to the United States;
- blocking a terrorist threat to the United States;
- stopping illicit and dangerous flows to the United States;
- combatting strategic instability and radical undemocratic alternatives; and
- blocking strategic economic and political advances of external state actors into the region.

Blocking a Conventional Threat to the United States

Since the end of the Cold War, no U.S. competitor has positioned forces in Latin America or the Caribbean so as to pose a credible threat to the U.S. homeland. Nonetheless, in the event of a global conflict with a rival such as the PRC, the latter could employ its commercial investments in the region, in

fields such as shipping, ports, banking, electronics, and manufacturing to project and sustain intelligence agents and other operatives in Latin America, with the purpose of collecting information on the United States, attacking or impacting the United States through commercial and financial activities in Latin America, or securing entry into the United States from the region.¹⁵

In the event of a protracted military conflict, the PRC or other adversaries could leverage knowledge and influence from political and military relationships and commercial operations to employ ports, airfields, or other facilities in the region in military operations in the region against U.S. targets.

In such an eventuality, the U.S. military would likely respond directly against the country or countries permitting the use of facilities, although such actions could be too little too late. Prior to such hostilities, however, the U.S.–partner nation military-to-military relationship would be key in deterring and blocking any such attempts by the PRC or any other adversary. Such resistance might involve relational effects, such as partner nation senior defense officials with both personal affinity for the United States and sincere professional belief that resisting cooperation with China is in their national interest, as are transparent, resilient institutions resistant to such vulnerabilities as bribery or personal compromise by PRC agents.

With respect to indirect action, Chinese incursions might be thwarted by sharing intelligence with the United States, and effectively acting with the United States upon information concerning threats. The partner relationship with the United States would also be important in conducting effective resistance or diversionary operations in the event that the country was coopted by the PRC (or any foreign power) in a military conflict with the United States.

Blocking a conventional threat also highlights the importance of achieving synergy between security cooperation engagement by the U.S. military,

and more conventional military activities. The motivation of local partners to report incursions by extra-hemispheric actors, at considerable risk to their personal security and the political position of their country, and their commitment to struggle with the United States against those incursions in the period leading up to, and during a conflict, will be strongly influenced by the perception that the United States is capable of, and willing to defend them (and take action if those partners permit the use of their territory against the United States). Apart from the goodwill, trust, and capability for coordinated action that comes from security cooperation, the decisions of partner nations, and specific individuals in them, will generally reflect the U.S. level of commitment visible in a capable U.S. force, and through the signals the U.S. gives when sustaining the costs of standing by its partners in other situations, both in Latin America and other parts of the world.

Blocking a Terrorist Threat to the United States from the Region

Preventing Latin America and the Caribbean from serving as a staging ground for a terrorist action against the U.S. homeland or its residents goes beyond the effective border control necessary to insulate the homeland from threats from individuals or minor devices. It also requires effective action by partners in the region (and by the United States where appropriate) to identify, degrade, dismantle, and block terrorist threat networks, including recruitment, planning, training, the acquisition or construction of weapons, or the raising of revenues (from licit or illicit sources) in the region.

While countering such terrorist activities may principally be a law enforcement function, the U.S. military may play a role in passing intelligence, and in equipping, training, and otherwise strengthening the capabilities of security forces in the region, to include the supervision of police and other programs as part of Department of State-led security assistance efforts,

increasing the capability of partner nation security forces to combat such threat networks. Where permitted by national laws and political conditions, U.S. engagement may also include direct action against threats, conducted in coordination with partner nation forces, where consistent with their policies, laws, and constitutional frameworks.

As with countering threats from external state actors, the U.S. military may also contribute to the fight against such networks by supporting strong governance in partner nations by helping to reform and strengthen institutions and processes through

programs such as the Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI) and the Ministry of Defense Advisors (MODA) program. DIRI, for example, recently helped Guatemala to develop a new national security planning and capability development process, SIPLAGDE. According to Major General Juan Manuel Pérez Ramírez, former Chief of the Joint Staff of Guatemalan Armed Forces, the vision was to use SIPLAGDE, working together with the United States and Colombia as partners, to systematically resolve capability gaps and achieve the modernization and transformation of the Guatemalan Army.¹⁶



In October 2018, a cadet from the Mexican Air Force Academy sits in the co-pilot seat on a C-17 Globemaster III at the U.S. Dover Air Force Base. Last year, 22 cadets from 11 different Latin American countries were brought to the United States to get hands-on experience with the different branches of the U.S. military. (U.S. Air Force/ Zoe M. Wockenfuss)

SIPLAGDE, and other security cooperation and security assistance programs may not only bolster partner nation institutional capabilities in identifying and combatting violent extremist organization networks but may also build bonds of trust that bolster partner nation willingness to cooperate with the United States in areas such as intelligence, and (where permitted by the partner nation) joint operations against them.

Such efforts may also include civil affairs activities aimed at bringing connectivity and economic opportunity to regions of partner countries deprived of opportunities other than collaboration with criminal groups and other actors of concern, helping the state to physically assert its own presence and build relations with the population, so as to reduce the space in which threat groups operate.

As a further indirect benefit in combatting threat networks, the institutional relationship, including exercises, training and professional military education of partner nation forces, ideally strengthens the commitment of the partner nation military to democracy and rule of law, limiting the latitude of populists and other regimes to engage in criminal activities that permit such threat networks to flourish.¹⁷

Blocking Illicit Flows into the United States

The role of U.S. armed forces in blocking illicit and dangerous flows to the United States is not unlike their indirect (and sometimes direct) contributions in the fight against violent extremist organizations and other threat networks.¹⁸ As when working against terrorist threat networks, the U.S. military may combat transnational criminal networks through the training, education, and equipping of partner nation security forces, sharing of intelligence, joint exercises, and in some cases direct action (as always, only where permitted by the partner nation) to more effectively control borders, interdict such flows, and counter associated threat groups.

The strong relationships built through security cooperation, and the commitment to democracy and rule of law, may be particularly important when security forces are obliged to act against a politically or economically influential criminal actor, or conduct security operations that impose economic costs, or generate collateral violence, such as occurred in Mexico during the war against the cartels.¹⁹

As with the fight against terrorist networks, military civil affairs activities, performed in coordination with other security assistance and partner nation activities, impair the ability of criminal groups to produce and move drugs, mining products, and other contraband through the region. These activities also discourage trafficking and smuggling people into the United States, through strengthening state presence and the critical bond with the population, thus increasing law enforcement effectiveness, and creating a culture in which adherence to the law is at least a viable, respectable option.

Combatting Strategic Instability and Anti-Democratic Alternatives

In addition to directly combatting and reducing the threat to the United States from terrorist and criminal networks, U.S. military engagement may reduce the risk of strategic instability and associated refugee flows that could impact the United States, or adversely impact governance and conditions in other countries in the region.²⁰ The primary vehicles for achieving these effects are security cooperation and administration of security assistance activities that strengthen partner nation institutions, as well as civil affairs and other efforts that bring stability, connectivity, and economic opportunity to critical areas of the partner nation.

In some cases, military engagement may include emergency response activities, coordinated through the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), addressing natural disasters

which threaten the well-being and even governance of a stricken nation. Examples include hurricanes such as Irma (2017), the Haiti (2010) and Ecuador (2016) earthquakes, and the eruption of Guatemala's Fuego volcano (2018). This could also potentially include man-made shocks which threaten the stability of the region, for example assisting Venezuela's neighbors as they struggle with the more than 2.3 million persons who have fled from that nation's economic collapse, criminal violence, and political repression.²¹ While such efforts may be bilateral, they may also be part of a multinational effort, coordinated through the OAS or another institution.

Beyond the tactical and operational level impacts of such assistance, and its role in strengthening good-will and trust, it potentially serves U.S. strategic interests by helping to inoculate receiving states against radical or anti-democratic solutions which find receptivity when populations lose faith in the ability of a democratic political system and a free market economy to effectively address the corruption, inequality, injustice, and other dysfunctions plaguing their country.

While helping partner nations avoid radical undemocratic alternatives is good on principle, it also strategically benefits the United States, since, as seen in cases such as Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua (and previously Ecuador), such governments tend to be anti-U.S. in character, and open the door for threat networks, criminal groups, and hostile extra-hemispheric actors.

Blocking Advances of External Actors

Beyond responding to overt military threats by external state actors in the region, the U.S. military also plays an important, albeit indirect role in resisting their strategic advances in the economic and political domains. It does so principally by contributing to partner nation stability and well-being, as discussed above, although U.S. military engagement that reduces susceptibility to corruption in partner nation security institutions plays a contributing role.

By helping partner nations successfully address the challenges of insecurity and development through democratic mechanisms and the rule of law, U.S. security cooperation and oversight of security assistance make radical anti-democratic political solutions, less attractive and thus less

likely. While leftist populist governments such as in Venezuela are not the only ones at risk of deepening economic dependence on, and political influence of China, such governments arguably have both a greater economic need, and political disposition to take relationships with external states further, in ways that can threaten U.S. equities, while corruption and authoritarian structures in their institutions make them more vulnerable to Chinese advances.²²

On the other hand, when healthy democratic partner nations engage with the PRC, institutions strengthened in part through anti-corruption initiatives and other U.S. security cooperation and security assistance oversight will be more likely to secure transparent deals from China that benefit

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the partner, without presenting substantial security challenges to the United States.

Good Governance: A Key Strategic Concept for U.S. Military Engagement

All of the vehicles for employing the U.S. armed forces in an integrated, whole-of-government effort to achieve U.S. objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean center on security cooperation efforts and security assistance oversight that strengthens effective governance.²³ Good governance makes countries more effective in tackling, and more resistant to the corrupting effects of, violent extremist organizations and other threat networks, including criminal groups that would employ partner nation territory to move people and illicit goods to the United States.

Good governance also reduces vulnerability to populists who exploit the frustration and ignorance of marginalized and other voters, fed up with elites who use corruption to seize power, then use the power of their mobilized followers to gradually overcome checks and balances and subvert democratic institutions and processes. It further restricts the tendency of such leaders, whose actions isolate their countries from Western companies, banks, and governments, to plunge their countries into relationships of dependency with China, in ways that challenge their own security as well as that of the United States and of the region.

In an international environment in which the countries of Latin America are increasingly globally interconnected, the United States cannot effectively block them from engaging with the PRC (among other external state actors), but through helping to strengthen their governing institutions, it can help to inoculate those nations against China's more predatory behaviors, such as winning economic and strategic benefits by wooing, compromising, and capturing local elites.

While the U.S. military is not the lead agency in advancing governance in the region, as argued

in the previous section its security cooperation and security assistance administration efforts are a valuable component of the overall U.S. integrated country strategy.²⁴

Challenges to the Effective Use of the Military

While governance is a compelling strategic concept, with a clear supporting role for the U.S. military, the advance of external state actors in the region, coupled with persistent insecurity, uneven development, weak governance and leftist populism, clearly indicate that much work remains to be done.

It is not that the U.S. military does not do activities such as security cooperation and security assistance administration in the region; rather, it does not adequately understand the dynamics and limitations of such activities, nor does it effectively integrate with non-military programs and partner nation efforts. Nor does it adequately resource them or execute them in an agile, timely fashion.

Limited Understanding

The U.S. military is, by its nature, focused on organizing, preparing the force for, and conducting large-scale combat operations in defense of the nation. It is not principally a foreign training and public works organization. Joint Publication 3–20 “Security Cooperation” provides some guidance for security cooperation and security administration assistance, yet beyond periodicals such as *Dialogo*, and publications oriented toward security cooperation professionals such as the *Foreign Area Officers Association Journal of International Affairs*, thinking within the mainstream military regarding the contribution of such activities has arguably been limited, particularly in the Latin American and Caribbean context.²⁵

Combatant Commander strategies include references to security cooperation and security assistance as a vehicle for shaping the theater, yet it is not clear that there is a shared understanding within

USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM regarding how that shaping mechanism functions, or how well it is working, beyond measuring security cooperation activities completed, and a subjective survey completed by the organization responsible for the action.²⁶ A DOD presentation explaining a change in funding authorities, for example, acknowledged a lack of “understanding of the security cooperation return on investments and lack of information to facilitate effective resource decisions.”²⁷

The lack of understanding also obscures the perceived benefits of scaling up security cooperation and security assistance and increases the risk of errors and inefficiencies, as arguably occurred with “nation building” efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁸

Limited Resources

In 2015, then Commander, U.S. Southern Command General John Kelly, in his posture statement before Congress, lamented the status of the region as the “lowest priority” among all of the Geographic Combatant Commands, and argued that the lack of resources allocated to the region had created “a near-total lack of awareness of threats and the readiness to respond.”²⁹ Unlike numerous states in the Middle East and Asia, Latin America and its member countries are not even mentioned in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act.³⁰

In most countries of the region, the funds available for U.S. security cooperation are scarcely adequate to do more than send a handful of partner nation officers to U.S. military training and professional military education institutions, do a limited number of in-country training events via entities such as the U.S. Special Forces 7th Group, DIRI, or the William J. Perry Center, conduct a small exercise and/or deploy a medical (MDRDTE) team, and send in a small number of civil affairs team (generally affiliated with the U.S. National Guard state partner for that country). Country Security Cooperation Offices (SCOs) in the region

are limited to very small foreign military sales or financing cases, such as acquiring or outfitting a small number of boats for counternarcotic missions, putting sensors on a handful of military aircraft, or providing or upgrading armored vehicles. Such assistance is seldom sufficient to truly make a difference to beleaguered partners with often aging, marginally functional assets, struggling against enormous illicit flows and well-resourced criminal and terrorist groups.

Limits on the Use of Military Resources

For a number of entirely legitimate reasons, the employment of the U.S. military instrument in Latin America is subject to significant legal and policy constraints. According to Title 22, section 2151 of the U.S. Code, with only limited exceptions, all foreign assistance (including security assistance) is the responsibility of the U.S. State Department.³¹ Within those areas in which DOD security assistance and other forms of engagement are permitted, it may not train or engage with military units or other Latin American entities implicated in human rights violations—“Leahy laws”—the compliance with which imposes time-consuming requirements to vet units to be trained.³²

Governing laws (principally within Title 10 and 22 of U.S. Code) also establish legal restrictions on how certain U.S. government funds can be used in support of military activities with or for the partner nation.³³ These include the conditions that must be met, components of the program that must be included, and often burdensome reporting requirements. Title 22, section 333 of U.S. Code, for example, was amended by Chapter 16 of the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, adding additional requirements for human rights training and reporting requirements.³⁴ Such well-intentioned requirements not only limit the commander’s flexibility to most effectively employ often very small allocations of money to advance country objectives,

but in practice, create a situation in which country teams spend more time on internal paperwork than actually engaging with and supporting their partners in the often rapidly changing contexts of the partner nation environment.

Such requirements also significantly increase the delay between the identification of a partner nation need that can be addressed through security assistance, and actual program implementation. The design and implementation of a program using Section 333 program funds, for example, is a two-year cycle, but in practice, the time from identifying a need to delivery of the capability to the partner nation may be three or four years.³⁵

The regulations and bureaucratic procedures of the U.S. Foreign Military Assistance and Foreign Military Financing (FMS/FMF) programs are similarly problematic, leading some U.S. partners to prefer purchasing military equipment from the Russians, Chinese, or other actors, rather than suffer the delays and administrative hurdles necessary to obtain superior U.S. equipment with superior maintenance and training packages.

The Path Forward

There is significant opportunity for innovative thinking regarding the role of the military in advancing U.S. national objectives through security engagement. This is particularly true in Latin America, where the direct importance of the region to the security and prosperity of the United States is substantial, but the need for, and appropriateness of traditional military engagement is limited.

As a first step, it is important for the military and other personnel engaged in security assistance to draw upon their experiences to publish more case studies and comparative analyses, not only in journals directed toward their own community such as the *Foreign Area Officers Association Journal of International Affairs*, but also for mainstream military publications such as

the U.S. Army's *Parameters*, *PRISM*, and *Military Review*. There is also a need for foreign area officers and others implementing security cooperation programs and overseeing security assistance, to dedicate more time during their professional military education (such as time spent at senior service institutions), and in other assignments, to more systematically study the dynamics and effects of such engagement for the benefit of others in their profession, and for the U.S. military and government team more broadly.

As a complement to better leveraging those with experience in this area, it is important that DOD senior service colleges include more or expanded modules on the dynamics and effect of security cooperation, particularly since at the strategic level, such engagement touches on the success of virtually every operation in which they are involved.

Beyond academics, it is also important for those in security cooperation offices in Latin America and the Caribbean, and elsewhere, to resist the pressures of time and competing requirements, to ensure that the words that they put on the “quad charts” and other documentation defining and justifying their programs, actually correspond to reasonable outcomes for their programs, and that those programs collectively, in conjunction with the other items in their integrated country plans, represent a coherent, mutually reinforcing series of effects that advance U.S. objectives in the country. Personal attention from the Ambassador, and the SCO chief on the military side in highlighting the importance of serious thought behind such program documentation assignments, and periodically reviewing the claims of past documents against program outcomes, would create a forcing function for the level and quality of thought for future programs.

Finally, it is necessary to address the two 800-pound gorillas in the room—resources and authorities. No U.S. Government agency nor DOD combatant command has the money and legal

latitude to do everything that it wants, in the way that would be most convenient. But in the context of serious challenges to U.S. national security from the region from a combination of external state actors, transnational criminal organizations, and extremist groups, among others, the status quo, which General Kelly referred to as keeping a “pilot light” of military engagement on in the region, is unacceptable.³⁶ An order-of-magnitude expansion in security assistance to the region, intelligently designed and executed, and greater latitude in dynamically designing and executing programs with partner nations, must be considered.

In the end, perhaps the greatest obstacle to the effective employment of security engagement as a military instrument in Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, is not recognizing it as a military instrument, because it does not correspond to the conventional concept of force-on-force engagement, nor are its uses and benefits well understood. Understanding how to do so is critical to achieve security in the region on whose prosperity and effective governance the United States depends, and in the process, more effectively utilizing all dimensions of the military as an instrument of national power. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The views expressed herein are strictly those of the author, who would like to thank COL Phil Cuccia, among others, for their inputs into this work. Commander of U.S. Southern Command Admiral Kurt Tidd, opened his posture statement with references to the area as an “economy of force” command. See: “Posture Statement of Admiral Kurt W. Tidd Commander, United States Southern Command Before the 115th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee,” February 15, 2018, available at <http://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM_2018_Posture_Statement_FINAL.PDF?ver=2018-02-15-090330-243>.

² The last interstate conflict was the limited 1995 “Cenepa war” between Peru and Ecuador. See James Brooke, “Peruvians at Disadvantage in Border War,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 1995, 10.

³ See, for example, Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs*,

2nd Ed (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008).

⁴ Michael J. Green, “The Legacy of Obama’s “Pivot” to Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2016, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/03/the-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>>.

⁵ Edwidge Danticat, “The Long Legacy of Occupation in Haiti,” *The New Yorker Magazine*, July 28, 2015, available at <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/haiti-us-occupation-hundred-year-anniversary>>.

⁶ Shannon K. O’Neill, “A U.S. Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Be a Disaster,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 18, 2018, available at <<https://www.cfr.org/article/us-military-intervention-venezuela-would-be-disaster>>.

⁷ See, for example, Nathalie Alvarado, “Why is There So Much Crime in Latin America?” *Insight Crime*, November 3, 2015, available at <<https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/why-is-there-so-much-crime-in-latin-america/>>. See also R. Evan Ellis, *Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America* (New York: Lexington Books, 2018).

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, II-2–3.

¹⁵ See R. Evan Ellis, “China’s Activities in the Americas,” Testimony before a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, September 10, 2015, available at <<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20150910/103931/HHRG-114-FA07-Wstate-EllisE-20150910.pdf>>.

¹⁶ E-mail correspondence with the Major General in fall 2018.

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El Aissami to Take over from Maduro,” Panam Post, August 9, 2017, available at <<https://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2017/08/09/hezbollah-announces-support-for-venezuelan-vice-president-el-aissami/?cn-reloaded=1>>.

¹⁸ For the purpose of this work, illicit and dangerous flows include drugs, arms, human smuggling and trafficking, and other contraband activity, as well as the destructive side effects from the insufficiently controlled movement of people and goods, including disease, incidental criminal activity, and economic and social disruption.

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²⁴ Joint Publication 3–20: Security Cooperation.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, vii.

²⁷ “FY17 NDAA Chapter 16 & Section 333,”

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²⁹ “Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly,” Senate Armed Services Committee, 114th Congress, March 12, 2015, available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly_03-12-15.pdf>.

³⁰ “H.R. 5515: John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2018,” *GovTrack*, available at <<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/hr5515/text>>.

³¹ 22 U.S. Code § 2151, available at <<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/2151>>.

³² See “Leahy Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, March 9, 2018, available at <<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/fs/2018/279141.htm>>.

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³⁴ “National Defense Authorization Act of Year 2017,” Public Law No: 114–328 S.2943, 114th Congress, 2016, available at <<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY17%20NDAA%20Bill%20Summary.pdf>>; These include a more extensive specification of measurable objectives and evaluation of return on investment from partner nations. See “FY17 NDAA Chapter 16 & Section 333,” Presentation by U.S. Southern Command, Reviewed September 20, 2018.

³⁵ Off-the-record interview by the author with U.S. security cooperation officials, September 2018.

³⁶ “Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly,” Senate Armed Services Committee, 114th Congress, March 12, 2015, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly_03-12-15.pdf.