



# THE LAST LINE OF DEFENSE

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Latin America: Beyond Counter-Drug and Counter Transnational Organized Crime.  
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01 A Border Patrol vehicle sits along the border fence line separating San Diego and Tijuana Mexico watching for illegal crossings. The border fence is a deterrent to illegal immigration, drug smuggling and human trafficking. The fence is regularly patrolled by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents on the lookout for illegal crossings. The U.S.–Mexico border, a component of the homeland defense, serves as America’s last geographic line of defense against malicious actors. U.S. CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION PHOTO BY DONNA BURTON

No country enjoys immunity from terrorist attacks, not even the United States. The attacks of 9/11 should prove a definitive reminder. The 2017 National Security Strategy acknowledged as much by establishing the protection of the American people and Homeland as part of its first pillar.<sup>01</sup> For U.S. Southern Command and U.S. North Command, the pillar includes the defense of the Homeland’s southern approaches from Latin America. The U.S.–Mexico border, a component of the homeland defense, serves as America’s last geographic line of defense against malicious actors. The last line of defense; however, cannot also serve as the first line of defense. Other defensive initiatives must exist throughout the theatre that degrade and deny access to Homeland. These initiatives can take different forms such as partner-nation capacity and strong governance and accountability through security cooperation. If the U.S. should achieve such an effect, then a wider aperture is necessary to understand Latin American security challenges.

The historical counter-drug and counter-transnational organized crime frameworks used to understand Latin America are less encompassing today than 25 years ago. The evolution of threats in the theatre transcend this legacy framework. Simply put, the legacy framework is too narrow. The complexity of security challenges now also includes terrorism and other great

powers operating in the theatre. A historical review of how U.S. policy toward Latin America progressed over the last 200 years is necessary to appreciate the complexity. The review shows that when the U.S. shifts its focus away from Latin America, problems emerge. These problems take shape in the spread of communism, drugs, terrorism, predatory economics and great power influence in Latin America, to name a few. The review also highlights the U.S. is currently imbalanced in its approach to mitigate these security challenges that exist in America’s backyard.

## LATIN AMERICAN POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The American Revolution and Napoleonic Wars helped inspire Latin American countries to seek independence from their European colonial powers in the early 19th century. Shortly afterward, President James Monroe and his administration grew concerned these European powers would attempt to recolonize their previous possessions and transport conflict and instability into the Western Hemisphere or WHEM.<sup>02</sup> Thus in his 1823 State of the Union Address to Congress, President Monroe stated that the American continents were not subjects for future colonization by any European powers.<sup>03</sup> President Monroe attempted to promote stability in the WHEM by deterring outside

actors. In 1904, in response to recent European military interventions in the WHEM, President Theodore Roosevelt reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine. The new interpretation, called the “Roosevelt Corollary” transformed the Monroe Doctrine from passive policy into justification for U.S. intervention in the WHEM. The Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico and Haiti serve as examples of active U.S. intervention during the early 20th century.<sup>04</sup> Thirty years later, the European continent existed on the cusp of war, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt believed the United States needed to shift its focus across the Atlantic, away from Latin America. President Roosevelt implemented the “good neighbor” policy that again reinterpreted U.S. policy and directed less U.S. involvement in the WHEM.<sup>05</sup>

After World War II, President Harry S. Truman had his own interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine but this time to counter the Soviet Union’s efforts to spread communism globally. The “Truman Doctrine,” as it came to be known, wanted to prevent “forcible expansion of Soviet totalitarianism into free, independent nations, because American national security now depended upon more than just the physical security of American territory.”<sup>06</sup> While the U.S. focused on countering communist growth in the Eastern Hemisphere, threats grew to the WHEM. Interestingly, in 1953, the United States did not invoke the Truman Doctrine to prevent the establishment of a Communist regime in Cuba by Fidel Castro, which exemplifies the antipathy toward addressing threats in Latin America immediately following World War II. The Kennedy administration’s attempt, however, to expel Communism from Cuba with the Bay of Pigs highlights the difficulty associated with ignoring Latin American security challenges until it is too late.

Beginning in the 1960s, illicit drug trade significantly influenced the U.S.-Latin American policy. In the U.S., drug use was on the rise when President Richard Nixon named drug abuse a serious national threat.<sup>07</sup> Congress then passed the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970, merging multiple drug laws to gain efficiency and prevent stove piped efforts.<sup>08</sup> In June 1971, President Nixon declared drugs public enemy No. 1 and initiated the drug wars.<sup>09</sup> Two years later, the President created the Drug Enforcement Administration as the lead federal agency. To balance the Cold War with the new drug war, the U.S. focused its counter-drug initiatives on supply eradication, crop dusting, transit routes and a pressure campaign to extradite foreign nationals to the U.S. for prosecution.<sup>10</sup> The DEA, the political rheto-

ric, and the pressure to counter Cold War adversaries birthed what are today’s CD efforts.

The U.S. government, in the 1980s, prioritized heroin eradication over marijuana and cocaine.<sup>11</sup> The eradication efforts thrust Mexico, a major heroin producer, into the spotlight while Colombian producers and traffickers bolstered their cocaine and marijuana operations.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. focus on heroin allowed the Medellin and Cali drug cartels, both in Colombia, to grow into significant threats.<sup>13</sup> President Ronald Reagan met these threats with a renewed policy and resource emphasis on the drug wars. The International Security and Development Act of 1981 and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 cumulatively increased funding for the drug wars from \$40 million to \$200 million annually.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Congress tied foreign aid to a nation’s progress in fighting the drug trade within their own countries.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite President Reagan’s intensified CD initiatives and drug wars, the national priorities were on the Cold War. During this period, the U.S. focused away from Latin America, the Salvadorian Civil War began, and Grenada and Panama required U.S. military interventions. Arguably, the U.S. heavy emphasis on the Cold War during the 1980s permitted significant security threats to grow in Latin America.

The 1980s and 1990s formed the frameworks used today to understand Latin American security challenges. The U.S. Andean Counter-Drug Initiative, formed from Plan Colombia, refocused resources to Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. The regional shift of U.S. policy within Latin America reallocated resources to include law enforcement training, military and economic assistance, intelligence sharing and training and other direct assistance to counter cocaine trafficking organizations.<sup>16</sup> The CD efforts, while still ongoing, only address part of the problem and do not fully encompass the convergence of threats in Latin America.

The United States has alternated from intense focus on Latin America to circumspect disinterest over the last 200 years. The reasons for this shifting focus varied (e.g., European intervention, countering communism, the World Wars, drugs, etc.) but the threat environment adjusted accordingly. Global conditions and crises dictate which disposition the U.S. assumes within the cycle. The Global War on Terror (redirected American time, resources and efforts toward the Middle East. This is understandable, but it is time to reevaluate that balance. Failure to balance U.S. focus on Latin America against other global challenges over the last two decades has encouraged U.S. peer adversaries to expand their influence in the WHEM. This

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influence fosters corruption, social unrest, and oppressive regimes in the nation's back yard.

## GREAT POWERS IN THE WHEM

The Soviet Union cultivated relationships with Cuba and other Latin American countries until the Cold War's conclusion in 1991. With President Vladimir Putin's rise to power, he renewed Russian interests, investments and pursuit of influence in the WHEM. By 2013, Russian trade in the region exceeded \$24 billion with rights for oil and gas exploration, arms sales, as well as the opportunity to propagate a subtle anti-U.S. mindset in the region.<sup>17</sup> But, the Russians are not the only great power operating within the WHEM.

China has a significant interest in the vast resources available in Latin America. Throughout the world, China employs predatory economics to develop commercial and political relationships to displace the U.S. as a global power and secure resources for the Chinese economy.<sup>18</sup> China's economic growth has provided copious resources directed at achieving these political objectives. Unlike the U.S., China is less concerned with the mode of government, human rights, or the improvement of a given area. Instead, China pursues its interests, often at the expense of weaker nations. For example, China does not subscribe to international standards on environmental safety and social norms.<sup>19</sup> Some of their projects in mining and infrastructure carry significant risk to the environment and some-

times force large populations to relocate.<sup>20</sup> Many of China's investments in Latin America support countries with poor governance and are in areas where corruption is prominent, which aids oppressive regimes in maintaining their control.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese pursuit of national interests in Latin America promotes instability in the WHEM.

These Chinese and Russian relationships foster unsustainable resource extraction that increases Latin American economic fragility. These relationships also increase military presence and erode U.S. influence in the WHEM. The U.S. focus toward counter-terrorism in the Middle East creates opportunities for these peer competitors to advance their interests in Latin America.

## EVOLVING TERRORIST THREATS IN LATIN AMERICA

The U.S. has been fighting the Global War on Terror for more than 17 years by focusing on international threats outside of the WHEM.<sup>22</sup> The focus on GWOT outside the WHEM contributed to a growing Latin American terrorism threat. Profits and freedom of movement lure terrorist organizations to drugs and other criminal activity in Latin America. For example, Hezbollah, the Lebanon based Shia terrorist organization supported by Iran, has grown its presence and influence in the theatre since 2004, shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom began. Among various nefarious activities, Hezbollah partnered with the drug cartel Los Zetas, a particularly violent organization with extensive influence in Mexico, which includes drug and arms trafficking and trade-based money laundering.<sup>23</sup> Hezbollah also uses corrupt government officials in Latin America to provide false identification (passport, birth certificate, driver's license, etc.) to facilitate freedom of movement for their people.<sup>24</sup> This criminal-terrorist nexus facilitates funding of terrorist activities.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, since the 1980s, Iran and Hezbollah have been present in the Tri-Border Area, the juncture of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. Iran covertly supported its proxy in Latin America while targeting countries by building mosques and Muslim cultural centers to spread their revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> To facilitate this and other activities, Hezbollah utilizes remote airfields and poor border security in the TBA to transport financial resources to and from Iran.<sup>27</sup> The TBA remains an important regional nexus of arms, narcotics, pirated goods, human smuggling, counterfeiting and money laundering, which are all likely funding sources for terrorists.<sup>28</sup>

Terrorists cooperating with transnational criminal organizations are transforming global affairs and endangering the lives of Americans both at home and abroad. The 2018 National Defense Strategy recognizes the impact of non-state actors that threaten the security environment. For example, jihadist groups (e.g., ISIS) are actively trying to radicalize and recruit using the access and intimidation afforded by international criminal gangs.<sup>29</sup> In February 2018, Islamic extremists

01 The Tri-Border Area where the borders of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil meet, is an important regional nexus of arms, narcotics, pirated goods, human smuggling, counterfeiting and money laundering, all likely funding sources for terrorists.

posed such a threat in Trinidad and Tobago planning a terror attack during the nation's annual Carnival activities. Members of Special Operations Command – South were able to advise and assist local Trinidadian security forces to thwart the attack.<sup>30</sup> In recent years, TTO-bred foreign terrorist fighters for ISIS and these fighters returned to the Caribbean with combat experience and a violent extremist ideology.<sup>31</sup>

Drugs and terrorism coexist across the globe in a marriage of mutual convenience; Latin America is no exception. Terrorists are looking at Latin America to recruit, corrupt, train and strengthen their power and influence.<sup>32</sup> These organizations are turning to criminal networks to generate funding and obtain logistical support.<sup>33</sup> The ascendance of converging threats in Latin America reflects the U.S.'s imbalanced focus favoring Middle Eastern CT efforts. The U.S. can achieve a better balance through tools such as Security Cooperation.

## THE WAY-FORWARD

The Chinese and Russian influence and influx of criminal-terrorist entities in Latin America presents formidable security challenges. The GWOT exacerbates this problem because the U.S. has devoted vast resources to defeating terrorists in the Middle East, which has taken U.S. focus away from Latin America. While allocating additional DoD forces to Latin America would be ideal, it is unlikely. The global demands are too high. Within USSOUTHCOM, SOCSOUTH deploys the preponderance of DoD forces to the theatre and is the Geographic Combatant Command's main effort. The remaining USSOUTHCOM service components have limited forces allocated to them due to other commitments. Competing global requirements allow for an allocation of only four percent of the Special Operations Command inventory to SOCSOUTH. Given that SOUTHCOM will likely remain a low priority for U.S. force allocation, the DoD has a unique opportunity to rebalance its Security Cooperation resources.

The current U.S. resources applied to CD and CTOC make up a preponderance of the ongoing SOUTHCOM security cooperation efforts. Coupled with the terrorist threats and peer competitor interest in the region, there exists a gap between current resources and the required resources to close this gap. The DoD's recent revision of the Security Cooperation program updates the planning, approval and reporting of these authorities, but more importantly offers an opportunity to achieve better resource balance. The Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act promulgated Section 333, the global train and equipment authority. This change consolidates several legacy authorities to ensure unified coordination, planning, and execution of security cooperation. Section 333 offers an opportunity to reevaluate U.S. priorities, adjust resources, and take positive actions to improve U.S. security cooperation efforts in Latin America. DoD should consider the converging threats in Latin America during the Section

333 Authority annual evaluation and allocation process. The 2018 Nation Defense Strategy openly accepts risks in the SOUTHCOM theatre as DoD primarily focuses on the threats posed by the peer competitors elsewhere on the globe. Since allocating more forces to USSOUTHCOM is unlikely, granting Section 333 authorities would greatly enhance SOCSOUTH's existing forces to address these challenges with a comprehensive approach. For this to occur, USSOUTHCOM must continue to work closely with the Joint Staff and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy to navigate the arduous approval process.

Following the publication of the FY17 NDAA, OUSD(P) developed a new oversight management process for Section 333. This process is still a work in progress, but GCCs can leverage Section 333 authorities for their mission priorities. USSOUTHCOM; however, was not allocated Section 333 authorities in FY17 or FY18. Initial staff estimates indicate an allocation of \$30M, roughly one percent of the nearly \$3B FY19 Security Cooperation budget. In the meantime, SOUTHCOM is utilizing Section 322 authorities, which are primarily for USSOF training abroad but provides minimal benefit to partner nations, as a stopgap. This is problematic for SOCSOUTH. SOF contributes military engagement, Security Cooperation and deterrence to protect and advance national security interests and shape regional security in the theatre. SOF also provides an efficient and effective DoD tool that helps build and develop regional security forces while maintaining a deployed presence for persistent engagements and pre-crisis periods. The current Section 322 authorities significantly limit engagement between USSOF and partner-nation forces and hinder the ability to support the NDS's second line of effort: to strengthen alliances as we attract new partners. The NDS acknowledges that "mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to U.S. strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match."<sup>35</sup> These partnerships also offer important access to potential basing and logistical support for contingency operations. Additionally, U.S. military equipment sales can modernize U.S. partner-nation equipment and facilitate integration with U.S. forces.<sup>36</sup> Partner-nation training and military sales, however, are not enough. Efforts should include improving U.S. allies and partners ability to successfully train, man and equip their own military to promote healthy Defense Institution Building. Section 333 authorities allow for this to occur, while Section 322 authorities do not.

Defense institution building empowers partner-nation defense institutions to establish or reorient their policies and structures as well as make their defense sector more transparent, accountable, effective, affordable and responsive to civilian control. It also improves defense governance and increases the sustainability of DoD Security Cooperation programs. It is typically conducted at the ministerial, general, joint staff, military service headquarters, and related defense agency level, and as appropriate, with other supporting

defense entities.<sup>37</sup> Further, defense institution building helps Latin American nations to help themselves. Section 333 authorities enhance DoD's ability to contribute to institution building in Latin America. As good as institution building is in Latin America and U.S. security, without Section 333 authorities, it will stagnate and USSOUTHCOM will continue to fight with one hand tied behind its back.

## CONCLUSION

Latin American threats have grown in the nearly 200 years since the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine. Currently, the combination of near-peer competitor presence and the unification of terrorist with crime organizations creates significant threats to the U.S. There is still time, however, to mitigate these threats. The SOUTHCOM theatre could best achieve its national security responsibilities by building defense networks throughout Latin America that protect the U.S. Homeland. A single defensive belt along the U.S.-Mexico border will not suffice. The last 200 years show that when the U.S. focuses too much attention away from Latin America, security threats emerge in the WHEM. The GWOT is causing this phenomenon to occur now. The global demands on DoD will likely not decline in the near term, making the allocation of additional forces to USSOUTHCOM unlikely. DoD, however, can have a significant impact in mitigating the convergence of these threats in the theatre by granting USSOUTHCOM Section 333 authorities, which will significantly improve all aspects of security cooperation in Latin America, including DIB. DoD can facilitate USSOUTHCOM's efforts to build defensive belts that protect the American people and the Homeland. **SW**

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U.S. Naval Special Warfare and Trinidad and Tobago special navy units prepare to board a Trinidadian and Tobagonian coast guard vessel during a joint training exercise. Collaborative exercises like this provide opportunities for USSOF to build effective relationships with partner nation forces that carry on into real world missions.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY MAJ. CESAR SANTIAGO

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