



Home >> Academia >> Challenges Of, Innovation Among, And Cooperation Between Central American And Caribbean Air Forces

Challenges of, Innovation among, and Cooperation Between Central American and Caribbean Air Forces



Illustration/Diálogo

BY R. EVAN ELLIS

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From August 26-29, 2024, I had the honor of participating as the moderator of the Central America and Caribbean Air Chiefs Conference, hosted by the leadership of U.S. Air Forces Southern ([12th Air Force](#)) in Tucson, Arizona. The event was an opportunity for the heads of the Air Forces of the region to discuss shared challenges, from organized crime and migration to climate issues, as well as their efforts, innovations, and cooperation to address them.

Challenges

The assembled senior Air Force leaders discussed new patterns of transnational organized crime affecting the region, including expanded flows of cocaine to Europe and the associated involvement of European criminal groups such as [Italy-based Ndrangheta](#); and increasing the importance of cooperation across the region with governments from other regions to address them. The leaders also examined evolving challenges from other forms of transnational



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In addition to transnational crime and migration challenges, the assembled Air Chiefs discussed the impact of climate-related effects on their countries of their security forces. The conversation touched on recent hurricanes and tropical storms, including [Beryl](#), the earliest hurricane of [Category 5](#), as well as the effects of flooding and drought, such as that causing severe difficulties in [Guatemala](#) and its neighbor's action on this year, as well as drought-fueled wildfires impacting [Colombia](#) and [Belize](#) in recent months.

The group also took note of the crisis in [Venezuela](#) and [Haiti](#), and their current and potentially expanded region-wide effect in the future, as well as the impact of other actors such as [Russia](#), [Iran](#), and the [People's Republic of China](#) (PRC) on the shared strategic environment.

Responses

Within the context of the different country perspectives of each nation represented at the Air Chiefs conference, the transnational and often transregional nature of the challenge identified by the participants emphasized the need for both making the greatest possible use of the capabilities of each nation, and for strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation to address those challenges.

With respect to strengthening their own capabilities, virtually all of the Air Forces of the partners represented are operating under severe resource constraints, yet with their own resource and the help of the United States and other partners, they are working to add needed capabilities and/or to cover gaps in those capabilities.

Examples of significant materiel items provided with U.S. assistance include two Bell 412 helicopters provided to Guatemala in December 2022, a Cessna 208 aircraft for Belize made operational in May 2023, delivery of a [C-208 to El Salvador](#) in November 2023, and delivery of a Cessna Caravan to the [Dominican Republic in February 2024](#). In addition, Panama took control over [eight Huey UH-1H helicopters](#) received through support from the U.S. State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) in June 2024, in addition to a Beechcraft King Air 250 that it received in 2022.

Some new partner aviation capabilities discussed at the event were acquired outside the United States. These include [Eurocopter H-425 helicopters](#) acquired by Honduras, and two [Hindustan Dornier 228](#) transport aircraft acquired by Guyana from India in April 2024.

At the organizational level, the group took note of and gained insights from the experience of the [new Air Wing](#) recently established by Antigua and Barbuda.

The regional Air Force leaders discussed a number of programs through which the United States could help its partner nations address operational needs, from services integrating commercial satellite imagery and supporting analysis, to training and other support through both the 12th Air Force and other U.S. Department of Defense organizations, including the U.S. National Guard State Partners of the countries of the region.

The conference further discussed promising work in cyber security, including work of the Jamaica Air Wing in [building its capabilities in that domain](#), as well as lessons that could help other partners in that regard.

Participants also discussed strengthening capabilities that went beyond material items. This included addressing recruitment and retention challenges, more fully leveraging the capabilities of the enlisted/noncommissioned officer portion of their forces, similarly best leveraging the contributions and perspectives of women, in addition to men in the force, among other topics.

The event discussed a range of vehicles for strengthening integration and working together, both bilaterally, as well as multilaterally. These included training programs such as the [U.S.-Colombian Action Program](#) (USCAP), as well as organizations for working together and sharing data such as [Joint Interagency Task Force South](#) (JIATF-S), as well as bilateral cooperation, such as [Jamaica's October 2023 agreement for air intercept with the Dominican Republic](#). The event further touched upon the value of embedded representatives in each other's military organizations, including not only partner nation officials in U.S. organizations, but also representatives in each other's organizations, such as the collocation of representatives in each other's organizations by Guatemala and Colombia.

Discussions at the conference further recognized the value of democratic extra-hemispheric friends such as the [British](#), [Dutch](#), French, and [other](#) European Union representatives, contributing to partner capabilities through collaboration such as training and information exchange, particularly in helping to address expanded trans-Atlantic drug flows.

Participants discussed the value of region-wide organizations of the Interamerican system for strengthening integration and creating opportunities for sharing information and identifying partners with needed capabilities and expertise, including the [Conference of Central American Armed Forces](#) (CFAC), and the [System of Cooperation Among the American Air Forces](#) (SICOFAA) and its annual meeting, the Conference of American Air Chiefs (CONJEFAMER). With respect to SICOFAA, participants noted the importance of Costa Rica's recent joining of the organization. They noted its value in serving as a bridge between the nations of the Caribbean, and those in Central and South America.

The event also took place in the context of numerous recent exercises serving to strengthening integration, including Tradewinds (just held [in Barbados](#) in May 2024), [UNITAS](#), [Continuing Promise](#), [Resolute Sentinel](#) (with Mexico and Colombia), and [Southern Seas](#), in which Colombia participated, among others. The group also discussed the importance of Colombia-led Operations such as ZEUS, well as Mexico-led cooperation initiatives with the region.

The group spoke about the importance of professional military educational institutions such as the [Inter-American Air Forces Academy](#) (IAAFA) in strengthening integration in the region. They also touched upon multinational peacekeeping activities in which many nations of the region have participated, including El Salvador's contribution to [operations in Mali](#), as well as planned and possible forthcoming contributions by regional partners [such as Jamaica](#) and Suriname to the United Nations Sanctioned Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission in Haiti.

Conclusion



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and managing them, as they continue to unfold.



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Evan Ellis is a Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College. The opinions expressed here are his own, and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Army War College, U.S. Air Forces Southern/12th Air Force, or the persons present at the Central America and Caribbean Air Chiefs Conference.

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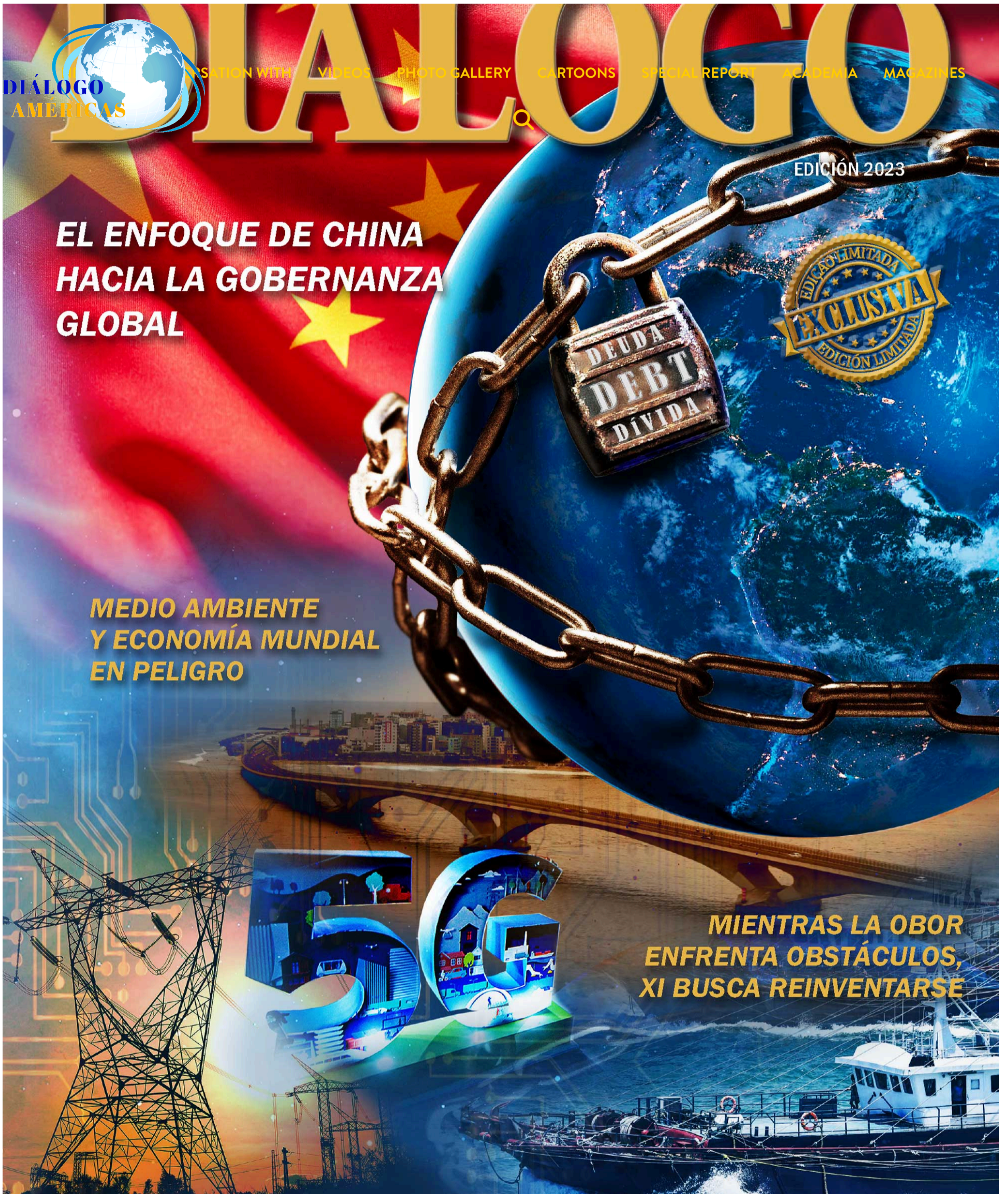
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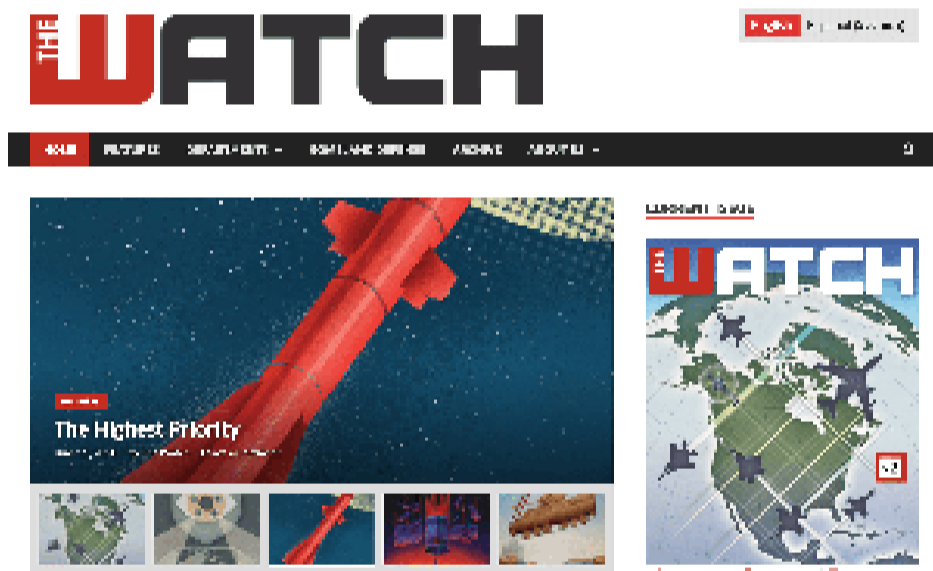
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