

The background of the cover is a collage of black silhouettes on a white background. At the top left, a helicopter is shown in flight. Below it, there are various shapes representing military equipment and personnel. In the center, a soldier is depicted from the back, wearing a helmet and carrying a large backpack. To the right, another soldier is shown in profile, holding a rifle. At the bottom left, there is a silhouette of a submarine. The overall theme is military and security.

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**Evolution of the  
Latin American Strategic  
Environment and the  
Posture of its Security Forces**

**R. EVAN ELLIS**

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**R. EVAN ELLIS**

*Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College*

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## ***Evolution of the Latin American Strategic Environment and the Posture of its Security Forces***

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# **Introduction**

The security environment in Latin America and the Caribbean continues to evolve, driven in part by dramatic underlying changes in the broader global dynamics. Latin American security forces, constrained by a combination of resources and administrative and political factors, struggle with varying degrees of effectiveness to adapt. This paper describes some of those interdependent changes in the strategic environment, and those reactions. It argues that the long-discussed imperatives of globalization themselves are evolving, with dramatic implications for the region.

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# The Evolving Global Context

The changing character of global interdependence shaping the security dynamics of Latin America begins, but does not end with, the intensification and change in the nature of connectivity. The later includes flows of data and ideas, goods, money, and people. Those flows, and the way in which the conditions and events of one part of the world rapidly and significantly affect the other are evolving and strengthening in some areas, even as they break down in others.

As global connectivity has expanded through the movement of goods, finance, ideas and people, and the physical and digital infrastructure which sustains them has grown, illicit activities have also become increasingly global, including drug movements, money laundering, migration, and the spread of ideas, including for terrorism and the use of technology in criminal operations.

Beyond crime and insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic, which begun in Wuhan, China and ultimately killed between 13.3 and 16.6 million people,<sup>1</sup> shows how, through flows of people and

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<sup>1</sup> “14.9 million excess deaths associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021,” *World Health Organization*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2022-14.9-million-excess-deaths-were-associated-with-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-2020-and->

commerce, evolved or artificially created diseases in one part of the world can, within weeks, can cause millions of casualties elsewhere, force the shutdown of economies, and massive changes in patterns of life, and oblige governments and armed forces to radically shift priorities to public health missions.<sup>2</sup> Other diseases such as SARS, Dengue, Zika, Mpox, Measles, and Oropouche,<sup>3</sup> while not as severe in their effects, are a reminder that COVID-19 (which itself continues to evolve), was not an isolated risk. Furthermore the expanded threat from pandemics is not limited human-borne illnesses, but also extends to the less discussed danger of transmissible animal and plant diseases, whose global spread can threaten global food security, economic activity, and the collapse of ecosystems on which human and all other life depends.<sup>4</sup> The advances in DNA manipulation through ever cheaper and more accessible gene-splicing technology, such as that available through Crisper, vastly increases global risks

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2021#:~:text=New%20estimates%20from%20the%20World%20Health%20Organization%20%28WHO%29,14.9%20million%20%28range%2013.3%20million%20to%2016.6%20million%29.

<sup>22</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Challenges for the Armed Forces of Latin America in Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of the Americas en Espanol*, 3rd Edition, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JOTA/Journals/Volume%202%20Issue%203/Ellis\\_eng.pdf?source=GovD](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JOTA/Journals/Volume%202%20Issue%203/Ellis_eng.pdf?source=GovD).

<sup>3</sup> "CDC Current Outbreak List," *Centers for Disease Control*, Accessed September 18, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/outbreaks/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Katy Wilkinson, et. al, "Infectious diseases of animals and plants: an interdisciplinary approach," *Philosophical Transactions*, July 12, 2011, 366(1573): 1933–1942, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3130394/>.

by making the technology available to kill millions and destroy economies available to rogue states, terrorist groups, and others lacking legal and moral constraints, and with interest in doing great harm.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond crime, insecurity, and diseases which propagate organically, the increasing role of digital technologies in not only communication, but in virtually all aspects of daily life, including artificial intelligence and big data, has increased the potential impact of manipulation, disruption, espionage and data theft from digital ecosystems. at risk to espionage, manipulation and disruption. Cyber incidents can propagate globally in hours, with devastating effects on economies, natural security, and the instruments on which life depends,<sup>6</sup> including affecting airlines, water systems and other public infrastructure, hospital equipment, corporate and personal financial data and other records, to weapon systems. As illustrated by deliberate Conti ransomware attack in Costa Rica<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>5</sup> Kyle E. Watters, Jesse Kirkpatrick, Megan J. Palmer, and Gregory D. Koblenz, "The CRISPR revolution and its potential impact on global health security," *Pathogens and Global Health*, 2021; 115(2): 80–92, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8550201/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Significant Cyber Incidents," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Accessed September 18, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/significant-cyber-incidents>.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Murray and Mehul Srivastava, "How Conti ransomware group crippled Costa Rica — then fell apart," *Financial Times*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/9895f997-5941-445c-9572-9cef66d130f5>.



the accidental propagation of a bad Microsoft software patch in July 2024 that wreaked havoc on the US airline system,<sup>8</sup> cyber incidents can bring the economies of entire countries to a halt and have ripple effects through global financial systems and supply chains, causing shortages and economic crises even in countries that have reasonably defended themselves from the direct risk against their system of evolving attacks.

Beyond making governments, economies, entities and individuals vulnerable to attacks from state and non-state actors, without warning, from virtually any part of the globe, the growing penetration of digital connectivity and associated technologies into all phases of life is also arguably undermining democracy more than it bolsters it, while simultaneously facilitating authoritarianism and the power of the state at the expense of the individual. This phenomenon is profoundly undermining the existing political order, contributing to domestic and interstate conflict. Specifically, the evolution from email to the internet, to social media has fragmented the channels for communicating and obtaining information, even while new algorithms and analysis of “big data” allows the

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<sup>8</sup> “3,000 US flights are canceled as a global computer outage wreaks havoc on businesses, 911 systems and government agencies,” *CNN*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/19/business/delta-american-airlines-flights-outage-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Thousands%20of%20US%20flights%20were%20grounded%20Friday%20as,debacle%20is%20%E2%80%9Cnot%20a%20security%20incident%20or%20cyberattack.%E2%80%9D>.

targeting of persons and highly tailored groups for individualized messages. At the same time, the growing capability of artificial intelligence allows the rapid production of fabricated content, including the audiovisual simulation of leaders and events, virtually indistinguishable from reality. The result is an increasing flood of tailored messages, reinforcing the perspectives and prejudices of individual micro-groups, coupled with false or distorted information that is ever easier to create and ever harder for central authorities to monitor or counter.<sup>9</sup>

The detrimental effect of these phenomenon on democracies is twofold. On one hand, the reinforcing cycle of communication within micro groups and the external identification and targeting of their preferences and interests with content increases polarization and distrust in an environment in which, for other reasons, citizens are increasingly dubious about the ability of procedural democracy to address their concerns. At the same time, the expanding ability to generate and transmit tailored content to millions of individual subgroups through artificial intelligence, including audiovisual fabrications virtually indistinguishable from reality, makes democratic societies that resist, on principle, the monitoring and control of information by the state, ever more

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, R. Evan Ellis, "Brazil's Attempt to Control X: The Deterioration of the Liberal World Order," *Global Americans*, September 13, 2024, <https://globalamericans.org/brazils-attempt-to-control-x-the-deterioration-of-the-liberal-world-order/>.

vulnerable to adversaries who wish to paralyze or destabilize them.<sup>10</sup>

The compliment to the asymmetric expansion of pressures and vulnerabilities of democracies from evolving digital technologies, is their role in empowering authoritarian states. On one hand, authoritarian states, through physical, legal, bureaucratic, and algorithmic information control, are inherently less vulnerable than democracies to the previously mentioned destabilizing forces. On the other hand, the combination of digital technologies, big data, and artificial intelligence also empowers the surveillance and control capabilities of the state far beyond that possible in previous years. This includes the ability to monitor, restrict, or act upon the digital activity of residents, and to a degree, those beyond national territories, including their social media activities, financial records, and physical movement, aided by the integration of networked cameras and other sensors with biometric recognition capabilities into surveillance and control architectures.

As seen with the advance of social control architectures being pioneered in China and being marketed and exported to other authoritarian regimes,

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<sup>10</sup> See also Vibhu Mishra, "Unchecked AI threatens democracy, warns UN chief," *United Nations*, September 15, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154316#:~:text=Left%20Unchecked%2C%20artificial%20intelligence%20%28AI%29%20could%20destabilize%20democratic,representing%20half%20the%20world%E2%80%99s%20population%20%E2%80%93%20hold%20elections.>

digital interconnectivity not only allows the state to monitor and detect, but to sanction and reward behavior, including the ability to restrict access to basic services from accessing public transportation and foreign travel, to driver's licenses, to medical care, to bank accounts, to buying groceries.<sup>11</sup> Beyond control, digitization, big data and artificial intelligence allow the state to manage economic activity and control undesired behaviors such as crime and violence with far greater effectiveness than prior "analog" command economies such as the Soviet Union, which were more dependent on human management in an information-poor environment.

Thus while the new digital environment contributes to the polarization, paralysis, vulnerability and dysfunctionality of traditional democracies, it facilitates both the control, and appearance of functionality and order of authoritarian societies, much more than in prior eras. These dynamics, in turn, are fundamentally impacting the global discourse about democracy, the role of governments in economic management and information control, and the balance between the penetration of technology and protections of the individual.

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<sup>11</sup> Mercy A. Kuo, "Surveillance State: Social Control in China," *The Diplomat*, October 3, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/surveillance-state-social-control-in-china/#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20surveillance%20state%20use%20vast%20quantities%20of,predict%20threats%20and%20problems%20before%20they%20even%20arise.>

In the context of such phenomenon, the rules-based international order, and the institutions and partial consensus on supernational commercial, financial, legal and other cooperation that sustained it, are being fundamentally undermined. In the security domain, this manifests itself in increasing difficulties in multilateral coordination to address disputes as well as a spreading array of exceptions in interstate collaboration on transnational organized crime and terrorism, increasing the difficulty in controlling those phenomenon, even as they expand in their incidence and effects.

Academic debates about the prevalence of a “bipolar” or “unipolar” world<sup>12</sup> are misleading. Rather, the previously noted deterioration of the rules-based order is facilitated by the emergent dynamic between an increasingly powerful People’s Republic of China (PRC), pursuing its own interests, and an array of illiberal states and non-state actors whose survival and actions undermining the system are indirectly facilitated by their engagement with the PRC.<sup>13</sup> In this destabilizing dynamic, the PRC economically and

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<sup>12</sup> Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, “Yes, the World Is Multipolar,” *Foreign Policy*, October 5, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/>.

<sup>13</sup> R. Evan Ellis, “Working Paper: China, the Illiberal Counter-Order, and the Role of Values in the Strategic Response,” *Florida International University*, June 10, 2024, <https://gordoninstitute.fiu.edu/news-events/the-policy-spotlight/2024/china-the-illiberal-counter-order-and-the-role-of-values-in-the-strategic-response.html>.

strategically benefits from those illiberal actors, without necessarily tying itself to their individual agendas or actions. Examples abound, including Russia and Iran, whose survival and pursuit of aggression is underwritten by its sale of oil and other goods to the PRC at prices favorable to it,<sup>14</sup> their purchases of weapons and components from the same PRC,<sup>15</sup> as well as their use of the PRC to circumvent sanctions imposed by the US-dollar denominated financial system and the associated SWIFT system for financial clearing.<sup>16</sup> The survival of authoritarian regimes in Venezuela, North Korea, and Nicaragua similarly is bolstered by PRC purchases of their goods, loans, and other forms of cooperation, while the PRC benefits from the actions of each of these actors in challenging the West, without the PRC associating

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria Kim and Clifford Krauss, "Asia is buying discounted Russian oil, making up for Europe's cutbacks," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/21/world/asia/asia-is-buying-discounted-russian-oil-making-up-for-europes-cutbacks.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Sher, "Behind the Scenes: China's Increasing Role in Russia's Defense Industry," *Carnegie Politika*, May 6, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/behind-the-scenes-chinas-increasing-role-in-russias-defense-industry?lang=en>.

<sup>16</sup> "Russia, China Find Payments Workaround as US Sanctions Net Widens, Sources Say," U.S. News and World Report, June 6, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-06-20/russia-china-find-payments-workaround-as-us-sanctions-net-widens-sources-say#:~:text=The%20workaround%2C%20which%20involves%20smaller%2C%20regional%20banks%20that,U.S.%20sanctions%20as%20they%20look%20to%20circumvent%20restrictions.>

itself directly with the malevolent actions of those regimes. While the PRC also profits from commerce which helps its illiberal partners sustain conflicts such as Russia's invasion of the Ukraine, or Iran's aggression against Israel through surrogates such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, the West is obligated to spend its own resources and attention defending its partners against that aggression. Meanwhile, the PRC observes and learns lessons possibly relevant to its pursuit of interests more central to it, on topics such as a possible future invasion of Taiwan.

The deterioration of the rules-based order is producing a series of compounding effects in the strategic environment. The loss of citizen faith in and deterioration of democracies due to their poor performance and the previously mentioned pressures from digitation breed new populist regimes, whose survival is also facilitated by the PRC through economic, technical and security engagement. With the proliferation of such regimes, less oriented to honor contracts, commitments to legal cooperation such as extradition and share data on financial and other crimes, the ability to combat bad actors declines. This in turn diminishes the ability to manage threats such as transnational organized crime and terrorism and insecurity, further undermining the democratic societies such corruption and criminal phenomenon touch.

As has been widely noted, the dynamics between an increasingly assertive PRC and a West seeking to protect its own interests, has facilitated both “strategic competition,” similar to, but distinct from, the environment of the Cold War, as well as “decoupling.” These dynamics accelerate the erosion of the global commerce, financial relationships, information and technology sharing at the core of the global order since the Second World War. As a compliment, the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, driven by illiberal actors underwritten by China such as Russia and Iran, have further highlighted the vulnerabilities of relying on global supply chains and international contracts. For illiberal states, the expanded use of sanctions has highlighted the vulnerabilities of relying on a dollar-based system of currency clearing, further driving the fragmentation of the international financial system.

Beyond undermining the international system, the expanded conflicts driven by those illiberal actors, in combination with the prospect of a major war between the PRC and the West, have placed the prospect of interstate warfare, including nuclear conflict,<sup>17</sup> back on the global agenda, a phenomenon that has influenced the thinking of Armed Forces and regimes around the world.

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<sup>17</sup> “Nuclear War: The Rising Risk and How we Stop it,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/07/opinion/nuclear-war-prevention.html>.



Adding to the geopolitical pressures that shape the dynamics between China, its illiberal partners, and the deteriorating rules-based order are playing out, climate change is having increasingly significant effects on all parties through not only measurable temperature and sea level rise, but also the increasing frequency and severity of major climate events.<sup>18</sup> These include hurricanes and typhoons, flooding and drought, and wildfires, all of which oblige the response of governments, usually leveraging their armed forces, to evacuate and protect populations and otherwise respond to their needs, maintain order during and after events, and in some cases conduct mitigation and repair activities. Such responses require those Armed Forces to dedicate resources programmed for other activities. By the nature of such climate-related crises, they increase missions in which Armed Forces must interact with domestic populations, an area in which they are generally are only partially trained and equipped.

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Poynting and Esme Stallard, “How climate change worsens heatwaves, droughts, wildfires and floods,” *BBC*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-58073295>.

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# **New Dynamics in the Latin American Strategic Environment**

The evolution of the Latin American strategic environment reflects the global trends described in the prior section yet is also shaped by dynamics unique to the region.

As a product of evolving global connectivity, technologies and other trends, the dynamics of organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean has changed in important ways in recent years.

At the level of individual groups, from transnational cartels, to gangs, militias, and entities which facilitate criminal transactions within national borders, the criminal landscape in the region has become more fragmented and violent.<sup>19</sup> This can be seen in the proliferation of groups in Mexico produced by the decapitation and fights between criminal cartels, their “armed wings” and the entities which have sprung up to protect them. It can also be seen in the fragmentation of the family-based smuggling group in Central

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<sup>19</sup> Juan Carlos Garzon Vergara, “Fragmentation and the Changing Face of LatAm Organized Crime,” *Insight Crime*, November 16, 2015, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/what-the-fragmentation-of-organized-crime-means-for-latin-america/>.

America, to guerilla organizations such as the FARC, ELN and self-defense groups in Colombia.

At the same time, some of these groups, particularly those with international reach such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nuevo Generation (CJNG) cartels in Mexico, and the First Capital Command (PCC) and Red Command (CV) gangs in Brazil, have become much more sophisticated in their international reach and level of armament. They increasingly are working through surrogates in their own home countries, and internationally to dominate territories and routes. Examples include the proxy wars between Sinaloa and CJNG within various states in Mexico<sup>20</sup> and the prospect for its escalation,<sup>21</sup> the work of both with Ecuadoran gangs such as Los Choneros and Los Lobos to dominate drug routes in that country,<sup>22</sup> and the proxy wars between the PCC and its rival Comando

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<sup>20</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Organized Crime in Mexico and the Evolving Government Response," *Global Americans*, August 18, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/08/organized-crime-in-mexico-and-the-evolving-government-response/>.

<sup>21</sup> Jesus Bustamante and Lizbeth Diaz, "Sinaloa violence sparks fear of intra-cartel war in Mexico," *Reuters*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/sinaloa-violence-sparks-fear-intra-cartel-war-mexico-2024-09-11/>.

<sup>22</sup> Pablo Ferri, "Mexican cartels linked to Ecuador violence: 'Criminals have an incentive to say they belong to a renowned group'," *El Pais*, August 11, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-11/mexican-cartels-linked-to-ecuador-violence-criminals-have-an-incentive-to-say-they-belong-to-a-renowned-group.html>.

Vermelho (CV) to dominate drug routes through Brazil.<sup>23</sup>

Innovative uses of technology and armament by well-funded groups in the region is particularly a problem. In Mexico, criminal groups such as Sinaloa, CJNG and others are not only employing ever-more sophisticated submarines and other watercraft to smuggle drugs and other contraband, but are also using military-grade arms,<sup>24</sup> building their own armored vehicles,<sup>25</sup> and are using improvised explosive devices and drones in sophisticated military operations against each other and against the state. The use of explosive drones by cartels in Ecuador in September 2024 to bomb a maximum security prison<sup>26</sup> highlights how innovations in distant battlefields such as Ukraine can be rapidly adapted by criminal groups in the region

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<sup>23</sup> Ryan C. Berg, "Tussle for the Amazon: New Frontiers in Brazil's Organized Crime Landscape," *Dialogo*, November 16, 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/tussle-for-the-amazon-new-frontiers-in-brazils-organized-crime-landscape/>.

<sup>24</sup> "Mexico demands investigation into US military-grade weapons being used by drug cartels," *Associated Press*, January 22, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-military-weapons-drug-cartels-united-states-659fecf40efc9977e8b127aed3ee5254>.

<sup>25</sup> Nathaniel Janowitz, "Mexico Just Destroyed 14 Homemade Narco Tanks," *Vice*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mexico-just-destroyed-14-homemade-narco-tanks/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Ecuador Maximum Security Prison Suffers Repeated Drone Attack," *Bloomberg*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-09-05/ecuador-maximum-security-prison-suffers-repeat-drone-attack>.

with deep pockets, presenting evolved threats that are difficult and expensive for under-resourced security forces to protect against. The exploitation of such lethal and other innovative technologies for criminal purposes in the region is only likely to accelerate in the coming years.

Within the domain of narcotics, the dominant drugs, and associated infrastructure required, is changing. On one hand, the growing of cocaine, which has traditionally been most focused on Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, supplemented by some heroin, principally produced in Mexico and Guatemala, is itself evolving. In Colombia in particular, both the quantity under cultivation and its efficiency has increased.<sup>27</sup> In Peru, cocaine is increasingly grown in the jungle region<sup>28</sup> in addition to traditional highlands. Local production of cocaine and its processing in laboratories is beginning to occur in laboratories in Venezuela, Guatemala and Honduras. The combined result has been to flood the region with coca, both going north toward the US market, and eastward toward Europe, with associated expanded fights between illicit actors over routes and markets.

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<sup>27</sup> Vanessa Buschschlüter, "Colombia cocaine: Coca cultivation reaches record high," *Insight Crime*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-66784678>.

<sup>28</sup> Ricardo Perez, "Terror and Cocaine in the Peruvian Jungle: a New VICE Documentary," *Amazon Watch*, August 13, 2024, <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2024/0813-terror-and-cocaine-in-the-peruvian-jungle-a-new-vice-documentary>.

At the same time, synthetic drugs including methamphetamines and fentanyl, have played an increasingly dominant role in the trade. Importantly, because synthetic drugs do not require reliance on agricultural production, but rather laboratories, the shift has transformed the nature of the logistics and social relationships involved in such crime from the logistics of growing and harvesting coca or heroin poppies in the countryside, to urban laboratories and obtaining precursor chemicals, principally from the PRC.<sup>29</sup>

The use of fentanyl has also vastly expanded because of its highly addictive quality, and the ease of smuggling from its potency and thus small size of individual doses, and increasingly is laced into other illicit products. That same potency has contributed to a significant increase in overdose deaths, first in the United States, but increasingly in other areas which were once transit countries for the substance, from Brazil to Mexico.<sup>30</sup>

Particularly with respect to cocaine, including that laced with fentanyl, Europe, where prices are far higher

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<sup>29</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Organized Crime in Mexico and the Evolving Government Response," *Global Americans*, August 18, 2022, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/08/organized-crime-in-mexico-and-the-evolving-government-response/>.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Gottesdiener and Brendan O'Boyle, "Fentanyl use spreads deeper into Mexico, on heels of US epidemic," *Reuters*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/fentanyl-use-spreads-deeper-into-mexico-worrying-authorities-2024-02-20/>.

than in the US, has increasingly become an important market. In the process, European groups from the Albanian mafia to Italy's Ndrangheta, have begun to play a role in Latin America.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the expansion of commercial and financial flows between the PRC and Latin America, and the infrastructure to support it, has facilitated an increased role for Chinese entities in criminal activities in the hemisphere. This includes the sourcing of precursor chemicals for fentanyl and other synthetic drugs in China, largely through Mexico-based cartels, as well as the use of Chinese gangs, companies and financial institutions in trade-based and other forms of money laundering.<sup>32</sup> With increased economic difficulties in the PRC, including high youth unemployment, Chinese nationals are an increasing part of immigrants being smuggled by trafficking groups

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<sup>31</sup> "Ndrangheta, Main European Ally of Latin American Narcotraffickers," *Dialogo*, February 14, 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/ndrangheta-main-european-ally-of-latin-american-narcotraffickers/>.

<sup>32</sup> Leland Lazarus and Alexander Gosco, "Triads, Snakeheads, and Flying Money: The Underworld of Chinese Criminal Networks in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Dialogo*, September 27, 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/triads-snakeheads-and-flying-money-the-underworld-of-chinese-criminal-networks-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>. See also R. Evan Ellis, "Chinese Organized Crime in Latin America," *Prism*, Vol. 4, No. 1, December 1, 2012, pp. 67-77, [https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism\\_4-1/prism64-77\\_ellis.pdf](https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_4-1/prism64-77_ellis.pdf).



through the region into the US through its southern border.<sup>33</sup>

With multiple political and economic crises in Latin America, migrant flows through the region, as well as the related criminal activities of human smuggling and human trafficking, has become an increasingly significant phenomenon. Eight million Venezuelans have been displaced from their country due to the economic collapse of that country and repression of dissidents by the Maduro regime,<sup>34</sup> with millions more poised to depart following the regime's robbery of the July 28, 2024 election and subsequent crackdown on protesters.<sup>35</sup>

The flow of Venezuelans through Colombia, Panama's Darien Gap, and the Central American isthmus to the United States, as well as southward along the Andes, has been compounded by large-scale

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<sup>33</sup> Huo Jingnan, "What drove last year's surge in Chinese migrants at the southern border?" *National Public Radio*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/07/nx-s1-5032835/chinese-migrants-southern-border>.

<sup>34</sup> Luciana Gandini and Andrew Seele, "Betting on Legality: Latin American and Caribbean Responses to the Venezuelan Displacement Crisis," *Migration Policy Institute*, May 2023, [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-venezuelans-legal-status-2023\\_eng\\_final.pdf#:~:text=More%20than%207.4%20million%20Venezuelans%20have%20left%20their,largest%20displacement%20crises%20anywhere%20in%20the%20modern%20world](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-venezuelans-legal-status-2023_eng_final.pdf#:~:text=More%20than%207.4%20million%20Venezuelans%20have%20left%20their,largest%20displacement%20crises%20anywhere%20in%20the%20modern%20world).

<sup>35</sup> "Losing Hope, Venezuelans Vow to Leave their Country if Maduro Wins," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/18/world/americas/venezuela-migration-election.html>.

exoduses of persons from Cuba, with the collapse of that nation's economy,<sup>36</sup> Haiti, with the degeneration of that nation through extreme gang violence there,<sup>37</sup> and Ecuador, with the takeoff of narco-related violence in that country.<sup>38</sup>

The millions of refugees flowing through the region have made human smuggling and trafficking across the region a business comparably lucrative to moving drugs.<sup>39</sup> That migration has also spread violent Venezuelan gangs such as Tren de Aragua throughout the region, from Colombia, to Peru, to Chile, to the U.S.,<sup>40</sup> preying on the desperation and vulnerability of

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<sup>36</sup> Natalia Favre, "https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64811310," *BBC*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-64811310>.

<sup>37</sup> Fritznel D. Octave, "Escalating violence in Haiti's capital causes exodus to province," *Haitian Times*, March 23, 2024, <https://haitiantimes.com/2024/03/23/haiti-capital-provinces-migration/#:~:text=On%20Wednesday%2C%20the%20International%20Organization%20for%20Migration%20%28IOM%29,the%20escalation%20of%20armed%20attacks%20and%20general%20violence.>

<sup>38</sup> Adriana Pérez and Alfredo Corchado, "A heartbreaking exodus: More people from Ecuador feel forced to migrate to the U.S." *Dallas News*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/immigration/2021/08/13/a-heartbreaking-exodus-more-people-from-ecuador-feel-forced-to-migrate-to-the-us/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Smuggling Migrants at the Border Now a Billion-Dollar Business," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/25/us/migrant-smuggling-evolution.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Josh Goodman, "US sanctions a Venezuela gang for spreading criminal activity across Latin America," *AP*, July 11, 2024,

fellow Venezuelan nationals. The flood of refugees has further changed the dynamics of informal criminal economies across the region. Security forces have been challenged to both control borders and facilitate the safety of refugees and the organizations attending to them, even while combatting the new gangs preying on those refugees.

The evolution of criminal flows in the region, in the context of hyperconnectivity, stressed democracies, and the erosion of the rules-based liberal order, is causing even more difficulties due to synergies between the new forms of crime, illicit groups, and capabilities. Illegal mining has become an effective vehicle for laundering cash earned in narcotics operations, while illegal logging also facilitates the smuggling of other goods.<sup>41</sup> In the Caribbean, expanded narcotics flows and associated illicit money, has supercharged the power of gangs, historically nurtured by politicians there to deliver votes. Supported by ready access to guns, principally from the United States,<sup>42</sup> those gangs have now produced

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<https://apnews.com/article/washington-venezuela-gang-sanctions-f742f6966d160ee80b703ed419dfdac3>.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, R. Evan Ellis, "The Evolution of Peru's Multidimensional Challenges: Transnational Organized Crime," *Center for Strategic Studies of the Peruvian Army (CEEPP)*, July 21, 2022, <https://ceeep.mil.pe/2022/07/21/the-evolution-of-peru-multidimensional-challenges-transnational-organized-crime/?lang=en>.

<sup>42</sup> "The Caribbean is awash with illegal American guns," *The Economist*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/10/05/the-caribbean-is-awash-with-illegal-american-guns>.

unprecedented levels of violence in countries like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago as they fight to control drug routes.<sup>43</sup>

In the climate domain, the number and intensity of hurricanes and tropical storms, droughts, floods, wildfires, and other weather phenomenon have strained the capabilities of Latin American security forces, already facing expanded requirements in other areas.<sup>44</sup> This has included record hurricane seasons such as that of 2021, the earliest Category 5 hurricane of the season (Beryl) in 2024, droughts that contributed to devastating crop loss and a foreign currency crisis in Argentina, unprecedented wildfires in central Chile in 2023, and in Bolivia and Brazil in 2024, and record flooding in Rio Grande Do Sul in April-May, 2024.<sup>45</sup> Temperature changes may also play a role in the expansion and geographic migration of mosquito populations, spreading a range of severe diseases such

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<sup>43</sup> Khalea Robertson and Brian Ellsworth, "Caribbean Murder Rates Are Spiraling As Illegal Guns Flood," *Americas Quarterly*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/caribbean-murder-rates-are-spiraling-as-illegal-guns-flood-in/>.

<sup>44</sup> See R. Evan Ellis, "Climate Change as a Regional Security Issue," *Journal of the Americas*, 3rd Edition, 2022, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JOTA/journals/Volume-4\\_Issue-3/03-Ellis\\_eng.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/JOTA/journals/Volume-4_Issue-3/03-Ellis_eng.pdf), pp. 183-198.

<sup>45</sup> Ana Ionova and Tanira Lebedeff, "Image of a Brazilian City Underwater," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/08/world/americas/brazil-flooding-photos.html#:~:text=Torrential%20rains%20have%20drenched%20the%20southern%20state%20of,killed%20and%20130%20others%20have%20been%20reported%20missing.>

as dengue, zika and chikunga,<sup>46</sup> creating public health crises.

Beyond the immediate effects of crime and climate, the stresses produced by those phenomenon, and previously discussed global factors involving technology, the rise of the PRC has contributed to the entrenchment of authoritarian states such as Venezuela and Nicaragua, and the deterioration of democracy in others, such as Honduras and El Salvador, with multiple effects in the security domain. The open complicity of regimes such as Venezuela in criminal activity in the region,<sup>47</sup> the refusal of others such as Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras, and to a degree Mexico, to cooperate with the US on issues of combatting crime.

In Venezuela, moves by the democratically unchecked Maduro regime to reassert historic claims over the vast Essequibo region of neighboring Guyana, with its significant mineral, timber and offshore oil resources, has resurrected a credible threat of interstate

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<sup>46</sup> Art Daniel, "Chikungunya virus surges in South America. But a new discovery could help outfox it," *National Public Radio*, August 18, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/08/18/1194392519/chikungunya-virus-surges-in-south-america-but-a-new-discovery-could-help-outfox>.

<sup>47</sup> "Nicolás Maduro: US charges Venezuelan president with 'narco-terrorism'," *BBC*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52053799>.

war,<sup>48</sup> not seen in the region since the 1995 Cenepa war between Peru and Ecuador.

At the same time, authoritarian anti-US regimes Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, and to a lesser degree, the Arce regime in Bolivia<sup>49</sup> and the Lula regime in Brazil,<sup>50</sup> have re-opened the region to engagement by Russia and Iran. Consequences include expanded risks of destabilization through information operations, advanced by the Russians in combination with the Venezuelans and Cubans in the region, as well as expanded activities by Qods forces and other Iranian

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<sup>48</sup> Regina Garcia Cano and Danica Coto, "Tensions are soaring between Guyana and Venezuela over a territorial dispute. Here's what to know," *Associated Press*, December 9, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-guyana-essequibo-territory-dispute-maduro-referendum-d956cc4d5d2a70e3a1e762b744e397de>.

<sup>49</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Bolivia, y los dilemas de Estados Unidos ante regímenes problemáticos en América Latina," *InfoBAE*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/america/opinion/2024/09/14/bolivia-y-los-dilemas-de-estados-unidos-ante-regimenes-problematicos-en-america-latina/>.

<sup>50</sup> Lisandra Paraguassu and Anthony Boadle, "Brazil's Lula draws Russian praise, U.S. scorn for Ukraine views," *Reuters*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-thanks-brazil-efforts-resolve-ukraine-war-2023-04-17/>.

agents, and surrogate groups such as Hezbollah,<sup>51</sup> involving money laundering and possibly terrorism.<sup>52</sup>

The combination of the consolidation of power by anti-US populist regimes in the region, willing to host military activities by extra-hemispheric adversaries of the US, combined with the risks of conflict involving those actors in other parts of the world, expands the possibility of terrorism or other military activity in the Western Hemisphere through the channel of those threat hosts. The risk of direct conflict between Israel and Iran in the Middle East increases the possibility of actions by Iranian agents such as its Qods Force, or surrogates such as Hezbollah, in regimes taking pro-US or Pro-Israel stances in the conflict. Similarly, the possible escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine to involve NATO, could lead Russia to leverage partners such as Nicaragua, Venezuela or Cuba to act against the US in its near abroad.

Finally, the increasing possibility of a conflict between the West and the PRC, possibly over moves by the latter against Taiwan, or its aggression against neighbors in the South and East China Seas, would

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<sup>51</sup> Joseph Humire, "Iran's Pattern of Penetration in Latin America," *Dialogo*, January 28, 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/irans-pattern-of-penetration-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>52</sup> R. Evan Ellis, "Iran's Re-engagement with Latin America," *Dialogo*, November 29, 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/irans-re-engagement-with-latin-america/>

likely have a Western Hemisphere component.<sup>53</sup> In such a conflict, the PRC would likely seek to leverage its commercial and military presence and relations in the region to impair US deployment and sustainment flows to the Indopacific and put the US homeland at risk. A conflict in the Indopacific could thus introduce a level of military conflict into Latin America not otherwise seen, including likely assistance by illiberal PRC partners in, or with a complimentary presence in the hemisphere.

With respect to details of such PRC wartime military activities in the Western Hemisphere, the PLA would likely leverage its signals intelligence and possible military training presence in Cuba.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the PLA and its partners could also use commercial facilities from which to stage special teams for attacking key US military installations in the Southeast United States from nearby locations in Central America and the Caribbean, as well as military facilities in the Southern Pacific coast of the US from nearby facilities in Mexico. The PRC could similarly use facilities in the region to disrupt supply chains in Mexico and Central America on which the US

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, R. Evan Ellis, "The Strategic Role of Latin America in a Global Conflict Over Taiwan," *Seguridad y Poder Terrestre*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January-March 2023, <https://revistas.ceeeep.mil.pe/index.php/seguridad-y-poder-terrestre/article/view/21/35>, pp. 113-131.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Pazzanese, "Chinese spies in Cuba? The problem runs deeper than that," *Harvard Gazette*, June 16, 2023, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/06/chinese-spies-in-cuba-problem-runs-deeper-than-that/>.



economy relied, create crises in partner nations to expand refugee flows, diverting resources for border control, and use expanded migrant flows to insert agents into the US to attack critical US infrastructure targets.

The PRC could use its familiarity with the Panama Canal to create deniable incidents shutting it down to traffic. It could also leverage its access to partner nation space facilities in the region, including the deep space radar operated by a subsidiary of the People's Liberation Army in Neuquén, Argentina,<sup>55</sup> to target US satellites, and support activities by its own space assets, including its recently tested Fractional Orbital Bombardment System, as part of the war in the Space domain in a future US-China conflict. Finally, the PRC could use access to commercial port facilities such as the 15-berth deepwater port it operates in Chancay, Peru,<sup>56</sup> to resupply its ships, serving as a base from which to project power in the eastern pacific, including against the Continental United States.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>5555</sup> Carlo J.V. Caro, "The Patagonian Enigma: China's Deep Space Station in Argentina," *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-patagonian-enigma-chinas-deep-space-station-in-argentina/>.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra Weiss, "Maritime superpower: China builds a mega-port in Peru and «out-boats» the competition," *Nueve Zuricher Zeitung*, July 25, 2024, <https://www.nzz.ch/english/chinas-mega-port-in-peru-poses-a-geopolitical-threat-ld.1840781>.

<sup>5757</sup> John Grady, "SOUTHCOM Commander Warns of Risk of Chinese Investment in South America, Caribbean," *USNI News*, March 12, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/03/12/southcom->

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# **The Responses of Latin American Security Forces**

The response of Latin American security forces to the evolving strategic environment has been limited by a lack of resources, made worse by the demands for whole-of-nation responses in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the increased operational demands for everything from border control to response to climate incidents. For this work, the author reached out to 30 senior Latin American defense officials, soliciting their off-the-record inputs on the responses of their armed forces to the changing environment.

Although each country in Latin America has faced a different set of specific challenges, and a different combination of needs to support other parts of the government, and legal frameworks to do so, in general, the focus of Latin American militaries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has evolved from a counterinsurgency focus, to a broader array of responsibility for public security, border security, support to operations against gangs and criminal groups, humanitarian assistance and disaster response missions, sometimes called “multidimensional security.”

Armed Forces in the region have sought to evolve their doctrines and organizations accordingly. Some

such as Colombia have defined the changes as “transformation.”<sup>58</sup> Others, such as Guatemala, have implemented new requirements-based planning systems to ensure that acquisitions of planned capabilities better match evolving needs,<sup>59</sup> although the results in the shifting environment, with severely constrained budgets have been indeterminate. In many cases, with resources not allocated by legislatures, and with changes in government, the Armed Forces have been forced to rely on opportunistic, piecemeal procurements that may be suboptimal from a long-term perspective.

The corresponding demands on resources and attention of the Armed Forces has caused some military officials in the region to worry about an erosion in their preparations for and ability to conduct traditional defense of national sovereignty against external threats, if called upon to do so.

Armed Forces of the region have sought to use greater international coordination, including bi-national frontier committees, regional bodies such as

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<sup>58</sup> “The Colombian Military and Globalization: A Strategic Evolution,” *Total Military Insight*, August 19,, 2024, <https://totalmilitaryinsight.com/colombian-military-and-globalization/>.

<sup>59</sup> R. Evan Ellis, “Working Paper: Guatemala’s Security Challenges and the Government’s Response,” *Florida International University*, July 23, 2024, <https://gordoninstitute.fiu.edu/news-events/the-policy-spotlight/2024/guatemalas-security-challenges-and-the-governments-response.html>.

the Interamerican Defense Board, the Defense Ministerial Conference of the Americas (CDMA),<sup>60</sup> the System of Cooperation of the American Air Forces (SICOFAA),<sup>61</sup> and the Central American Integration System (SICA), to name a few. They have sought to compliment U.S. led efforts with those led by other countries such as the Colombia Action Plan and the Colombia-led multilateral exercises of Operation Zeus.<sup>62</sup>

Overall, it is not clear whether the responses of the Armed Forces in the region have kept pace with the demanded changes. This includes the adequacy of new capabilities acquired, coordination across their governments, the evolution of doctrine and organizations, and the legal framework in which the

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<sup>60</sup> “Department of Defense Engagement in the Western Hemisphere,” U.S. Southern Command, official website, July 28, 2022, <https://www.southcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/3109199/departement-of-defense-engagement-in-the-western-hemisphere/#:~:text=CDMA%20is%20the%20premier%20hemispheric%20defense%20ministerial%20for,of%20the%20Americas%2C%20and%20convenes%20every%20two%20years>.

<sup>61</sup> Rachael Maxwell, “Air chiefs from across the Americas convene in a display of continued cooperation,” 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force, official website, July 2, 2024, <https://www.12af.acc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3824317/>.

<sup>62</sup> R. Evan Ellis, “Challenges of, Innovation among, and Cooperation Between Central American and Caribbean Air Forces,” *Dialogo*, September 18, 2024, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/challenges-of-innovation-among-and-cooperation-between-central-american-and-caribbean-air-forces/>.

Armed Forces of the region operate, with continuing direct contact with civilian populations for internal security and HA/DR missions.

While governments have often addressed the immediate legal questions involved in using their Armed Forces in non-traditional missions through states of emergency and similar vehicles, long-term questions of the appropriateness of their training, doctrine, equipment, and legal issues associated with such participation remain unaddressed. The later includes questions of the jurisdiction of military versus civilian tribunals for cases involving military officers and representation and payment of legal fees for those accused of wrongdoing.

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## Conclusion

Latin America is entering an era without precedent with respect to the challenges presented to democratic societies from the evolving nature of the strategic landscape, and the associated demands on public security forces. The demands on those security forces are only growing, because of the increasing frequency and complexity of those challenges, in the context of the fundamental role of those security forces to support the survival of their homelands. In the face of severe institutional and resource limitations, those security forces continue to make valiant efforts to respond and adapt to the requirements placed upon them. Nonetheless, the magnitude of the challenge calls for a fundamental reassessment of the question of preserving security in the Americas, the role of security forces in that task, and resources, authorities and changes they require to adequately perform those tasks.

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