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Shared Challenges and Military Partnerships in Central America and the Caribbean



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Global Americans Contributor



Chilean, Brazilian, and Peruvian air force colonels and liaison officers stand next to the Air Forces Southern sign in 2012. Source: U.S. Air Force photo / Senior Airman Brittany Dowdle.

December 5-9, 2022, I had the opportunity to support an event held by U.S. Air Forces Southern, with the military heads of our partner nation Air Forces in Central America and the Caribbean. The event included the “Air Chiefs,” as well as the senior enlisted leaders of our partner nation Air Forces. The engagement was an opportunity to discuss shared security challenges, strengthen relationships, and to improve our collaboration and coordination with partners in the region. The event included presentations and important dialogues between those present in a range of areas—highlighting the degree to which the United States and our partner nations have shared interests as it relates to the region’s prosperity, security, and democratic governance.

The event highlighted that, whether hurricanes, tropical storms, floods, or

require collaborative responses between the U.S. and partners in the region. This collaboration is particularly relevant for Central American and Caribbean militaries as they play a key role in national disaster response systems in their countries, with critical responsibilities in all phases, from planning and preparation, to support for evacuation of populations, to emergency response during the event itself, to helping to provide food, medical and other assistance and security both during and after the event. In the background of the discussions, the record-breaking 2020 Atlantic hurricane season and more recent major storms—such as Bonnie, Ian, Fiona, Julia, and Nicole—were reminders that likely increases in the frequency and severity of such weather events will impact the demand on partner nation militaries to supporting their governments and neighbors in the human assistance/disaster response (HA/DR) response to such events.

The interactions between U.S. and partner leaders also highlighted how global connectivity—including flows of people, goods, money, and information—increasingly ties world events and conditions, to the security and stability in the Americas. COVID-19 clearly illustrated this point—not only due to the pandemic’s health effects, but also its devastating impact on Central American and Caribbean economies. As in other regions, Central American and Caribbean militaries supported their government’s COVID-19 responses in a range of important—and resource demanding—ways. This included helping distribute food and medical supplies, providing hospital and transportation services, enforcing curfews and sanitary measures, and helping limit virus spreading movements of people within and across national frontiers. The significant, often unrecovered costs of these activities, including on equipment, personal, and operations costs, were a reminder of how the biological dimension of global interconnectivity can generate major requirements for which the Armed Forces must be prepared to respond and the need to cooperate and coordinate with partners across the region. Our discussion of challenges facing our region was also colored by the inflationary

vulnerable through large increases in prices of basic foodstuffs, as well as increased costs for transportation fuels, heating and cooking oil. In a number of countries, these have fueled public protests requiring the response of security forces.

In the domain of informational connectivity, cyberattacks—such as the Conti attack with its devastating impact on the Costa Rican government and economy—highlight the importance of working together on cybersecurity issues. Beyond cybersecurity, however, conversations about informational connectivity also touched on the challenge of social media and its manipulation on elections, public discourse, and public order.

Crime and insecurity was, of course, a key focus of the military leaders present. Topics discussed included drug production and flows, illegal mining and logging, IUU fishing, money laundering, and challenges stemming from immigration. For me, data highlighting the increasing role of Venezuela in the flow of drugs from South America toward both U.S. and European destinations was critical. These flows impact the Dominican Republic and rest of the Caribbean, as well as Guyana and Suriname, for which there are a substantial number of illicit air and maritime transits. This is an issue that arguably deserves more attention in Washington. Discussions at the event also touched upon the access to arms and how they contribute to violence across the region.

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If many of the interactions between the U.S., Central American, and Caribbean Air Force leaders focused on the challenges affecting the region, the discussion of ways to better work together and strengthen collective capabilities was equally as important. These included discussions of the work of the Regional Security System (RSS) as a vehicle for responding to HA/DR and counterdrug missions, among others. Participants also discussed the important role of the System of Cooperation among American Air Forces (SICOFAA) in facilitating collaboration, and areas where its work could be extended.

We also had a number of discussions of U.S.-led contributions to regional collaboration and organizations—such as Continuing Promise and Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S). Discussions among the Air Chiefs and other event participants also highlighted ways that the United States could help partners in domains such as cybersecurity and space as well as provide geospatial and data tools for Enhanced Domain Awareness.

Less discussed, but part of the context, were the range of programs in which the United States continues to augment the capabilities of partners. These are not just symbolic—as often occurs with countries engaging with the militaries of the region—but are determined through discussions that we have with our partners regarding their needs and capabilities. Just in recent months, this support has included delivery of a C-208 aircraft to the Belize Defense Force, two Bell 412 helicopters for Guatemala, a Beechcraft King Air 250 donated to Panama, a similar aircraft currently on order for Costa Rica, and 5 MD-30 helicopters for El Salvador as well as funding to support their use in that nation's contribution to the International Peacekeeping Force in Mali, among other items.

Beyond material items, we also discussed U.S. perspectives on bolstering both our own and partner nation capabilities through more effectively leveraging

initiatives, we highlighted better leveraging the potential of female members and leaders of the armed forces through the “[Women’s Peace and Security](#)” program, as well as leveraging the initiative and capabilities of enlisted leaders (NCOs), areas in which the U.S. brings perspectives and experience to the table that distinguish it from the military engagement of non-democratic actors also [offering training](#) to the region. We spent some time, for example, achievements of partners such as the Dominican Republic with their NCOs. We also spent some time discussing the contribution of Ukrainian NCOs in that nation’s fight. Although Russia has the vast numerical superiority of invading forces, they largely lack a professionalized NCO corps. These are areas in which the United States brings perspectives and experience to the table that distinguish it from the military engagement of non-democratic actors that [offer training](#) to the region.

Beyond ways in which the United States continues to support and work with partner nation Air Forces in Central America and the Caribbean, our discussions at the event touched on the important contributions of other partners such as Colombia and Mexico—both of whom were represented at the event. Specifically, we discussed the ways in which Colombia and Mexico have helped the region by hosting Caribbean and Central American personnel at their professional military education (PME) and training institutions. We also discussed their operational support such as through Colombia’s Operation Zeus and Zeus-related collaboration with partners across the region. In addition, we discussed contributions to region-wide capability and interoperability by other partners—including Jamaica’s [Caribbean Military Academy](#) and its aviation training programs.

While not explicitly on the agenda, the question of the region’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China, about which our partners have a range of perspectives, was arguably in the minds of many at the event. In recent years, China’s People’s Liberation Army has [actively courted security forces](#) in both

recognizing the PRC send personnel to courses at the PRC National Defense University in Champing, among other institutions. The PLA Navy Hospital Ship “Peace Arc” has visited the region three times—in 2011, 2015, and 2018-2019—making multiple stops in the Caribbean on each occasion. From 2004 through 2012, PLA military police participated in the MINUSTAH Peacekeeping force in Haiti.

The Chinese have made regular donations and sales of military equipment to the region, including providing Y-12 aircraft to Guyana and Costa Rica, none of which continue in service. The PRC has built a police training facility for Costa Rica. They have donated motorcycles, police cars, construction vehicles, ambulances, and other equipment to Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.

Chinese companies operate commercial ports in the Bahamas and Panama, which could potentially be used by the PLA Navy even without a military basing agreement—just as occurred with PLA Navy use of Hanbantota in Sri Lanka. The Chinese also have interest in ports in Costa Rica, Jamaica, and El Salvador and have previously expressed interest in developing and operating the port of Manzanillo on the north side of the Dominican Republic.

On the diplomatic front, 7 of the last 14 governments in the world diplomatically recognizing the Republic of China (ROC, or “Taiwan”) are located in Central America and the Caribbean. This highlights that decisions by their governments to stand by or abandon their Taiwanese friends could have a meaningful impact in emboldening the PRC to attempt to forcibly take over Taiwan—potentially unleashing a war of global scope. This could have not only grave economic impacts on the Western Hemisphere, but see operations by Chinese intelligence personnel (MSS), special forces, and even the PLA in the region.

If there was an underlying theme of the gathering of the Central American and Caribbean Air Chiefs and Senior Enlisted Leaders in Tucson, it was not “preventing the region from engaging with China,” but rather of strengthening cooperation with the region in the face of shared challenges and looking for how the United States could be a better, more effective partner.

To their credit, the military leaders gathered in Tucson made important advances in working effectively together within the framework of the resources and policies established by our elected civilian leaders. As I took encouragement from the very positive engagement, I also reflected on the enormity of the challenges affecting the region to which the United States is most closely tied through bonds of geography, commerce and family. I was reminded that it is critical that our elected leaders in Washington provide both the resources and authorities commensurate with the magnitude of the challenge and commensurate with the importance for us to collectively succeed.

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