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# Paraguay's Security Challenges and the Government Response

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## **Introduction**

The land-locked South American country of Paraguay receives little attention in Washington D.C. relative to its strategic importance for the region and the U.S. It is larger than Germany, and like Germany, its impact, and the nature of its challenges, begin with its central location in the continent. That centrality gives Paraguay enormous, largely unrealized potential as a regional logistics hub, as well as a low-cost point of access to the South American Common Market (MERCOSUR), of which it is a part.

Paraguay's central location also means that its economy and security are closely tied to the conditions and activities of its neighbors. Its export of agricultural products to international markets depends substantially on access to the Atlantic via the Paraguay and Parana rivers, impacted by decisions by neighboring Argentina regarding the dredging of, and tolls on the Paraná River.<sup>[1]</sup> Its electricity and a portion of its national income derives from the Itaipu hydroelectric facility that it shares with Brazil, and secondarily, the Yacyreta facility it shares with Argentina, giving importance to the price that Paraguay receives for the surplus portion of its electricity, which it sells back to Brazil.

In the criminal economy of the region, Paraguay's centrality means that a substantial portion of the cocaine produced by Bolivia and Peru to Paraguay's northwest, passes through the country en route to Argentina and Brazil to its southeast, headed for Europe's expanding drug consumption market. The fertile agricultural land in the east of the country has also made Paraguay the major supplier of marijuana for the continent.

The access that Paraguay affords to the Brazilian and Argentine markets through Mercosur has transformed Ciudad del Este, which borders both neighbors, into not only a hub for manufacturing and trade, but also a center of the illicit economy and a base of operations for the Islamic extremist organization Hezbollah. The demand for guns by the large number of violent gangs in neighboring Brazil, has transformed the country into a center of firearms trafficking for the region.

Paraguay's response to such challenges has historically been impaired by a corrosive feedback effect between the corrupting effect of such illicit economies, and the weakness of Paraguay's institutions.

In August 2023, Santiago Peña was elected President of Paraguay. He has brought energy and innovative initiatives in the fight against organized crime and a commitment to working closely with the United States, as well as Israel and Taiwan, for which Paraguay is strategically important as the last country in South America that recognizes it, and its geographically largest partner. At the same time, the continuing strong influence in the country of Peña's political patron and former President Horacio Cartes, called out by the U.S. State Department for "significant corruption,"<sup>[2]</sup> raises questions regarding the limitations Peña will face in combatting such challenges to their core. This work examines the significant multidimensional challenges facing Paraguay, and the response of the Peña government, in conjunction with its international partners.

## **Paraguay's Security Challenges**

Paraguay's security challenges are multifaceted, dominated, but not limited to, mutually reinforcing issues of transnational organized crime, with both internally and externally based criminal groups. The nation's security situation is paradoxical, with high levels of corruption and criminality contrasting with a relatively low level of public insecurity. Paraguay's homicide rate in 2023 was a mere 6.2/100,000 people, [3] among the lowest in the region. At the same time, the country was designated by BBC's *Global Organized Crime Index* as the 4<sup>th</sup> largest hotspot for organized crime in the world.[4] Paraguay scored a mere 28 out of 100 on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, ranking it 136<sup>th</sup> of the 180 countries surveyed.[5]

**Cocaine.** Cocaine produced principally in Peru and Bolivia, to Paraguay's north, transits the country toward Brazil and Argentina, to the southeast, facilitated by both local and external armed groups, in the process nurturing and stimulating fights between them for the control of those routes. Cocaine generally enters from neighboring Bolivia via both land and air routes across the Chaco, the vast, sparsely inhabited northwestern portion of the country, facilitated by a lack of radar coverage and flat terrain with large private properties in which narco airstrips can be built. In the east of Paraguay, a long, dry land border with Brazil facilitates smuggling of cocaine and other substances into Brazil, including near the city of Pedro Juan Caballero, which has become a key node in Paraguay's criminal economy.[6] In the south, numerous, poorly controlled river ports facilitate smuggling into Argentina. Although Paraguay's counterdrug organization seized only .6 metric tons of cocaine in 2023, less than 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of the 739.5 metric tons seized by Colombia that year,[7] the discrepancy arguably reflects the failure to detect and stop cocaine flows, more than their absence.

Brazil's powerful First Capital Command (PCC) has established a significant presence in Paraguay, largely through the cocaine trade, although its principal Brazilian rival the Red Command (CV),[8] and the smaller group "Bullet in the Face" (*Bala na cara*)[9] have established a presence as well. Homegrown Paraguayan criminal organizations, most notably the Rotella clan, which expanded from a base in microtrafficking[10] to an estimated size of 1,000 persons,[11] have compete with their Brazilian rivals over drug routes.

Each of the groups have established a significant presence and influence in Paraguay's prisons. The PCC notably expanded its presence from 2010, with over 500 members of the PCC in Paraguayan penitentiaries.[12] The groups have periodically had violent clashes within Paraguayan prisons, illustrating the limited reach of state control there, including violent incidents in San Pedro prison in 2019, and in Misiones in 2020. [13]

The Rotela clan came to occupy a particularly strong presence in the Tacumbu prison, [14] turning the overcrowded facility into a center for the coordination of operations and recruitment by the criminal groups. The extent of the Rotela clan's power in Tacumbu was highlighted in October 2023, when gang members took over the facility, taking multiple guards hostage.[15]

**Marijuana.** The fertile soil of the agricultural land in the east of Paraguay, coupled with relatively weak state presence, has made the area the principal source of marijuana exports for South America,[16] including supplying contraband marijuana even to areas such as Uruguay in which it has been legalized. An estimated 7,000 hectares are under cultivation for marijuana in the country,[17] with a particular

concentration in the departments of Amambay,[18] Canindeyú, and Caaguazú. As with cocaine, Paraguay's long dry land border with Brazil, and international river access to Argentina, facilitates transshipment of marijuana into both countries.

**Arms Trafficking.** Paraguay has become a key supplier of arms to criminal groups in the region. The demand for arms from Paraguay is facilitated by an estimated 73 criminal groups in neighboring Brazil,[19] coupled with weak controls over the importation of arms on the Paraguayan side.[20] Arms acquired from the United States for \$800-\$1,000 are reportedly sold to criminal groups in Paraguay for as much as \$20,000.[21] In one scheme, involving complicity within the arms import supervision organization of Paraguay's own military, DIMABEL, some 43,000 arms worth \$243 million were imported into the country over three years.[22]

Ciudad del Este has become an important hub for the legal importation of arms into Paraguay, as well as the acquisition of arms illicitly obtained from military and other sources, with an industry for laundering the arms and removing identifying serial numbers, before smuggling them into Brazil and other destinations.

**Hezbollah.** The Iranian-backed Islamic extremist group Hezbollah has established itself in Paraguay. Its operations are concentrated in Ciudad del Este and the "tri-border" area of adjacent Brazil and Argentina more broadly, taking advantage of significant licit and illicit commerce in the region to raise money for the group's global operations. Operation Mendaz, conducted in 2015 by Paraguayan and other authorities, highlighted the presence of Hezbollah leaders in the area.[23]

The continuing activities of Hezbollah in Ciudad del Este was highlighted in 2022, when a cargo airliner operated by the Venezuelan front company Emtrasur, and carrying senior Hezbollah and Iranian operatives, made a stop in the city, before going on to Aruba, transporting a cargo of cigarettes[24] affiliated with the company of former Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes. U.S. authorities have indicated that there is credible evidence linking Cartes to Hezbollah financial activities.[25]

The possible escalation of the conflict in the Middle East to involve large-scale direct fighting between Iran and Israel, and possibly the United States, could shift Hezbollah's posture from principally raising money in Paraguay, to planning and executing terrorist operations. Should such a shift occur, the physical presence of Hezbollah in Paraguay and the strongly pro-Israel stance of the Peña government makes the country one of many potential targets in the region.

**Paraguayan Popular Army.** The Paraguayan Popular Army (EPP) has operated for at least two decades in the east of the country with a minor, albeit persistent presence there. The EPP emerged from the Free Fatherland party in 1992. It emerged onto the national scene in 2004 with the kidnapping of Cecilia Cubas, daughter of former Paraguayan President Raul Cubas. In 2008, it began conducting its first public terrorist attacks in the country, beginning with the destruction of farm equipment in the department of Concepcion in March, and an attack on the Tacuati military facility in the department of San Pedro in December of that year.[26] Despite the Paraguayan government's deployment of a joint military-police task force of several thousand persons to the east of the country where it operates, the group has persisted. The 2012 destitution of leftist Paraguayan President and Catholic Bishop Fernando Lugo arguably convinced many in the EPP and their supporters of the impossibility of working for social justice within the Paraguayan state, encouraging them to persist in the armed struggle.

Key leaders including Carmen Villalba have been arrested,[27] and others killed or imprisoned, including senior EPP figure Osvaldo Villalba, killed by Paraguay's Joint Task Force in October 2022.[28]

In 2014, a fraction of the group split off, calling itself the ACA, with most of that splinter group subsequently arrested or killed by authorities. A portion of the organization, including its support group, lives outside the country, including in Argentina, as highlighted by the arrest in April 2024 of relatives of Carmen Villalba, who were living in the north of that country, in Operation *Alas Rotas* (broken wings). [29]

The size of the EPP has dwindled modestly from prior estimates of 150 adherents,[30] to currently approximately 20—30 full-time members.[31] It is currently believed to be dominated by one of its fractions, the “Indigenous brigade.” [32]

Despite such weakening, the PCC has continued to sporadically make its presence felt in the region. In 2020, the group kidnapped former Vice President Oscar Davis, who had played a role in the removal of former leftist President Fernando Lugo.[33] In April 2022, it used an improvised explosive device (IED) to ambush a Paraguayan government security patrol, wounding three.[34]

### **The Paraguayan Government Response**

The Paraguayan government response to the nation's diverse array of security challenges has been complicated by the significant corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies permeating the nation's institutions. Nonetheless, the current administration of Santiago Peña has taken promising initial steps to address those challenges, in conjunction with partners such as Brazil and the United States.

For leading and coordinating the whole-of-government response to Paraguay's security challenges, President Peña has substantially expanded the use of the National Security Council, assisted by its secretary general, ADML® Cibar Benitez.[35]

In intelligence matters, the Peña government is working to strengthen the civilian National Intelligence Secretariat (SNI), under the leadership of Marcos Alcaraz, who is relatively well respected in Paraguayan and external circles.[36] SNI is nonetheless working to overcome a substantial turnover of personnel, due to the government's replacement of personnel close to the prior administration of Mario Abdo Benitez with its own. [37]

In the fight against organized crime, the government has demonstrated commitment and progress through a number of operations involving cooperation between agencies.

In *Operation Ignis*, in December 2023 in Canindeyú, the Paraguayan counterdrug organization SENAD, working in conjunction with the Joint Task Force, the national police, and Brazilian authorities, took down “Macho,” a key leader of the PCC, killing 9, arresting 10, and confiscating a substantial quantity of weaponry used by the group. [38] For security experts, although the impact of the operation on narcotrafficking flows and criminal groups was limited, it demonstrated a laudable amount of interagency and international coordination.[39]

The Paraguayan military is also improving its coordination against narcotrafficking through joint and international activities such as its Basalto series of exercises, in which SENAD, the Joint Task Force and other Paraguayan entities work with their Brazilian counterparts in operations against drugs.[40]

With respect to the previously noted challenge of prison control, in operation Veneratio, Paraguay's government, successfully planned and executed a mission to retake control of the Tacumbu prison, moving Javier Rotela, head of the Rotela clan which had dominated the prison, and 700 other inmates, to other locations around the country.[41] The operation involved over 1,000 police personnel, with 1,200 members of the military operating in support to guard the perimeter. The large-scale operation, planned in secret over three months without apparent major leaks, and incorporating electronic warfare, deception operations, and other sophisticated elements, [42] was successfully conducted against an entrenched prison population with only one police casualty and approximately a dozen prisoners injured. The operation also notably employed CODENA for Presidential-level management and coordination. [43]

In operation *Nuevo Alianza*, Paraguayan authorities made a major push against the country's marijuana crops, eradicating 235 hectares of marijuana,[44] and seizing over 60 metric tons in 39 separate operations.[45] Nonetheless, while an important achievement, the amount of marijuana impacted was only a tiny portion of that produced in the country.[46] Some experts interviewed for this article noted a pattern of periodic operations against marijuana crops without meaningfully reducing overall production. [47]

At the micro level, the Peña administration has launched Operation Sumar, to discourage drug use among Paraguayan youth,[48] although due to its newness, its effect thus far is unclear.

In operation Pergatorio/Joapy, Paraguay, operating in conjunction with Brazil, successfully identified and deported to Brazil members of Brazilian gangs PCC, CV and Bala Na Cara, previously interned without knowledge of their Brazilian criminal group affiliations in multiple Paraguayan prisons.[49] The operation illustrated heightened Paraguayan interagency coordination, as well as an improved access to and use of intelligence from Brazil. [50]

In operation Dakovo, in December 2023, Paraguayan authorities, again operating with their Brazilian counterparts, cracked down on a major weapons trafficking ring, involving an Argentine businessman and his widely known company *Auto Supply*, the former head of the Paraguayan Air Force Arturo Gonzalez, and the Paraguayan military's oversight organization for importing arms, DIAMBEL.[51] Operation Dakovo highlighted the extent of the problem and the complicity of corrupted elements within the military and government, yet as with Operation Purgatorio/Joapy, it also demonstrated the government's willingness to take steps to address the problem, and its improved coordination with and support from Brazil.

Beyond the aforementioned high profile operations in recent months, Paraguay has also demonstrated improvement in the use of its Joint Task Force, [52] leading it to deploy the organization to additional sites to combat criminal organizations including Pedro Juan Caballero, a strategic location for drug trafficking and other activities on the dry border with Brazil, as well as in the department of Canindeyú.[53]

As an outgrowth of the previously mentioned ambush of JTF members using an IED in 2023, the military also spent \$3 million to acquire four Typhoon MRAP armored vehicles from the United Arab Emirates for the Internal Defense Operations Command (CODI) to better protect themselves from such threats in operations in the future from such attacks.[54]

Beyond the JTF, the Peña government is seeking to acquire radars and interceptor aircraft to control its airspace, although the source for funding for both are unclear. [55] In support of a recently passed Paraguayan law requiring the government to assure control over Paraguayan airspace, the government is seeking to acquire as many as nine radars, with initial acquisition of 4-5 units for high priority strategic locations, in order to control parts of the airspace currently most exploited by narcotraffickers, such as the Chaco. The estimated cost of the initial units is approximately \$120 million.

As a compliment to the radars, the Paraguayan air force is considering purchasing six new Tucano AT-29s and refurbishing another six Tucano AT-27s at a total cost of an additional \$121 million.[56] By contrast to some other countries exploring the deployment of radars and interceptors to combat the use of national airspace by narcotraffickers and other criminal groups, Paraguay already has in place laws governing non-lethal intercepts which help to address some of the potential risks the acquisition of such capabilities raise.

To better control its rivers, Paraguay is receiving 10 patrol boats from the United States as a gift, including two larger vessels, and in 2022, spoke with Colombia's naval shipyard COTECMAR regarding possible purchases of other vessels.[57]

To further support combatting insecurity, the Peña government is expanding the size of the police force at an aspired to rate of 5,000 per year, from 24,000 to as many as 60,000.[58] The mechanism of that expansion is unclear, however, given that the capacity of the Paraguayan police academy is only 1,000 persons for a program that requires two years to complete. The source of resources to maintain such a greatly expanded force are also unclear. [59]

Within the police, the Peña government is also expanding the size of a special motorcycle-mobile urban police force, Lince, by at least 1,200 members. In support of that expansion, the government of Taiwan has made an important donation of 600 motorcycles.[60]

In the domain of combatting money laundering, Paraguay's Financial Intelligence Unit SEPRELAD is relatively well respected, and in 2023, passed its reciprocal review with the Latin American branch of the Financial Action Task Force (GAFI-LAT), albeit with some problems. Partially in recognition for its achievements, in 2024 the administrator of SEPRELAD, Liliana Alcaraz, was named President Pro Tempore of GAFI—LAT.[61]

In addressing its security challenges, both Taiwan and the U.S. play an important role as partners to the Peña administration, in addition to Taiwan's previously noted donation of 600 motorcycles to Lince, it has provided 16 helicopters and 30 HMMWVs to their armed forces in recent years, as well as sponsoring training for Paraguayan officers in Taiwan. The U.S. also supports Paraguay through multiple training and

equipment programs. Indeed, in addition to the previously noted program providing patrol boats for river control, it has doubled doubling billets for training Paraguayan military officials in U.S. institutions.[62]

## Conclusions

The Peña government has showed commitment, innovation, and some initial progress in addressing Paraguay's complex, and multidimensional security challenges. Given the scope of the criminal flows through Paraguay, questions over resources to support the government's initiatives, and the weakness of Paraguayan institutions battling endemic corruption, Paraguay's ability to make substantial gains over the long term is by no means clear.

Paraguay's success or failure in doing so will have significant implications for its neighbors, tied to Paraguay by those illicit flows, as well as the future of the country, and by extension, the United States and Taiwan, both of which rely on Paraguay as one of their few remaining close partners in the region.

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