



US Department of Defense Role in Addressing Extra-hemispheric State Rivals in Latin America and the Caribbean



British Prime minister Winston Churchill (L), U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt (C) and USSR Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party (PCUS), Joseph Stalin (R) pose at the start of the Conference of the Allied powers in Yalta, Crimea, on February 4, 1945 at the end of World War II. During the conference, "The Big Three" (Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill) decided the demilitarization of Germany and carved out their own post-war zones of influence across the globe. (Photo: Farabolafoto/Leemage via AFP)

By **Dr. Robert Evan Ellis*
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The engagement of extra-hemispheric state rivals to the United States in Latin America is an increasingly acknowledged strategic challenge to the U.S. and the region that requires a whole-of-government response, including a supporting role by the U.S. military. The character of that challenge, however, is substantially different than the efforts by the Soviet Union and its proxies to destabilize and overthrow pro-U.S. governments during the Cold War. Moreover, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, and Iran, as the principal three U.S. extra-hemispheric rivals in Latin America have different goals, resources, motivations, and associated sensitivities as each engages in the region. That engagement sometimes integrates but is not always coordinated among those three and other extra-hemispheric rivals.

The centrality of economic activities as the key focus of engagement by the PRC, as the extra-hemispheric actor that presents the far most significant strategic challenge to the U.S. and the West, means that the greatest threat to the U.S. military, in protecting its partnerships and access to the region in the complex and interdependent regional environment, comes not from insurgencies, but from the political influence and transformation of the socioeconomic fabric of the region that is fueled by that Chinese engagement.

Those impacts build upon enabling conditions such as endemic corruption and poor performance by the region's government, opening spaces for crises that bring leftist populist governments to power through initially democratic elections, then hijack those institutions, in the face of tepid popular commitments to procedural democracy to consolidate power, creating both needs and opportunities for the new authoritarian populists to expand engagement with China, Russia, Iran, and other U.S. rivals. That support to the authoritarian populists includes not only commerce, investments, and loans, but also information and surveillance architectures, military, and other forms of security engagement that helps the anti-U.S. regimes lock in their power, decreasing security and other cooperation with the U.S., and fomenting leftist populist political change in other parts of the hemisphere, while deepening their engagement with and dependence on extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals.

Leftist populist regimes

As 2021 drew to a close, leftist populist regimes leveraging or deepening relationships with extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals included Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Peru, with troubling prospects for additional turns to the left for Honduras,

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Even in countries not governed by authoritarian populist governments, commercial engagement by the PRC as the principal U.S. geopolitical rival, and its impact as an alternative development model and source of resources, has arguably undercut the U.S. agenda and strategic position in the region.

While the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has given increasing attention to supporting U.S. government efforts to respond to extra-hemispheric rival actors (external state actors or ESAs) in the region, it is not clear whether it currently has the resources, capabilities, or focus to do so effectively.

In the current environment, simply providing additional resources, or incrementally adjusting and improving DoD performance of its traditional missions in Latin America and the Caribbean (or elsewhere) is insufficient to meaningfully impact the advance of ESAs in the region. If it is to succeed in this mission, the U.S. military must develop new and realistic strategic concepts for how it brings its capabilities to bear as part of a whole-of-government effort, coordinated with international partners and the actors in its operating environment, to effectively address the ESA challenge.

Elements of the solution

The internationally coordinated, whole-of-government effort in which the supporting activities of the U.S. military are rooted should not try to prevent partners in the region from engaging with the PRC, but rather, to use U.S. diplomatic, economic, and other sources of leverage to push for that partner engagement to occur in the context of transparency, rule of law, and a level playing field in which all have an equal opportunity to participate. It should help to improve the competence of partner institutions for planning, soliciting, and evaluating development projects, and equally enforcing national laws for those chosen to work in the country. Trying to block engagement with the PRC would both be ineffective and generate resentment among our partners. Instead, helping to advance transparency, rule of law, a level playing field, and realizing projects through competent institutions will decrease opportunities for corrupt or predatory behavior by Chinese and other partners, while ensuring that the people of the region perceive that democratic institutions coupled with a law-based, market-oriented approach can bring tangible improvement to their lives.

Within such a framework, the role of the U.S. military should combine traditional missions in the region with adaptations supporting transparency, rule of law, strengthening partner nations' institutions, and actions in select areas to resist ESA advances. The U.S. military should also expand its risk assessment to accommodate long-run threats to its access as partner of choice, and to the advance of rivals in the region that come from outside its relationships with their militaries and other security partners, to include the leverage and corrupting effects of adversary presence in the economy, relationships of influence with political elites, and changes of government that bring to power new leaders less disposed to work with the U.S., and more oriented toward its rivals.

The concepts involved are complex and far-reaching, entailing activities oriented toward both peacetime engagement and contingencies for wartime. They implicitly involve enhancement and re-thinking of civil affairs, public affairs, and psychological operations roles, among others, as well as the scenarios for which special forces and other units assigned to the commonly called Area of Responsibility (AOR) prepare themselves and partner nations for. The activities involved can be understood in terms of five interrelated lines of action:

Show and Leverage Value to Partners. The intelligence, training and professional military education, materiel, exercises, and implicit security guarantees, and other forms of U.S. support are of value to our partners in the region, and often considered of higher quality than that offered by competitors such as the PRC, Russia, or Iran. By maintaining, expanding, and improving that offering, including removing impediments to working with our partner institutions in the way they most prefer (e.g. with military organizations supporting internal security work consistent with their Constitution and laws), the U.S. military not only bolsters the capability of its partners, but incentivizes the continuity of that relationship against alternative choices that would jeopardize it. To this end, the U.S. should combine its demonstration of value with credible positions regarding why partner nations' adoption of Chinese telecommunications, e-commerce, and smart cities technologies, or expanded engagement by ESA security institutions could inhibit U.S. cooperation and its ability to share sensitive intelligence and other information. Such conditionality must be truthful and credible, however, and not advanced as threats that, if partner nations ignore, could actually oblige the U.S. to unnecessarily cede terrain to U.S. rivals, or be forced to reverse itself in ways that hurt U.S. credibility.

Communicate the Threat. As a complement to public diplomacy, in which the U.S. State Department has the lead, DoD plays an important role through senior officials, public affairs officers, and directly through activities with regional partners, in communicating the threat presented by extra-hemispheric rivals in the region. This includes using intelligence and engagements in a focused manner to collect data on the difficulties and harms incurred by partners through their engagement with Chinese companies and other actors, effectively communicating such problems through DoD engagement with its security partners and making that data available to DoD and other U.S. government leadership. Such communication includes sharing information and helping to make the case to publics in the region regarding bad deals and questionable contracts with Chinese actors. Disseminating credible



Participants from several countries pose for a photo at Guyana's Colonel Robert Mitchell Jungle and Amphibious Training School prior to visiting some of the Tradewinds training sites, June 17, 2021. Tradewinds is a U.S. Southern Command-sponsored Caribbean security-focused exercise in the ground, air, sea, and cyber domains, working with partner nations to conduct joint, combined, and interagency training, focused on increasing regional cooperation and stability. (Photo: U.S. Army Lieutenant Elizabeth Allen)



information regarding such risks can bring pressure on leaders. As a compliment, DoD entities, through engagement with partner security institutions, in coordination with the U.S. embassy team, can share information of concern to partner nation elites who may be adversely affected, so that those partners, can use the information in their own institutional battles to resist such engagements. DoD communication options also includes using institutional channels, where appropriate, to indicate to leaders contemplating such actions the potential consequences, from a security cooperation perspective, of the engagements they are contemplating.

Help Maintain and Strengthen Partner Institutions. DoD security assistance and security sector assistance has long contributed to the functionality of partner nations' institutions in a variety of ways. These include directly improving partner performance through training and equipping. It also includes helping them to control corruption through supporting their monitoring and testing of personnel, and indirectly by supporting their efforts to combat the corrupting influence of illicit flows of drugs, mining, goods, persons, and money, as well as by attacking and dismantling the organizations involved in such criminal activities. In the process, DoD support contributes to the perceived performance of democratic, market-oriented regimes as a bulwark against the capture of power by populist leaders, which empirically have deepened their country's relationship with China and other extra-hemispheric actors in troubling ways, as noted in the introduction.

Nonetheless, DoD strategic concepts, doctrine, and capabilities must do more to focus such security assistance and its contribution to the functionality of partner nations' regimes, rather than simply as an instrument of fostering goodwill or keeping drugs and economic migrants out of the U.S. Doing so requires not only new capabilities and increased resources, but also a re-examination of the authorities embedded in the National Defense Authorization Act, and other policies, to ensure that DoD contributions are as responsive and coordinated with partner nations' needs and preferred methods of engagement as possible.

Leverage Partner Insights and Institutional Positions. As suggested previously, the strong relationships and value-added DoD provides to partner nations through security cooperation potentially position them as institutional advocates within their societies in achieving the strategic objectives in limiting and channeling engagement by extra-hemispheric rivals described at the beginning of this paper. That includes leveraging the security institutions of aligned partner nations to advocate for transparency and adherence to rule of law and a level playing field in engaging with such actors. It includes using their advocacy within their governments to help limit certain ESA engagements in intelligence-sensitive telecommunications, e-commerce, and surveillance architectures and security cooperation.

To the extent that populist leaders come to power, or partner elites sympathetic with ESAs begin to covertly advance more troubling forms of engagement with them, friends of the U.S. within the security institutions of partner nations may also serve as an important resource for understanding, and potentially heading off, undesirable behaviors.

Assess and Defend Against Wartime Threats from Region. In the context of preparations for a future war, DoD should plan for attempts by ESAs to conduct operations in the Western Hemisphere, just as U.S. opponents sought to do during both World War I and World War II. Such actions might include insertion of intelligence agents or special forces in the region, with the objective of creating diversionary crises, or striking against U.S. deployment and sustainment flows, the U.S. economy, food supply, or the U.S. homeland itself. Such threats dictate that DoD should create contingency plans, risk assessments, and expand its intelligence and other cooperation in the region to identify and respond to such possibilities. Doing so may imply both expanded capabilities to help defend partner nations against such attacks, as well as plans and training with partner nations to respond to such threats if launched against the U.S. from partner nations' territories or waters.

Finally, even without formal military alliances and basing agreements, the U.S. must anticipate the possibility that, in the context of such a conflict, one or more states in the region may permit use of their ports, airfields, or other facilities to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Particularly because the U.S. has so long treated Latin America and the Caribbean as a zone free of military threats from geopolitical rivals, the U.S. should now start developing contingencies for neutralizing such threats, potentially leveraging friendly forces from the State permitting wartime access by the PLA, and neighboring countries, to include credible plans by the U.S. to defend those neighboring States and friendly forces from the Chinese, in exchange for their support.

Toward the future

The development of appropriate new DoD strategic concepts calls for work by both the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and simultaneously, each of the Services within DoD.

While this article has focused on ESAs in Latin America and the Caribbean as the area in which their presence most directly threaten the homeland and by extension the U.S. strategic position, the development of strategic concepts and supporting plans and doctrine to address the challenge arguably has relevance for every part of the world, adjusted for the particular situations and U.S.-ESA relationships there. The challenge of ESAs takes the U.S. and DoD into new territory, which is different from both business as usual in the fight against terrorist and criminal actors, as well as from the Cold War, waged against an economically less capable adversary in a less interdependent era. It is incumbent on DoD, as part of a broader U.S. response, to adopt its thinking, resource, and action accordingly.

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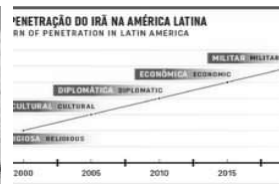
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