



SMART NEWS & RESEARCH FOR LATIN AMERICA'S CHANGEMAKERS

# **The Defense Department's Role in Addressing Extra- Hemispheric State Rivals in Latin America and the Caribbean**



Evan Ellis | December 8, 2021  
Global Americans Contributor



*Photo: Gen. Laura Richardson, Commander of U.S. Southern Command, meets with Brazilian Defense Minister Walter Braga Netto / U.S. Embassy Colombia*

This work examines the role of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in responding to the challenge of extra-hemispheric actors in Latin America and the Caribbean. It argues that the U.S. military must go beyond committing additional resources and improving capabilities. It must also develop new strategic concepts for the role of DoD as part of an internationally coordinated, whole-of-government effort against such rivals in the hemisphere. It argues that the national level strategy should be rooted in selectively resisting, rather than seeking to block all, engagement by extra-hemispheric rivals. It recommends five areas for DoD focus: (1) show and leverage the value of DoD engagement to partners in the region;

strengthen partner institutions as a bulwark against external threats; (4) leverage partner insights and institutional positions; and (5) assess and defend against wartime threats from the region.

## The Challenge

U.S. officials increasingly recognize the role of extra-hemispheric rival state actors (ESAs) in Latin America as a strategic challenge for the United States and the region, one that requires a whole-of-government response and a supporting role for 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 three principal U.S. extra-hemispheric rivals in Latin America, have different goals, resources, motivations, and sensitivities as each engages in the region. Extra-hemispheric actors rarely coordinate their engagement, although one government's actions may sometimes complement those of another.

The PRC presents the most significant strategic challenge to the United States, and its engagement in Latin America is centered on economic activities. As such, the greatest threat for the U.S. military in protecting its partnerships and access in the region comes from endemic corruption and poor governance, enabled by Chinese investment. Over the last two and a half decades, successive crises have

## **SUPPORT US**

**Global Americans is a non-profit organization, which means we don't have advertising or a paywall. Your donation allows us to continue to deliver unique research and analysis on the Americas.**

**[Click here to help](#)**

to power through initially democratic elections. In Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and elsewhere in the region, these governments consolidated power in the face of tepid popular commitments to procedural democracy, creating both needs and opportunities for greater engagement with China, Russia, Iran, and other U.S. rivals. That engagement includes not only commerce, investments, and loans, but also information and surveillance architecture, and military and other forms of security assistance that helps the anti-U.S. regimes lock in their power.

As 2021 draws to a close, leftist populist regimes leveraging or deepening relationships with extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals include Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Peru, with troubling prospects for upcoming turns to the left in Honduras, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil.

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 undercut the United States' agenda and strategic position in the region.

While the Department of Defense has given increasing attention to supporting U.S. government efforts to respond to 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 impede the advance of ESAs in the region. If it is to succeed in this mission, the U.S. military must develop new and realistic

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 leverage U.S. diplomatic, economic, and other sources of leverage to push for 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 be ineffective, as well as generate resentment among our partners. Instead, helping to advance transparency, rule-of-law, a level playing field, and 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 U.S. military role should combine traditional missions in the region with adaptations supporting transparency, rule-of-law, strengthening partner nation institutions, and actions in select areas to resist ESA advances. The U.S. military should also expand its risk assessment to evaluate: (1) long-run threats to its access as partner of choice; and (2) the advance of rivals in the region, including 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 United States, and more oriented toward its rivals.

The concepts involved are complex and far-reaching, involving 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 AOR prepare for and prepare partner nations. 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 United States should combine its demonstration of value with credible positions regarding why partner nation 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 which, if partner nations ignore, could actually oblige the United States to unnecessarily cede terrain to U.S. rivals, or to reverse itself in ways that hurt U.S. credibility.



***Communicate the Threat.*** As a complement to public diplomacy, in which the 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 the public in the region regarding bad deals and questionable contracts with Chinese actors. Disseminating credible information regarding such risks can bring pressure on leaders. As a complement, 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 officials may also decide, when appropriate, to warn leaders who are contemplating greater ESA engagement how that engagement will affect U.S. security cooperation.

***Maintain and Strengthen Partner Institutions.*** DoD security assistance and security sector assistance has long contributed to partner nation institutions in a variety of ways. These include directly improving partner performance through training and equipping. They also include helping them to control corruption by 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, people, and money, as well as by attacking and dismantling the organizations involved in such criminal activities. In the process, DoD support contributes to the

bulwark against the capture of power by populist leaders, which have deepened their country's relationship with China and other extra-hemispheric actors in troubling ways.

Nonetheless, DoD strategic concepts, doctrine, and capabilities must do more to focus such security assistance and its contribution to the functionality of partner nation regimes, rather than simply as an instrument of fostering goodwill or keeping drugs and economic migrants out of the United States. 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 nation 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 the department as an institutional advocate 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 aligned partner nation security institutions 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, surveillance architecture, 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 United States within partner nation security institutions may also serve as an important resource for



***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 the first and second World Wars. 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, U.S. 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 United States from partner nation territory or waters.

Finally, even without formal military alliances and basing agreements, U.S. policymakers must anticipate the possibility that, in the context of such a conflict, one or more states in the region may permit People's Liberation Army (PLA) use of their ports, airfields, or other facilities. Particularly because the United States has so long treated Latin America and the Caribbean as a zone free of military threats from geopolitical rivals, the United States should start now 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 U.S. 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

Military Transformation led by Andrew Marshall and OSD Net Assessment in the 1990s and beyond. As with those important efforts, the new analysis arguably requires decentralized thinking and socialization across DoD as an institution through studies, wargames, and other efforts. Within the Army, it calls for input from each of the branches, particularly those which arguably play important roles in the peacetime element of the response, including Psychological Operations, Civil Affairs, Public Affairs, and Foreign Area Officers, among others. It will also require changes to doctrine and authorities, and by extension, involvement of members of the Executive Branch and legislature by both parties as the concepts advance.

While this article has focused on ESAs in Latin America and the Caribbean as the area in which ESA presence most directly threatens 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. and ESA relationships there. The challenge of ESAs takes the United States and DoD into new territory, different from both business as usual in the fight against terrorist and criminal actors, as well as from the Cold War, which was 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, resources, and action accordingly.

***Dr. Evan Ellis*** is Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute with a focus on the role of extra-hemispheric actors, transnational organized crime and populism. From 2019 to 2020, he served on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Policy Planning Staff. Dr. Ellis has published over 300 works, including four books, and is regularly called to testify before the U.S. Congress. He appears frequently on television, radio, and other Latin America media and presents his work

## Related Posts

---

### **Russian Influence in Latin America**

As 2015 unfolded, one-by-one Russia's principal political supporters in Latin America and the Caribbean entered...

### **Washington's New Friends in Latin America President Donald J. Trump**

US President Barack Obama's visit to Cuba and Argentina this week underlines the United States...

President Donald Trump's relationship with Latin America will surely be one to watch this year.

Filed Under: [Asia & Latin America](#), [Security & Rule of Law](#), [U.S.-Latin America Relations](#)

Tagged With: [Argentina](#), [Bolivia](#), [Brazil](#), [Chile](#), [China](#), [China-Latin America Relations](#), [Colombia](#), [Cuba](#), [Department of Defense](#), [Honduras](#), [Iran](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Peru](#), [Russia](#), [Russia-Latin America relations](#), [Venezuela](#)

©2021 Global Americans

Website development by Robert Gourley.

---

## **Menu**

