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SOUTHCOM's Concerns

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USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. 2nd Class Rafael Martie



SOUTHCOM photo by Jose Ruiz

Above: US and multinational troops storm the beach during a joint training exercise in Panama. Left: USAF Gen. Douglas Fraser (I), with Belize Defense Force Commander Brig. Gen. Dario Tapia, speaks at a Central American security conference. Below: US sailors, Coast Guardsmen, and members of the Colombian Navy search for illicit drugs in the Caribbean. More than a quarter-ton of illicit drugs was recovered from the water on this mission.

US Southern Command doesn't expect major war, but it must deal with criminals, drug cartels, and natural disasters—all very near the United States.



USN photo by Lt. Ed Early

Top officials at US Southern Command manage a unique mission: They face a range of threats, not always military, but close to home.

“From Latin America and the Caribbean, I don’t see a military threat to the United States,” SOUTHCOM’s Gen. Douglas M. Fraser stated flatly this past February.

This is quite a contention, and surprising in some lights, as South America’s militaries have quietly become some of the fastest modernizing militaries on the planet, according to trends of arms and aerospace equipment sales. Across Latin America, total military sales rose from \$29 billion to \$39.6 billion between 2003 and 2008, led by countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela.

“So why do we need military engagement in Latin America, you might ask?” Fraser added.

SOUTHCOM’s main efforts are described by a nebulous phrase that has come to define a range of military, civilian, and law enforcement operations in the region: counterillicit trafficking operations (CITs).

“Here’s my real concern,” said Fraser in February after noting the absence of traditional military threats in the region. “It’s transnational criminals; it’s illicit trafficking.”

In his various briefings and public statements over the past year, Fraser

often has on hand a litany of indicators and metrics to point out the progress Latin and South America have made in regard to economic growth and alleviating poverty. Countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Panama have made great strides in helping to close the income inequality gap in their countries as they grow economically.

No Respect

He caveats these developments, however, by noting a third of the region still lives below poverty level, on less than \$2 a day, with 13 percent living on a dollar a day. “That has significant social impacts,” Fraser said. As a result, violence and corruption are “endemic” through different parts of Southern Command’s area of responsibility, reflecting on people’s individual security and their opportunities.

While the security situation within Mexico has received the lion’s share of American media attention recently, the trafficking routes for drugs into the US run through Fraser’s AOR, making transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) a “continuing challenge to regional and hemispheric security” as they engage in the movement of drugs, arms, money, and people through the porous borders of the region.

“They don’t respect national sovereignty, laws, governments, or human life,” Fraser said in a March briefing at the Pentagon. He highlighted the

“northern triangle” of Central America—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—as an area of great concern, as it has seen growing levels of violence and become “probably the deadliest zone in the world outside of war zones—active war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan and others around the world.”

The description is surprising to some, but is borne out by the facts. In 2010, the United Nations reported 14 violent deaths per 100,000 in Iraq, while in Honduras the same year it was 77 per 100,000 and 71 per 100,000 in El Salvador. The murder rates are a direct result of criminal activity, a collision of the massive monetary resources of cartels and the modestly equipped governments in the region.

According to SOUTHCOM estimates, transnational criminal organizations bring in between \$300 billion to \$400 billion a year, from activities spanning the globe. “That’s a significant number when you put it against the capacities of the governments that we’re talking about,” Fraser added.

Drug traffic from South America is an old problem, but movement patterns have shifted significantly, especially since the implementation of “Plan

An E-3 AWACS searches for drug runners over the eastern Pacific Ocean. In the past, the US has staged AWACS missions from Manta Air Base in Ecuador, but that nation recently ended the relationship.



USAF photo by TSgt. Cecilio Ricardo

Colombia,” the ramp-up of US aid to the Colombian government dating back to 2000.

While the vast majority of cocaine originates from Colombia, “what has changed in the last 10 years is the direct route has largely been interrupted,” said Robert Knotts, SOUTHCOM’s chief of counterillicit trafficking operations. The retired Army lieutenant colonel oversees all CIT operations throughout SOUTHCOM, in coordination with Joint Interagency Task Force-South (a counterillicit trafficking subordinate command, headquartered in Key West, Fla.), and tracks detection and monitoring activities across the theater.

Colombia’s institutions, such as its counternarcotics law enforcement and its military, have grown much stronger and more capable in the past decade, so as a result, illicit traffickers have had to push to the east, into spaces such as Venezuela’s Apure region, where more than 90 percent of air smuggling flights originate, Knotts noted. Small loads move short distances, whether by air, sea, or even miniature submersible to get to the Central American land bridge.

This is a relatively recent trend in drug trafficking, SOUTHCOM officials have noted. The shift to land took place because a Colombian “air bridge denial” program has heavily curtailed criminal air traffic (with US assistance).

“Nearly all cocaine destined for the US crosses the Guatemala-Mexico border,” command officials note. The expansion of Mexican cartels in Central America has fed violence and instability, and the command is pushing forward with a number of cooperative activities between US Northern Command (which includes Mexico in its AOR), partner civilian agencies, and affected countries. Focusing specifically on the vulnerable Mexico-Guatemala-Belize region, SOUTHCOM is moving to develop a “regional operations capability” among these three countries, according to its most recent posture statement.

What exactly this entails is tricky, however. More than capability, what’s needed to more effectively combat the rise in violence and instability wrought by illicit trafficking is effective communication and intelligence sharing, SOUTHCOM officials contend. Also, US forces under SOUTHCOM only have a piece of the solution, as under US Code, military forces can only monitor and track suspected criminal traffickers, with US law enforcement agencies leading interdiction efforts in



ITAR-TASS photo by Lev Fedoseyev

A Russian-made Su-30 of the Venezuelan Air Force over the southern Caribbean during joint exercises there between Venezuela and Russia in 2008. Venezuela is heavily investing in military aircraft modernization.

international waters. Even in countries where US forces are carrying out interdiction missions, the host governments are responsible for decisions to interdict suspected illicit traffickers within their borders, waters, and airspace.

Critical Information Sharing

“In many instances, the end games are conducted through the partner forces,” said Juan Hurtado, the SOUTHCOM science advisor and a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, who leads commandwide efforts to develop science and technology tools and rapidly field them. Even for relatively simple equipment such as sensors, radar, and aircraft, he said, detection and monitoring is expensive for many nations in the SOUTHCOM region.

“The commander has tried to push efforts to fuse information, ... fuse it in a way that is less expensive,” Hurtado said. “We can develop an operational picture [and] you could have the information available to all stakeholders.”

Senior SOUTHCOM planners and intelligence officials say the countries affected are making an effort to close this gap, and to do it without spending a lot of money. Doug Sellers, SOUTHCOM’s chief of strategic initiatives, said the Panamanian government has recently opened a coordination center, and the US is working on the development of an unclassified-information sharing network, which originates from the command’s south Florida headquarters and ties in the sensors, radars, and intelligence networks of America’s

partners in the region. It would form a collection pool for maritime, air, and land countercriminal trafficking activities. Several countries in the region have expressed interest in joining the network, Sellers added.

In addition, SOUTHCOM and its partners must also maintain constant communication with US Northern Command, as it is the primary liaison with the Mexican government, and spends a great deal of effort on CIT activities.

Marine Col. Pete Baumgarten, NORTHCOM’s liaison officer at SOUTHCOM headquarters, completed a workshop with several countries in the region and Mexican officials in March. The problem along the southern Mexican border with Central America is that “you have so many smaller countries that the movement of these [illicit trafficking] organizations is so quick, it is very difficult for them to act in time,” he said.

Better information sharing—between the US, its allies in Central America, and the Mexican government—is critical to any future success. Resources are also an issue, and countries such as Belize and Guatemala are seeking additional means to improve ground and air mobility. Some countries have asset-forfeiture laws, Knotts points out, which allows them to take confiscated aircraft and equip them with inexpensive sensors.

Despite longstanding military-to-military engagement with many countries in the AOR, a gap in the partnership activities persists, Fraser said. “We have a very good system that supports our ability to

work with peers or near-peer partners in capability; we understand how to do that," he noted. The US participates with a wide range of exchanges and exercises with modernized militaries such as Chile and Colombia, but they are not the areas facing the most significant threats from criminal trafficking and violence.

Countries such as Guatemala and Honduras are not near-peers, and have significantly less capability than the United States, with small fleets of aircraft and limited resources to confront these threats.

The US needs high-reliability, low-cost systems to assist these places, Fraser said of countries such as Guatemala and Honduras. Light airlift and light ISR platforms would make a huge difference in Central America, and there are opportunities to expand US and allied partnerships with platforms such as the MC-12 surveillance aircraft, now in high demand in Afghanistan. "We've got to figure out how to do that ... and bring that [aircraft] into the region," he added.

The US military footprint in the region is a sticky issue, as evidenced by the Ecuadorean government recently ending the US presence at Manta Air Base, where E-3 AWACS often staged monitoring flights.

A 2009 accord with the Colombian government for the US to have access to several of its military bases for the purpose of CIT activity (partially to make up for the loss of Manta) was scuttled by the country's constitutional court last year, which said any international treaties had to be approved by the Colombian congress.

For now, SOUTHCOM uses two "cooperative security locations," one at Comalapa, El Salvador, and another on Aruba, where it stages detection and monitoring activities with partner nations. A redrafted version of the base access agreement with Colombia is anticipated.

Despite the legal setback, the US and Colombia maintain a close relationship, Knotts notes, and the Colombians themselves are taking a larger role in the training and advising mission in the region (the US has supplied more than \$7 billion in aid since 2000). Years of expertise in counterillicit trafficking and counterinsurgent operations against the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) have made the country's security forces the go-to experts in the region.

Colombians regularly conduct training of Mexican helicopter pilots, host members of the Panamanian military in their schools, and carry out other regional activities. "We are very ... pleased" they are taking on a larger role, Knotts said. "We have partnered for 14 years [on Plan Colombia] and at this point, they are able to export their training capability and ... operational expertise," he added.

Natural Disasters

SOUTHCOM also watches with a wary eye Colombia's immediate neighbor, Venezuela, and while Fraser often downplays the bellicose rhetoric of the Hugo Chavez government, senior intelligence officials at the command monitor the country's modernization activities and its ties to groups such as the FARC.

Though South America's arms spending has jumped, many of the governments have gone years without modernization. Those with improved economies are now investing in their defense, one senior official noted.

Venezuela, on the other hand, "is going above and beyond what is needed," with approximately \$9 billion in acquisitions over the last five years. Acquisitions include T-72 and T-90 tanks, transport and attack helicopters, thousands of AK-103 small arms, and 24 Su-30MK2V fighters.

Still, a SOUTHCOM intelligence official added, the consensus is Venezuela is not a regional threat, as many of these acquisitions are spaced out over years and the ability of the nation to sustain this equipment over the long term is questionable.

More of a concern is the Venezuelan government's closeness with the FARC and their associated criminal trafficking activities. "The majority [of cocaine] goes through Venezuela," said the intelligence official at SOUTHCOM. "Clearly that amount cannot go through without someone in the Venezuelan government being aware."

A good deal of information about the ties between the Venezuelan government and FARC has come to light following the Colombian military's raid on the camp of FARC senior leader Raul Reyes in 2008, just inside the border of Ecuador (resulting in his death and the confiscation of documents and computer equipment by the Colombian military). Since then, the Chavez government has publicly acted several times against certain

FARC figures, extraditing some to Colombia. "We are seeing a little bit of change on that level as far as what he is willing to do," the SOUTHCOM official noted.

The multilateral, pan-institutional mission of SOUTHCOM is gaining visibility as the US is investing heavily in efforts in the region. Much of this visibility comes through emergency humanitarian efforts.

Fraser, currently the sole airman serving as a geographic combatant commander, helped lead DOD's response to one of the most significant humanitarian operations in recent memory: the relief effort in the wake of the January 2010 Haitian earthquake, Operation Unified Response.

He helped direct a massive US and allied military mobilization of some 22,000 troops, more than 30 ships, and 300 aircraft, providing emergency assistance and delivering millions of pounds of food and water following the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that devastated the Caribbean nation. The operation also saw the first use of the MQ-1 Predator remotely piloted vehicle in support of disaster relief operations, a capability that greatly aided efforts to gather real-time reconnaissance about the devastated country.

The command incorporated lessons from the operation later on, in other relief efforts such as Chile's February 2010 earthquake and the June 2010 Guatemala storm and flood relief operations, working with the host nations and US civilian agencies such as the US Agency for International Development.

"The region is prone to natural disasters, ... and our ability to respond quickly and effectively remains a real time issue," Fraser said, noting such operations will be an "ongoing requirement" for the region.

Effective communication with Central and South America is crucial for SOUTHCOM, whether for disaster relief or to combat shadowy criminal organizations.

Therefore, in December, Fraser presided over the opening of a new \$402 million headquarters building for the command in Doral, Fla., part of greater Miami. The facility includes expanded conference rooms, training facilities, and a Conference Center of the Americas which gives users the ability to translate meetings into multiple languages and conduct video teleconferences. ■