

STATEMENT OF
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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

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Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished committee members, it is a distinct honor and privilege to serve as United States Southern Command's (USSOUTHCOM) 33rd Combatant Commander. In assuming this role, I have leveraged 22 months of insight as the USSOUTHCOM Military Deputy Commander and have moved forward to lead this command's service members, civilians, contractors, and their families, as we strengthen democracy, security, and stability throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The United States of America and the many nations and territories that comprise Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are bound together by rich cultural traditions, family bonds, economic endeavors, and an enduring commitment to democratic principles. Upon this foundation, USSOUTHCOM builds lasting trust across the region through engaged and credible presence. Together, with our Allies and Partners, we seek to engender security, capability, democratic norms, and resilience that fuel regional peace, prosperity, and sovereignty.

There are several threats to this vision. I assess the most concerning to be the actions of nations such as China and Russia. These authoritarian regimes continue their methodical incursion into the region using varying tools towards separate end states. While China's long-term global campaign to become the world's dominant geopolitical power is evident in the Western Hemisphere, "Russia continues to support anti-American authoritarian regimes militarily and spread disinformation throughout the region to undermine [U.S.] interests."¹ The consequences not only run counter to U.S. national interests, but also threaten sovereignty, and advance our adversaries' economic, political, and military objectives. Their malign actions here in the Western Hemisphere have "ramifications that stretch far beyond the region, posing a global risk."²

Simultaneously, transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and violent gangs, as well as Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), use enormous revenue from drug trafficking and other illicit activities to corrupt and co-opt portions of regional governments, degrading the region's democratic institutions. Criminal violence drives drugs, illegal migration, and lawlessness to our border and imperils citizen security. TCOs are linked to the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans every year. Both threaten the safety, stability, security, and sovereignty of all nations in our shared neighborhood. Time is not on our side. The Western Hemisphere is suffering from an "erosion of democratic capitalism, which in too many countries is being replaced by...authoritarianism."³

We can stem this tide by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our Allies and Partners. Our Partners want to work with us, but to maintain their trust and confidence they must feel and see our presence and commitment before it is too late. USSOUTHCOM will continue to campaign along its three lines of effort: *Strengthening Partnerships, Countering Threats, and Building our Team*. Under this framework, we are taking swift action, rising to the occasion to bolster like-minded democracies, outmaneuver, and thwart our adversaries.

Success relies on taking a holistic approach to our operations, activities, and investments. To be effective, each must be nested with the contributions and capabilities of our Allies, Partners, U.S. Government partners, non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector. To this end, we have redoubled our efforts to nest military engagement with diplomatic, informational and economic initiatives across the whole of government. Together, we will build a safer and stronger Western Hemisphere while ensuring the national security of our homeland.

Challenges in the Region

Strategic Competition with the People's Republic of China

The United States and China are engaged in a fierce strategic competition, pitting democracy against authoritarianism. Over the course of the last decade, the United States has focused predominantly on the Indo-Pacific, while the China has taken a global approach. The LAC region is on the front lines of a decisive and urgent contest to define the future of our world. China is assailing U.S. interests in every theater, in all domains, and increasingly in the Caribbean archipelago – a potential offensive island chain. Failure to adequately compete here and now “will leave the region under the influence of America’s chief authoritarian rivals,”⁴ which directly threatens the “US shift to the Indo-Pacific...jeopardizing freedom of maneuver, access, and influence in our near-abroad.”⁵

While the United States is looking to the Far East, China is plowing fertile ground to our south. The region is home to abundant natural resources, including 20 percent of the world’s oil reserves, 25 percent of its strategic metals, 30 percent of its forest area, 31 percent of its fishing areas and 32 percent of its renewable freshwater resources.⁶ Access to these and other economic opportunities is central to China’s interests in the region. China has expanded its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to LAC and has become South America’s largest trading partner and the second largest in Central America and the Caribbean.^{7 8} A bold strategy governs its trade “beyond raw materials and commodities to include traditional infrastructure (road, bridges, ports) and ‘new infrastructure’: electric vehicles, telecommunication, and renewable energy.”⁹

China has not broadened its reach into this hemisphere as a benevolent gesture. Rather, through the BRI and other means, it is engaged in a “global campaign to monopolize strategic

natural resources” and use them to advance its national strategic goals.¹⁰ Under the guise of investment, China continues to displace Taiwan’s recognition in the region. Seven of the 12 countries that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, are found in LAC, four in the Caribbean. Having already successfully courted 21 of the 31 countries in USSOUTHCOM’s area of responsibility (AOR) to join the BRI, Beijing has gained ground by offering our Partners short-term gains that leave them vulnerable to unsustainable debt, environmental degradation, and informational security risks.¹¹

China claims to have “always been a member of the Global South”¹² and is using the BRI and other investments to set the theater and expand its access to rare earth metals and control of ports, space facilities, and telecommunications infrastructure for a potential dual civilian-military purpose.¹³ Fifty percent of the world’s lithium reserves are found in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile.¹⁴ Chinese State-Owned Entities (SOEs) dominion on rare earth mining and refining has extended control over global supply chains into the region.¹⁵ Between 2000 and 2018, China invested \$73 billion in Latin American and Caribbean markets, leaving supply chains for advanced technology and everyday items in its control, and garnering influence that makes the United States and our Partners vulnerable to Beijing’s malign agenda.^{16 17}

Chinese telecommunications SOEs continue to proliferate, with Huawei, “expanding its presence as one of the main information and communications technology (ICT) enterprises in the region.”¹⁸ Eight of our Partner Nations have installed Chinese 5G equipment to date, and 24 others use Chinese 3G/4G infrastructure, perhaps making future 5G upgrades with Western companies cost-prohibitive.^{19 20} Multiple governments, organizations, and companies have accused Chinese SOEs, most notably, Huawei, of assisting in Chinese espionage campaigns, jeopardizing U.S. and Partner Nation security and sovereignty.^{21 22}

Winning the strategic competition with China in the Western Hemisphere is essential to securing the defense of our homeland, maintaining regional stability, and advancing U.S. national interests. Increasing Chinese presence creates vulnerabilities and a potential ability to exploit global chokepoints – such as the Panama Canal, sea lines of communication, space, and supply chains – in future conflicts.²³ Moreover, the malign activities, harmful influence, and autocratic philosophy of China are a direct threat to the democratic will of this region’s people. The United States offers economic prosperity, sustainable development through transparency, and true partnership in our shared hemisphere. Broadening innovation efforts and supporting transparent foreign investment will assist in meeting the needs of our Partners, enhance stability in the region, and support U.S. national security. By amplifying these benefits and doubling down on our strategy of strengthening partnerships with engaged and credible presence, we will do more than manage this strategic competition, we will “win it.”²⁴

Russia’s Strategy in the West

Russia’s malign activities in the Western Hemisphere have global security consequences as it seeks to “position itself at the heart of a new world order.”²⁵ Moscow views strategic competition in the region as analogous to that in Europe and is engaged in a campaign to challenge United States leadership and influence.²⁶ Consequently, Russia seeks to undermine the U.S. regional interests, support like-minded authoritarian regimes and traditional partners in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and foster stronger relations with other potentially receptive nations. To do so, Moscow leverages malign propaganda, military engagements, arms sales, and force projection, along with diplomatic and economically coercive practices to demonstrate its global reach.

Russia uses state-controlled media to disseminate disinformation and propaganda widely through outlets such as RT and Sputnik Mundo in an attempt to destabilize Partner Nation governments,²⁷ spread biased and false narratives that criticize the United States, and downplay Russian global malfeasance.²⁸ These messages are communicated across other forms of traditional and social media, and with the assistance of Russian embassies, are now incorporated into regional academia through educational exchanges – creating conditions for the indoctrination of future regional leaders.^{29 30}

Although Russia does not enjoy the same level of economic and military power as China, it continues to make its presence felt at a magnified level. Since 2008, 15 of the 41 visits by the Russian Navy to the region have included warships. Last June, a Russian Surface Action Group, led by the frigate Admiral Gorshkov and cruise missile submarine Kazan docked in Havana, Cuba, passing within 30 miles of the Florida Keys.³¹ This follows visits by the Admiral Gorshkov to the western Atlantic Ocean in 2023 and the Russian training ship Perekop to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela later that year.

“The Russian state and para-state cyber penetration of much of Latin America is far broader, deeper, and more successful than is general understood.”³² The region also hosts Russian military/security infrastructure and personnel. In Nicaragua, Russia maintains its GLONASS navigation system – Russia’s alternative to the U.S. global positioning system, as well as “a multimillion-dollar vaccination plant that produces no vaccines, a sanctioned police academy that does little of what it advertises, a cyber warfare and training center in the state telecommunications building, and a Russian Ministry of Interior building that enjoys the diplomatic status of an embassy.”³³

On the economic front, last year Russia sharply wielded its trade policy to suspend banana imports from five Ecuadorian companies, preventing the country from exchanging aging Russian military equipment for \$200 million in reliable U.S. alternatives.³⁴ Although Russia maintains a small trade presence and has no trade agreements in Latin America, this is a powerful example of the economic leverage and influence it deploys against our Partners to further its interests.³⁵

Transnational Criminal Organizations

TCOs create and exploit regional instability throughout LAC. Their illicit actions threaten good governance and the economic, environmental, and citizen security of every society in the Western Hemisphere. There are 35 TCOs sanctioned by the United States based in the region. In 2023, they amassed an assessed revenue of \$358 billion by engaging in the trafficking of humans, drugs, weapons, and wildlife, as well as the counterfeiting of goods and illegal logging, mining, and fishing. This staggering number is six times higher than the defense budgets of all countries in the region combined, including Mexico. TCO-facilitated corruption and instability may open space for China, Russia, and other malign actors to achieve strategic ends, further their agendas, and threaten our homeland.

Meanwhile, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), cocaine production is reaching record highs, with markets and TCO operations expanding in Europe, Africa, and Asia.³⁶ Illicit flows of precursor chemicals and equipment from China have facilitated an unprecedented global synthetic drugs crisis. The direct regional implications of this crisis are fully apparent, with fentanyl and other synthetic opioids being increasingly manufactured using precursor chemicals and equipment from China and trafficked throughout the Western Hemisphere. We remain concerned that criminal actors will exploit the region's

vulnerabilities to expand precursor smuggling or fentanyl production into other countries. We look to our Partners in the region, as well as other major sources of illegal synthetic drugs, to do more to address this crisis.

According to the UNODC, the Americas have the highest regional homicide rates in the world, with high rates of violence related to organized crime.³⁷ Illegal smuggling of weapons contributes to increasing violence and instability while providing TCOs or regional terrorist groups with an arsenal that often exceeds that of the legitimate state. Gang violence is becoming deadlier, especially in Haiti, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.³⁸ One-third of the world's homicides occur in the Caribbean, with firearms used in more than half of these crimes.^{39 40}

Additionally, both regional and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist actors are equally active in the region. Four U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army, Segunda Marquetalia, the National Liberation Army, and Shining Path) routinely collaborate with TCOs to further destabilize the region. Over 10,000 members of these groups are found in Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela, undermining state sovereignty while waging war with security forces. Colombian terrorist groups are leveraging emerging technology, and in 2024, they conducted more than 140 Unmanned aerial systems attacks. Moreover, members and supporters of four U.S.-designated FTOs (Lebanese Hizballah, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force, ISIS, and al-Qa'ida) are believed to operate in the Western Hemisphere.

In February, the Department of State designated eight Western Hemisphere based TCOs as FTOs, including the Venezuela-based Tren de Aragua (TdA), El Salvador-based Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), and six Mexico-based cartels whose violent and illicit activities include

drug trafficking to the United States through Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. TdA and MS-13 are attempting to destabilize the region through continued violence, assassinations, authorization of its members to attack and kill U.S. law enforcement, corruption, money laundering, kidnapping, extortion, human smuggling, and drug trafficking.

Iran

Iran seeks to build political, military, and economic clout in Latin America with the assistance of sympathetic authoritarian regimes and states where it believes cooperation is achievable. Tehran views U.S. engagement in the region as a “foreign occupation” and parallels it to its own strife with the West as a commonality and avenue for shared opposition to the U.S. influence.⁴¹ Iran has also increasingly developed criminal networks in Latin America in an attempt to kill or kidnap enemies of the regime, including Israeli citizens.

Although the theocratic regime works primarily with Venezuela on the diplomatic and military front to provide drones and warships to Caracas, it also has expanded security cooperation with Bolivia. Iran has provided drones and river boats to Bolivia, and it has assisted Bolivia with cybersecurity matters and participated in combined military training exercises.⁴² Iran has expanded economic and commercial overtures to Brazil, and in January 2024 joined BRICS. In 2023, Brazil was the only country in the region to permit Iran’s 86th Surface Action Group to make a port call, allowing the vessels to stay for a week before continuing its 8-month mission to circumnavigate the globe.

Iranian partner Lebanese Hizballah (LH) has had a presence in Latin America since the 1980s. The group has plotted attacks against targets in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia,

Panama, and Peru. LH launders money, extorts local populations, and profits from drug trafficking, primarily in the tri-border area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. These illicit activities threaten regional stability and raise millions of dollars for the terrorist organization to plan attacks worldwide.

Regional Crises

Illegal Immigration. Regional instability has fueled unprecedented levels of illegal immigration throughout LAC and placed significant political, economic, and social burdens on our Partners throughout the region. This is the result of numerous factors including TCO violence, poor socioeconomic conditions, desire for family reunification, and food shortages. TCOs are taking advantage of migrants, engaging in migrant smuggling, human trafficking, extortion, and other criminal activities. The TdA organization is one such group and its abhorrent operations pose a significant threat to the region and have expanded its reach beyond the routes taken by illegal immigrants and into the United States.

During Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, 302,203 illegal immigrants trekked through Panama's dangerous Darien region likely enroute to the United States in the same year, with more than 209,000 originating from Venezuela.⁴³ The large numbers of illegal immigrants transiting the region strains our Partner Nations' resources and creates new challenges for countries already grappling with security issues.

Border security is a concern for us all. To assist in addressing the unprecedented flow of illegal immigration at the Southwest Border, USSOUTHCOM has stood up Joint Task Force SOUTHERN GUARD at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in support of the Department of

Homeland Security to safely and humanely hold illegal aliens until they are returned to their country of origin.

Haiti. Security underlies governance and is the foundation for the broad investment in the youth, education, and strategic economic development that Haiti desperately needs to achieve its potential.⁴⁴ Endemic corruption and violent criminal gangs have left the country at a “dire crossroads.”⁴⁵ More than one million Haitians have been displaced since at least 2021.⁴⁶ Gangs control nearly all of Port-au-Prince, and their presence and influence is growing, as they are “spreading terror and fear, committing murders, kidnappings and sexual violence of unprecedented brutality in the affected regions.”⁴⁷ Children “account for 30 to 50 percent of armed group members...[and are being] used as informants, cooks, and sex slaves...[in addition to being] forced to perpetrate armed violence themselves.”⁴⁸

The current United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, and a potential future U.N. mission, requested by Haiti’s transitional government and supported the majority of stakeholders, are mechanisms through which the international community can assist Haiti bring stability and restore constitutional order. While USSOUTHCOM is providing logistical support to the MSS mission, as of March, Kenya, the Bahamas, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Jamaica have sourced a ground force of approximately 1,000 personnel to assist the Haitian National Police (HNP) in countering the pervasive gang violence. But more must be done. The HNP is “outgunned and outnumbered.”⁴⁹ A transition to a UN PKO or UN support office are options that could enable the operation of a multinational force to bring stability.⁵⁰ A transition to a UN PKO or UN support office are options that could enable the operation of a multinational mission to bring stability.⁵¹

Nevertheless, China and Russia have previously disregarded support from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organization of American States, and Haiti for a UN mission.

Our adversaries are capitalizing on instability and insecurity in the Western Hemisphere and are using all tools at their disposal to do so. Security on the western half of the island of Hispanola must be restored to set conditions for vital governance and economic reforms, thus incentivizing educational, technological, and infrastructure investment. USSOUTHCOM continues to work with Allies, Partners, and the Department of State on related initiatives that aim to alleviate suffering, create sustainable development, and build toward a more resilient, democratic, and prosperous future.

Venezuela. Venezuela exemplifies the devastating effects and consequences of authoritarian rule. The authoritarian Nicolas Maduro and his regime are engaged in narcoterrorism, corruption, drug trafficking, money laundering, human rights abuses, and other nefarious activities, which have contributed to the destabilization of Venezuela.⁵² Ruthless repression and widespread inability to access life-sustaining necessities have resulted in an exodus of more than 7.8 million Venezuelan citizens since 2014.⁵³ TCOs and gangs have taken advantage of this crisis to expand their operations, while Maduro’s representatives increasingly embrace drug trafficking and other illicit activity for personal enrichment while the Venezuelan people suffer. Under Maduro, Venezuela has become a major cocaine and arms trafficking hub, “transform[ing] the country into a destabilizing force in the Western Hemisphere.”⁵⁴

Maduro’s fraudulent election in July 2024, subsequent inauguration in January 2025, and the recurring detentions, disappearances, and reprisals against the Venezuelan population have been met with international concern.⁵⁵ Anti-democratic practices and authoritarian ideology unite this illegitimate regime with our adversaries and like-minded states across the globe. The

backing of malign state actors may embolden Maduro to escalate propaganda and saber rattling related to his claim to Guyana's Essequibo region. The United States, alongside our Allies and Partners in the region, remain vigilant. We maintain a united front in the face of these acts of unwarranted aggression and reject the oppressive and illegal tactics of the Maduro regime.

Cuba. Instead of addressing the ongoing economic disaster it created with its failed policies, the Cuban regime is strengthening ties with our adversaries. Cuba's malign actions undercut our relationships in the region, encourage irregular migration, and threaten the safety of the United States. By the Cuban regime's own statistics, more than one million Cubans fled the country between 2022 and 2023.^{56 57} however NGOs estimate the number of Cubans fleeing the island as much higher. As a result of the regime elite's comfortable lifestyle and wrongheaded political decisions, the long-suffering populace does not have sufficient access to medicine, food, and essential services such as fuel and electricity.⁵⁸ While the Cuban military-owned companies invest in empty high-rise hotels and retain billions of dollars in bank accounts, Cuba's antiquated energy infrastructure struggles to meet even half of Cubans energy demands, resulting in frequent electrical blackouts, especially outside the capital.

China is poised to capitalize upon its diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives with Cuba's support. Cuba has advocated at the U.N. "in support of China's counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang" and signed on to the BRI, receiving Huawei, TP-Link, and ZTE-built telecommunications infrastructure used to spy on its population and discourage political dissent.⁵⁹ Cuba also serves as a proximate location for intelligence gathering and force projection by our adversaries, which is particularly concerning given its proximity to the United States.

Nicaragua. Democratic, political, religious, and personal freedoms are all under attack from the repressive Ortega-Murillo regime amidst worsening socioeconomic conditions. Human rights violations, crack downs on dissent, property seizure from, and incarceration of, political opponents are all hallmarks of President Daniel Ortega’s and Co-President and First Lady Rosario Murillo’s governance.⁶⁰ Initiated in November 2024 and ratified in January 2025, the Ortega-Murillo regime ushered in 100 constitutional amendments, including naming the two leaders co-presidents and extending their term to six years.⁶¹ Nicaragua is expanding ties with authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, and Iran, while maintaining a robust traditional relationship with Russia. Nicaragua also hosts Russian troops and aims to strengthen military cooperation with Iran.

Levers: Overcoming Threats and Challenges in the AOR

The threats and challenges within the Western Hemisphere have global implications. For instance, Chinese access, presence, and influence across the region and at strategic chokepoints such as the Panama Canal have the potential to threaten the United States’s ability to rapidly respond in the Indo-Pacific should a crisis unfold. The key to overcoming the challenges of our adversaries is partnership.

Partnership goes beyond traditional bilateral relations. It means leveraging the talents and capabilities of our broad coalition of Allies, Partners, and U.S. Government partners, as well as non-governmental, private sector, and academic organizations, to meet U.S. and our Partner’s needs to set the conditions for enduring prosperity in the Americas. USSOUTHCOM will continue to collaborate across the whole-of-government in the use of all instruments of national power – diplomacy, information sharing, military engagement, and economic and security

cooperation – in all domains, to maintain and strengthen the partnerships which form an advantage unmatched by our adversaries.

Each day USSOUTHCOM is taking action to strengthen partnerships and counter threats by being engaged, credible, and present in the region. We devote precious resources to Security Cooperation and Department of State Security Assistance to responsibly build interoperability and the capabilities of our Partners. Additionally, initiatives like the *Framework for Western Hemisphere Allied Collaboration* (F-WHAC) are synchronizing and coordinating Allied efforts to improve regional stability and align strategic goals. These initiatives, among many others, highlight USSOUTHCOM's relentless effort to forge trust, the foundation of partnership.

Strengthening Partnership and Countering Threats

Security Cooperation and Security Assistance. Security Cooperation and Department of State Security Assistance are USSOUTHCOM's main levers that enable us to strengthen partnerships. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our Partners to build their capacity and capability. Congress plays a vital role in providing the funding for Partner Nation military equipment, training, and professionalization efforts that cultivate interoperability and enhance combined operations to outcompete adversaries and defeat our common threats.

In FY 2024, we executed 1,125 Security Cooperation activities. Our commitment to hemispheric security is highlighted by FY 2024 efforts to meet our partner nation equipping needs. Our \$35 million program to enhance Peru's maritime domain awareness is on track and we are currently building Peruvian capacity to receive the delivery of one of two maritime patrol aircraft in 2025, which is timely given the November 2024 inauguration of the Chinese-owned

and operated Port of Chancay. This investment will greatly enhance their maritime domain awareness to help protect the Global Commons in the region.

Additionally, we coordinated with the U.S. Government partners to train and equip the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security with a critical shipping container scanner capability to counter illicit trafficking. This \$16 million investment is projected to be operational by early 2025. Additionally, we have invested \$13 million in the modernization of Ecuadorian Air Force surveillance radars to enhance their air domain awareness and expand their capacity to feed raw data to our regional operational picture through Joint Interagency Task Force – South (JIATF-S), which will assist in countering TCO activity.

Likewise, Security Assistance is imperative to meet the needs of our Partners at the speed of relevance. Through Foreign Military Sales, and Excess Defense Articles programs we are better posturing our Partners to become interoperable with U.S. forces by providing U.S. and western defense article alternatives to those of China and Russia. This past year, Security Assistance played a vital role in Argentina’s acquisition of 24 F-16s from Denmark, with the approval of a \$941 million sustainment package from the United States. This investment not only ensures the procurement is properly maintained and equipped but also proved essential in preventing China from further embedding itself in the military apparatus of a key Partner. Similarly, in November 2024, Brazil announced the acquisition of 12 UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters. This \$950 million deal provides our Brazilian partners with a proven system to counter TCOs and deliver disaster assistance to their people. Security Cooperation and Security Assistance funding provides ongoing opportunities for lasting United States' presence and demonstrates the benefits of western alignment. Ongoing congressional support for these

programs is indispensable to creating conditions for long-term stability in the Western Hemisphere that makes the United States safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

Additionally, the Department of State's International Military Education and Training (IMET) program spanned 27 USSOUTHCOM partner nations and served as a catalyst for fostering strategic relationships that promote U.S. security interests, enhance Partner Nations' self-defense capabilities, and facilitate seamless collaboration in multinational operations. FY 2024 saw investment in the professional development of 630 international military leaders. IMET enabled the growth of a global network of like-minded partners, ultimately contributing to increased access, collaboration, and cooperation during peacetime and contingency operations. The outcomes of IMET also facilitate higher levels of interoperability with U.S. forces, as evidenced by enhanced performance during joint training exercises, key leader engagements, and other collaborative activities. As a result, participating nations and the United States achieve a heightened state of strategic readiness, better equipping them to address shared security challenges and respond to emerging threats.

Joint Exercise Program. USSOUTHCOM is building robust interoperability, capacity, and readiness with Allies and Partners under our Joint Exercise Program. During FY 2024, USSOUTHCOM successfully executed eight joint exercises in seven different countries touching the Southern Cone, Andean Ridge, Central America, and the Caribbean. With over 10,000 participants from 38 countries, these joint exercises enhanced our collective resolve to defend our shared interests, protect the global commons, and promote stability across all domains.

The \$54 million that support our Joint Exercise Program are critical to building our readiness and strengthening the partnerships that enable USSOUTHCOM to achieve our Campaign Plan Objectives. Over the course of 2024 we executed four exercises in support of the

United States European Command-led Large Scale Global Exercise. These events included CENTAM GUARDIAN in Honduras and Costa Rica, TRADEWINDS in Barbados, RESOLUTE SENTINEL in Peru, and FUERZAS COMANDO in Panama. These four exercises showcased our ability to work with 29 Partner Nations from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean and included the U.S. Government partners and Allies from North America and Europe. These opportunities to exercise as a team demonstrated a comprehensive approach to training that reinforced our unrivaled commitment to this region.

Our remaining exercises included FUSED RESPONSE in Colombia, PANAMAX at the USSOUTHCOM headquarters, PANAMAX ALPHA in Panama, and UNITAS hosted in Chile. These exercises were a combination of staff crisis response training and field training exercises that not only prepared the USSOUTHCOM Enterprise for contingency response, but also enabled U.S. access, presence, and capability demonstration across the entire region.

UNITAS enabled over 4,300 participants from 24 Allied and Partner Nations to train in a complex multi-domain environment and was a fitting culminating event for FY 2024. The operations conducted in the Southern Cone demonstrated that the United States, our Allies, and Partners can rapidly deploy, integrate, and sustain combat operations against our adversaries.

Humanitarian Assistance. Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HA/DR) operations, activities, and investments are a critical component of USSOUTHCOM's strategy to assist our Partners during both steady-state and crisis. We meet the needs of civilian populations, increase governmental legitimacy, strengthen partnerships, and cultivate trust across a network of Allies, Partners, U.S. Government partners, and non-governmental and private organizations.

Since 2021, USSOUTHCOM has delivered \$985 million-worth of top-quality humanitarian assistance projects to address the basic needs of the civil populace while simultaneously building Partner Nation local and regional disaster preparedness and response capacity, directly improving stability in the region. This includes an investment of \$4.8 million in building partner health through the donation of 27 containerized clinics with general practice, surgical, maternity, and dental capabilities to six countries in LAC. Last year, USSOUTHCOM enhanced Colombia's ability to meet humanitarian needs and responded in the aftermath of natural disasters by donating 10 mobile bridges representing a value of \$11.9 million – the largest humanitarian assistance project in USSOUTHCOM's history.

Additionally, our commitment to assisting our Partners extends to planned and executed operations such as CONTINUING PROMISE and the Lesser Antilles Medical Assistance Team (LAMAT). During the 59-day CONTINUING PROMISE mission this past year, the USNS Burlington sailed to Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Jamaica, and Panama, where the team aboard supported the delivery of vital healthcare services to 21,222 medical patients, repaired \$1.6 million of medical equipment, and treated 1,925 animals. The mission also conducted numerous HA/DR seminars, and in the aftermath of Hurricane Beryl, delivered 35 pallets of medical and disaster supplies donated by non-federal entities to the Jamaican Ministry of Health and Jamaica's Office of Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Management.

Likewise, LAMAT 2024 deployed to four locations in the Caribbean (Suriname, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and St. Kitts and Nevis) during the 43-day mission that brought \$3.57 million of health services support by treating 3,573 patients and conducting 6,126 procedures. Today, planning for CONTINUING PROMISE 2025 and execution of LAMAT 2025 are underway.

Humanitarian Assistance is an essential soft power tool that engenders goodwill and promotes stability in the region. In future conflict or crisis, the goodwill and trust of our Partners will be of paramount importance. We recognize that similar advances by our adversaries aim to displace our standing as the most trusted partner and increase their role and influence in the Western Hemisphere. Accordingly, we must continue to invest in building regional capability and capacity to reduce, mitigate, and overcome the inherent risks encountered in our shared neighborhood. Doing so will enhance the security, stability, and resiliency of us all.

Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative. USSOUTHCOM's Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative (TMPI) has sustained momentum teaching and building a culture of maintenance readiness with our Partners. This program fortifies existing Partner Nation tactical and operational level maintenance programs through educational exchanges and the development of nine TMPI Centers of Excellence throughout the region. TMPI is a paradigm shift in maintenance culture and is significantly enhancing the readiness, interoperability, and professionalism of our Partners, while paving the way for future export of logistics maintenance capability. In FY 2025, we are moving towards initial operating capability in both Colombia and Jamaica. Colombia will host a Rotary Aviation and Communications Electronics Center of Excellence as well as a Multinational Logistics Officers Course at its war college. Jamaica will host an all-domain Anglophone Center of Excellence with initial focus on air and maritime challenges common to Caribbean states. Jamaica will also hold a Multinational Logistics Officer Course. These Centers of Excellence are being outfitted with the tools, kits, training aids, and the formation of Technical Assistance Field Teams which will further their capability, readiness, and professionalization.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The efforts of the dedicated men and women of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) are facilitating partnership, building key infrastructure, and increasing the capacity of our Partners throughout the hemisphere. USACE activities remain constant in 17 of our Partner Nations. In addition to larger construction projects at Fort Tolemaida in Colombia and the Port of Callao in Peru, their agreement with the Panama Canal Authority is contributing to a tremendous effort that is developing the preliminary designs to ensure the canal operates openly and successfully for the next 50 years. Ongoing disaster assistance projects in Belize and Guatemala, military construction in Honduras, projects in support of exercises in Guyana, and the Corps' growing technical support in Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Dominica, all illustrate examples of their contributions to building partner capacity. However, their efforts in water security may yield the largest effects long-term, as they contribute directly to local economies, which in turn ensure national stability. Overall, in a financially transparent manner, USACE is executing projects with Partners having complex engineering challenges and providing an environmentally conscious and more technically sound alternative to China and Russia. Our projects regularly incorporate Allies and the U.S. Government partners, while working to select contractors internal to that country or region. These efforts increase our regional competitiveness and actively increase the momentum of USSOUTHCOM's theater strategy.

National Guard State Partnership Program. USSOUTHCOM and our Partner Nations continue to succeed together through the National Guard State Partnership Program (SPP). These 24 State Partnerships with 30 Partner Nations are critical to increasing Partner Nation security capacity and developing the resilient teams required to take on the threats and challenges in our shared neighborhood. Teamwork made the 316 events completed in FY 2024 a reality with SPP

delivering an engaged and credible presence throughout the region. Approximately 30 percent of USSOUTHCOM's FY 2024 operations, activities, and investments were supported by the SPP. With another 311 engagements planned thus far for FY 2025, SPP is building interoperability and serving as a vital link to the region's security forces and civil entities. Our continued investment and participation in the SPP sustain these long-term relationships and creates enduring opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with our Partners. By doing so, we demonstrate our commitment to meeting their needs and build the trust that is essential to outcompeting our adversaries.

Countering TCOs. Drug trafficking and the illicit activities of TCOs in the region remain a complex threat, not only to our Partners, but to our homeland. In coordination with our Allies, Partners, and the U.S. Government partners, USSOUTHCOM is confronting this menace head-on. JIATF-S continues to lead the way in disrupting illicit drug flow with our Allies and Partners, who participated in 80 percent of interdiction efforts. Last year, they successfully disrupted 302 narcotics shipments, including the interdiction of over 328 metric tons of cocaine and 67 metric tons of marijuana with a wholesale value at \$8.4 billion.

In the Caribbean, Operation BUFALO NK, a collaborative effort between USSOUTHCOM, JIATF-S, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Dominican Republic, exemplified the benefits of cooperation in combatting drug trafficking and money laundering. The operation, which targeted a criminal organization with extensive international connections to Colombia, Venezuela, the United States, and Europe, resulted in the seizure of over two metric tons of cocaine headed to the United States with 28 persons arrested, including TCO leadership.

While JIATF-S will continue to maximize the counter-narcotic (CN) resources it receives, CN surge operations in 2020 demonstrated that with more, we can do more, and help

secure our seas and borders, dismantle the drug cartels responsible for the death of tens of thousands of Americans every year, and send a clear message to our adversaries and our partners. FY 2020 saw 3,584 U.S. Ship Days resulting in 572 persons detained for U.S. prosecution, while in FY 2024, U.S. Ship Days reduced to 1,542 and only 252 persons were detained for U.S. prosecution. Increased resourcing directly increases our ability to advance investigations, support indictments, dismantle networks, and recharge the intelligence cycle. Should resources become available, we will seek to replicate the successes of 2020's CN operations. We are also examining the long-term sustainment of our PALE ALE aircraft and identifying non-traditional ISR capabilities that could help mitigate shortfalls in the D&M mission.

Thanks to the support from Congress, the Ship Special Mission (SSM) is a significant asset in the fight against TCOs. During Operation PULPO from 21 May to 9 June 2024, the SSM enabled Ecuadorian surface assets to conduct combined counter drug operations off their west coast and disrupt narco-traffickers transiting the area. Over 9.168 metric tons of cocaine was disrupted, along with the interdiction of four vessels, and detainment of 12 individuals.

Additionally, our Partners are taking a leading role in addressing the illicit synthetic drug threat. Argentina is working to establish a regional center for information sharing and cooperation to counter illicit synthetic drugs and to divert precursor chemicals. Likewise, the Dominican Republic has committed to leading the Caribbean in formulating coordinated strategies to counter the production and trafficking of illicit synthetic drugs, including fentanyl.

CN assets are the principal way USSOUTHCOM projects force and maintains a visible presence to assure our Partners and deter our adversaries. Since 2020, we have seen a steady decline in available resources to support the CN mission because of competing global

requirements. Thanks to support from Congress, assets like SSM and PALE ALE aircraft are essential detection and monitoring assets that keep illicit drugs far from our shores. However, the fact remains that JIATF-S suspects more than 3,200 maritime movements of illicit narcotics were bound for the United States last year but was only able to act on a fraction – nine percent – of that number.

USSOUTHCOM as an Innovation Hub. As our adversaries gain influence within our AOR creating global challenges, innovative solutions are essential to address these threats. USSOUTHCOM continues to position the region as a hub for innovation, supported by the favorable environment fostered through our partnerships with the nations and territories of LAC. The region's proximity to the United States, coupled with its geography, provides an ideal setting for demonstrating new technologies through experimentation, evaluation, operational adaptation, and the refinement of Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures. Additionally, joint exercises and military utility assignments further enhance our capabilities in this dynamic landscape.

Following the initial success of integrating air, surface, and subsurface robotic systems into the international exercise UNITAS 24, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command (USNAVSOUTH/4th Fleet) has continued to explore these technologies through both short, targeted tests and extended operational trials. USNAVSOUTH/U.S. 4th Fleet is operationalizing robotic autonomous systems in support of the United States Navy. During 2024's Hybrid Fleet Campaign Event, USNAVSOUTH/U.S. 4th Fleet combined manned and unmanned systems and Artificial Intelligence tools to bolster maritime domain awareness, counter narcotics flow, and counter illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing (IUU Fishing), while demonstrating these capabilities to our Chilean, Colombian, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian partners.

We are assessing the integration of robotic systems into JIATF-S' detection & monitoring (D&M) operations out of Cooperative Security Location Comalapa. As the Navy seeks to inform its hybrid fleet of the 2030s, USSOUTHCOM will seek “win-win” opportunities that support this effort while enabling D&M and interdiction operations.

Operationalizing Data to Enhance Decision-Making and Partnerships. Data is a strategic asset. Decisions should be augmented with rigorous analysis based on high-quality data. USSOUTHCOM is working diligently to harness the power of our data to drive operations, planning, and engagements. Our ability to operationalize data is critical to our success, and we are committed to leveraging cutting-edge techniques to enable us, our allies and partners to rapidly respond to challenges and actively counter threats posed by our adversaries.

Our Enhanced Domain Awareness (EDA) initiative is a prime example of how we are applying data analytics and artificial intelligence to better understand our operating environment. By integrating data from various sources, we are able to gain a more complete picture of the situation and make more informed decisions. By leveraging our EDA system, we are facilitating coordination between partner nations on a common platform. This enables the secure sharing and collaboration of information in near real-time, which is critical to enabling multi-domain operations.⁶²

However, operationalizing data is not without its challenges. It requires a unique blend of talent, skills, and experience, as well as access to cutting-edge computing capabilities. It also requires support from our Allies and Partners, and a commitment to investing in the right people, processes, and technologies. As we move forward, we will continue to push the boundaries of what is possible with data. We will work to attract and retain the best talent, invest in the latest technologies, and build partnerships that will help us stay ahead of the curve. By operationalizing

our data and enhancing our partnerships, we are not only enhancing our own operations, but also contributing to a broader effort to build a more secure, stable, and prosperous region.

Space Domain Awareness: A Critical Component of Global Security. Space domain awareness is critical to maintaining global security and advancing the capabilities of Partner Nations. The establishment of United States Space Forces – Southern at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, this year, is a testament to our commitment to this principle. Moreover, we continue to integrate the space domain throughout our Joint Exercise Program, exemplified by Exercise RESOLUTE SENTINEL 2024, where we gathered with our Allies to conduct space domain awareness training with our Partners.⁶³ The exercise demonstrated the importance of space domain awareness in providing essential near real-time information to troops on the ground.

Our teams worked tirelessly to track satellite launches, operations, and maneuvers, and to understand the overall space operating picture. This awareness is critical to responding to nefarious actions that may impact satellite operations and communications. By leveraging commercial capabilities and fostering open communication, we are enhancing interoperability and strengthening partnerships among our regional partners.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing. IUU Fishing is a pervasive menace which poses a threat beyond simply destroying the diverse ecosystems of our Partners. Aside from threatening food security, harming legitimate commercial fishers, and undermining fisheries management, it contributes to migrant smuggling, labor exploitation, and facilitates the illegal proliferation of drugs, weapons, and wildlife.⁶⁴ Distant-water fishing fleets, primarily from China, travel to the pristine waters of LAC to extract precious resources. However, this practice is becoming more localized and constant.⁶⁵ Additionally, our Partner Nation Coast

Guards and Navies are increasingly monitoring and interdicting domestic vessels engaged in IUU Fishing, as was the case in January 2024 when a Colombian vessel was stopped for its illegal taking of 1.2 tons of clams from the Magdalena River.⁶⁶ IUU Fishing results in the annual loss of approximately \$6 billion in the region and \$36 billion globally.⁶⁷

IUU Fishing's lucrative nature and operational limitations to combat it means that it is likely to expand. This provides the United States with an opportunity to lead and demonstrate our commitment to democratic values and supporting the territorial sovereignty of our Partners. We can do so by assisting our Partners in the acquisition and maintenance of offshore patrol vessels and working side-by-side to develop and implement innovative technology such as unmanned aerial vessels, unmanned surface vessels, and the Enhanced Domain Awareness program to better understand the size and location of these fleets.⁶⁸ Moreover, we can augment our Partner Nations' efforts by expanding U.S. Coast Guard "shiprider" agreements and supporting U.S. Coast Guard counter IUU Fishing operations in concert with Partners, as we successfully did off the coast of Peru during last year's Operation SOUTHERN SHIELD.⁶⁹

Competing in the Information Space. In the face of adversarial attacks that inundate the information domain with falsehoods and disinformation, USSOUTHCOM takes a proactive approach to disseminating and promoting facts. We are committed to expanding coordination with Allies, Partners, and the U.S. Government partners to showcase the positive impacts of U.S.-led initiatives in the region, while countering the malign narratives and exposing the nefarious activities of our adversaries. USSOUTHCOM's media platform, *Diálogo Americas*, exposes the predatory economic practices, environmental degradation, and political and military interference of China, Russia, and Iran, while promoting transparency and the benefits of regional cooperation to reinforce common interests and counter common threats.

Cyber. The cyber domain continues to grow in importance to modern life. It has reshaped how individuals, organizations, and governments interact with one another. Communication, economics, healthcare, technology, governance, and national security are just a few of the areas vulnerable to and being disrupted by malicious cyber activities. Its consequences endanger the democratic values and freedoms that form the foundation of our societies. In LAC, China, Russia, and Iran and their proxies deploy cyber espionage and information operations to gather intelligence and persuade audiences to support their interests. Cyber threat intelligence demonstrates that financially motivated actors are pursuing various schemes throughout the region, including the rising use of ransomware to incorporate data theft and extortion into their operations.

USSOUTHCOM is committed to assisting our Allies and Partners to counter the growing threat and build resiliency in the face of cybercrime. Our Joint Combatant Command Cyber Assistance Teams and Defend Forward Operations are making a difference by providing our Partners with the capability and equipment necessary to prepare, defend, mitigate, and recover from malicious cyberattacks. Another notable example is our joint cyber security review with the government of Paraguay, which identified a Chinese-based cyber espionage group, Flax Typhoon, infiltrating Paraguayan government systems. This successful collaboration demonstrates the importance of working together to strengthen our cyber defenses and protect critical infrastructure. We continue to invest in developing strategies and best practices with our Partners through successive engagements and symposiums, including last December's Caribbean Nations Security Conference in Trinidad and Tobago.

Economic Cooperation. Economic cooperation plays a crucial role in supporting state stability and democracy in Latin America by creating opportunity for prosperity. To that end, we

must double-down on a collaborative approach that improves the region's access to economic development, foreign direct investment, and access to international financing.⁷⁰ Our Partners are asking for our help and if we truly wish to compete, we must deliver. USSOUTHCOM is not the lead federal agency for economic engagement, but by furthering our communication and collaboration with institutions and agencies like the International Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, the U.S. Export-Import Bank (EXIM), and the Development Finance Corporation, we can attract Western-based private investment and provide financing solutions for our Partners' critical infrastructure projects and other initiatives that are untethered from expectations of *quid-pro-quo* support of anti-democratic measures or political fealty. One such example of this wider coordination is EXIM's recent memorandum of understanding to loan up to \$500 million to Trinidad and Tobago, financing priority projects, beginning with the enhancement of its maritime domain capability. This is the type of economic-based solution our Partners are looking for to enable economic opportunity, security, and stability in the region.

Moreover, it is incumbent upon us to better emphasize and advocate for the presence and investment of U.S. and western companies in LAC. These companies bring the benefits of transparency, fair labor practices, and the hiring and training of local residents, that our adversaries choose not to offer. By adhering to the rule of law and respect for human rights, U.S. and Western presence empower, rather than erode, our common democratic values.

Building Our Team

Every day is an opportunity to achieve greatness. At USSOUTHCOM, we achieve excellence in all we do through preparation and an ongoing investment to build our team. Alongside our Allies and Partners, each service member, civilian, and contractor is an integral link to our collective success. With empathy and compassion at the forefront, this command

works tirelessly to develop talent, address challenges, and realize the promise of each team member. Together we are stronger and united in our common cause, to deliver upon our *Enduring Promise* to the Americas.

Housing and Cost of Living. Miami rose one spot since last year and is now the third most expensive place to live in the United States.⁷¹ We appreciate the support of Congress for our privatized housing project, located across the street from the Headquarters, which will alleviate some of this stress by lodging more than 200 service members and their families. It remains on schedule, with completion anticipated between the summers of 2026 and 2027. Additionally, the increasingly high costs associated with local living negatively impacts USSOUTHCOM's ability to attract and retain top civilian talent. USSOUTHCOM continues collaboration with our local, state, and federal leaders and agencies to address the difficult financial realities of working and residing in our South Florida community.

Total Force. USSOUTHCOM's investment in and utilization of Active Duty, Reserve, and the National Guard service members enables an enduring presence throughout the region that our competitors struggle to match. Reservists and National Guardsmen comprise 28 percent of the manpower at USSOUTHCOM's headquarters, making them integral to headquarters operations. In theater they are having an outsized impact, illustrated by USSOUTHCOM's Civil Affairs Persistent Engagement initiative. Composed of seven U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs elements and four Liaison Officers, they currently work hand-in-hand with U.S. Country Teams and our Partner Nations in Central America – with planned expansion in the Caribbean to build capacity and deliver Disaster Assistance at the point of need. Reserve and National Guard forces extend USSOUTHCOM's operational reach through its robust SPP and significant integration in

the command's Joint Exercise Program. USSOUTHCOM's assigned Reservists also ensure critical surge capacity for largescale contingency operations should the need arise.

What Resources Does USSOUTHCOM Need?

USSOUTHCOM is on the frontlines of significant threats in our hemisphere that directly impact our safety at home. The Command leverages military capabilities and expertise in our region to provide the United States a strategic advantage in countering threats from wherever they arise, in whatever form they take. This region is one where a little goes a long way. This high return on investment presents an opportunity: USSOUTHCOM has been executing the mission effectively in a resource-constrained environment for a number of years.

Assets – Presence with Presence. TCOs exacerbate preexisting instability and violence throughout the region that have forced millions to leave their home countries for the United States while costing American lives with their illicit drugs that flood our country. Over the past several years, USSOUTHCOM has seen a decline in available resources for the counterdrug mission due to competing global requirements, USSOUTHCOM has utilized innovative solutions to fill gaps, from contracting maritime patrol aircraft and vessels to utilizing U.S. Navy ships transiting the area to provide presence. The right assets ensure the fight against TCOs is kept further from our homeland: preventing more illicit drugs from reaching our shores, targeting a major source of TCO revenue, and increasing gathered intelligence necessary to dismantle these organizations.

These efforts have produced results, but one thing is clear: with more we can do more. We must meet presence with presence. China, Russia, Iran, TCOs, and our Allies and Partners all recognize the value and power of presence. Simply put, we are better able to counter foreign

malign influence, foster diplomatic engagement, strengthen partnerships, and enable effective interdiction through robust and persistent presence.

Able Partners – Security Cooperation. Security Cooperation continues to be one of the primary means USSOUTHCOM uses to execute its mission. Through increasing our partner militaries' proficiency, we support our Partner Nations' efforts to provide for their own security, addressing potential threats further away from our borders. While Security Cooperation has been incredibly effective in building partner capacity, with more we can do more. Partner Nations have been participating in an increasing percentage of illicit drug interdictions – currently over 80 percent - serving as a key force multiplier. With Security Cooperation resources, we continue to develop more lethal, more effective partners, build interoperability and provide for our collective regional security.

Advocacy – Sustained Congressional Support. We appreciate Congress' continued support of USSOUTHCOM, our missions and our efforts. Congress' recognition of such requirements and support of our programs, particularly those that expand cooperation, share operational information, advance interoperability, and improve the capabilities of our Allies and Partners, has been a key ally to our efforts. Notably, the recent increase of congressional visits to the region has been an important signal to our partner nations. We welcome more delegation visits which provide important first-hand context to policy decisions while maintaining high-level American presence. With Congressional delegations and support, USSOUTHCOM can more effectively execute the vital missions critical to keeping the United States safe.

Conclusion

The time is now. The decisions we make today will impact the future of the Western Hemisphere for generations. The current threats and challenges will not subside on their own; they demand collective attention and action. With our Allies and Partners by our side, USSOUTHCOM is ready to rise to the challenge. The Americas is a rich tapestry of opportunity, poised for growth and prosperity, but it is the power of partnership that will unlock the region's full potential. Bound by shared ground, shared values, and commitment to a shared purpose, we will achieve far more together than we could alone. United, we will achieve a freer and more secure future for all.

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