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“Year in Review: U.S. Policy Toward a Changing Western Hemisphere”

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, and distinguished members of the Committee, allow me to thank you for including me as a witness in this 2015 review of developments in the Western Hemisphere. I have been asked to focus from a strategic perspective on how key events this year impact U.S. national security and security cooperation with our regional allies.

All told, prosperity, security and liberty are more at risk today than they were only a few years ago. A stable, if not peaceful, democratic and prosperous Western Hemisphere is in the interests of all the citizens of the Americas, and certainly in our national interests. Defending our interests and our values is not imposing them. And failing to defend them – indeed, by failing to consistently and meaningfully engage our hemispheric neighbors – has made the United States neither more secure nor more prosperous.

This has been a challenging year for our near and far hemispheric neighbors. Through our shared families, as well as our land and maritime borders, the economic ills and lack of stability suffered by many of our southern neighbors are – and will continue to be -- transmitted to the U.S. in the form of child immigrants and refugees, violence, the spread of criminal activities, and opportunities for terrorists and state rivals who, from un-governed or under governed spaces, could operate to do us harm. Worse is the potential for citizens in towns and districts beset by rampant corruption, violence and hopelessness to find themselves susceptible to gangs or criminals supporting foreign extremists who desire to attack the U.S. homeland, our allies, or our interests.

It is not as much of a stretch as we used to believe: In 2010, Abdul Kadir, a Guyanese convert to Islam under the guidance of Iranian cultural attaché in Argentina, Mohsen Rabbani, was sentenced to life for planning to detonate bombs in pipelines leading to JFK airport. Rabbani, a leading recruiter for Iran’s Islamic radicals, was one of those responsible for the 1994 bombing of the Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. The sudden death of Argentine Special Prosecutor Alberto Nisman the day before he was scheduled to testify on this matter remains unsolved. Mexico’s Zetas employed drug traffickers and launderers Chekry Harb and Ayman Joumaa, both of whom channeled portions of their earnings to Hezbollah. Muamad Armadar, a Guyanese arrested in Lima in October of last year, was identified as a likely Hezbollah operative who was stockpiling explosives in his apartment. More recently, earlier this month Argentina

arrested six Syrians who arrived on a flight bearing false Greek passports. Before that, five Syrian men were detained in Honduras on their way to the U.S., having transited Brazil, Argentina, and Costa Rica on their way north. In October, Brazil detained eight Iraqi Nationals traveling on Greek passports also likely obtained in Turkey. While there is no open source information indicating these individuals had terrorist intentions or even violent agendas, the fact is that networks long used for all kinds of illicit activities, including the smuggling of people, weapons and drugs, are open and available to terrorists.

In the last decades, Latin American and the Caribbean have experienced a generally positive trajectory for the last twenty years along the lines of internal reconciliation, interstate peace, and growing democratic processes and institutions. Regrettably, this progress is counterbalanced – and perhaps even threatened – by worsening problems, including rampant corruption, persistent income disparities, limited educational and employment opportunities, continued growth of well-armed and well-financed criminal organizations and continuing migration from the region and abroad to the United States. In general, little progress has been made in the last year against these threats.

Relations with key allies such as Mexico and Canada, in particular, have been strained. At one point, one observer noted that while the Administration took initial steps toward supporting Mexico's efforts to stem international crime, the U.S. appeared to step back to the point that "there is not much to talk about" in terms of U.S. policy actions. The "escape" of Mexican drug cartel leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán exacerbated the existing chill. According to 2013 data, extraditions of criminals to the United States under President Peña Nieto are proceeding at a rate of less than half of what they were under his predecessor.

Canada, our largest trading partner, is increasingly looking to Asian markets. And although Canada no doubt remains a steadfast ally, its newly elected Prime Minister, Mr. Justin Trudeau, followed through on early indications he would end Canada's participation in air strikes against Syrian ISIS targets and restrict its military efforts to training. Sadly, what likely stands out in many observers' minds as symbols of American engagement in the hemisphere as this electoral cycle ends are the Executive Order on Immigration, U.S. outreach to the anti-American governments of Cuba and Venezuela, as well as the Department of Justice's welcome investigation of FIFA. With few exceptions, the region has simply not been a priority for U.S. efforts or resources.

Meanwhile, China and Russia have joined Iran in reaching out to countries in the hemisphere seeking allies and markets. Their interactions go beyond the longstanding relationships they had with the Cuban dictatorship and focus primarily on those countries engaged in anti-U.S. activities and rhetoric. While China has been busy undercutting the region's multilateral organizations that include the U.S., it has simultaneously attempted to undermine U.S. efforts to remain the security partner of choice for our Latin American and Caribbean allies. For example, multilateral humanitarian engagements of the early-to-mid 2000s have led to bilateral military crisis relief exercises with the Peruvian navy and the deployment of a Chinese hospital ship in the Caribbean. In 2013, while the U.S. looked for opportunities to pivot toward Asia and

was only beginning to understand Chinese island-building intentions in the South China Sea, Chinese warships in a PLA naval flotilla crossed the Pacific where it conducted combat exercises for the first time with Chile and Brazil, and made a port call in Argentina. The Chinese also have considerably increased military sales in the region.

For its part, Russia has re-announced its presence by sending into the Caribbean a bomber aircraft and a naval flotilla, as well as its Defense Minister seeking access to ports and airfields in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. As tensions between the U.S. and Ukraine escalated, Russia sent its signals intelligence ship the Viktor Leonov, which had been operating in the Caribbean, to port calls in Havana Harbor. Earlier this year, as State Department senior negotiators landed in Havana to advance the normalization of relations, the Viktor Leonov made yet another Havana port call. According to at least one analyst, in the last decade or so, Russia has sold at least \$14.5 billion in arms to Latin America, with no less than \$11 billion to Venezuela. Brazil, Peru, and Nicaragua also have been important customers.

With these and other challenges come notable opportunities. Just days ago, President Nicolás Maduro and the Socialists that succeeded Hugo Chavez were trounced by a coalition of parties forming the opposition, which have won a clear majority in the Venezuelan National Assembly. Thus far, Maduro has acknowledged the surprisingly overwhelming loss with words that calmed initial fears of violence. While the victory will likely be mired in a power struggle between the long-marginalized opposition and the government, and imperiled by a combination of a catastrophic economy, a notoriously corrupt and inept government bureaucracy as well as heightened expectations, the people of Venezuela have spoken and will bear the brunt of the burden. There are things that the U.S. can and must do to support and strengthen this movement. Confrontation or violence could still erupt, for example, if Maduro attempts to limit the role of the parliament, or over the release of jailed opposition leaders like Leopoldo López. If the regime attempts to roll back the election results, the U.S. should be prepared to act.

Colombia has long been the recipient of rigorous U.S. security assistance and related support. With the third anniversary of negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) only weeks ago, the government of Colombia has heightened expectations that peace may be finally within reach. But reaching and selling a Final Agreement to the Colombian people will not be easy or inexpensive. In the words of a recent SOUTHCOM Commander, the Colombians are the model for winning the fight against violent insurgencies and criminal networks. It has shown that the key to defeating terrorists and criminal groups is by upholding and defending the very values that these groups threaten: freedom, democracy, and the protection of human rights. Moreover, Colombia has proven itself repeatedly through the years as a reliable partner with the United States. It is critical that the U.S. offer tangible support for the implementation of potential peace accords not only in support of Colombia, but to advance our own strategic hemispheric goals.

Meaningful engagement by the United States is necessary to mitigate the impact of these and other threats, as well as build upon nascent successes and recent opportunities -- and robust

security cooperation is key to that engagement. Security cooperation enhances the security of the Western Hemisphere and bolsters regional capacity and cooperation to counter current and emerging threats. It promotes cooperation in the hemisphere and encourages transparency, and even interoperability, as we face common threats. In addition to thwarting drug traffickers and other illicit organizations, these relationships are instrumental to our counter terrorism efforts, and could be used to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. As the United States considers how to right-size its global posture during these increasingly austere times, security cooperation through periodic and strategically targeted joint exercises with allies and partners could provide a low-cost alternative to continued forward deployment of U.S. forces. U.S. Southern Command's efforts to build partnership capacity and provide both strategic and operational support with planning, training, and equipment should be enhanced. Finally, existing examples of successful security cooperation and security efforts can be built upon, expanded or replicated. For example, in August 2015, the South American Defense Conference in Paraguay, co-hosted by SOUTHCOM, prioritized transnational organized crime and highlighted the success of Sovereign Skies, a program developed in 2010 by the Dominican Republic in collaboration with the U.S., Brazil and Colombia. The program interdicted illicit air traffic and regained air sovereignty over the Caribbean nation with 120 to 130 illicit airplane tracks per year reduced to nearly zero. More recently, Brazil and the U.S. endorsed a bilateral Defense Industry Dialogue, which will allow their respective private sectors to strengthen their collaboration and work to identify possible projects to be developed jointly.

Looking ahead, the presence of forces threatening the stability of our regional partners, the heightened competition in this hemisphere to traditional U.S. roles, and the proliferation of threats to the U.S. and its neighbors dictates that we work to immediately reinvigorate our regional engagements. We must signal our unwavering attention to our continental partnerships and do so on a focused, sustained and creative basis. Should the U.S. relinquish its position as the hemisphere's presumed security partner, the consequences could be dire.