

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Restoring Effective U.S. Security Partnerships in the Americas

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My name is Andres Martinez-Fernandez. I am the Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

In my testimony today, I am drawing from over a decade of experience working on U.S.-Latin America policy issues both in think tanks and the private sector.

The Western Hemisphere is experiencing a period of surging instability, violence and criminality largely driven by increasingly powerful criminal organizations. From Haiti's collapse at the hands of gangs, newfound narco-violence in once-peaceful Ecuador, increasingly deadly drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia, and more, we are constantly confronted by evidence of a failed status quo for security in our hemisphere. These threats do not stay in Latin America. Instead, they drive increasingly deadly and destabilizing consequences to the United States and directly to the American people.

The absence of robust and effective security engagement from the United States in Latin America is a key driver of the current state of affairs in the Americas. Indeed, the collapse of the hemispheric consensus on counter-narcotics is due in no small part to decisions by Washington to blunt and curb its security cooperation in the Americas away from the core support for regional security forces. This trend is driven in part by Washington's focus on other foreign conflicts and crises, including many with far fewer impacts on the safety and prosperity of the American people. The impact of this inattention has been exacerbated by mission drift and the watering down of in critical institutions like the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL). Additionally, hemispheric security and stability has suffered by the Biden administration's politicization of U.S. security engagement and tools in Latin America.

Hemispheric Drift Away from Core Security Cooperation

The so-called expert consensus on Latin America security policy has shifted dramatically over the past two decades, prompting detrimental changes in the nature and magnitude of U.S. security cooperation. Vocal leaders and activists have successfully framed organized crime in Latin America as primarily being an issue of economic development and judicial institutions, deemphasizing the role of enforcement and security forces. Today, at the core of the new conventional wisdom in Washington is increasingly the poorly substantiated claim that confronting Latin America's powerful criminal organizations only serves to exacerbate insecurity and criminality.

One of the key events that has provided support for this view was the spike in violence in Mexico during the late 2000s following President Felipe Calderon's attempted crackdown on the cartels. However, today, after over decade during which the Mexican government has pulled back from confronting the cartels, Mexico's homicide rates now exceed the worst years of violence during the Calderon administration. Add to that the over 100,000 annual American overdose deaths caused by the cartels deadly trafficking of fentanyl.

Indeed, Mexico's disastrous "hugs, not bullets" strategy on the cartels showcases the dire consequences of deemphasizing enforcement and the role security forces. In Colombia, a similar approach by the government of Gustavo Petro has also brought worrying increases in violence, spiking illicit coca cultivation, and dramatically expanded territorial control for narco-trafficking groups.

With Mexico, the Merida Initiative drifted from its initial focus of providing training, equipment and operational support to Mexican security forces and instead shifted to U.S. support for reform of the Mexican judicial system. When President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador fully abandoned the Merida Initiative, the new security cooperation framework with the U.S. that replaced it further deemphasized the role of security forces and enforcement.

In both Mexico and Colombia, the United States failed to push back on regional leaders abandonment of security commitments. This failure was particularly egregious under the Biden administration. It is well established that the Biden administration had no qualms about imposing controversial social agendas on Latin America's conservative populace. However, President Biden's administration made no substantive efforts to press regional leaders to maintain their commitments to the rule of law, even as hundreds of thousands of Americans and countless more across Latin America paid the consequences with their lives.

Even worse, the Biden administration leaned into this wrongheaded approach to organized crime by regional leaders. In the case of Colombia, President Biden actively drew attention away from Colombia's deteriorating security situation by ending the longstanding program of U.S. monitoring of coca cultivation.

The consequences of these unwise shifts in security policies have been not isolated to the countries where they are adopted or even limited to the ultimate destination for the deadly illicit narcotics trade, the United States. Look no further than Ecuador to see the consequences for countries once safe from these criminal threats. As Colombian guerrilla groups and Mexican cartels have enjoyed new freedom and reach thanks to wrongheaded security policies in their countries, these groups have rapidly

expanded into Ecuador, bringing dramatic violence to what was once one of the safest nations in the Americas.

Clearly, weak and watered-down security policies have failed across our hemisphere. Those who say that cracking down on organized crime also cannot reconcile their claims with the reality of El Salvador restored stability and safety following robust enforcement against the country's once dramatic gang threat.

Resources and Priorities for U.S. Security Cooperation

Washington's attention and allocation of security cooperation resources to Latin America and the Caribbean is shockingly low given the exposure of the United States to regional criminality. For years, overall funding levels for INL and broader security cooperation for Latin America have either remained static or been subjected to budget cuts. However, stagnant funding levels have been accompanied by dramatic increases in the lethality of the threats to the American people posed by illicit narcotics and criminal organizations.

Over the past four years in particular, as illicit narcotic overdose deaths in the U.S. have spiked by over 100% claiming nearly half a million American lives, Washington has failed to direct appropriate resources to these security threats. In 2019, 40% of the Trump Administration's Foreign Assistance budget request for Latin America was dedicated to security cooperation. In the Biden Administration's 2024's request, security cooperation was less than under 27% of the budget.

Worse still, the already scarce security cooperation funding has been increasingly assigned to programs and initiatives distant from core mission of INL. As previously discussed, U.S. training and equipping of regional security forces has for years been on the decline, increasingly replaced by less controversial and less impactful efforts such as support for reforming regional judicial systems.

In addition to not confronting the increasingly deadly threat of organized crime in our hemisphere, the Biden administration further exacerbated the watering down and politicization of U.S. security policies in the Americas.

Perhaps most egregious was the Biden administration's forcing of the so-called Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) agenda into INL's activities, including by adding specially designed DEI courses to INL's Law Enforcement Academies. The Biden administration also made community engagement programs, gender-based initiatives, and social activism core elements of U.S. security engagement in Central America. In Guatemala, a particularly bizarre INL initiative was recently funding hip hop classes for young people.

Under the Biden administration, other tools traditionally used for combatting organized crime and related corruption became politicized weapons to undermine conservative governments abroad.

Not content to give Guatemala's institutions and democratic processes space to resolve an internal political controversy, the Biden administration, in the closing weeks of 2023, issued an unprecedented wave of sanctions against dozens of democratically elected Guatemalan political and business leaders as well as their families. The Biden administration also took a hostile stance toward El Salvador's

President Nayib Bukele and his government, using sanctions but also activist NGOs and other tools to undermine a pro-U.S. partner. Further south, the Biden administration was quick to issue politically timed sanctions against leading Paraguayan political figures just weeks ahead of presidential elections in the pro-U.S. and socially conservative South American country.

By contrast, the Biden administration spared Venezuela's narco-dictatorship from new sanctions up until the waning days of President Biden's term. The Biden administration also remained silent even as substantial evidence of narco-corruption came to light implicating Colombia's far-left President Gustavo Petro and his associates. Other leftist leading political figures in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere were spared from U.S. sanctions despite clear evidence of their corruption and efforts to undermine of democratic institutions.

Conclusion

To confront the dire threats posed by organized crime in our hemisphere, U.S. security assistance through INL and other agencies should be bolstered and refocused on the core mission of counternarcotics and transnational organized crime. Failure to do so urgently will bring increasingly deadly consequences for Latin America and the American people.

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