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**“The Strategic Importance of the Western Hemisphere:
Defining U.S. Interests in the Region”**

Chairman Duncan, ranking member Sires, distinguished committee members, thank you for the opportunity to share my analysis with you today. While I am a Research Professor at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, I am here today in my personal capacity and, as such, these views are my own and do not represent the position of the Army War College, the US Army, or the Department of Defense.

There is arguably no region more critical to the security and prosperity of the United States than Latin America and the Caribbean. The U.S. trades with and invests more in the region than with any other part of the world, binding our well-being to that of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The 17% of U.S. residents of Hispanic origin also highlights how we are connected to the region by bonds of family.

Through our shared land and maritime borders, the ills that occur in the region are transmitted to this country in the form of refugees, criminal activities, and openings for terrorists and state rivals, who would use it as a base from which to do us harm.

Today, I wish to highlight four interrelated challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean, which I respectfully submit merit this Subcommittee's attention: organized crime, Russia, Islamic radicalism, and China.

Organized crime. In Mexico and Central America, the passage of drugs and immigrants toward the United States continues to fuel transnational criminal organizations, street gangs, and other illicit groups, deepening the crisis of violence, corruption, impunity and lack of opportunity in parts of those societies—particularly in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Such conditions, in turn, also create spaces in which actors disposed to harm the United States may operate.

In Mexico, just two weeks ago, David Arellano Cuan, head of legal affairs in the country's Interior Ministry, warned that 75% of Mexico's municipalities are vulnerable to infiltration by organized crime.¹ At that same hearing, the head of criminal investigations in the Mexico's Attorney Generals' office, Tomas Zeron de Lucio, called the level of municipal police corruption in the country "alarming."²

Mexico's government reports that it has captured or killed more than 80 of the nation's 122 most wanted criminals.³ Yet with more than 80,000 Mexican lives lost since 2006 in the conflict, it is not clear whether the situation has improved.

I also worry that momentum has been lost in the historic expansion of mutual respect and confidence that occurred between our governments and armed forces since 2006. In addition, 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.⁴

In Central America, the surge in immigrant children arriving at the U.S. border last spring, the willingness of El Salvador government, to broker a truce (which has now collapsed) between the rival street gangs Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18,⁵ and the September 2012 appeal by conservative Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina that

violence and criminality is so out of control that the region should consider legalizing drugs,⁶ shows just how desperate the situation has become.

One illustrative case is Honduras. Like others in the region, it was designated by the White House in 2014 as a “major drug transit and/or major illicit drug producing country.” Its president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, has publicly declared that the transnational criminal organizations operating there are as aggressive and cause as much destruction as Middle Eastern terrorist groups like ISIL.⁷ Indeed, in 2013, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world, at 79 per 100,000, while only one percent of such homicides in major cities result in convictions of the perpetrator.⁸

In the Caribbean, the flow of cocaine has reached levels not seen for more than a decade, with 91 metric tons seized in 2013.⁹

The situation is compounded by both the external and domestic policies of the ALBA regimes, where high levels of public corruption combine with an unwillingness to cooperate with Western law enforcement to effectively creates sanctuaries for transnational criminal organizations operating in the region. In 2014, pursuant to section 706(1) of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 2003 (Public Law 107-228), the administration designated the ALBA regimes Venezuela and Bolivia as not complying with their international obligations in the fight against narcotics.¹⁰ Last week, Venezuelan security official and presidential bodyguard Leamsy Salizar fled to the United States, collaborating with U.S. authorities and publicly naming Diosdado Cabello, his former boss and President of Venezuela’s National Assembly, as the head of the “Cartel of the Suns,” Venezuela’s principal transnational criminal organization.¹¹

In addition, the still modest but growing threat of trans-pacific crime involving the region also merits more attention. Dimensions of concern include human smuggling, precursor chemicals, illegal mining, other contraband goods, and money laundering.¹²

Illustrative of such problems, a major operation by the Mexican Navy in the state of Michoacán in November 2013 exposed a transpacific criminal production chain in which ore illegally mined in territory under the control of the Knights Templar criminal organization was bought by criminal middlemen and eventually shipped to the PRC.¹³ Similarly, the February 2014 takedown of Sinaloa Cartel boss “El Chapo” Guzman led to the public exposure of his organization’s ties across the Pacific, including operations the Philippines, and precursor chemicals sourced from Chinese mafia organizations such as Sun Yee On and Sap Sze Wui.¹⁴ In Brazil, a recent government investigation found that the transnational criminal organization First Capital Command (PCC), one of the largest such groups in the country, is using bank accounts in the PRC, as well as in the United States, to launder money.¹⁵

Russia. Of the external actors with an interest in the region, Russia is the one which has most openly challenged the United States. Since 2008, Russia has repeatedly deployed nuclear-capable aircraft, warships, and submarines within close proximity to this country. In November 2013, a Tu-160 bomber violated the airspace of U.S. ally Colombia in a transit between Nicaragua and Cuba.¹⁶ In addition, signals intelligence ship Viktor Leonov has been operating in the Caribbean, making at least three port calls in Havana Harbor in the past year, including in February and March 2014 as tensions between the US and Russia heated up over Ukraine,¹⁷ and most recently, on January 20th of this year, as Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Roberta Jacobson and her team headed to Havana to advance the normalization of relations between our government and Cuba.¹⁸

Since 2001, Russia has sold Latin America \$14.5 billion in arms, of which approximately \$11 billion has gone to Venezuela,¹⁹ although Brazil, Peru, and Nicaragua have also been important customers.²⁰ Moscow is also working with Nicaragua in counterdrug operations,²¹ and has established a regional training center in Managua, giving Russian instructors the opportunity to interact with visiting security personnel from across the region.²²

Russia has also signaled its intent to expand its military presence in the region. In February 2014, its Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu expressed his government's intent to pursue agreements with Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela to allow Russian military ships and aircraft to resupply in the ports and airports of those countries, as well as possibly re-opening the large Cold War era surveillance facility in Lourdes, Cuba.²³

Las November, Minister Shoigu added to such declarations of intent, announcing Russian plans to send bombers and other Russian military aircraft on long range patrols in proximity to the U.S. coast, including flights into the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico.²⁴

Islamic Radicalism. Iran's current president Hassan Rouhani, in contrast to his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has not publicly pursued alliances with anti-US leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean. Yet Iran has used its embassy personnel to recruit and radicalize would be terrorists in the region, who have then planned operations against the United States. Examples of such Iranian officials include former cultural attaché to Argentina Mohsen Rabbani, implicated in the 1994 attack against the AMIA Jewish cultural center in Argentina, and believed to have been one of Iran's lead recruiters of Islamic radicals in the region. One of the people whom he is believed to have recruited is Abdul Kadir, a Guyanese convert to Islamic radicalism, sentenced to life in prison in 2010 for a plot to detonate bombs under New York's JFK airport.²⁵

The death of Argentine Special Prosecutor Alberto Nisman by a gunshot to the head, the day before he was to testify to the Argentine Congress regarding an alleged cover-up of Iran's role in the 1994 AMIA attack by Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her government, raises disturbing questions regarding that government's relationship with Iran and Islamic radicals.

While it is not clear to what degree Iranian activities in Latin America have continued under President Rouhani, Latin America continues to be a source of terrorist financing, including a portion of the otherwise legitimate remittances and charitable donations sent from Islamic businessmen in the region, as well as illicit activities such as those by the narcotrafficker Chekry Harb, and by Ayman Joumaa, who laundered money for Los

Zetas; both men channeled a portion of their earnings to the terrorist organization Hezbollah.²⁶

Latin America and the Caribbean also continues to provide fertile ground for terrorist recruitment, including the previously mentioned JFK Airport plot by Guyanese nationals Abdul Kadir and Abdel Nurwere, and more recently, Muamad Amadar, arrested near Lima, Peru in October 2014, believed to be a Hezbollah operative stockpiling explosives in his apartment for use against targets in the country.²⁷

PRC. China, in its pursuit of economic objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean also has impacted the region's security environment. Of the more than \$100 billion that its banks have loaned to the region since 2005, more than $\frac{3}{4}$ has gone to the nations of ALBA and Argentina,²⁸ including more than \$9 billion lent to the regime of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela since the death of his predecessor Hugo Chavez in March 2013. The PRC has also committed almost \$20 billion to Ecuador, including \$7.5 billion in new credit, just announced during President Correa's January 2015 visit to Beijing.²⁹

While the PRC has been cautious not to associate itself with the anti-US rhetoric and activities of the ALBA regimes, its money has sustained their viability, enabling countries such as Venezuela to continue as de facto sanctuaries for criminal and insurgent groups, and also, as points of entry into the region for Russia, Iran and other actors with potentially hostile intentions toward the United States.

Chinese resources also contribute to ALBA efforts to undercut the region's established institutions for multilateral democratic interaction, including the Organization of American States. In recent years, ALBA regimes have created obstacles to the use of the OAS to address important regional issues, and have withdrawn their personnel from OAS institutions such as the Interamerican Defense College, while simultaneously attempting to create substitute institutions that explicitly exclude the U.S. and Canada, such as UNASUR and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

(CELAC), and to use such substitute institutions to address the region's most important issues.

Indeed, the PRC has directly contributed to the promotion of institutions that exclude the U.S., rather than working through the OAS and established Interamerican system. Although the PRC has been welcomed as an observer at the OAS since 2004, it has chosen CELAC, which explicitly excludes the United States and Canada, as its preferred vehicle for engaging with Latin America and the Caribbean.³⁰

The PRC has also expanded its military activities with Latin American and the Caribbean states. Institutional visits to the region by the People's Liberation Army, education and training for its officers in China, and gifts and sales of military material by Chinese companies are undermining U.S. efforts to remain the security partner of choice for Latin American and Caribbean countries.³¹

Chinese military companies such as the NORINCO group are also now selling radars, fighter aircraft, military helicopters, trucks and armored vehicles to Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Beyond the ALBA countries, Chinese arms companies have sold the Peruvian armed forces Beiben, Dong Feng, and Shaanxy military trucks, and have pursued contracts to supply 40 Type 90B multiple launch rocket vehicles to the country.³² Chinese companies have also recently advanced into the sale of naval vessels to the region, agreeing last year to providing a patrol boat for Trinidad and Tobago,³³ and negotiating similar sales with Uruguay and Argentina.³⁴ The PRC is also in negotiations to sell its FC-1 fighter to Argentina, just as Russia is trying to sell Argentina its Su-24 bomber,³⁵ either of which would create a threat to the British position in the Falkland Islands.³⁶

PLA military activities in Latin America and the Caribbean have expanded from multilateral humanitarian exercises, such as participation in the MINUSTAH peacekeeping operation in Haiti from 2004 through 2012, to bilateral activities such as a November 2010 disaster response exercise with the Peruvian military, followed in 2011

by deployment of the new PLA Navy hospital ship “Peace Arc” to conduct medical activities in the Caribbean.³⁷

Moving beyond such humanitarian activities, in October 2013, while Washington was distracted by the federal budget crisis, a PLA naval flotilla crossed the Pacific, where, for the first time, Chinese warships conducted bilateral combat exercises with their counterparts in Chile³⁸ and Brazil,³⁹ as well as making a port call in Argentina.

While the PRC does not currently show an interest in establishing military bases or alliances in Latin America or the Caribbean, its expanding economic presence and commercial capabilities in the region in areas such as logistics, telecommunications, and space gives it numerous options for shaping the outcome of a crisis involving the US and our allies in Asia, were one to occur.⁴⁰

I am concerned that, while public discussions of security challenges to the United States in the hemisphere correctly focus on issues such as drugs, organized crime and terrorism, they seldom include the equally important consideration of how, in the undesirable event of a major conflict involving the U.S. elsewhere in the world, our adversaries could use their commercial position and assets to impact U.S. coalition formation, deployment, sustainment, and political will.⁴¹

Despite such difficulties, there is arguably no other region in the world where the U.S. has as much of a comparative advantage for building strong partnerships and making a difference, than it does in Latin America and the Caribbean. What is needed, however, is more strategic thinking about the region, its connection to the world, and its contribution to U.S. security, prosperity, and the U.S. global posture broadly.

The U.S. should take advantage of the extraordinary opportunity provided by both reapproachment with Cuba and the upcoming summit of the Americas to reinvigorate the OAS as the primer multilateral institution for the Western Hemisphere, while opposing attempts through the empowerment of alternative organizations such as UNASUR and CELAC to exclude the U.S. from the region.⁴²

For Mexico and Central America, we must show our partners that we are as focused on reducing narcotics demand in the U.S. and the flow of firearms to the region, as we are to stopping drug transits and dismantling criminal organizations in the region itself. From this base of confidence and trust, we can then work more effectively with those partners in pursuit of internationally coordinated, whole-of-government solutions, helping them strengthen their own institutions (as well as ours) to collectively become more secure and more prosperous.

The United States can also make it clearer to extra-hemispheric actors such as Russia, the PRC, and Iran where it draws the line between engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and actions which unacceptably undermine US security and other interests in the region.

Reciprocally, the U.S. can also do more to *facilitate* engagements by those extra-hemispheric actors whose objectives and practices are consistent with democracy, free markets, and the rule of law in the region, such as India, Japan, and South Korea. If our current era is the “Century of the Pacific,” then one cornerstone of our strategy should be to coordinate with like-minded states on both the Asian and American sides of that ocean to advance projects such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and initiatives of others such as the Pacific Alliance, to ensure that the regime that prevails across the Pacific is one in which democratic states, respecting human rights, free markets, and the rule of law, can thrive.

There are also still other ways in this time of tight budgets that, without expensive new programs, the Administration and this Congress can demonstrate that Latin America and the Caribbean are fundamental for US security and prosperity. It would be refreshing, for example, for the President and Congressional leaders to mention the region more often when on trips to other parts of the world, just as visits to Latin America by Administration officials are filled with discussions of ISIL, Ebola, or North Korea.

Latin America and the Caribbean will also be listening, I suspect, for how many times the region is mentioned (other than for matters of immigration and border security), by candidates for the U.S. Presidency in 2016.

Arguably in no other part of the world does a region's prosperity and good governance so affect the well-being of the United States, and in no other region do failures so immediately bring economic refugees, criminal actors, and potentially, terrorists to our borders, as Latin America and the Caribbean.

For no other region is what happens there a matter of "family" as this region is for so many Americans. Latin America and the Caribbean deserve our attention; its security and prosperity are in our common interest.

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