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Strategic Insights: The Strategic Relevance of Latin America in the U.S. National Security Strategy

March 14, 2018 | Dr. José de Arimatéia da Cruz

The much-anticipated *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* was released in December 2017 by President Donald J. Trump. The *National Security Strategy* is composed of four pillars and is applied in a regional context. How does the *National Security Strategy* view the Western Hemisphere? What are the U.S. priorities within the realm?

The four pillars are as follows: Pillar I is entitled “Protect the American People, the Homeland, and the American Way of Life.”¹ According to President Trump, “We [the United States] will defend our country, protect our communities, and put the safety of the American people first.”² The first pillar addresses some important concerns to the homeland, such as securing U.S. borders and territory, especially against nonstate actors. The current state of U.S. borders, according to the *National Security Strategy*, “place[s] the safety of the American people and the Nation’s economic vitality at risk by exploiting vulnerabilities across the land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace domains.”³ The President and his administration place a tremendous value on safeguarding our borders as a strategy to prevent the infiltration of criminal elements into the United States. According to the President, “strengthening control over our borders and immigration system is central to national security, economic prosperity, and the rule of law.”⁴ According to the *National Security Strategy*, the United States will pursue threats to the homeland at their sources in an aggressive and systematic way. The President highlights that the primary transnational threats Americans face are from jihadist terrorists and transnational criminal organizations. According to the President, jihadist terrorists and transnational criminal organizations threaten the U.S. homeland by exploiting its open society and by operating in a loose confederation and adapting rapidly to an ever changing international system; they rely on encrypted communication and the dark web to perpetrate their malfeasances against the homeland while also using the dark web to recruit, disseminate their ideology of hate, and execute their operations; operate within conditions of state weakness; and finally, jihadist terrorists and transnational criminal organizations are sheltered and supported by states that do their bidding. In order to protect the homeland and its people, the President’s *National Security Strategy* will enhance intelligence sharing domestically and with foreign partners. Furthermore, the United States will devote greater resources to dismantle transnational criminal organizations and their subsidiary networks.

Pillar II of the *National Security Strategy* is to “Promote American Prosperity,” and according to President Trump, “Economic security is national security.”⁵ In order to promote U.S. economic prosperity, which in turn benefits all the nations of the world, the President proposes to rejuvenate the domestic economy. According to the President, “Promoting American prosperity makes America more secure and advances American influence in the world.”⁶ The President also proposes that under his administration, the United States will “Promote Free, Fair, and Reciprocal Economic Relationships.”⁷ As the President has stated on several occasions:

For decades, the United States has allowed unfair trading practices to grow. Other countries have used dumping, discriminatory non-tariff barriers, forced technology transfers, non-economic capacity, industrial subsidies, and other support from governments and state-owned enterprises to gain economic advantages.⁸

Under Pillar II, the President also proposes that the United States “Lead in Research, Technology, Invention, and Innovation.”⁹ To accomplish those goals, the President suggests the United States improve its “collaboration with industry and academia and the recruitment of technical talent.”¹⁰ Also, the President suggests that protecting the National Security Innovation Base (NSIB) is one of his administration’s top priorities. “The NSIB is the American network of knowledge, capabilities, and people—including academia.”¹¹ As the President points out, “Protecting the NSIB requires a domestic and international response beyond the scope of any individual company, industry, university, or government agency.”¹² Another important target under Pillar II is the protection of intellectual property. Throughout the document, the President acknowledges that the Chinese Government is the main culprit concerning intellectual property theft. “Every year, competitors such as China steal U.S. intellectual property valued at hundreds of billions of dollars.”¹³

Pillar III of the *National Security Strategy* is to “Preserve Peace Through Strength.”¹⁴ According to President Trump, “As long as I am President, the servicemen and women who defend our Nation will have the equipment, the resources, and the funding they need to secure our homeland, to respond to our enemies quickly and decisively, and when necessary to fight, to overpower, and to always, always, always win.”¹⁵ The President points out that there are several challengers to U.S. sovereignty and power: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and jihadist terrorist groups and transnational criminal organizations. China and Russia, according to the *National Security Strategy*, “want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”¹⁶ President Trump also points out in the *National Security Strategy* that, “The scourge of the world today is a small group of rogue regimes that violate all principles of free and civilized states.”¹⁷ The President is very specific to name the Iranian and North Korean regimes as the primary culprits. In order to protect U.S. power abroad to preserve peace, the U.S. Government “must integrate all elements of America’s national power—political, economic, and military.”¹⁸ According to the *National Security Strategy*, liberalism/idealism is dead in the 21st-century post-Cold War environment; therefore, the United States must adjust and adapt to new realities. In other words, the United States will look at the world as it is rather than as we wish it was. As the *National Security Strategy* points out, great-power competition is on the rise. In fact, in the latest issue of *The Economist*, the British newsweekly magazine argues that the shift in geopolitics and technology is renewing the threat of great-power conflict.¹⁹

Another observation from the *National Security Strategy* is that deterrence is significantly more complex to achieve now compared to during the Cold War. Therefore, deterrence must be extended across all the domains (land, air, maritime, space, and cyberspace) and we must address all possible strategic attacks. In the post-Cold War world of the 21st century, there are three revolutions taking place simultaneously that will define our time. According to Moisés Naím, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the three revolutions are: the More revolution, the Mobility revolution, and the Mentality revolution. The More revolution is based on the idea that everything in the world is exponentially increasing (such as population size, standards of living, literacy rates, etc.). The Mobility revolution has set people, goods, money, ideas, and values moving at a speed previously never imagined. Finally, there is the Mentality revolution,

which is changing people's expectations and aspirations.²⁰ Another important concern for Pillar III of the *National Security Strategy* relates to cyberspace in light of the "democratization of space."²¹ Cyber has become an integral part of a nation's military arsenal as a force multiplier. Cyberattacks alone will not win wars, but they will be used in conjunction with conventional warfare to create a Clausewitzian "fog of war." As the *National Security Strategy* succinctly points out, "Malicious state and non-state actors use cyberattacks for extortion, information warfare, disinformation, and more."²² In the networked world, "many countries now view cyber capabilities as tools for projecting influence, and some use cyber tools to protect and extend their autocratic regimes."²³ In the cyberwars of the future, states and nonstate actors will use the Internet to disseminate information, misinformation, and propaganda. The Internet has provided rogue states and nonstate actors with the ability to weaponize information.

Pillar IV of the *National Security Strategy* is "Advance American Influence."²⁴ According to President Trump, "Above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are."²⁵ While the United States will work with others to advance its values and ideals, "the United States will not cede sovereignty to those that claim authority over American citizens and are in conflict with our constitutional framework."²⁶

What are the U.S. priorities within the Western Hemisphere? According to the *National Security Strategy*:

The United States must tailor our approaches to different regions of the world to protect U.S. national interests. We require integrated regional strategies that appreciate the nature and magnitude of threats, the intensity of competitions, and the promise of available opportunities, all in the context of local political, economic, social, and historical realities.²⁷

A prosperous, secure, and democratic Western Hemisphere, according to the *National Security Strategy*, would "enhance our security and benefit our economy."²⁸ As it is acknowledged by the *National Security Strategy*, the Western Hemisphere has come a long way since its return to democracy in the 1980s, with military dictatorships returning to the barracks. While this is good, most democratic societies in the Western Hemisphere are still feckless and unconsolidated, thereby representing a threat to the national security of the United States by external actors (such as China and Russia) opposing U.S. interests in the region.²⁹

Transnational criminal organizations are also a major concern for the United States regarding the region's democracies. As it has been pointed out by several scholars, transnational criminal organizations are not only destructive to the consolidation of democracy in Latin America, but they also destroy the social fabric of society; corrupt societal institutions, such as the judiciary, legislative, and executive branches of a government; and destroy economies.³⁰ Corruption and coercion are major sources of institutional decay and the marginalization of citizens, since they cannot trust the various institutions that are supposedly responsible for their security. As the *National Security Strategy* points out, "terrorists and criminals thrive where governments are weak, corruption is rampant, and faith in government institutions is low."³¹

The *National Security Strategy* highlights three key priorities when it comes to the Western Hemisphere: political, economic, and military security. From an economic perspective, the United States will "catalyze regional efforts to build security and prosperity through strong diplomatic engagement. We will also isolate governments that refuse to act as responsible partners in advancing hemispheric peace and prosperity." While such an approach is welcomed by some in

the region, it will ultimately relegate others to external influences such as China, Russia, and Iran. According to Tzvi Kahn, a senior policy analyst at the Foreign Policy Initiative:

Iran always viewed its presence in Latin America not as an economic opportunity, but as a military and ideological imperative. The region, with its many anti-American regimes, offers Tehran a safe haven that enables it to export its radical vision of the Islamic Revolution to America's doorstep and simultaneously fund its global military adventurism.³²

The United States will also assist the developing nations of the Western Hemisphere to further advance their “market-based economic reforms and encourage transparency to create conditions for sustained prosperity.”³³ Again, while such an approach is commendable, the United States must be careful not to alienate strategic partners by imposing another Washington Consensus by a different name. The Washington Consensus was a market-based approach to economic reform associated with the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. The Washington Consensus led to the rise to power of politicians with a center-left attitude toward the United States and its economic institutions, which facilitated the influence of China, Russia, and Iran as alternatives to Washington as an economic partner. The “Pink Tide nations,” as it became known, were essentially leaders that came to power between 1998 and 2009 and are united by a strong anti-American sentiment. In his book, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*, Peter Smith writes that the leaders of Pink Tide nations “did not sweep ashore as an organized movement. It was a spontaneous upsurge of popular will.”³⁴ Though the Pink Tide has no clear-cut ideology, its supporters are united in opposition to the Washington Consensus.

The final policy priority of the United States toward the Western Hemisphere, according to its *National Security Strategy*, is military and security. As President Trump asserts, the United States:

will build upon local efforts and encourage cultures of lawfulness to reduce crime and corruption, including by supporting local efforts to professionalize police and other security forces; strengthen the rule of law and undertake judicial reform; and improve information sharing to target criminals and corrupt leaders and disrupt illicit trafficking.³⁵

This is an important strategy priority that should be fully implemented by the United States with full collaboration and active participation from the nations in the region. In an atmosphere of criminal impunity, criminalization of society, and unrule of law, criminals and terrorists morph into society and corrupt its vital civil institutions. As John P. Sullivan, José de Arimatéia da Cruz, and Robert J. Bunker argue: criminal organizations are now actively involved in Brazil's election process, taking place in October 2018, in an attempt to position themselves for key strategic offices or to elect candidates sympathetic to them in the prosecution and combat of drug trafficking.³⁶ The professionalization of Latin American police forces is also much welcomed and needed. As Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt argue, “the police in particular are often seen as the most threatening enemy of the poor. It is no surprise that local informal and criminal armed actors manage to project their image as protectors of the population, despite the ruthlessness of their tactics.”³⁷

Latin American megacities are also a laboratory for the U.S. Army in cooperation with its strategic partners in addressing another important issue or, perhaps, an old issue in the post-Cold War international system: how to fight a conventional war in an unconventional environment. As Evan Ellis argues, “there are a number of ways in which the United States can continue to strengthen its partnership with Brazil, particularly with respect to defense cooperation, while

harvesting the security and other benefits that come from greater cooperation.”³⁸ One particular issue involves combating transnational criminal organizations and their affiliated megacities or highly urbanized centers.³⁹ Transnational criminal organizations and local gangs are battling the police, the Armed Forces, and other gangs in the *favelas* or shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro such as Rocinha, Morro do Alemão, Complexo da Maré, Nova Holanda, and Jacarézinho on a daily basis. Megacities are the new arena for conflicts in the 21st century. Therefore, the U.S. Government and Army cannot afford to be caught off guard when called upon to exercise and accomplish its mission. As the Chief of Staff of the Army, Strategic Studies Group points out, “the U.S. Army has a great deal to learn from the challenges posed by the drug gangs of Rio de Janeiro. Utilization of a combined arms maneuver against a hybrid threat in a megacity is a challenge Brazil is addressing now.”⁴⁰ This new type of conflict is part of what scholars call fourth-generation warfare (4W).⁴¹ As Moisés Naím argues, in 4W conflicts, “violent nonstate actor[s] (VNSA) fights a state and where engagement is military not just in the narrow sense of armed hostilities but also in the sense that it plays out in media and public opinion, each side seeking to undermine the other’s grounding and legitimacy as much as to defeat it in the battlefield.”⁴²

Another region where cooperation and information sharing will be vital is in the Northern Triangle of Central America—composed of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This region has been a major source of violence and chaos with the infiltration of key public institutions by criminal elements associated with MS-13, an international criminal gang that originated in Los Angeles in the 1980s.⁴³ In this new environment of the 21st century, the weakening of states’ monopoly over the use of force is further heightened by the privatization of violence. As Mary Kaldor points out in her book *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (2012), “the new wars occur in situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy as well as the spread of criminality, corruption and inefficiency, violence is increasingly privatized both as a result of growing organized crime and the emergence of paramilitary groups, and political legitimacy is disappearing.”⁴⁴

The release of the U.S. *National Security Strategy* is a welcome document. Its objectives and priority actions are concise and comprehensive. However, its implementation toward the Western Hemisphere must be done in the spirit of cooperation and recognition of the sovereignty of the nations of Latin America. While the document only mentions specifically the Northern Triangle nations (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), it must be remembered that other nations in the region are facing the same perils, such as Cuba and Venezuela. The inability or unwillingness to work together in the spirit of cooperation, interference in the internal affairs, and lack of respect for the sovereignty could further alienate the United States from Latin American nations, thus allowing U.S. enemies to interfere in the internal affairs of a region traditionally within the U.S. sphere of influence.

ENDNOTES

1. Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017, p. 7.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 8.

4. Ibid., p. 9.

5. Ibid., p. 17.

6. Ibid., p. 18.

7. Ibid., p. 19.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 20.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 21.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., p. 25.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 26.

18. Ibid.

19. "The next war: The growing danger of great-power conflict: How shifts in technology and geopolitics are renewing the threat," *The Economist*, January 27-February 2, 2018, p. 9. See also, within the same issue, a Special Report entitled, "The Future of War."

20. Moisés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge isn't What it Used to Be*, New York: Basic Books, 2013, p. 11.

21. Trump, p. 31.

22. Ibid.

23. For an excellent discussion of the networked world and how it will impact the study of international relations see Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017.

24. Trump, p. 37.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., p. 40.

27. Ibid., p. 45.

28. Ibid., p. 51.

29. See Evan Ellis, "China, Russia Increase Leverage in Venezuela Amid Crisis," *Newsmax*, September 7, 2017, available from <https://www.newsmax.com/EvanEllis/venezuela-crisis-china-russia/2017/09/07/id/812212/>, accessed February 4, 2018; Evan Ellis, "Russian engagement in Latin America:

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31. Trump, p. 49.

32. Tzvi Kahn, as quoted in José de Arimatéia da Cruz, "Iran in the Lands of the Incas," *War Room: United States Army War College*, May 25, 2017, available from <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/iran-lands-incas/>, accessed February 4, 2018.

33. Trump, p. 51.

34. Peter H. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

35. Trump, p. 51.

36. Sullivan, de Arimatéia da Cruz, and Bunker.

37. Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, "Urban Fragility and Resilience in Latin America: Conceptual Approaches and Contemporary Patterns," in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Violence and Resilience in Latin American Cities*, London, UK: Zed Books, 2015, p. 21.

38. Evan Ellis, "Brazil: Between cooperation and deterrence," *Global Americans*, December 18, 2017, available from <https://theglobalamericans.org/2017/12/brazil-cooperation-deterrence/>, accessed February 4, 2018.

39. Megacities are traditionally defined as cities with a population over 10 million people. Those so-called megacities have been growing exponentially since the 1970s. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is one such megacity. For a great discussion of megacities and their politics of exclusion and violence, see Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Megacities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, New York: Zed Books, 2009.

40. Harris et al., p. 17.

41. Robert J. Bunker, "Epochal Change: War Over Social and Political Organization," *Parameters*, Vol. 27, Summer 1997, available from <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/Articles/97summer/bunker.htm>; Naím.

42. Naím, p. 118.

43. The recent release of a classified document by Devin Nunes regarding the investigation of whether Russia was involved in the meddling of the 2016 U.S. election has created some concerns among military officers in Latin America, according to personal conversations of this author with military leaders.

44. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era, Third Edition*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012, pg. 7.

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