

12-9-2016

Strategic Insights: Thinking Strategically About Latin America and the Caribbean

R. Evan Ellis

Follow this and additional works at: https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ellis, R. Evan, "Strategic Insights: Thinking Strategically About Latin America and the Caribbean" (2016).
Articles & Editorials. 449.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/449

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles & Editorials by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.

Strategic Insights: Thinking Strategically About Latin America and the Caribbean

December 9, 2016 | Dr. R. Evan Ellis

In the 2016 U.S. presidential debates, as on other occasions, the theme of Latin America and the Caribbean was remarkably absent. Important events in the region occasionally insert themselves into the U.S. consciousness through the mainstream media, including: the arrival of thousands of Central American child refugees at the U.S. border; the U.S. re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba; the impending collapse of Venezuela; and the Colombian public's rejection, on October 2, 2016, of the agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Yet even with its geographic connectedness to the United States, and although Latin America eclipses even China and Asia as the U.S. principal foreign trading partner, and despite the fact that more U.S. residents have family in the region than any other part of the world, Latin America, and the Caribbean continue to be remarkably absent from the U.S. strategic and foreign policy discourse.¹

Part of the job of the U.S. Army War College is to educate future military leaders and prepare them for higher command, including thinking about the global strategic environment within which U.S. forces operate and how that environment is evolving. A range of security-related issues compete for the attention of U.S. leaders, from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and instability in the Middle East, to the nuclear and ballistic missile threat from North Korea, to Russian belligerence toward the West in the Ukraine and elsewhere, to a recalcitrant Iran now re-connected with global financial and commercial markets, to the ever greater presence of the People's Republic of China in world trade and its increasing willingness to assert its interests, to non-traditional threats, including the Zika virus and other emergent diseases, cyberthreats, potentially disruptive new technologies, and even the emergence of space as a theater in which multiple U.S. rivals now operate.

To be frank, the space that Latin America occupies in the agenda of senior U.S. military leaders is limited at best. Within the U.S. Army, there are talented people who serve in Latin America-focused assignments in the Pentagon, U.S. Army South, U.S. Southern Command, U.S. Special Operations Command 7th Group, National Guard State Partner Programs (SPPs), and within the individual security cooperation offices (SCOs) of the U.S. embassies in Latin America, among others. However, the number of Latin America-focused U.S. Army personnel is small compared to the number of personnel focused on other areas, such as the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, and, of course, the U.S. homeland.

The Strategic Importance of the Region.

Let's be clear. Although it is possible to postulate scenarios in which terrorists, rogue governments, or foreign powers pose a threat to the United States from Latin America and the Caribbean, by comparison to the rest of the world, the region is at peace and arguably does not present the same near-term existential threats to the United States as those found in other regions.

Yet, therein lies the misunderstanding. The absence of a near-term existential threat from Latin America and the Caribbean does not make it any less strategically important for the United States. Its strategic importance stems from its unique and inherent potential as both a vulnerability and as an opportunity to support the effectiveness of U.S. engagement in the globally interconnected world.

As noted previously, there is arguably no region (including Asia) upon which the United States is more dependent for its prosperity and security, and with which it is more closely tied through bonds of family, than Latin America and the Caribbean. In terms of trade and investment, from manufacturers to the food Americans put on the table, there is no region for which disruption of commerce with the United States could do more damage to our economy and the everyday lives of Americans. Reciprocally, the region's proximity to the United States makes it a logical and attractive business partner; there is not another region of the world for which prosperity, healthy infrastructure, and institutions could contribute more to a win-win commercial relationship with the United States.

With respect to security, the United States is blessed by the absence of neighbors that pose a direct military threat to the nation, are experiencing conditions of chaos, or permit U.S. adversaries to operate from their territory. Yet, if these fortunate conditions were to change, the resulting threat to U.S. national security could force a significant reorientation of U.S. security initiatives away from its foreign engagements to address the emergent threat closer to home.

To use a military analogy, Latin America and the Caribbean is, for the United States, an "unoccupied high ground." The fact that the United States does not fully leverage the opportunities offered by Latin America, nor suffers a significant immediate security threat from the region, does not make it any less strategic.

The Challenge of Transnational Organized Crime in the Region.

The activities of transnational organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, often characterized as the principle security issue in the region, is more of a strategic challenge to the United States than is commonly understood.

On the one hand, the activities of groups such as the Maras in the Northern Triangle and warring cartels in Mexico generate violence and destroy economic opportunity in ways that generate refugee flows toward the United States. Indeed, the 2014 crisis of child migrants from Central America obliged the Obama administration to request an additional \$3.7 billion to respond to the situation, eclipsing the \$979 million previously spent on the region under the Central America Regional Security Initiative since 2008.²

In addition, the money used to enable transnational criminal activities corrupts institutions, undermining governance, and expanding criminal networks that can be used by terrorist organizations to raise and launder money, smuggle persons and materiel through the region, as well as creating spaces in which they can hide, train, plan operations, and recruit fighters for their global activities.

Such threats are magnified further where anti-U.S. governments, such as the "Bolivarian Socialist" government of Venezuela, tolerate and possibly even facilitate the activities of such groups, permitting, for example, the entry of Iranian paramilitary Qods forces into the region through the country.³

The Need for U.S. Scenario Planning to Include the Potential Use of the Region by U.S. Adversaries to Conduct Actions Against the United States.

Military professionals in the United States have the responsibility for planning how to fight the nation's wars if called upon to do so by their elected leaders. In today's globally interconnected world, it is highly unlikely that a U.S. "near-peer competitor," such as China or Russia, would allow the United States to engage with them in such a conflict (however undesirable) entirely as an "away game." U.S. defense planners must expect that in such a conflict, the adversary would employ its full global range of assets, capabilities, and options, including: relationships and access agreements with foreign militaries (however benign) in all parts of the world, knowledge of, and the potential for, staging activities leveraging their commercial operations near the United States, as well as information technology infrastructure built by the adversary's companies there.

Potential U.S. adversaries such as Russia and China may be expected to leverage such assets and relationships in Latin America and the Caribbean, in addition to other regions, in order to undermine U.S. coalition formation in the run-up to a conflict, to conduct operations in the region during the conflict to disrupt the U.S. economy and financial system, and potentially to conduct military operations from Latin America and the Caribbean to attack U.S. deployment and sustainment flows, and to put the U.S. homeland at risk, thus forcing the diversion of U.S. forces from other theaters.

While Russia and China have not currently established formal military bases in the region that could be used against the United States, their familiarity with Latin American armed forces through regular military-to-military engagement, their knowledge of regional infrastructure such as ports, airports, and commercial logistics systems, means that they could achieve a functional military capability in the region rapidly in the months leading up to the conflict, if U.S. adversaries in Latin America permitted them to do so.

Although it is unthinkable for many in the United States that a Latin American or Caribbean country would collaborate militarily with an extra-regional power against the United States, the rejection of this proposition presumes that the U.S. victory in such a conflict would be so certain as to deter hostile regimes in the region from betting against us. Yet, despite U.S. hubris, such presumptions are increasingly cast in doubt with the evolution of global power balances. To recall a historical example, the German government believed, in the run-up to World War II, that Mexico might contemplate allying with them against the United States to help recuperate Mexican territory lost to the United States in the Spanish-American War.

Nor would such foreign support necessarily have to be overt. During World War II, German U-boats, re-supplied with the assistance of German sympathizers in the region, sank over 180 merchant marine ships in the Caribbean.⁴

Latin America as a Strategic Opportunity.

While it is important to understand Latin America's potential as a strategic vulnerability for the United States, it should also be recognized for the numerous opportunities that it presents to the United States as a partner, to more effectively engage globally in support of shared values such as democracy and human rights.

Latin American military and other government forces have substantial, but little-leveraged knowledge, experience, and capability to contribute to coalition efforts. The United States has already discovered the potential for such collaboration within the region through programs such as the *Colombia Action Plan*. Outside the region, a core component of U.S. security assistance and

capability building efforts in complex, corrupted, and conflict-ridden societies involves questions in which their Latin American counterparts have ample experience. One example is the military support to local police forces. Such operations involve a complex range of considerations involving the relationship between the local military and the police, and the relationship of both to the local community. U.S. personnel working such activities in Iraq and Afghanistan have had to learn “on the fly.” Yet, such military-police coordination is a challenge that their Salvadoran, Honduran, or Guatemalan counterparts must deal with on a daily basis.

Leveraging the Opportunity of Latin America and Preventing it from Becoming a Strategic Threat.

The instruments for leveraging the strategic potential of Latin America and the Caribbean and preventing it from becoming a strategic threat to the United States are mostly non-military. They have to do with the strengthening of institutions, democracy, the rule of law, and equitable societies and political systems in which populist leaders cannot exploit the legitimate aspirations for a better life of the marginalized in order to further those leaders’ own wealth and power. Preventing Latin America from becoming a strategic threat involves maintaining a region of governments with transparency and checks and balances that can maintain healthy economic and political relationships with a variety of global partners, without becoming co-opted by anti-U.S. actors to sustain their own political survival.

The price of leveraging the region and preventing it from becoming a strategic threat to the United States is remarkably low, yet more than what U.S. policymakers have been willing to pay to date, absent compelling immediate threats.

Although U.S. behavior toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the past has created a complex legacy to navigate, overcoming resentments and suspicion of the United States that exists in some parts of the region can be achieved with sustained and sincere commitment on the basis of a respectful and equitable partnership. There will always be naysayers.

The number of Latin American business and military professionals who have attended U.S. institutions, and who have family in the United States is without equal among U.S. rivals, yet that is arguably underleveraged as an asset for building goodwill and partnerships.

From the point of view of military engagement, U.S. proximity and shared history with the region means that the United States has a legacy of working relationships with Latin American militaries and other groups on which to build. Indeed, the substantial proportion of Latinos in the United States and the U.S. Armed Forces means that there is not another region of the world in which the United States has similarly broad options to engage with its partners through shared language and ethnicity.

While extra-hemispheric actors like the Russians may have established substantial human ties and some residual goodwill during the Cold War, neither the Russians nor others, such as the Chinese or the Iranians, have the ability to engage the region through the shared bonds of language and culture that the United States is able to leverage.

The Need for More Strategic Thinking about Latin America and the Caribbean.

While the importance of Latin America to the United States demands more resources and attention from the U.S. leadership, it also requires more strategic thinking about the dynamics of the region, the implications of those dynamics in both the region and other parts of the world, and how best to work with regional partners to manage the associated challenges.

Although only one resource within one part of the U.S. Government, the U.S. Army War College benefits each year from the presence of some of the most talented officers in the U.S. military who attend the institution as students. That student body is further enriched by the presence of international fellows, including some of the best and brightest officers from Latin America and the Caribbean itself. This essay encourages more of the talented officers receiving their strategic-level education at the War College to consider focusing their strategic research projects (SRPs) on the strategic challenges and opportunities within the region, and to continue deepening such thinking as they progress in their careers.

With respect to the content of U.S. strategic thinking about Latin America and the Caribbean, this article makes five recommendations. In each, the U.S. State Department should have the lead on the U.S. side, with the support of the Department of Defense and other parts of the U.S. and partner nation governments in the region.

First, the United States needs to analyze the challenges of Latin America and the Caribbean in more system-oriented terms as it works with its partners in the region on how to address the complex problems of security, governance, and prosperity in an internationally coordinated, whole-of-government fashion. Too often, the United States and its regional partners apply government resources in a semi-coordinated, but traditional fashion: without truly analyzing the interdependence of the threat and the socioeconomic context in which it is rooted; without identifying the centers of gravity of that system, such as finance and corruption, in order to develop strategic concepts for how best to attack those challenges.

Second, the United States should make strong institutions and the rule of law in Latin American societies the anchor point for U.S. strategy toward the region, since these are key to combating transnational organized crime and achieving equitable growth that makes those societies more likely to prosper and more resistant to exploitation by populists who seek to leverage perceived inequality and corruption to take control of the national political system and pervert it for the benefit of the populist leaders' personal wealth and power. In the process, governments with strong institutions are also more resistant to predatory behavior by extra-hemispheric actors who may offer easy finance and special favors for individual leaders in the interest of advancing their own strategic position. While the United States already promotes strong institutions and the rule of law in the region, U.S. decision-makers should recognize the centrality of these conditions in relation to the rest of the objectives that it pursues in the region, and invest more resources toward strengthening the region's institutions and promoting the rule of law, always in a respectful fashion and within the framework of the national objectives of partners in the region.

Third, the United States must do more to reduce narcotics consumption within its borders, and the export of firearms from the United States to the region, as well as communicating more effectively with the region regarding its efforts to do so. Largely unknown in the region, the United States does spend significant resources on reducing drug demand domestically, and preventing guns acquired (legally or otherwise) in the United States from leaving the country. Yet there is a strong perception in the region that the scourge of transnational criminal actors is fueled by U.S. drug demand, and the violence that they unleash is enabled by U.S. firearms. The United States must do more to combat both this perception, and this reality, if it wishes to strengthen its relationship with the region.

Fourth, the United States must be more responsive to exploiting strategic opportunities and addressing risks arising from the situation and political orientation of individual countries in the region. At present, for example, Peru, Argentina, and Brazil have set aside experiments with socialist and ethno-nationalist governments in favor of pro-democracy, pro-market, rule of law-

oriented leaders. It is in the strategic interest of the United States to invest the modest resources and policy support required to help those new leaders succeed.

Reciprocally, as the “Bolivarian Socialist” regime in Venezuela teeters on the brink of economic and political collapse, despite the enormous petroleum resources available to its government over the past 17 years, the United States must do more to highlight to the region the false promise of adopting anti-market policies in the name of development, and the undermining of democratic institutions in the name of the people.

Finally, the United States should pay more attention to shaping the framework of multilateral institutions and rules within which interactions occur within the hemisphere, including engagement with extra-hemispheric actors such as Russia, Iran, and the People's Republic of China. It is strategically important for the United States, for example, to have a healthy Organization of American States and a functional inter-American system to ensure that the challenges of the region are resolved through a democratic framework in which the United States, as an integral part of the region, has a seat at the table. Similarly, with the continuing expansion of trans-Pacific commerce and other relations, the United States should regard the implementation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the successful advance of the Pacific Alliance, as strategic matters, helping to ensure that such engagements are conducted within a framework of transparency and the rule of law, and in which all nations sharing the Pacific Rim have equal prospects to reap the benefits of their innovation and good policies.

Latin America and the Caribbean are vital to the security and strategic position of the United States as it engages in an ever more interdependent world. Investing the resources and taking actions commensurate with that thinking does not imply a U.S. retreat from engagement further from home, but in the long-run, is necessary to sustaining it, and doing it effectively. In that effort, the students of the U.S. Army War College have a modest, but important, role to play, as do those far beyond the War College with a stake in the security and prosperity of the United States and the region of which it is inextricably a part.

ENDNOTES

1. R. Evan Ellis, “The Strategic Importance of the Western Hemisphere: Defining U.S. Interests in the Region,” Testimony to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, Foreign Affairs Committee, February 3, 2015, available from <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20150203/102885/HHRG-114-FA07-Wstate-EllisE-20150203.pdf>, accessed on December 2, 2016.

2. Michael D. Shear and Jeremy W. Peters, “Obama Asks for \$3.7 Billion to Aid Border,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2014, available from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/us/obama-seeks-billions-for-children-immigration-crisis.html?_r=0, accessed on December 2, 2016; U.S. Department of State, “Central America Regional Security Initiative,” available from <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/carsi/>, accessed on December 2, 2016.

3. Bill Gertz, “Iran boosts Qods shock troops in Venezuela,” *The Washington Times*, April 21, 2010, available from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/21/iran-boosts-qods-shock-troops-in-venezuela/>, accessed on December 2, 2016.

4. “U.S. Ships sunk, damaged or detained in Caribbean Sea during World War II,” American Merchant Marine at War, February 7, 2007, available from <http://www.usmm.org/carib.html>, accessed on December 2, 2016.

The views expressed in this Strategic Insights piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This article is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press articles should contact the Editor for Production. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College."

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Press publications may be downloaded free of charge from the SSI website. Hard copies of certain reports may also be obtained free of charge while supplies last by placing an order on the SSI website. Check the website for availability. SSI publications may be quoted or reprinted in part or in full with permission and appropriate credit given to the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA.