

Statement by

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on

Strategic Competition and Security Cooperation in the Western Hemisphere

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on how the Department of Defense (DoD) approaches strategic competition and security cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. We would like to make two main points:

First, the Department is committed to maintaining strong defense relationships with our key partners in the Western Hemisphere, including Canada, Mexico, and the majority of the countries from the Caribbean and Central and South America. Security cooperation is a vital tool to maintain these relationships, as Russia and China continue expanding their influence and actively seek to compete with us in this hemisphere across multiple sectors.

Second, even as we engage in this competition, we also must support responses to threats posed by state or non-state actors, including drug trafficking, trafficking in persons and weapons, illicit financial flows, humanitarian disasters with natural and man-made causes, and malicious cyber activity. Our security cooperation partnerships serve as a critical way to counter transnational threats, as part of a whole-of-government approach.

## **Strategic Competition**

As DoD addresses multiple threats to international peace and stability, we are mindful that a relatively safe and secure Western Hemisphere helps give us the bandwidth to tackle challenges elsewhere in the globe. However, we cannot take security in this hemisphere for granted, especially as our strategic competitors seek to shift the balance in their favor.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the pacing challenge for the Department in the Western Hemisphere. The PRC continues to expand its diplomatic, technological, informational, military, and economic enticements to our partners in the region. We are concerned that PRC offers of military cooperation, scientific exchanges, and information technology assistance have nefarious objectives. We are also concerned that the PRC's economic investments are predatory in nature and may mask military purposes. Russia continues to promote instability in the hemisphere with disinformation and by providing diplomatic, intelligence, financial, and military

support to authoritarian regimes, and its activities could enter a new phase if Russia seeks to amplify these activities in reaction to the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Iran's cooperation with the Venezuelan regime of Nicolas Maduro among other countries remains of great concern to us.

Responding to these threats requires attention, commitment, and investments. As the forthcoming National Defense Strategy will outline, DoD will need to maintain strong bilateral and multilateral defense partnerships in the hemisphere, enabled by engagements and presence, intelligence and information exchanges, education programs and exercises, and other tools of security cooperation.

### **Enduring and Emerging Threats**

In addition to state competitors, drug trafficking and other transnational criminal organizations continue to accrue billions of dollars in illicit profit at the expense of American lives and regional security. They engage in illicit activities such as trafficking in humans and weapons, and illegal mining. These organizations undermine stability by enabling corruption, eroding democratic institutions, and hindering governments from exercising effective sovereignty within their countries.

Western Hemisphere nations, particularly in Central America and the Caribbean, face the threat of extreme natural disasters, in many cases exacerbated by climate change. These disasters often lead to a variety of destabilizing effects that compound economic hardship and insecurity, and can help drive migration.

We have also seen the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the hemisphere. The pandemic's effects on political and economic stability, and on public health, will resonate across the region for decades to come.

Finally, there is concern across the hemisphere about the increasing threat of a range of malicious cyber activities, including unauthorized intrusions.

## **Strong Relationships and Effective Security Cooperation**

Addressing these strategic and transnational threats requires DoD to closely cooperate with other U.S. Executive Branch partners and with international partners. Building and strengthening these partnerships are key to maintaining the Western Hemisphere's security and stability. Our partnerships with other hemispheric nations are based on the essential principles of support for democratic institutions, civilian control of the military, and respect for human rights and dignity. Dedicated training on human rights is a core component of our security cooperation activities with partners.

Senior DoD officials have led multiple bilateral working groups and other senior-level engagements with our partners across the Americas, including several with Caribbean partners as part of our greater emphasis on cooperation with that vital region. We continue institutional capacity-building and professional education programs with partner nations' defense and security ministries and militaries, including in Central America. Our defense and security cooperation with Colombia remains strong, and is a key component of the U.S.-Colombia Bicentennial Partnership that Presidents Biden and Duque announced on March 10.

At the same time, we are expanding into new areas of cooperation, to include cyber, climate resilience, and space. We also cooperate in multilateral settings, to include the Inter-American Defense Board and the Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, which Brazil will host this July. In addition, to help our U.S. law enforcement and international partners disrupt drug trafficking and other transnational criminal organizations, DoD continues to provide detection and monitoring, intelligence analysis, and other forms of support, using the counterdrug authorities and appropriations provided by Congress for more than 30 years.

## **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished Members of the Committee, these are just some of the ways in which DoD employs security cooperation to address strategic competition and transnational threats. Thank you, and we look forward to your questions.