



WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES

PROCEEDINGS

2018 EDITION, No.4 (JULY)



Central America Regional Seminar on Countering Transnational Threat Seminar, Group Photo, Panama City, Panama

Central America Regional Seminar on Countering Transnational Threat Networks

Panama City, Panama, 5 – 7 June 2018

Summary Proceedings¹

By William Godnick, Celina Realuyo and Boris Saavedra

The nations of Central America face increasingly formidable security challenges from transnational threat networks that have regional and global reach without boundaries. Military and security forces must recognize and confront these threats, with interagency frameworks and the understanding that it takes a network to neutralize a network. The William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (WJPC) provides a space for academics and practitioners to address these issues affecting the Western Hemisphere in a constructive and enriching environment. To that end, and as a follow up to the May 2018 Central American Defense Conference

¹ These summary proceedings reflect the discussions conducted under Chatham House Rules (no attribution) of the 5 – 7 June 2018 William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies Central American Regional Seminar on Countering Transnational Threat Networks in Panama City, Panama. In specific cases where provided authorization their names and institutions are included in the report. .

(CENTSEC) in San Salvador, El Salvador, the Perry Center co-hosted with the Panamanian Ministry of Public Security a Central American Regional Seminar on Countering Transnational Threat Networks for participants from 11 countries (Belize, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and United States) in Panama City from 5 – 7 June 2018.

DAY ONE

Introduction/Counterterrorism

I. Panama’s National Strategy for Citizen Security 2030

Panama’s Minister of Public Security, Alexis Bethancourt Yau, opened the seminar presenting the National Strategy for Citizen Security 2017 – 2030, an effort meant to engender a long-term approach by multiple government agencies in Panama to address the multidimensional challenges of crime and insecurity beyond the time limits of any specific government administration. The strategy has benefitted from the financial and technical support of the Inter-American Development Bank, European Union and the United Nations Development Program and is comprised of five lines of action:

1. universal access to a violence-free life;
2. transparent and responsible institutions;
3. local action as the first line of response;
4. participation and inclusion for a culture of peace; and
5. the building of international and domestic alliances for long-term success.

The strategy itself is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), in particular SDG 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions. One of the key inputs to the strategy was a process of broad public consultation, including both the general public and a survey of the prison publication undertaken by the office of the human rights ombudsman.



Panama’s Minister of Public Security, Alexis Bethancourt Yau

Minister Bethancourt emphasized that the Government of Panama includes national defense within the national strategy in the roles specifically played by the National Border Service and the National Aero-Naval Service responsible for border security and the maritime domain respectively. In this context, the Minister mentioned the maritime interdiction plan focused on counternarcotics as well as the focus on terrorism prevention. The presentation concluded with call for regional governments to continue to collaborate for collective security and to build upon existing collaboration for the benefit of the Western Hemisphere.

II. U.S. Assistance to Central America

A representative of the U.S. Southern Command presented the contributions of civilian agencies to efforts to improve governance and security in Central America through the three pillars of Defense, Diplomacy and Development. In the current context, U.S. interests in Central America are heavily focused on supporting good governance and economic development for the purpose of addressing the conditions that favor illegal migration, youth participation in gangs and illegal narcotics trafficking. These problems are compounded by the frequent natural disasters hitting the isthmus.



U.S. Southern Command representative

In Central America, U.S. interagency response in recent years has been developed within the Central American Security Initiative (CARSI), bringing together the resources of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement as well as resources from the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice. The role of the Department of Defense via Southern Command lies in a number of areas, but most intensely on intelligence, communications and logistical resources to support share interagency missions and partner efforts.

Remarks also focused on how CARSI implementation in national contexts in the Northern Triangle of Central America are directed towards place-based or "hot spots" where three levels of intervention are implemented: primary, improving the overall conditions of the community to prevent crime and violence; secondary, to respond to violent acts and support victims; and tertiary, focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of violent offenders into society.

Questions and comments from the seminar participants were varied and expressed frustration with the lack of tangible results of these efforts as

well developed aid in general. Additional comments attempted to draw parallels with the current situation in Colombia and the challenges arising from the implementation of the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

III. U.S. Strategy to Counter Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas

The 2017 U.S. national security strategy addresses threats from nation states like China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as well as transnational non-state actors like terrorist and criminal networks. While crime is nothing new, the magnitude, velocity, wealth and violence associated with transnational organized crime due to globalization are presenting security challenges to the security, prosperity, rule of law, and governance of countries around the world. The convergence of organized crime and terrorism, demonstrated by the cases of the FARC in Colombia, Shining Path in Peru, ISIS, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Lebanese Hezbollah is further empowering these threats to nation states. Criminalized states, such as Venezuela, that has become an enabler of international criminal and terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, are of increasing concern in the region.

The U.S. Administration under President Trump has committed to continue and enhance the mission outlined in the Obama Administration's 2011 U.S. Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime to address human, drug, and arms trafficking, corruption, and financial and cybercrime. The Administration is seeing an evolution of transnational criminal threats like the diversification of the global drug trafficking, with the increase supply of opioids like heroin and fentanyl as well as cocaine into American, European, and Asian markets. The opioids epidemic in the U.S. is contributing to an average of 173 drug overdose deaths per day. The human smuggling and trafficking networks are moving more people than ever in the Hemisphere who seek to flee poverty, violence or persecution. To counter these threats, the U.S. is engaged in several foreign assistance programs to



Professor Celina Realuyo (Perry Center) with various seminar panelists representing, Canada, Colombia, Mexico and United States.

encourage socio-economic development, enhance citizen security, and improve judicial institutions in the Americas, particularly in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Fundamental to the counter-crime strategy, corruption and impunity in the region must be combated through the application of the law at the national level and collaboration at the regional level with better intelligence, a more professional police forces and support from the professional military forces. The government must actively engage the public, private and civic sectors through better communication, cooperation and collaboration to better counter transnational organized crime with a whole of society approach.

IV. Globalization and the Convergence of Terrorism and Crime (Celina or Boris)

Representatives from Colombia, Mexico and Panama discussed national experiences related to the convergence of terrorism and crime. Colombia is implementing the historic peace accord brokered by the government with the FARC after over 50 years of armed conflict. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process of the FARC guerrillas is underway, but armed violence continues as some FARC members have not adhered to the peace and some criminal bands are filling the power vacuum

left by the FARC. Criminal activities continue due to record levels of coca production and illegal mining, and the ELN remains an active terrorist group in Colombia.

In Mexico, the cartels are not considered terrorist organizations under Mexican law since they do not aspire to overthrow the government. Although the cartels use terrorist tactics to control territory and routes and to intimidate local populations, their actions are not viewed as political. For the past decade, the Mexican government has employed the armed forces to support the police to confront the cartels, but the record levels of violence in Mexico this year demonstrate that these efforts by the security forces are not having the desired effect. Violence, crime and corruption are leading issues dominating the presidential electoral debates.

Panama is concerned about transnational threats and considers its strategic geographic location as an attractive feature for terrorists and criminals who seek to move product, people and money across the isthmus. Panama has been actively addressing irregular migration with biometric measures used to complement enhanced border security and close cooperation with neighboring Colombia and Costa Rica. Panama has identified and detained third country

nationals from Africa and the Mideast who were on the “no fly” list thanks to these measures. Panama has specialized counterterrorism units charged with protecting critical infrastructure, especially the Panama Canal and is preparing for the Pope’s visit in January 2019. CT units are monitoring terrorist groups including Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Lebanese Hezbollah that might try to enter or transit Panama.

DAY TWO: Countering Crime

I. Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Networks in the Americas

A plenary presentation was dedicated to an overview of the roles and interest of extra-regional actors in the Western Hemisphere (Russia, China, Iran and Hezbollah among others) as well as traditional insurgent groups that now focus on illicit drugs trafficking and criminal enterprises (FARC in Colombia, EPP in Paraguay and Shining Path in Peru).

A relatively newer phenomenon is the direct participation of several states of the Hemisphere in organized crime, not only as a way to enrich corrupt leaders, but also as an instrument of national power. Under this scenario, governments are not just passive participants looking the other way, but active and tend to criminalize opposition parties and leaders as a way of ensuring their permanence in power and continuity in illicit activities. This has led to potential changes in the rules of statecraft as well as to the question if whether or not state management of criminal enterprises is illegal?

A range of illicit activities, actors and modalities were described to include the difficulty in tracing the illegal gold trade, the transformation of Central American gangs into broader transnational mafias and the expansion of Mexican cartels throughout the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, attention was drawn to the global financial sector and the web of questionable transactions funneled through a variety of private and government-owned banks and entities.

Question and answer session brought forth concerns that neither the United States nor regional partners have found the precise formula required to counter these threats effectively, in particular given the U.S. Department of Defense’s global missions sets.

II. Country Perspectives on Transnational Organized Crime

Partners from Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Honduras shared national experiences related to human trafficking, illicit narcotics, illegal migration and gangs.

The Costa Rican experience of creating the National Coalition against Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking (FONATT) was shared with participants as well as some of the findings related to the phenomenon. The FONATT is an interagency structure bringing together all the relevant government institutions. The majority of the cases managed by the FONATT have been related to sexual exploitation practices with cases of exploitative labor being the second most prevalent. The phenomenon disproportionately affects women. After Costa Rican nationals, citizens from neighboring Nicaragua constitute the largest numbers of victims. The Government of Costa Rica invested more than USD 2 million in 2017 to address the human trafficking problem, including a system of comprehensive victim assistance and a ‘Blue Heart’ campaign to raise awareness among the general and vulnerable at-risk populations. One major challenge is the continued lack of successful prosecution of cases against those involved in the human trafficking chain of criminality.

The situation of illicit narcotics trafficking in the Dominican Republic was relayed in detail, including the dynamics of the movements by air, land and sea. Recent documentation that the majority of cocaine trafficked into and through the country originates in Venezuela, either directly or indirectly via the land border with Haiti. Dominican authorities were able to confiscate more than 15,705 kilos of cocaine in 2017, the largest figure ever recorded. Outbound shipments

from the country head north with the highest figures for interdiction recorded in Puerto Rico and by the U.S. Coast Guard in open seas. The government is concerned that increased success in drug interdiction is an indicator that even larger quantities of illicit drugs are making it to market. The National Drug Control Directorate has recently launched a smart phone application that allows citizens to report illicit drug dealing and trafficking anonymously, including the ability to upload videos and images.

In Guatemala, the phenomenon of illegal migration is raising heightened concerns and involves Guatemalan citizens as well as those of neighboring El Salvador and Honduras. Notably, migrants from South America and Africa are also increasingly passing through Guatemala. While government defense and security policies have contributed to a reduction of homicides by armed violence in recent years, levels of poverty and extreme poverty have increased after years of progress. Poverty, natural disasters and the threat of urban gangs continue to put pressure on Guatemalans to seek greener pastures northward. With the support of the international community with national resources more than USD 209 million has been dedicated to address outward migration from source communities. Similar to the framework espoused by the Government of Panama, as described above, the Government of Guatemala is implementing a National Strategy for Crime and Violence Prevention (2017 – 2027), a whole of government approach that focused on prevention, repression and recovery.

In Honduras, the problem of gangs, referred to as maras, is an ongoing challenge similar those faced by neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador. The MS-13 and Mara 18 continue to be the primary, but not only, gang organizations occupying poor, and increasingly, rural communities of Honduras. The magnitude of the problem has led to the government tasking the armed forces with supporting and implementing policies to address the gangs and their criminal activities. This resulted in the creation of the National Interagency

Security Force (FUSINA) that pools efforts of the military, police, public prosecutor and immigration service as well as the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP). Preliminary results from these efforts have shown modest results in the positive direction. Current policy and legislative debates include proposals to lower the age for which gang members can be tried as adults as gangs increasingly use younger members to commit heinous and violent acts. While such proposals have significant public support, they also come up against national obligations to implement international human rights and child rights commitments.

III. Country Perspectives on the Role of the Military and Police in Citizen Security

In contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean, the armed forces have increasingly been called upon to support missions to counter organized crime and citizen insecurity, due to growing levels of crime and the need to respond to the use of military weaponry by criminal groups. This situation generates a serious of challenge related to training, use of force and human rights guidance as well as technical and legal orientation to support evidence chain of custody and judicial processes. In this session, country perspectives were shared from Belize, Dominican Republic and Guatemala.

In recent years, the Belize Defence Force (BDF) has been called in to support police efforts to counter organized crime and urban insecurity. The primary role of the Defence Force in this context is to provide patrol and perimeter support as soldiers do not generally have the authority to arrest and detain suspects. These efforts are enshrined in the Joint Military and Policing Operation framework. The other key role played by the BDF border security where soldiers patrol remote areas where there is no police, and little if any state presence. These are areas where drugs, weapons and human trafficking commonly take place.



From left: Dominican Republic representative, Rafael Arias and Dr. Boris Saavedra (Profesessor at the Perry Center).

In the Dominican Republic, the Armed Forces have a long tradition of supporting public security and anti-crime operations established through the constitution and other legal norms. Through the Specialized Corps for Border Security or CESFRONT, the Dominican military is one of the key actors in providing security to the territory along the shared border with Haiti, long impacted by issues of migration and contraband. Of particular note, is the Dominican military's support to the citizen security component of the national development framework which includes providing military and logistical support to anti-narcotics efforts, additional reserve troops to back up police during emergency operations and the 'Tranquility' Task Force where troops provide patrolling support in the country's largest cities affected by urban violence and insecurity.

The case of Guatemala is somewhat unique in that the Armed Forces have been called upon to support citizen security for many years now, but have also implemented a strategy to gradually withdraw the military from this role. While this process is by no means consolidated or complete, it acknowledges the temporary and exceptional role that most armed forces are meant to play in efforts to combat crime

and improve citizen security. While homicide rates did decrease in Guatemala during the deployment of the military to public security operations, it is not clear if the role of the military was the decisive in this reduction. The Guatemalan military has expressed its concern that the role it plays in public security detracts from other traditional roles, in particular providing border security.

IV. Interagency and Regional Cooperation to Combat Transnational Threats

The current mantra of the U.S. Southern Command is that it takes a network to dismantle a network and for this reason internal interagency and regional defense and security cooperation are essential. This session provided country perspectives of important partners to the Central American region: Canada, Colombia, Mexico and the United States.

Canada defines its defense strategy towards the Western Hemisphere in the slogan 'Strong, Secure and Engaged.' The primary support of the Canadian Armed Forces to Hemispheric Security cooperation has been in the maritime domain, through 'Operation Caribe' working together with 14 nations to patrol 42 million square miles of ocean. Through the

deployment of four Canadian Navy vessels, more than fifty interceptions have taken place resulting in the seizure of more than 85 metric tons of illicit narcotics. These efforts do not include a myriad of Canadian civil cooperation supported by the Anti-Crime Capacity Building Program, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Border Service Agency. Looking forward, the Canadian Navy is planning on providing Hemispheric partners with support from new state-of-the-art artic and offshore patrol ships (AOPS) during the winter when the Arctic seas are unnavigable.

In Colombia, the evolving peace process with the FARC is generating new peacetime opportunities as well as legacy challenges, as dissident guerillas join other insurgent groups and organized crime organizations. This context is compounded by the increasing humanitarian emergency spilling over from neighboring Venezuela. In this sense, the Colombia government and armed forces are seeking international cooperation to address these evolving threats as well as to support the implementation of the peace agreement under United Nations verification.

Mexico stressed the importance of both regional and extra-regional cooperation for the Central American Security Strategy developed within the Central American Integrations System (SICA). Increased cooperation is called for at the financial, technical and political levels in the areas of combating corruption illicit arms trafficking, drugs trafficking and the role played by vessels using flags of convenience.

The United States emphasized the importance of intelligence sharing both within and among the defense and civilian sectors of partner nations. The key issues touched on here were the need to avoid leaving important intelligence within agency silos as well as the crucial task of trust building among intelligence partners in order to guarantee the integrity and veracity of information sharing frameworks.

DAY THREE: Emerging Technologies, Inclusive Security and HADR

I. Cybersecurity and Emerging Technologies

The challenges and opportunities presented in the cyber domain and by emerging technologies are now common themes of debate in defense and security cooperation circles. One of the key elements of the current environment is that defense and security institutions have a limited role in generating cyber defense and security in comparison to the private sector. Nonetheless, defense and security institutions need to have strategies in place to provide for cyber defense and security for the country, based on public-private partnerships that include the entire country from the individual to the whole nation. It includes the protection of systems vulnerabilities, such as critical infrastructure, Big Data systems, Internet of Things, not to mention the supporting role provided to counter the diverse types of cybercrime. This session included national perspectives from Guatemala and the host country of Panama.

In Guatemala, nearly 40% of computers are affected by malware programs while nearly 20% have been victims of phishing techniques. The country's current regulatory environment addresses a number of important issues in particular as related to data protection, but does not comply with emerging international standards relating to the criminalization of new types of cybercrime. Of particular concern is the vulnerability of the banking and financial sectors. Additionally, legal frameworks focus on data and networks owned by the public sector, and only to a lesser degree address private sector digital assets and infrastructure. These current vulnerabilities require a cybersecurity strategy at national level that can identify the roles and responsibilities of public and private sector.

In recent years, the Republic of Panama has created a National Cyber and Data Incident Response team as part of a year 2013 national cyber and critical infrastructure protection strategy. At present, a bill



Dr. William Godnick (Professor, Perry Center) with various seminar panelists representing, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras.

on cybercrime is under debate in the legislature. Phishing and botnets are currently the two most common types of cyber incidents encountered by the Panamanian authorities. The Government of Panama is looking to identify ways to address the range of emerging technologies that will require both legislation and technical capacity. In the Panama Canal, the country has one of the world’s most important critical infrastructure assets to protect. In order to better protection the cyber domain of the whole country including public and private sector, a cybersecurity strategy is necessary that defines roles and responsibilities and focuses on better prevention regarding what to do and how to do it.

II. Promoting Inclusive Security in the Americas

The U.S. government is actively promoting the role of women, peace and security as called for in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in the year 2000. This resolution calls not only for addressing the vulnerabilities of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict contexts, but also for acknowledging and promoting the agency of women professionals and organizations in finding solutions to complex global, regional and national security problems. During this session, national perspectives from Costa

Rica, Dominican Republic and Panama were shared.

In the case of Costa Rica, women professionals from the private security sector have been active in addressing the use of these companies as fronts to legally obtain and later illegally sell firearms to organized crime, as has been the case of thousands of weapons that have crossed the borders into Panama. As part of this work, companies from the sector have begun to promote the increased use of unarmed private security services as a way to reduce the quantity of weapons in circulation as well as the vulnerability of private security guards to physical attacks by criminals to steal their weapons. Additionally, the important role of civil society organizations was noted such as the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress in promoting the UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

In the Dominican Republic, the history of longstanding efforts to promote women with ranks of the armed forces was shared with participants. At present, 22% of the armed forces are female officers and non-commissioned officers; the fruits of promoting greater gender participation have now resulted in the promotion of four women to the rank of flag officer in each of the country’s armed services.



From left: Panama's Minister of Public Security, Alexis Bethancourt Yau and Lieutenant General (Ret.) Frederick Rudesheim (Perry Center Director)

Of particular note, was the growing participation of women in the Dominican Republic's peacekeeping and peace observer mission, including the current verification mission underway in Colombia.

The work of women professionals in the citizen security sector in Honduras has led to the adoption of new preventive approaches to gang participation in vulnerable communities. This has included strategies to be inclusive of girls in social projects even if they represent to the minority of gang members. Preventive efforts combined with more traditional security operations in Honduras have resulted in an important reduction in the country's homicide rate in recent years.

III. Regional Approaches to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response

International cooperation among defense and security institutions in cases of natural disasters is one of the bright spots in cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. The region's vulnerability to hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, fires and volcanic events makes this a regional necessity. The volcanic eruptions

in the U.S. islands of Hawaii and in Guatemala during the convening of the seminar made this topic particularly salient for participants. National perspectives on humanitarian assistance and disaster response were shared from the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Panama.

The Dominican Republic described the difficult lessons learned from a generation of hurricanes as well as earthquakes in neighboring Haiti. The augmented response capability in recent years has reduced damages and deaths thanks to the creation of a national emergency coordinating committee (COE) that brings military logistical and material resources under the coordination of civilian authorities. The emergency response framework is coordinated in four areas: radio communications, operations, humanitarian assistance and public information.

Honduras, a country heavily impacted by natural disasters most notably Hurricane Mitch in 1998, shared an evolution on capability similar that documented in the Dominican Republic through the establishment of a national contingency commission (COPECO). Two of the key accomplishments of this

system has been to scientifically identify vulnerable geographic regions and communities and establish a natural disaster early warning system.

Panama is a country that has to respond to natural disasters without an armed forces component per se. For this purpose, the country has established a National System for Civilian Protection (SINAPROC). This system has established emergency operations centers across the country and used a red, yellow and green alert system to inform the general public. A joint interagency task force was established to implement emergency operations, guaranteeing citizens rights to security and protection; dignity and humanitarian assistance during disasters and other catastrophic events. From 2015 to June 2018, more than 300,000 Panamanian citizens had benefitted from SINAPROC.

The main message from this panel was that internal interagency cooperation and international cooperation for humanitarian assistance and disaster response are the key strengths of defense and security cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. It would be advantageous to transfer some of this spirit of trust and technical cooperation to efforts to combat transnational threat networks■

William J. Perry Center
for Hemispheric Defense Studies
260 5th Ave., Bldg. 64
Abraham Lincoln Hall, Fort McNair
Washington, DC 20319-5066
<http://www.williamjerrycenter.org/>
Layout Design: Viviana Edwards