

Southcom Generals Say "Not In Our Backyard"

Tom Barry | June 20, 2005

Pax Americana has got problems — not just in the Middle East and East Asia, but in the imperium's own backyard.

Latin America's turn to centre-left politicians and the rise of what the U.S. Southern Command calls "radical populism" have sent Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice scurrying to the region this year, trying to patch together its hegemony.

Latin America is a continent that is drifting left, out of U.S. control. Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's outspoken president, embodies this continental drift with his anti-imperialist rhetoric. It's a shift away from Pax Americana that is occurring both at the ballot box and in the streets, as elected leaders in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina defy Washington and attempt to chart independent political and economic paths.

On the city street and across rural Latin America, popular organizations are challenging traditional elites and elevating leaders of their own — none of which win favor with the U.S. government.

Soon after the launch of the war on terror, leading Republicans warned that the problem in Latin America came from a regional axis of evil that ran from Cuba through Venezuela and down to Brazil.

But today, the U.S. security establishment realizes that the threat to Pax Americana in the Americas is more widespread. The administration's new director of central intelligence, Porter Goss, warned the House Armed Services Committee the drift to the left might be even more pronounced following eight presidential elections scheduled in 2006 in countries with strong center-left candidates, like in Mexico.

Any "destabilization or a backslide from democratic principles," said Goss, "would not be helpful to our interests and would probably be threatening to our security in the long run."

Meanwhile, Southcom — one of the five U.S. military commands that span the globe — is adapting to the changes in its "Area of Responsibility", which includes all of Latin America and the Caribbean. In the past few months, it has released a new "theatre command strategy" and a new "posture statement" by Southcom's commander.

Southcom, with its 1,400 staff and 800-million-dollar budget, is the primary U.S. interlocutor in Latin America

and the Caribbean, having more people on the ground than all other U.S. agencies combined. Southcom trains more foreign troops than any other regional command, and it manages a vast U.S. military aid program, including 700 million dollars annually to Colombia.

Both statements frame regional security issues as part of the "global war on terror." But running through them is an evident, although not explicitly stated, concern that the United States is losing control of its own hemisphere.

Also evident are the politics of self-delusion — seen in statements that ignore the reality of the failed drug war, the anti-democratic character of U.S. policy, and the simple fact that the U.S. government and its armed forces continue to be more part of the problems in Latin America than part of the solution.

That self-delusion was on display this week when Rumsfeld and the U.S. military insisted, despite the flood of new evidence, that the treatment of detainees at the Guantánamo Bay military base in Cuba was not an "international embarrassment", as some Republican and Democratic lawmakers have charged.

In his annual posture statement, presented to Congress in March, Southcom commander Brantz Craddock told Congress that the U.S. military continued "to emphasize U.S. commitment to treating detainees humanely" and "in a manner consistent with the principles of Geneva."

Craddock said that Southcom "has played a key role over the past 25 years" in fostering democratic transitions throughout the region, that it has "made significant gains in attacking the illicit narcotics industry," and that the "rapid reaction of our troops" had saved the "lives of

innocent civilians" — assessments that are routinely accepted in Washington but have no credibility in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Craddock blamed the usual suspects — "anti-U.S., anti-globalization, and anti-free trade demagogues" — for political instability in the region. In the context of addressing regional security threats, Craddock said that these sectors that are "unwilling to shoulder the burden of participating in the democratic process and too impatient to undertake legitimate political action," thus decide



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to "incite violence against their own governments and their own people."

The solution, according to Craddock, is "building capabilities of the security forces of our region—because a secure environment is a non-negotiable foundation for a functioning civil society."

Craddock described the region as seething with threats to U.S. national security, listing for the lawmakers the following "threats": "transnational terrorism, narcoterrorism, illicit trafficking, forgery and money laundering, kidnapping, urban gangs, radical movements, natural disasters, and mass migration."

For each of these threats, Southcom has charted out a response as part of its "mission and vision" for its area of responsibility.

Southcom's declassified version of its "theatre command strategy" views U.S. national security concerns in the region largely through the lens of counterterrorism. In the near future, Southcom will focus on seven objectives, two of which remain classified.

The five unclassified objectives extend far beyond measures that directly or indirectly would bolster U.S. homeland security. Objective number one is to guarantee that "regional energy supplies will flow freely into international markets and will not be targets of aggression."

Essential to meeting this security objective, says Southcom, is improving the ability of "partner nation security forces to protect critical infrastructure" of the energy industry in the region.

The second objective is ensuring that "countries will exercise sovereignty over their territory."

Southcom, formerly based in Panama and since 1997 headquartered in Miami, outlines a highly intrusive form of guaranteeing that its 30 "partner nations," excluding Cuba, protect their national sovereignty.

To meet this objective, Southcom asserts that it will support "Andean Ridge nations in their efforts to establish dominion over ungoverned spaces," will assist unnamed countries in preventing prevent 'spill-over' effects" from unstable bordering nations, "help Peru ensure that [the Maoist guerilla group] Sendero Luminoso does not reestablish itself," and will "assist PNs [partner nations] who are suffering critical internal instability."

Recognizing its own limitations in the "global war against terror," the Pentagon has in the last

several years stepped up its efforts to establish U.S.-controlled military, naval, and intelligence

operations in Latin America and the Caribbean that target threats from what Southcom calls the "ungoverned spaces" in its theater command.

The third objective, then, is that with Southcom assistance "regional partners will have both the capabilities and willingness" to conduct an array of "combined operations" — ranging from counterterrorism and "maritime interception" to peace operations and humanitarian assistance.

Southcom's fourth and fifth security objectives remain classified, while its sixth objective is to "prevent rogue states from supporting terrorist organisations," leaving the countries and organizations it considers to be rogues and terrorist unnamed. Its final objective is to "strengthen and maintain stable, democratically elected governments throughout the AOR."

Southcom's most recent strategy statements mark a return to a U.S. national security doctrine that, like during the Cold War, calls for U.S. military involvement in the internal affairs of what it calls its partner nations.

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