

STATEMENT OF
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SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES

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Chairwoman Ernst, Ranking Member Peters: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I have been in command of U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) for nearly seven months. In that time I have traveled frequently throughout our area of responsibility, meeting with counterparts and learning about this vital, dynamic part of the world—our neighborhood, the Western Hemisphere.

I've been inspired by the many strengths and opportunities of our hemisphere: our cultural and economic ties are historic and enduring. Our relationships are firmly rooted in common interests and the shared values of democracy, sovereignty, human rights, and rule of law. The most disturbing insight, however, has been the degree to which External State Actors (ESAs)—China, Russia, and to a lesser extent, Iran, and North Korea—have expanded their access and influence in our neighborhood. Each actor engages in a wide array of concerning, potentially destabilizing activities, blurring the lines of what constitutes a traditional “military threat” through economic coercion, the systematic stealing of technology, pernicious disinformation campaigns, and malicious cyber activity. With every inroad they make, they gain additional opportunities to interfere with our security relationships, undermine our efforts to reinforce international norms, and potentially hold our interests at risk.

As the National Defense Strategy recognizes, the principal problem facing the Department of Defense is interstate strategic competition with China and Russia. I believe an important element of this involves competition for values, ideas, and ideals. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this competition is also taking place in parallel with another competition: one between legitimate governance and illegitimate power wielded by transnational criminal organizations and violent extremist organizations. These groups threaten citizen safety, regional security, and the national security of the United States and our allies and partners. This region is

the largest source of illicit drugs and illegal migrants to the United States. Rule of law is under constant assault by illicit networks that engage in bribery, coercion, and violence that disrupt legitimate economic opportunities. Their illegal activities in turn provide fertile ground for ESAs—particularly China and Russia—who capitalize on the opportunities provided by weak institutions and corruption to expand their influence. We see this most acutely in Venezuela, where Russia contributes to propping up the corrupt Maduro regime in return for increased access and leverage, but this practice is widespread. Enormous sums of Chinese cash, coupled with murky conditions on loans and business deals, have the potential to exacerbate the region's corruption problem.

Where threats are transregional, multi-domain, and global—like ESAs—the United States must renew focus on our neighbors and our shared Western Hemisphere neighborhood. Our strong partnerships, rooted in shared values, provide us with an advantage that no competitor can match. Continuing to increase security and stability in this hemisphere will expand opportunities for legitimate trade and investment for the United States and our allies and partners. Working with our partners to address shared challenges and threats—including weak governance, corruption, transnational criminal organizations, and the flow of illicit drugs—not only increases the security of our homeland, it decreases the ability of malign actors to exploit this region at the expense of our shared interests.

I look forward to discussing the nature of ESA activity in detail, how we're working with partners to address them, and what we need to maintain our competitive edge.

China. China poses a significant long-term threat. While the military problems it poses are most acute in the Indo-Pacific region, China has nonetheless turned its attention to the Western Hemisphere, quietly accumulating unprecedented levels of influence and leverage.

China is now inside our own neighborhood seeking to displace the United States as the partner of choice and weaken the commitment of our partners to the rule of law and democracy.

Economic engagement. China's increasing access is enabled by economics. As in other parts of the world, China is adept at leveraging its economic instruments of power to achieve its strategic interests, often in ways that can undermine the autonomy of countries: corrupt practices, non-transparent and excessive loans, restrictions on market economies, and potential loss of control of natural resources. China's aim is to become the region's largest investor and creditor. China plans to increase trade with the region to \$500 billion by 2025. With 19 nations in the region now participating in the One Belt One Road Initiative and pledges of at least \$150 billion in loans, Beijing is translating this economic heft into political influence. It is the single largest creditor of the Maduro regime, saddling the Venezuelan people with more than \$60 billion in debt and providing financial lifelines that have helped keep Maduro in power.

Access. On the maritime front, China has significantly increased its naval deployments to the region, increasing its regional port calls by 70% over the last five years. Chinese companies currently have over 50 active port projects in the hemisphere, and planned investments will more than double the amount of ports where China has a presence. In the future, China could use its control of deep water ports in the Western Hemisphere to support global military deployments. Particularly concerning is China's effort to court Panama and exert control over key infrastructure associated with the Panama Canal. Hong Kong-based company Hutchison Whampoa operates ports on either end of the Panama Canal, and the Chinese government has aggressively invested in Panama's infrastructure, security, and telecommunications systems. China recently completed three infrastructure projects valued at \$1 billion, and is slated to complete five more projects this year worth over \$2.5 billion.

Data protection. China’s telecommunications investments and access to space tracking facilities in the hemisphere place military operations, intellectual property, and private data at risk. Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE have aggressively penetrated the region with telecommunication projects in 16 countries, providing the backbone of commercial and government communication systems for most of the region. As we’ve seen elsewhere, Huawei’s 5G systems presents significant national security concerns. Because of the intimate relationship between Chinese businesses and China’s National Intelligence Law,¹ we have significant concerns that any data transiting China or processed by Chinese companies is at risk to access by the Chinese government. If governments in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to gravitate toward using Chinese information systems, our ability and willingness to share information over compromised networks is likely to suffer.

Surveillance technology and authoritarian systems. China is also increasing sales of its surveillance technology through its “Smart and Safe Cities” initiative. What seems like a good idea—technology to help improve safety in crime-ridden areas, for example—may come with substantial hidden costs. Citizens living in democracies in the Western Hemisphere could potentially have their entire digital identity under the surveillance of an authoritarian government. Beijing has a long track record of controlling information and suppressing dissent within China, and is now exporting these tools to the region’s authoritarian leaders, as we’ve seen in Venezuela with the new “fatherland” card—created by ZTE—that Maduro uses to monitor citizens and dole out scant resources to his loyalists.²

Security cooperation. China uses weapons sales and donations and security services’

¹ China’s National Intelligence Law provides that “any organization or citizen shall support, assist, and cooperate with state intelligence work in accordance with the law, and maintain the secrecy of all knowledge of national intelligence work.”

² Assistant Secretary of State Kimberly Brier, *Remarks on China’s New Road in the Americas: Beyond Silk & Silver*, April 26, 2019.

training (similar to our IMET program) to improve security cooperation and offer an alternative to U.S. military training. It has donated equipment to our partners in the region and provided anti-riot gear the Maduro regime uses to suppress protests in Venezuela. Additionally, China's "no strings attached" approach to security cooperation and economic relationships presents a challenge to Inter-American values of democracy, sovereignty, human rights, and the rule of law. Unlike the United States and our allies, the Chinese government places no demands on their partners to implement governance reforms, protect human rights, strengthen institutional accountability, or play by the established rules. China has zero interest in advancing these values; instead, it often attempts to undermine them as part of its long-term strategic goals that include support in international fora and access to mineral wealth.

Sovereignty threats. China undercuts regional sovereignty and international norms through the widespread practice of illegal fishing in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, and Chile. When our partners have attempted to enforce rule of law, Chinese flagged vessels have responded aggressively, endangering the lives of sailors and coast guardsmen in the region. Although it has pledged to designate all variants of fentanyl controlled substances, China's capacity and will to stop illicit shipments has been uneven. The vast majority of fentanyl flowing into the United States still originates in China, with many of the precursor chemicals needed to produce fentanyl illegally trafficked into Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean via regional drug dealers and corrupt Chinese businessmen.

Russia. In contrast to China's long-term strategic approach, Russia seeks to be more of a "spoiler" in the region by attempting to disrupt or undermine U.S. engagement. Russia seeks to sow disunity and distrust, propping up autocratic regimes in Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, and

Nicaragua, which are counter to democracy and U.S. interests.

Disinformation. Moscow continues to use Latin America and the Caribbean to spread disinformation. As we've seen elsewhere in the world, Russia floods the internet, social media, and television outlets with original and reproduced propaganda, using RT-TV and Sputnik Mundo to employ a "fog of falsehood" designed to disorient audiences. These state-run media outlets allow Russia to discredit, slant, or outright fabricate stories about the United States, our partners and allies, and our role in the region. Russia also supports its authoritarian cronies through propaganda and other information-related tools, providing positive media coverage of its autocratic allies, papering over repression and socioeconomic inequity in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

Shows-of-force. Russia's deployment of two nuclear capable bombers to the Western Hemisphere last year, and its most recent deployment of its most advanced warship (an ADM GORSHKOV-class frigate) are intended as shows of force to the United States. While aimed at us and the region, this message is also aimed at Russia's domestic audience, as part of a broader effort to distract from internal issues and endemic corruption. In addition to its regular deployment of intelligence collection ships, Russia has also deployed underwater research ships to Latin America capable of mapping undersea cables—information it could use to cut critical lines of communication during a future crisis.

Security cooperation. Latin America and the Caribbean is a major market for Russian arms sales, and Moscow continues to make inroads into traditionally US-dominated training activities. Since 2009, Russia has sold nearly \$9 billion in military equipment to Venezuela, including combat aircraft, tanks and Surface-to-Air-Missile systems (SAMS). In March, Russia inaugurated a helicopter training center that can train up to 300 Venezuelans on Russian-made

aircraft, allowing the Venezuelan military to increase its combat readiness. Since 2012, security officials from nearly all Central and South American countries have received Russian CN training. These engagements, combined with Russia's Counter Transnational Organized Crime Training Center (CTOC) in Nicaragua, potentially provide Moscow with a regional platform to recruit intelligence sources and collect information.

Support to authoritarianism. Russia uses the sanctuary of its robust relationships with traditional allies—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—to gain a foothold close to our homeland, and enable destabilizing activities by like-minded, authoritarian governments. Russia has successfully pursued simplified port access agreements in Nicaragua, and is establishing joint space projects with partners in the region, such as Cuba, which it could eventually leverage for counter-space purposes in the event of a global conflict. The Cubans and the Russians remain the main foreign supporters of the Maduro regime, with both malign actors providing security advisers and Cuba embedding numerous personnel in Venezuela's armed forces and intelligence services. As tensions increase with Russia in Europe, Moscow may leverage these longstanding partnerships to maintain asymmetric options, including forward deploying military personnel or assets.

Iran. Iran remains the most significant state sponsor of terrorism around the world. Iran has looked to reenergize its outreach in Latin America and the Caribbean in recent years. The Iranian Threat Network, to include Lebanese Hezbollah, maintains an established logistical, facilitating, fundraising and operational presence in this region that can be quickly leveraged with little or no warning in a contingency. Many of these Hezbollah networks cache weapons and raise funds, often via charitable donations, remittances, and sometimes through illicit means, such as unsanctioned drug trafficking and money laundering. Last September, Brazil arrested a

Hezbollah financier in the tri-border area near Paraguay and Argentina, and in recent years Paraguay, Peru, and Bolivia have arrested multiple Hezbollah-linked suspects. Having a footprint in the region also allows Iran to collect intelligence and conduct contingency planning for possible retaliatory attacks against U.S. or Western interests.

North Korea. Although not as significant a threat as other ESAs, we remain concerned that Pyongyang could use its small presence in the region to collect intelligence or conduct contingency planning. Given its efforts to generate revenue and history of working with supporters like Cuba to circumvent sanctions, North Korea is likely engaged in some form of illicit activity in Latin America.

Outcompeting ESAs. Outcompeting China and countering other ESAs requires a whole-of-government approach, of which the military plays a small but important role. Strong partnerships—enabled by engagements and presence, intelligence and information exchanges, and education and training—are our primary bulwark against the influence of malign actors in the hemisphere and are bolstered by our work together on military professionalism.

Engagements and presence. We have to be on the playing field to compete. The same presence that strengthens our partnerships sends a powerful signal to Russia, China, and others that the United States is committed to the region and to the security of our neighborhood. Key leader engagements, high-profile visits, multinational exercises with visible U.S. presence, and our wide array of security cooperation, training, and capacity-building demonstrate meaningful U.S. commitment. We appreciate efforts by the Congress to recognize the need for consistent presence and focused attention on this hemisphere. In recent years, Congress has generously provided funding for additional air and maritime platforms, as well as intelligence capabilities that enable USSOUTHCOM to strengthen our partnerships throughout the region. During my

recent posture hearings before the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, I witnessed bipartisan support for reinvigorating our relationships within our neighborhood and USSOUTHCOM is postured to work side-by-side with our partners to advance the security of this hemisphere against all competitors.

Information & intelligence sharing. For our part, we are increasing cooperation with partners to better understand, expose, and counter the malign activities of Russia, China, Iran, and their authoritarian allies. We are also working more closely with other U.S. combatant commands and the Joint Staff to ensure that globally integrated plans and operations are informed by threats and opportunities in this hemisphere, as well as continuously improving the quality, frequency, and depth of our intelligence exchanges.

Education and training. Additionally, our work with partners to reinforce the hemisphere's substantial, but incomplete, progress in human rights is even more critical in light of Russia and China's own disregard for human rights. USSOUTHCOM's Human Rights Initiative—which just celebrated its 20th anniversary—has conducted more than 200 human rights engagements that have enhanced the ability of partner nations to build professional forces that have legitimacy in the eyes of their populations.

As I have discussed in previous testimony, the Department of State's security assistance programs—like International Military Education and Training (IMET) and Foreign Military Financing (FMF)—are strategic game changers. Education and training for partner nation personnel facilitate mutual understanding of our values, doctrine, and cultures, while building life-long friendships that enable strong partnerships despite political shifts or changeovers. This understanding allows us to operate with our partners more effectively, while strengthening shared values. Since 2009, IMET has provided opportunities for over 55,000 students from the

region to attend schools like the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), the Inter-American Air Force Academy (IAAFA), and the Inter-American Defense College (IADC). While China and Russia have made inroads in equipment sales, our partners still prefer U.S. equipment, which offers the “total package” approach that includes training, maintenance, and sustainment. Just like U.S. military-to-military partnerships, U.S. equipment is built to last. We also appreciate the support of Congress on our security cooperation programs that enable us to build these partnerships.

Conclusion. Chairwoman Ernst, Members: I’ll end with a final observation. External State Actors offer the region many things (not all of them benign), but the United States takes on the hard challenges—helping our partners develop leaders, agencies, and institutions. Our partners in the region want to work with us, train with us, learn from us, and fight alongside us. They share our vision of a safe, prosperous, and secure neighborhood. The right, focused and modest investments in this hemisphere yield a solid rate of return for the United States, in the form of capable partners that contribute to our shared security, and reduced opportunities for inroads by External State Actors. Thank you.