



United States Army aircraft assigned to the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, perform in-flight formation movements as part of a battalion continuity of operations (COOP) training exercise over Honduras and El Salvador, May 28, 2020. The battalion COOP is an effort to ensure essential functions continue to be performed in the case of an emergency in which Joint Task Force-Bravo would be called upon to assist. It also ensures readiness for pilots and the battalion as a whole. (U.S. Air Force photo by SrA Jovan Banks, Graphic by MIPB Staff)

Introduction

The operational environment in Latin America presents layers of complexity. Central America shares many things in common with other countries throughout U.S. Southern Command's (USSOUTHCOM's) area of responsibility, but it also bears a uniqueness given its geographic location between South America and the United States. It serves as a natural bridge between the two major regions, providing a crucial distribution channel. Where we find adequate investment in infrastructure, we see the conditions established for effective governance, application of security, and support for the rule of law, all of which are essential for economic growth and development. However, the most significant of these is effective governance. Unfortunately, for a long time, Central American nations have been subject to corruption, polarization of wealth, and varying forms of social injustice. While many people struggle throughout the region, there is potential for improvement. We just have to ask, "Where do we target an investment strategy, and how can we use it to promote stability?"

Panama

Panama is one of our best examples of potential coming to fruition. Panama, located at the base of Central America, houses the most strategically important asset in the entire USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility—the Panama Canal. The Panama Canal supports the annual distribution of

approximately \$270 billion worth of goods.¹ Approximately 60 to 70 percent of Panama Canal traffic accounts for the United States import-export volume. Both its regional and global significance are without question. The Pan-American Highway also supports extensive trade and distribution in the region, but its reach throughout many Central American nations remains limited. Overall, Central American nations spend approximately an average of 2 percent of their gross domestic product on transportation and infrastructure, a significant limitation for improving commercial market reach and development.²

Both of these critical infrastructure items are only as effective as far as they can reach. Many regions throughout Central America remain isolated because they lack a connective infrastructure and do not realize the value created by the Pan-American Highway and Panama Canal. The resulting barriers to legitimate market entry are major contributors to the polarization of wealth, and nearly every Central American nation has this challenge. A few examples are Gracias a Dios, Honduras; Izabal, Guatemala; Puerto Limón, Costa Rica; and Darién, Panama.

Narcotics Trafficking

While each country has access to trade and distribution venues, regionally, each nation also retains areas within its sovereign borders that remain isolated from legitimate market flows, affecting select local economies. As a result, transnational criminal organizations offer an alternative

Examples of Isolated Regions

Gracias a Dios, Honduras. Gracias a Dios remains grossly isolated from the interior of the country. Puerto Lempira, the largest settlement, is adjacent to Laguna de Caratasca along the east coast. This city retains no connective infrastructure to the capital, nor does it have an established port that supports maritime trade. As of 2015, an estimated 94,450 local nationals and 6,100 square miles of terrain remain without support from government services. As a result, criminal activity goes undetected, with low-level corruption being a principal enabler.

Izabal, Guatemala. Like Puerto Lempira in Honduras, Izabal does not retain the amount of critical infrastructure needed to support inland exchange and distribution. Additionally, rough terrain makes inland movement challenging and often untimely. Izabal lacks the amount of necessary infrastructure to support investing activities, specifically near Lake Izabal. Criminal organizations use areas near the eastern shoreline for the transshipment of illicit products, which presents a lucrative alternative to those who struggle to meet day-to-day needs.

Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. While Puerto Limón remains connected via causeway to the Costa Rican capital of San José, the port city remains significantly less populated than the interior of the country. As such, security and investment remain marginal. Over the last decade, drug traffic through the port city has increased significantly, serving markets in both the United States and Europe. Additionally, the Limón province is the most violent in the country. Without adequate security presence, investment, and development, Puerto Limón will continue to be a major projection point for cocaine distribution worldwide.

Darién, Panama. The Darién province is a region known for the Darién Gap—about a 60-mile break in the Pan-American Highway, affecting the flow of goods and services into the region. The gap is caused by extensive vegetation and severely restrictive terrain. Given the lack of development from Metetí to the southwest, local communities are prone to criminal influence—supporting both narco-trafficking and human smuggling. Illicit migration continues to challenge the security apparatus of the Panamanian government, as does the movement of illicit product throughout this region.

to legitimate business enterprise—black market activity. Isolated segments within each nation become prone to exploitation by the criminal enterprise and less supportive or cooperative with host-nation governance. In essence, we see the theory of competitive control in action.³

In each of the isolated regions described above, narcotics trafficking, which has existed for many years, continues to flourish. With a growing demand for illicit products in Europe, Colombian traffickers have expanded their production and outflow to place product to market in regions beyond North America. With the drug trade thriving, criminal organizations are putting more effort and investment into protecting supply chains out of Costa Rica, particularly in Puerto Limón. For local inhabitants, this offers better opportunities than basic employment. With average incomes reported at approximately \$17,000 per year, additional cash from illicit activity is hard to resist.⁴

Like Puerto Limón, Gracias a Dios (Honduras) and Izabal (Guatemala) are two key areas where narco-trafficking efforts continue to prosper (Figure 1 on the next page). Both areas are extremely isolated from governing influence and support, and both have continued reports of illicit aircraft encroachments that contain large amounts of narcotics shipment. Illegal maritime trafficking occurs near these areas. Because of the long tracks that both aircraft and watercrafts make, corruption within host-nation security and

military forces is necessary to assure successful movement over land and can even enable port-to-port exchange via littoral movement.

Even without the presence of corruption, a lack of presence and infrastructure needed to sustain military operations severely degrades both countries' ability to detect and respond to illicit encroachments. With the recent passage of the new Air Sovereignty Law in Honduras, increasing support from the United States and many Central American partners (including Colombia) continues to be provided for the detection and monitoring of illicit aircraft encroachment; however, detection and interdiction are only part of the solution. Without infrastructure and subsequent economic development, members of local populace in both regions will remain complicit, and oftentimes cooperative, with the criminal organizations. "*Plata o plomo*" (silver or lead, i.e., money or bullets) becomes their only option, making the criminal enterprise the dominant influence on a region's inhabitants. In short, they forcibly become reliant on the criminal enterprise, or die. Without a stable alternative for the local people, they will continue to support black market activity, and drug trafficking will thrive.

China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative—Picking Up Where We Left Off

In 2013, the Chinese government announced its One Belt, One Road initiative, also known as the Belt and Road

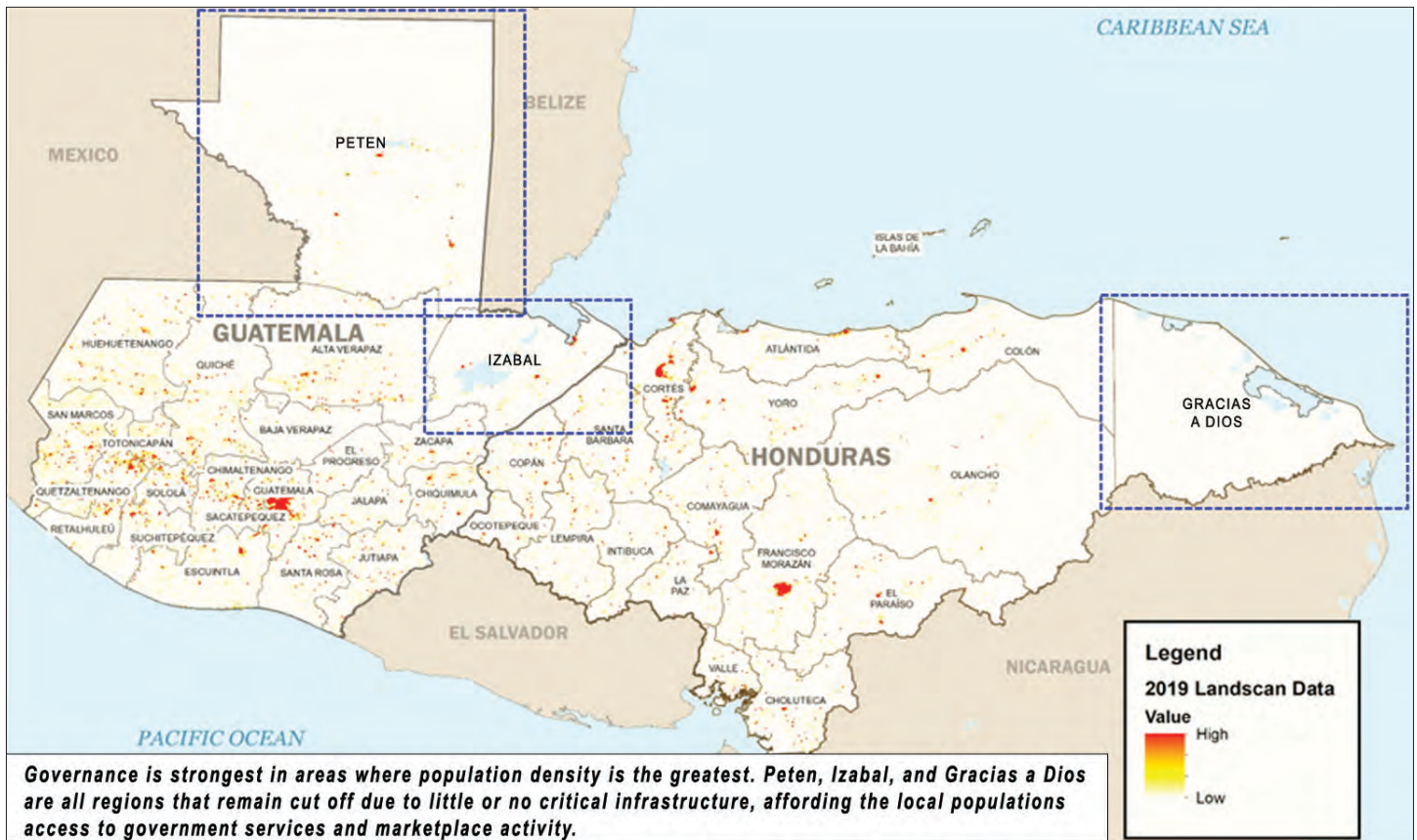


Figure 1. Population Density Study, NGA, 2019⁵

Initiative, aimed at developing infrastructure projects on an international scale to dominate global supply chains. With the United States historic efforts behind the construction of the Panama Canal and the Pan-American Highway, the Chinese have a predetermined roadmap for success. According to the American Enterprise Institute, the Chinese have invested approximately \$1.4 trillion (U.S. dollar equivalent) globally since 2013, with approximately \$3.8 billion worth of projects in Central America (Figure 2), with most of its development concentrated along areas either near or directly along the Pan-American Highway.⁶

Investments in Panama have been most notable, with Costa Rica and El Salvador heavily targeted as well. While the introduction of Chinese physical capital has supported economic development, it has also been arguably predatory. In general, Chinese investments gravitate mainly toward areas where distribution transcends one sovereign territory to the next, giving the Chinese greater ability to gain cost control over a nation's

imports and exports. This can be problematic in the event of a dispute with the Chinese government. Additionally, multiple cases have been reported implicating Chinese involvement in illegal logging, mining, and wildlife trafficking, alongside allegations of white-collar crimes such as bribery and corruption.⁸ The nature of Chinese business dealings has not been ethical, nor have these business dealings been in the best interest of the host nation, despite their appearance. However, the introduction of new infrastructure, capital, and employment has been effective in eroding the influence of criminal organizations. As mentioned previously, remote areas with little government reach are where there tend to be greater propensities for illicit activity.



Figure 2. Chinese Investment Outlays (in billions) from 2013 to 2020, Central America⁷

So how exactly does the growth of the Chinese business enterprise threaten United States interests? The answer is simple: If the Chinese control distribution, then they control the flow of imports into the United States, along with the flow of exports outward. The Chinese would essentially retain the ability to harness greater power over pricing mechanisms associated with product distribution in either direction. This can pose a direct threat to our economy. Additionally, where there are Chinese investments, the potential exists for an increasing Chinese military presence. Should the Chinese emerge as the partner of choice for our Central American partner nations, this will pose a direct threat to both United States national security and Central American regional security across all instruments of national power.

Nicaragua and the Waterfall Effect

After decades of political conflict, it is no surprise that Nicaragua has little to no ties with the United States. Since the 1980s, the United States has maintained its stern position with regard to the Sandinista regime and its past affiliation with the Soviet Union and now with the Russian government. In recent years, when Daniel Ortega (a long-time Sandinista) reclaimed power as President of Nicaragua, the United States reaffirmed its opposition toward the Sandinista regime and its alliance with the Russians, particularly on human rights violations that the Sandinista regime has committed. In late 2018, the Nicaraguan National Police and pro-Sandinista paramilitary groups were behind a series of massacres committed against various local populations during a string of protests against the regime.⁹ More than 300 Nicaraguan nationals were murdered during this time, warranting attention from the United Nations and subsequent sanctions imposed by the United States and European nations. Despite the outcry and criticism, the Sandinista regime has maintained its power and control of the government.

Since the massacres in 2018, migratory outflow has continued on a progressive trend into Honduras and Costa Rica. In a 2019 interview, Costa Rican Vice President Epsy Campbell Barr disclosed that approximately 86,000 Nicaraguan nationals had fled to Costa Rica seeking refuge from the oppressive Sandinista regime.¹⁰ A month later, she stated that this number had grown to approximately 106,000. With criminal activities increasing across Costa Rica, many government leaders believed that Nicaraguan nationals were seeking financial support via the criminal enterprise. In January 2020, the United States State Department elevated the travel advisory from level 1 (exercise normal precautions) to level 2 (exercise increased caution), drawing criticism

from Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado Quesada. The change in travel advisory would have a significant impact on the tourism industry, as well as many of the structured engagements and exchanges between Costa Rica and the United States, striking a significant blow to the Costa Rican national economy.

Nicaraguan domestic policy and the subsequent “waterfall effect” of migratory outflows into Costa Rica have clearly warranted concern on a regional basis. In February 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited with President Alvarado Quesada to discuss the challenges that Costa Rica was facing, focusing mostly on the reasons for the increase in reported crime. During this meeting, members of Sandinista opposition were also able to meet with the U.S. Secretary of State, highlighting the long-standing issues associated with the Sandinista regime and its need for U.S. involvement and promoting favorable policy measures.


In recent developments, mass migration continues to remain at the forefront of national discourse, especially in the wake of hurricanes Eta and Iota in Honduras. Hidden among these migratory caravans were human trafficking and smuggling efforts. There were also reports of members of criminal gangs attempting to blend in with large-scale movement. Furthermore, with the pandemic continuing to affect many communities globally, illicit pathways could further spread coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) within the United States. Overall, because of the conditions of instability derived from poor economic development, corruption, internal regional isolation, and poor perception for the rule of law, many parts of Central America are largely responsible for numerous national security concerns that currently affect the U.S. southern border. With presence, influence, and increased investment, the conditions throughout the region can evolve toward those that are more favorable to all. The Chinese government has already recognized this situation and used this approach accordingly, especially since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, their approach does not support diplomatic relationships between the United States and Central America—that is for us to develop.

Conclusion

So how do we proceed as a military force in the Central American region? Continued support to humanitarian assistance opens the doorway for our partners across the spectrum of government capabilities. In 2019 and 2020, USSOUTHCOM provisioned civil affairs teams to Joint Task Force-Bravo to develop a mechanism for persistent engagement. In concert with intelligence and public affairs offices, civil affairs teams help to initiate and integrate

efforts to promote U.S. goodwill, ergo incentivizing nations to view the U.S. Department of Defense as the regional partner of choice.

Furthermore, the presence of persistently engaged civil affairs teams will help identify local needs and investment opportunities for both U.S. Government interests and private enterprise. In the long term, this will be critical to

energize efforts to outperform the Chinese competitors and counter the influence of criminal organizations. Within the Department of Defense, we can project influence through increased security cooperation, global health engagements, and combined exercise initiatives. However, for these to make a positive impact, our engagement must be persistent. We simply need to “be there.”¹² 

Joint Task Force-Bravo

On 1 September 2019, Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) gained operational control of a U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs Company comprising five civil affairs teams and a company headquarters. Prior to this date, JTF-B had never had a civil affairs tactical capability. JTF-B, in partnership with USSOUTHCOM, developed funding, authorities, and permissions for each of the five civil affairs teams to be persistently deployed within JTF-B's named areas of interest across Central America. The civil affairs teams' mission was to first understand the threat—transnational criminal organizations and external state actors—by conducting civil reconnaissance and civil engagement with indigenous civilian stakeholders across the military, police, private industry, and provincial government. Upon understanding the friendly, neutral, and enemy situation, the civil affairs teams executed support to civil administration operations, activities, and investments to bolster the friendly indigenous networks, which in turn undermined, isolated, and disrupted threat influence over key populations.

One example of support to civil administration operations, activities, and investments is the civil affairs teams' combined COVID-19 response, which from March to July 2020 provided approximately \$1.3 million of aid to the northern triangle governments to fight the pandemic. All operations, activities, and investments were closely synchronized with the JTF-B public affairs office to amplify the effects across Central America. For COVID-19 response operations, activities, and investments, the tactical level effect (messaging) depicted that the indigenous government was directly aiding the populace, which legitimized local governance—indirectly delegitimizing transnational criminal organization political influence. The operational level effect (messaging) involved compiling all of the U.S. Government's COVID-19 response activities across JTF-B, the U.S. Embassies, and USSOUTHCOM to emphasize across the northern tier—that the U.S. Government was the partner of choice—directly delegitimizing external state actors' political influence.

Civil affairs operations were most symbiotic with the JTF-B J-2 and the public affairs office. The JTF-B J-2 determined the named areas of interest in which the civil affairs teams operated. Then the civil affairs teams' civil information management further illuminated threat activities and motivations within a named area of interest. Additionally, a singular civil affairs team COVID-19 response activity may only aid one village. However, by leveraging the public affairs media networks, the COVID-19 response activity was broadcast to influence thousands of people—amplifying effects at both the tactical and operational levels.

—LTC Jeffrey Uherka, JTF-B, Civil Affairs¹¹

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MAJ Mark Medlock enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2003 serving as an intelligence analyst focused on Latin American affairs and support to counterterrorism. In 2006, he attended Officer Candidate School and commissioned as an intelligence officer. He currently serves as the Chief of Intelligence Planning for U.S. Army South G-2, Fort Sam Houston, TX, Joint Base San Antonio. MAJ Medlock's previous assignments include 2nd Infantry Division, the 75th Ranger Regiment, 1st Armored Division, the U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence, U.S. Army North, and Joint Task Force Bravo. His overseas tours of duty consist of Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Honduras. He is a graduate of Texas Tech University with bachelor's degrees in finance, accounting, and economics.

Contributor:

COL Gary Miskovsky is the G-2 Assistant Chief of Staff at U.S. Army South.

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