
The Security of the Americas

Throughout most of its history the United States has conducted relations with Latin America based on an



Guyanans operating assault craft.

55th Signal Company (Sean Terry)

exclusive issue: first, checking the influence of European powers, then combating Communist threats, and today stemming the flow of drugs.

The articles in this JFQ Forum argue that the future will

be markedly different. The Americas share compelling security interests that necessitate cooperation on a continual basis to meet the aspirations and apprehensions of all countries in the Hemisphere.

Economic factors occupy a leading role in rethinking security relations with Latin America. About half of all U.S. trade moves north-south today. Included in this flow of goods and services is some 30 to 40 percent of U.S. oil imports. In addition to energy resources, the region contains some of the busiest avenues of international trade. The Panama Canal remains a central element in that network and a key pathway for world commerce. Although the United States formally turned over the canal to Panama, this waterway remains important because of its role as an economic and strategic transit point for allies and friends. Closing military bases in the Panama Canal Zone and developing more complex economic ties are emblematic of dramatic changes in the region.

The United States can no longer secure its interests by guarding strategic points or casually interacting with countries in Latin America. The Caribbean illustrates dynamics that compel north-south integration and a prescription for updating the U.S. approach to its southern neighbors. The success and future prospects for hemispheric trade will depend in part on security partnerships that advance regional stability, free markets, and democratic institutions.

There are also powerful underground economies that shape the region. Billions of dollars are generated by illegal drugs, eroding the fabric of local institutions. Thus counterdrug operations are not only focused on

stemming the movement of drugs into the United States, but are integral to attempts to protect national integrity. Plan Colombia, which includes a comprehensive package of foreign aid and military assistance, is a case in point.

But military assistance is only one component of Plan Colombia, and the counterdrug effort is just the most visible initiative by the United States to adapt to the new realities of Latin America. Border disputes and domestic insurgencies—traditional bugbears of hemispheric relations—are far less prominent than in the past. Nonstate and transnational threats such as illegal drugs, migration, natural disasters, environmental degrada-

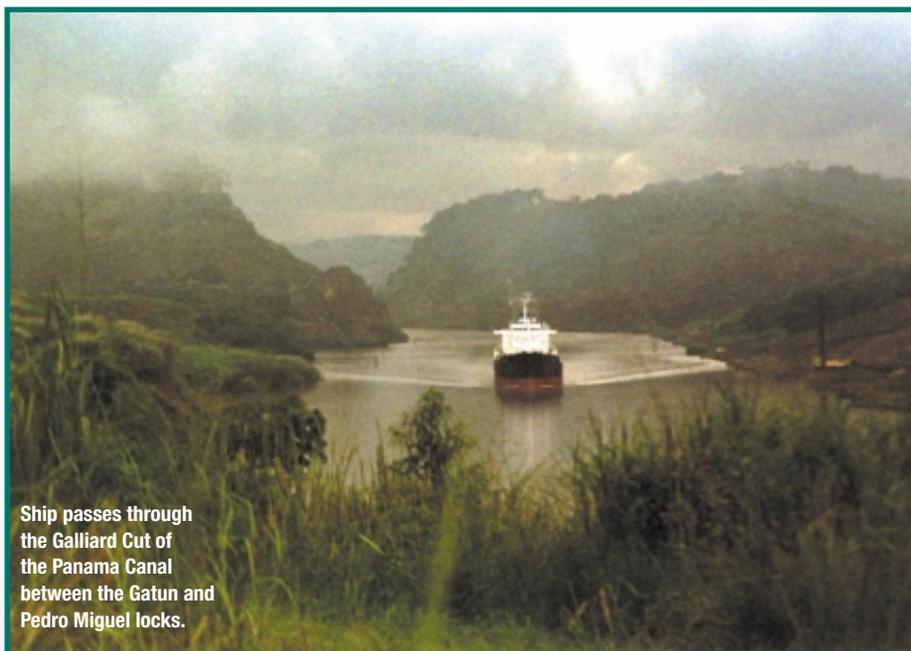
tion, and disease are primary concerns. Engagement calls for more than military solutions, making interagency cooperation ever more critical.

U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) has helped to build capabilities for responding to natural disasters in the region. With the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, an agency of the Department of State, nongovernmental organizations, and many other institutions, the command is improving capabilities to handle natural disasters while combining



Bolivian soldiers near Cordoba, Argentina, Cabanas '00.

55th Signal Company (Cory Montgomery)



Ship passes through the Galliard Cut of the Panama Canal between the Gatun and Pedro Miguel locks.

AP/Wide World Photos (Julie Pleasencia)

resources to assist neighbors. As a result, responses to regional disasters has been significantly enhanced in recent years, though there is room for improvement.

Moreover, although the region can be subdivided into the Southern Cone, Andean Ridge, Central America, and Caribbean, engagement must address the unique conditions in each country. At the same time, cooperation among neighbors is still the best course of action for building trust, sharing resources, and tackling regional issues. For example, when Bolivia and Peru aggressively countered drug trafficking, the flow moved over their borders to other states. Single state solutions prove inadequate in dealing

with threats that do not recognize national sovereignty and frontiers. Initiatives taken by Colombia will succeed if its neighbors coordinate their policies and efforts.

The region has also experienced a strengthening of civilian control over the military as well as a reduction of oppression in the name of internal security. Remarkable developments occurred throughout Latin America over the last decade with the encouragement and support of the United States. While U.S. efforts have represented a positive force, much of the credit for improvements must go to dramatic change in the security environment and the maturation of civil institutions.

As the security environment evolves, the unified command plan will become a topic of further debate. Responsibility for the Caribbean and adjacent waters moved from U.S. Atlantic Command to U.S. Southern Command in 1997. As a result, SOUTHCOM has a much larger area under its purview, but this provides a more coherent and comprehensive way of addressing regional affairs. It should be noted, however, that Mexico stands outside this framework. Consequently, military contact is handled on a bilateral basis between Washington and Mexico City.

This JFQ Forum suggests that active engagement in the security of the Americas is essential but that U.S. efforts must be more responsive, nuanced, and skilled in integrating the military with other instruments of national power. Effective engagement will require a deeper understanding of regional as well as political, economic, and social issues. As myriad links between North America and South America grow, the pressure to confront security concerns will follow.

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