

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

CRITICALITY OF U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

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ABSTRACT

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This SRP will provide an in-depth strategic analysis of the Central American countries, with specific emphasis on their national and international interaction, including governments, economics, GDP, population expansion and military. Analysis revealed that successful application and execution of the strategic programs and policies in Central America, as articulated through the U.S. National Security Strategy, are dependent on the continued role and forward presence of U.S. military personnel deployed in Honduras and the stabilizing effect they have in the region.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
CRITICALITY OF U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA.....	1
HISTORY / BACKGROUND	1
NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (ENDS)	4
DIPLOMATIC.....	5
INFORMATION.....	6
ECONOMIC.....	6
MILITARY.....	8
CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY COMPARISON	8
USSOUTHCOM SECURITY STRATEGY FOR THE AMERICAS (WAYS)	10
USSOUTHCOM AND MOOTW	11
PRECISION ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC AIMS.....	12
MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.....	13
NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL STRATEGY.....	15
JOINT TASK FORCE—BRAVO (MEANS)	16
STRUCTURE.....	17
BUDGET.....	19
MISSION.....	20
OPERATION CENTRAL SKIES I & II.....	22
CONCLUSION	23
ENDNOTES.....	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE 1. USSOUTHCOM WIRING DIAGRAM.....	4
FIGURE 2. PRECISION ENGAGEMENT CYCLE.....	13
FIGURE 3: JTF-B WIRING DIAGRAM.....	18

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY COMPARISON.....	9
TABLE 2: COSTS IN \$MILLIONS TO OPERATE SOTO CANO (1994).....	20

CRITICALITY OF U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 not only marked the beginning of a whole new era for our nation, and our military, it also transformed our foreign, domestic and military strategic policies regarding our interaction on the world stage. Suddenly the U.S. found itself as the pre-eminent unipolar hegemon in a volatile, unsteady post-Cold War world. Following the Gulf War, the remainder of the 1990's witnessed the elements of U.S. national power used repeatedly in an effort to rectify presumed inequities across a myriad of political, economic, informational and military fronts on a global scale. Truly this was a time when Constructivists seized opportunities to further their own agenda on the premise that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Conversely, the Realists recognized that the world was not, and is not, ready to abandon their views and be led into democratic bliss under the tutelage of the United States. In short, the world remains a dangerous place, and security continues to be of paramount importance.

The scope of this research project will examine the continued strategic regional security challenges that face U.S. forces assigned throughout the countries of our closest neighbors in Central America. It will focus on U.S. Southern Command's strategic response to maintain regional stability in accordance with the 2002 National Security Strategy, National Military Strategy, Joint Doctrine, and DoD Instructions as required. (It is appropriate to begin with a brief history to establish the strategic and stabilizing impact USSOUTHCOM forces have had on the region for the last 100 years, in order to assess the contributions they continue to make.)

HISTORY / BACKGROUND

In 1903, U.S. Forces were first introduced into what is now known as the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR), when U.S. Marines were sent to Panama to protect the personnel building the Panama Railroad connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans across the Panamanian Isthmus. The Marines remained in Panama to provide security during the early construction period of the Panama Canal in 1904. From 1904 to 1907, civilian efforts to complete the Panama Canal were further plagued by both yellow fever and malaria. In 1907, then President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Army Lieutenant Colonel George W. Goethals to the post of chief engineer of the Canal Commission, subsequently changing control of the canal construction project from civilian to military.¹

Elements of the U.S. Army's 10th Infantry Regiment arrived in Panama in 1911 to assume primary responsibility for canal defense while construction efforts continued. Finally, on 14

August 1914, seven years after the military assumed command of the construction efforts, the Panama Canal officially opened to international commerce.

The completion of this strategic and monumental construction project marked a milestone in human achievement, and the United States immediately recognized the need to permanently assign/station forces in the region to ensure regional stability. As a result, the first company of coastal artillery arrived in 1914. Infantry and light artillery established fortifications at each end (Atlantic and Pacific) of the Canal, but remained centrally located so they could reinforce either end and support the defense. In 1915, Headquarters, U.S. Troops, Panama Canal Zone was established. The headquarters, first located in the Canal Commission building in Ancon adjacent to Panama City, was subordinate to the Army's Eastern Department Headquarters at Fort Jay, Governor's Island, New York. In 1916, the command relocated to the newly constructed facilities at Quarry Heights.²

The Panama Canal Department was activated on 1 July 1917 as a geographic command of the U.S. Army. It remained as the senior Army headquarters in the region until activation of the Caribbean Defense Command (CDC) on 10 February 1941. The CDC, also co-located at Quarry Heights, eventually assumed operational responsibility over air and naval forces assigned in its area of operations, and established a Joint Operations Center at Quarry Heights by early 1942.³

As WWII raged in Europe and North Africa, concerns over canal security resulted in an escalation in U.S. military presence in Panama that reached its peak of 68,000 forces in January 1943. The end of hostilities in Europe was marked by a rapid demobilization of U.S. Forces around the globe to include a reduction of forces in Panama. Between 1946 and 1974, military strength in Panama varied between 6,600 and 20,300 personnel, finally reaching steady state of approximately 10,000 personnel from 1975 until late 1994.⁴

In December 1946, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended to President Truman a plan that is now considered a revolution in military affairs, which involved a comprehensive division of military commands by geographic region under the control of a single military commander. Known today as Unified Combatant Commands, they were, and continue to be responsible for conducting military operations throughout their assigned geographic AORs. However, despite Caribbean Command's new designation by DoD in November 1947, it did not become fully operational until March 10, 1948, marking the inactivation of the CDC. With primary responsibility for Central and South America, Caribbean Command was finally re-designated as United States Southern Command on 6 June 1963.⁵

Changes to the Unified Command Plan (UCP) in both January 1996 and June 1997 resulted in a myriad of geographic boundary changes to USSOUTHCOM's Area of Responsibility. The new AOR includes the Caribbean, its 13 island nations and several U.S. and European territories, the Gulf of Mexico, as well as significant portions of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The 1999 revision to the UCP--known as VISION 21--also transferred responsibility of an additional portion of the Atlantic Ocean to SOUTHCOM. On 1 October 2000, USSOUTHCOM also assumed responsibility for the adjacent waters in the upper quadrant above Brazil, which was then under the responsibility of U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM).⁶

The new USSOUTHCOM AOR includes the landmass of Latin America south of Mexico, the waters adjacent to Central and South America, the Caribbean Sea with its 12 island nations and European territories, the Gulf of Mexico, and a portion of the Atlantic Ocean. It encompasses 32 countries (20 in Central and South America and 12 in the Caribbean) and covers about 15.6 million square miles. The region represents about one-sixth of the landmass of the world assigned to regional unified commands.⁷

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter negotiated the Panama Canal Treaties to be implemented NLT 31 December 1999. The treaties called for the complete withdrawal of permanently assigned U.S. Forces in Panama, along with the permanent neutrality, and cessation of U.S. operation of the Panama Canal. In preparation for withdraw of forces, Southern Command headquarters relocated to Miami, Florida on 26 September 1997.

Currently, U.S. Southern Command has about 3,000 permanently assigned military personnel assigned to the following subordinate service components (responsible to train, equip and organize their respective forces): United States Army South (USARSO) at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, (moving to Fort Sam Houston, TX in summer of 2003); Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command (COMNAVSO), at Naval Station Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico; U.S. Southern Air Forces (12th Air Force) at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona; U.S. Marine Forces South (MARFORSO) in Miami, Florida; and Special Operations Command (SOCSOUTH) at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico. Additionally, USSOUTHCOM exercises command and control (C2) over: Joint Inter-Agency Task Force-East (JIATF-East) located at Naval Air Station (NAS) Key West, Florida; Joint Task Force-160 (JTF-160) and the Joint Task Force-170 (JTF-170) both located at U.S. Naval Base Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; Joint Southern Surveillance Reconnaissance Operations Center (JSSROC) located at Truman Annex, NAS Key West, Florida; Joint Task Force-Bravo located in Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras; and 26 Security Assistance Organizations (SAO) throughout the AOR. These SAOs are organized as

Military Groups (MilGps), Military Liaison Offices (MLOs), Office of Defense Representative (ODRs), Offices of Defense Cooperation (ODCs), Office of Defense Assistance (ODCs) and Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAGs).⁸ Figure 1 below depicts the current command and control structure for USSOUTHCOM.

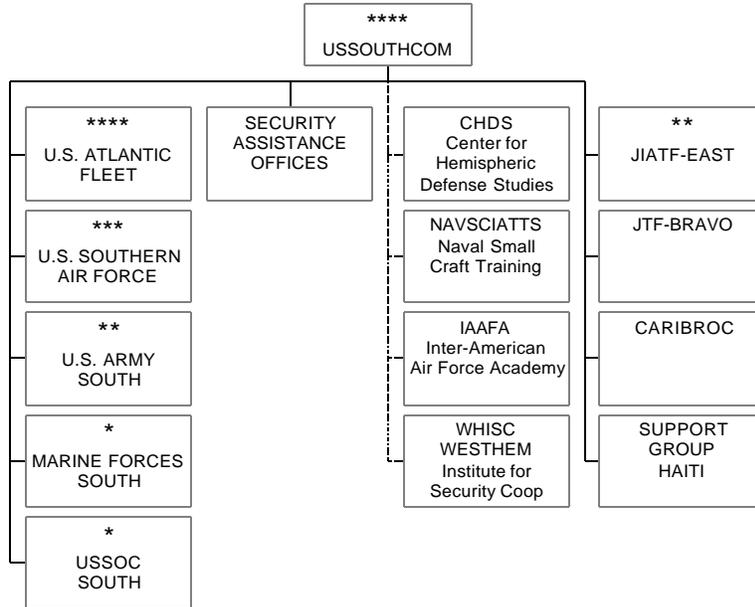


FIGURE 1. USSOUTHCOM WIRING DIAGRAM

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (ENDS)

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 served as a catalyst for even greater revolutionary changes in U.S. domestic and foreign policy. These horrific acts on U.S. soil resulted in a galvanization of our executive and legislative branches of government, along with the military, modifying the U.S. strategic vision toward the future in a way unseen in the past. The 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) is clearly oriented on the reduction/elimination of global terrorism, standing up homeland security, and the improvement of world markets and economies.

In the Western Hemisphere we have formed flexible coalitions with countries that share our priorities, particularly Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Chile, and Colombia. Together we will promote a truly democratic hemisphere where our integration advances security, prosperity, opportunity, and hope. We will work with regional institutions, such as the Summit of the Americas process, the Organization of

American States (OAS), and the Defense Ministerial of the Americas for the benefit of the entire hemisphere.⁹

As specified in the NSS, the United States remains steadfast in its resolve to improve the security, stability, and quality of life for its closest regional, hemispheric partners. Meanwhile the administration continues to leverage diplomatic, informational, military and economic elements of national power to assist in the strategic advancement, security and stability of Central America. To this “end”, USSOUTHCOM remains responsible for the application of the military element of national power throughout its AOR.

Soaring unemployment and rapid urbanization continues to threaten the fragile economic growth and regional stability that many of Central American countries rely on to maintain control of their democratic destiny. Following is a detailed analysis of the 2002 NSS and how the administration intends to implement the elements of national power to assist our Central American partners maintain this precarious balance.

DIPLOMATIC

From a career military officer’s perspective, potentially one of the most underestimated forms of national power is diplomatic. Certainly one of the more sublime forms of power, diplomacy can often achieve “ends” that the military cannot. Unfortunately, diplomacy often takes considerably more time, and the results, although quantifiable in the end, are significantly more subtle as they are occurring. Regardless of their political or economic situation, Latin Americans remain a proud people. As a result, the male-dominated Central American society tends to lend itself more readily to diplomatic means, as there seems to be a demonstrated need to be recognized as equals with their U.S. counterparts. The National Security Strategy clearly understands the importance of diplomacy as evidenced by the following statements:

As the United States Government relies on the armed forces to defend America’s interests, it must rely on diplomacy to interact with other nations. The State Department takes the lead in managing our bilateral relationships with other governments. Officials trained mainly in international politics must also understand complex issues of domestic governance including public health, education, law enforcement, the judiciary, and public diplomacy.

Our diplomats serve at the front line of complex negotiations, civil wars, and other humanitarian catastrophes. As humanitarian relief requirements are better understood, we must also be able to help build police forces, court systems, legal codes, local and provincial government institutions, and electoral systems. Effective international cooperation is needed to accomplish these goals, backed by American readiness to play our part.¹⁰

Our adroitness to leverage diplomacy is inextricably linked to the quality of our information strategy and readiness, not only on the part of our diplomats, but also through our military personnel serving in the region.

INFORMATION

The 2002 National Security Strategy recognizes the significance of our information element of national power, as it applies within a comprehensive strategy to interact with U.S. allies, friends, and regional partners. Coupled with the other elements of national power, information can prove to be a very potent tool. Any effective military strategic campaign includes the extensive use of information warfare and psychological operations. On a larger perspective, the NSS outlines its information campaign specific to the burgeoning democratic societies of Central America. Holding to the premise that knowledge is power, education becomes an essential element of strategic regional success:

Emphasize education. Literacy and learning are the foundation of democracy and development. Only about 7 percent of World Bank resources are devoted to education. The United States will increase its own funding for education assistance by at least 20 percent with an emphasis on improving basic education and teacher training. The United States can also bring information technology to these societies.

New technologies, including biotechnology, have enormous potential to improve crop yields using fewer pesticides and less water. Using sound science, the United States should help bring these benefits to the millions of people who still suffer from hunger and malnutrition.¹¹

The role and magnitude that education (information) plays in the regional stability of Central America cannot be overstated. If, for example, a particular country needs to rebuild homes after a natural disaster, rather than having foreign assistance deliver them bricks and cement, it is more strategically sound to arm them with the technology and know-how to make their own building materials from their internal natural resources. As with diplomacy and information, the strategic application of the economic element of national power remains equally significant.

ECONOMIC

As the countries of Central America continue to strive for economic independence, attempt to compete in a global marketplace, and bring their respective countries into the 21st century, the use of the economic element of national power by the United States to maintain regional stability, is only rivaled by the continued application of our military engagement. The economies of Central America are arguably their strategic center of gravity, but unlike

diplomacy, however, economic measures can only do so much. In March 2002, President George Bush said it best while addressing a group in Monterrey, Mexico when he stated, "When nations close their markets and opportunity is hoarded by a privileged few, no amount--no amount--of development aid is ever enough. When nations respect their people, open markets, invest in better health and education, every dollar of aid, every dollar of trade revenue and domestic capital is used more effectively."¹² The National Security Strategy further defines the administration's economic plan for the continued development of the Americas:

Improving stability in emerging markets is also essential to global economic growth. International flows of investment capital are needed to expand the productive potential of these economies. These flows allow emerging markets and developing countries to make the investments that raise living standards and reduce poverty.

Our aim is to achieve free trade agreements with a mix of developed and developing countries in all regions of the world. Initially, Central America, Southern Africa, Morocco, and Australia will be our principal focal points.

Trade policies can help developing countries strengthen property rights, competition, the rule of law, investment, the spread of knowledge, open societies, the efficient allocation of resources, and regional integration—all leading to growth, opportunity, and confidence.¹³

Ambitious economic and free trade agreements have already proven themselves effective tools throughout Latin America. Reflecting on the successes achieved by the U.S., Mexico and Canada under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), many in Central America optimistically anticipate similar benefits from the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement set to begin by 2005.

Mr. Phillip T. Chicola, current Director, Office of Andean Affairs, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, and former Political Counselor, Deputy Chief of Mission, and Charge d' Affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Managua, Nicaragua from 1988 to 1993, sees the role of U.S. forces in CA in a much different light:

The future for Central America is how the countries themselves integrate and look to the future for economic well-being. We (U.S.) don't have the time to develop free trade agreements with every country in CA. We need to speak to you (CA) as a group.

The presence of a few hundred U.S. soldiers and a handful of helicopters at Palmerola (Soto Cano) does not really matter. The best role model is how USARSO and USSOUTHCOM interact with these countries, and their respective militaries.¹⁴

Regardless of the mission, one could argue that elements of volatility, uncertainty, change and ambiguity (VUCA) continue to convolute the strategic environment and adversely affect the security and prosperity of the United States. Throughout Central America, the critical linkage between the Administration's Grand Strategy, and its subsequent use of the military element National Power, are manifested in USSOUTHCOM's employment of forces assigned to Joint Task Force-Bravo. The last, and arguably the most powerful U.S. element of national power remains the military. However, the employment of U.S. forces around the world remains the administration's last rather than first resort to maintain regional stability.

MILITARY

As the unipolar hegemon, the United States assumes enormous responsibility in the judicious application of its military element of national power. Whether unilaterally, or as part of a multinational force, the United States only tends to use its peerless military might as a last resort, after all other forms of national power have failed. The 2002 NSS specifically states:

The unparalleled strength of the United States armed forces, and their forward presence, have maintained the peace in some of the world's most strategically vital regions. The presence of American forces overseas is one of the most profound symbols of the U.S. commitments to allies and friends, and demonstrates our resolve to maintain a balance of power that favors freedom. To meet the many security challenges we face, the United States will require bases and stations, as well as temporary access arrangements for the long-distance deployment of U.S. forces.¹⁵

As the aforementioned historical analysis depicts, USSOUTHCOM has an extensive record of involvement throughout the Central American theater of operations. The USSOUTHCOM Combatant Commander must internalize the President's guidance in the National Security Strategy, along with other JCS directed tasks, and develop his own tailored strategic plan on how to implement the administration's specified and implied tasks to achieve the desired strategic end-state. This road map translates into USSOUTHCOM's Strategy of Theater Security Cooperation. However, before an analysis of how USSOUTHCOM plans to attack the challenges it faces in Central America, it is necessary to provide a foundation of what those challenges are, assess the potential impact that U.S. forces have in the region, and how the other elements of national power effect this strategic synergy.

CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY COMPARISON

The Central America countries of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica gained their independence from Spain on 15 September 1821, while Belize claimed its independence from the UK on 21 September 1981.¹⁶ Much like the early United States,

Central America is primarily an agrarian based society that is most recently attempting to move toward a more lucrative industrial/service base.

When one takes a comparative strategic review of the countries of Central America, it becomes evident that none of them is truly capable of conducting protracted, full-scale conventional offensive operations against any of its neighbors in the region without significant assistance from outside countries like the United States. Fortunately, the threat of war appears to remain relatively low based on each country's respective gross domestic product (GDP), and their financial commitment to maintain a credible fighting force. Central America continues to take progressive measures to integrate their societies with the United States in regards to trade and immigration.

Regional threats are characterized by limited border disputes that continue to erupt over coastline/shipping access, fishing rights and historic regional territorial disagreements. However, over the last decade, internal hostilities have predominantly been limited to small-scale contingencies, rebel activity and banditry, fueled by a rise in narco-trafficking, crime, and corruption, exacerbated by weak political and economic institutions. Table 1 below further accentuates the similarities between these regional partners.

COUNTRY COMPARISON

COUNTRY CRITERIA	LAND MASS	COAST LINE	POPULATION	POPULATION GROWTH	GOVERNMENT	GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT	MILITARY	% of GDP on the MILITARY
BELIZE	22,806 sq km	386 km	262,999 (70.3% Literacy) (11.5% Unemploy)	2.65%	Parliamentary Democracy	\$830 Million 18% Agricult 24% Industry 58% Services	64,909 Total 38,472 FFMS	1.87% (\$7.7 Million)
NICARAGUA	120,254 sq km	910 km	5,023,818 (68.2% Literacy) (23% Unemploy)	2.09%	Republic	\$12.3 Billion 33% Agricult 23% Industry 44% Services	1,308,430 Total 802,779 FFMS	1.2% (\$26 Million)
GUATEMALA	108,430 sq km	400 km	13,314,079 (63.6% Literacy) (7.5% Unemploy)	2.57%	Constitutional Democratic Republic	\$48.3 Billion 23% Agricult 20% Industry 57% Services	3,186,894 Total 2,080,504 FFMS	0.6% (\$120 Million)
HONDURAS	111,890 sq km	820 km	6,560,608 (74% Literacy) (28% Unemploy)	2.34%	Constitutional Democratic Republic	\$17 Billion 18% Agricult 32% Industry 50% Services	1,563,174 Total 930,718 FFMS	0.6% (\$35 Million)
EL SALVADOR	20,720 sq km	307 km	6,353,681 (71.5% Literacy) (10% Unemploy)	1.83%	Republic	\$28.4 Billion 10% Agricult 30% Industry 60% Services	1,500,712 Total 951,715 FFMS	0.7% (\$112 Million)
COSTA RICA	50,660 sq km	1,290 km	3,834,934 (95.9% Literacy) (5.2% Unemploy)	1.61%	Democratic Republic	\$31.9 Billion 11% Agricult 37% Industry 52% Services	1,058,283 Total 707,927 FFMS	1.6% (\$69 Million)

TABLE 1. CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY COMPARISON

Their respective economic transitions continue to be plagued by inferior literacy rates, comparatively high unemployment, and a high percentage of the population living below the poverty line. Unlike some of the former Yugoslav or Middle Eastern countries, which continue to fight over religious differences, the preponderance of Central America embraces the Roman Catholic faith, which furthers their collective potential to unify as a group of nations. Additionally, these Central American countries pursue some form of democratic governance, which again makes them more likely to participate with their regional partners rather than engage in military operations. Conversely, however, the high “poverty rates coupled with weak institutions, breed corruption making weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.”¹⁷ It is the basis of these previously demonstrated similarities that USSOUTHCOM evaluates how to effectively plan, analyze and revise its strategy to remain engaged throughout Central America.

USSOUTHCOM SECURITY STRATEGY FOR THE AMERICAS (WAYS)

U.S. Southern Command, consisting of Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine and Special Operations Forces is headquartered in Miami, Florida, and is one of nine unified commands throughout DoD. The Combatant Commander has articulated his vision as, “a community of democratic, stable, and prosperous nations successfully countering illicit drug activities and other transnational threats; served by professional, modernized, interoperable security forces that embrace democratic principles, demonstrate respect for human rights, are subordinate to civil authority, and capable and supportive of multilateral responses to challenges.”¹⁸ In 1999, General Wilhelm, USSOUTHCOM Combatant Commander (COCOM), summed up his Security Strategy for the Americas when he said “The task of our regional strategy is precisely to use our defense and military assets in peacetime engagement to avoid and prevent crises.”¹⁹ The National Security Strategy provides the basis for and is reflected in the USSOUTHCOM mission statement, which reads:

USSOUTHCOM shapes the environment within its area of responsibility by conducting theater engagement and counterdrug activities in order to promote democracy, stability and collective approaches to threats to regional security; when required responds unilaterally or multilaterally to crises that threaten regional stability or national interests, and prepares to meet future hemispheric challenges.

Like the other regional unified commands, USSOUTHCOM has two major tasks:

- Defend U.S. interests within the assigned area of responsibility.

- Assist the development of modern militaries within friendly nations throughout the area of responsibility.²⁰

USSOUTHCOM AND MOOTW

For the preponderance of the last two decades, operations throughout USSOUTHCOM's AOR can be characterized as Military Operations Other Than War or MOOTW. By definition, MOOTW, like all military operations, are driven by political considerations and encompass the use of military capabilities across the range of military operations short of war in support of national security objectives.²¹ Joint Publication 3-07 identifies sixteen different potential missions in a MOOTW environment which include: arms control, combating terrorism, DoD support to counterdrug operations, enforcement of sanctions/maritime intercept operations, enforcing exclusion zones, ensuring freedom of navigation and over-flight, humanitarian assistance (HA), military support to civil authorities (MACA), nation assistance/support to counter-insurgency, noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO), peace operations, protection of shipping, recovery operations, show of force operations, strikes and raids.²²

The mid 1990's gave way to the cessation of overt hostilities throughout the Central American AOR causing the USSOUTHCOM's strategic mission focus to become more oriented on their precision engagement mission of today. Recognizing that MOOTW concentrates on deterring war, resolving conflict, promoting peace and supporting civil authorities, USSOUTHCOM remains focused on the six MOOTW principles of objective, unity of effort, security, restraint, perseverance and legitimacy in the execution of its strategic mission.²³ Throughout USSOUTHCOM's lengthy history in Central America, it could be argued that at some point U.S. Forces have been involved in every one of these MOOTW missions. Interestingly, the Army characterizes these same missions, with the exception of strikes and raids, as stability and support operations (SASO).²⁴

Most recently, however, U.S. personnel permanently assigned in Central America, more specifically Honduras, devote a majority of their time conducting humanitarian assistance, military support to civil authorities (New Horizons), and DoD support to counterdrug operations (Operation Central Skies). None of these operations are conducted without inherent challenges, but one could argue that the austere environment of Central America, coupled with the penchant for corruptibility within the host nations, makes achieving unity of effort most difficult during counterdrug operations. Dr. Gabriel Marcella, Director of World Studies, Department of National Security and Strategy, USAWC, and former International Affairs Advisor to Commander, USSOUTHCOM provides the following insights regarding drug trafficking:

Narco trafficking is a menace that threatens the social, moral, and political fabrics of the Latin American countries. Though not classically within the military's purview, narcotics suborn officials, institutions and governance. Narco trafficking makes a mockery of the principle of sovereignty in international order. It also distorts economies and generates violence that often stretches the thin capabilities of inadequately trained and poorly paid police forces, which are too often vulnerable to the corrosive attraction of easy money. The military's role is to support the police forces within constitutional limits.²⁵

As previously stated, the USSOUTHCOM area of responsibility includes 32 countries, 14 territories and 15.6 million square miles located in Central and South America and the Caribbean, making it one of the most expansive of the five geographic combatant commands. The sheer size alone requires the Combatant Commander to rely heavily on the ability of his subordinate service component and/or Joint Task Force commanders to implement/execute the USSOUTHCOM mission. Success is reliant not just on military operations, but also by the careful blending of multinational, interagency, and host nations working in unison toward a common end. As General Wilhelm, former Commander, U.S. Southern Command states, "Interdependency among western hemispheric countries supports the growing trend toward diplomatic resolution of disputes, and expanding acceptance of confidence and security building measures reduces the potential for intra-hemispheric hostilities."²⁶ Centralized planning and decentralized execution are indistinguishable traits essential to the maintenance of regional security and the execution of USSOUTHCOM's strategic aims.

PRECISION ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIC AIMS

Precision engagement remains the key to USSOUTHCOM's strategic aims, which include its continued ability to sustain, strengthen and expand multilateral security cooperation with security forces in the region. Simultaneously, USSOUTHCOM attempts to assist in the peaceful resolution of disputes, while promoting confidence-building measures, support for democratic institutions, civilian control of military/security forces and assist host nations in reducing the flow of illegal drugs through the transit zone. U.S. Forces remain critical to enable the region to combat terrorism, protect U.S. citizens and vital interests, and, when directed, rapidly respond to disasters to provide humanitarian assistance. Engagement optimizes coordination and interoperability among interagency, civilian agencies, and regional security forces, through full-spectrum exercises, training, and continuous refinement of deliberate planning.²⁷

USSOUTHCOM conducts precision engagement (Figure 2) to foster the positive development of democratic institutions, while simultaneously supporting the institutional transformation of regional security forces as they adopt appropriate roles and missions. This tends to cultivate proper civil-military relations, foster civilian control of security forces, and develop respect for human rights and the rule of law, in an effort to strengthen and expand multilateral security cooperation to enhance regional and theater-wide security and stability.²⁸

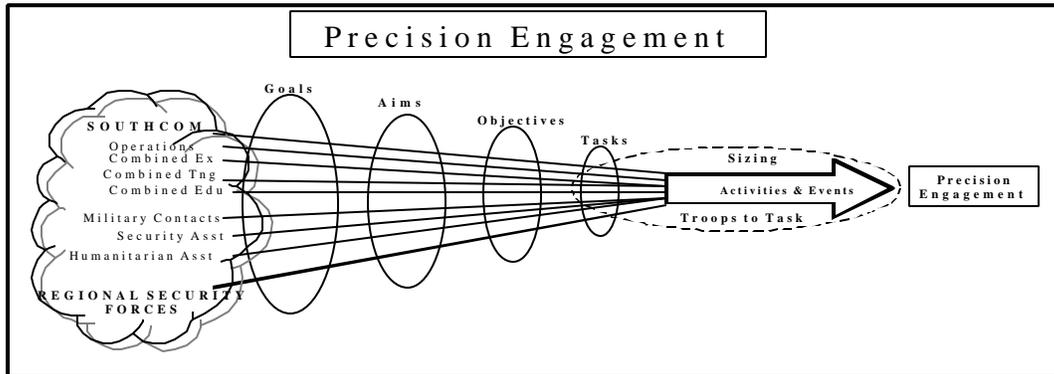


FIGURE 2. PRECISION ENGAGEMENT CYCLE

One way that USSOUTHCOM continues to remain engaged throughout the Central American region is through the vigorous application of robust military assistance programs, aggressive support for counter-drug operations (Operation Central Skies), repetitive humanitarian assistance efforts (New Horizons), and disaster relief operations to cite a few.

MILITARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Despite the political/civil unrest that raged through Guatemala during its 36-year civil war (1960-1996), leaving in its wake some 200,000 dead; the Sandinista control of Nicaragua from 1979-1990 which claimed 30,00-50,000 victims; and the 12-year El Salvadoran civil war between the FMLN and the Army of El Salvador which resulted in 75,000 killed in action, the U.S. role in the region has remained relatively constant.²⁹ In the early 1980's, President Reagan significantly increased U.S. financial commitment in the Central American region and reversed many of the military assistance programs (MAP) that were curtailed under the Carter Administration. These military assistance programs focused on military-to-military contacts, nation assistance/support to counterinsurgency, peace operations and limited show of force operations.

The three elements of the United States military assistance program for Honduras come under international military education and training (IMET), military assistance program (MAP), and foreign military sales (FMS). Under the IMET program, Honduras received \$14.2 million between 1962 and 1986; it received an additional \$5.8 million between 1987 and 1991. During the 1980s, the IMET program provided military education to 9,500 Honduran military officers at bases in the United States and other locations. During the same period, El Salvador was the only Latin American country to receive more military training than Honduras under the IMET program. In addition to the IMET training at the United States Army School of the Americas, (in Panama before 1985, thereafter at Fort Benning, Georgia), mobile training teams (MTTs) conducted by United States Special Forces entered the country for short periods to train Honduran soldiers in counterinsurgency tactics and other military skills.³⁰

Between 1962 and 1986, MAP grants to Honduras totaled \$257.2 million, while additional MAP grants totaling \$140 million were made available from 1987 to 1989. Foreign military sales credits equaling \$44.4 million were made from 1978 to 1983, and although Honduras did not receive FMS credits between 1983 and 1990, it did receive \$51 million in credits during 1991 and 1992.³¹ Other United States military-related programs also aided Hondurans during the 1980s. Under the Overseas Security Assistance Management Program, the United States stationed military managerial personnel in Honduras and authorized nearly \$2 million annually to execute this program. Honduras also benefited from United States Department of Defense military construction grants, which financed the construction and maintenance of military airfields, radar stations, ammunition storage warehouses, training facilities, and a strategic road network. The United States military retains access and usage rights to many of these facilities today. The U.S. spent an additional \$8.2 million on military construction projects in a two-year period in 1987 and 1988.³²

In 1985 the United States Congress exempted Honduras and El Salvador from a U.S. foreign aid prohibition on the funding of police forces. As a result, \$2.8 million in funding was secured for training, riot-control gear, vehicles, communications equipment, and weapons. Aid to the Honduran police has also been provided under the Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program, which is managed by the United States Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security. Other police training has been sponsored by the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), which is managed by the United States Department of Justice.³³ This training serves as a means to instill professionalism, discourage corruption, and provide the Honduran people with a renewed faith and trust in their local law enforcement.

More recently, the U.S. has expanded its security assistance programs throughout the USSOUTHCOM AOR, most significantly through the aggressive execution of a comprehensive counter-narcotics program. USSOUTHCOM assigned joint forces stationed in Central America make significant daily contributions to our nation's War on Drugs, enhancing regional cooperation and stability. Before an assessment can be made of the USSOUTHCOM counter drug contribution, it is necessary to review the nation's drug control policy.

NATIONAL DRUG CONTROL STRATEGY

The 2002 National Security Strategy articulates the Bush Administration's commitment to the counter-narcotics program and the nation's continuing effort to fight the War on Drugs:

Parts of Latin America confront regional conflict, especially arising from the violence of drug cartels and their accomplices. This conflict and unrestrained narcotics trafficking could imperil the health and security of the United States. Therefore we have developed an active strategy to help the Andean nations adjust their economies, enforce their laws, defeat terrorist organizations, and cut off the supply of drugs, while—as important—we work to reduce the demand for drugs in our own country.³⁴

Webster's II dictionary defines "strategy" as: "The science or art of military command as applied to the overall planning and conduct of large-scale combat operations."³⁵ Additionally, from a strictly military perspective, if one aspires to the Clausewitzian definition of war, the aim of which is to "totally destroy the enemy to achieve victory"³⁶, one could surmise that the administration's counterdrug policy is neither a strategy nor a war, and that potential success is being mired in the excessive bureaucracy of ineffective organizations. In short, an argument could be made that the expenditures are inversely proportional to the results, when one considers the amount of money and resources the U.S. has committed to the War on Drugs.

The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) sits at the apex of the nation's drug program, and is responsible the development, administration, implementation and execution of the NSS counter-narcotics program. The ONDCP develops an annual National Drug Control Strategy, which compliments the President's NSS, and provides the granularity necessary for the execution/oversight of a comprehensive program. Substantial funding is a levied against our Nation's War on Drugs, which is used for everything from student education programs, law enforcement support and the treatment of drug addicts, to funding international drug control cooperation programs. In 2001 alone, ONDCP received \$502.1 million dollars, with a projected budget of \$523.1 million by 2003, while the total federal drug budget was \$18 billion in 2001, \$18.8 billion in 2002, slated to rise to \$19.1 billion by 2003.³⁷

Departments of Defense and State continue to provide substantial forces and resources in the War on Drugs. Throughout Central America, in addition to the efforts of Joint Interagency Task Force-East and the FOLs, the U.S. military commitment falls under the execution of Operation Central Skies. Interestingly, military assistance to civil authorities (MACA), which is governed by DoD Directive (DODD) 3025.15, includes military support to civil disturbance control, counterdrug (CD) activities, combating terrorism and law enforcement support.³⁸ Further, Title 10 U.S. Code (USC) strictly limits active component (AC) and federalized National Guard forces' support to counterdrug operations, while state-controlled counterdrug operations yield to Title 32 USC, section 112 for administration.³⁹ Several of the Combatant Commands, including U.S. Southern Command, continue to play a key role in support of the national counterdrug effort. Not surprisingly, responsibility for enforcement of U.S. Drug laws falls squarely on the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA); however, primary oversight responsibility for U.S. military involvement in CD operations OCONUS belongs to Department of State (DOS). According to Joint Publication 3-07.4, "the DOS provides assistance to foreign countries under the Foreign Assistance Act, the Arms Export Control Act, the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, and International Narcotics Control Act."⁴⁰

JOINT TASK FORCE—BRAVO (MEANS)

In 1954 the Governments of Honduras and the United States signed a military assistance agreement, and in 1965 began conducting combined, multinational training exercises. In 1983, the number and size of these exercises increased when the Honduran Government requested a more visible (semi-permanent) U.S. presence to deter growing regional pro-communist threats and Nicaraguan aggression during their 1980s civil war. Originally dubbed Joint Task Force 11, the unit was re-designated as Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-Bravo) in August 1984; making it the third in a series of USSOUTHCOM-controlled subordinate headquarters in the region. JTF-Bravo makes its home at Enrique Soto Cano Air Base, formerly known as Palmerola Air Base. The Honduran-owned facility, built in 1982, is located about 90 kilometers northwest of the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and is also the home to the Honduran Air Force Academy.⁴¹

In 1983, despite the absence of a status of forces agreement (SOFA), and being advertised as a temporary site, the Pentagon began spending hundreds of millions of dollars to transform this once obscure facility into the most advanced military platform in Central America. U.S. construction projects included: an F-16 capable runway extension; 22-miles of roads; water, sewer and electrical systems; and barracks, office, and recreational facilities.⁴² The 1980s also witnessed the installation of sophisticated listening devices and radar to track the

communications and movements of El Salvador's leftist guerrillas and to support communications with the Contra rebels who were attempting to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista government.⁴³

With the 1999 exit of U.S. forces from Panama, Soto Cano remains the U.S. military's only usable airfield on the Latin American mainland (with the partial exception of counterdrug forward operating locations (FOLs) at Manta, Ecuador; Comalapa, El Salvador; Aruba; and Curacao, Netherlands Antilles. As a result, the Defense Department argues that Soto Cano, which is likely to play a greater anti-drug role, is highly relevant to its future activities.⁴⁴ Today, Soto Cano Air Base continues to function as the nerve center of intelligence gathering, logistical support, and communications for United States military operations in Central America. An important point to recognize is that even though JTF-Bravo operates at the tactical and/or operational levels, the actions of U.S. forces there often times has strategic implications. Based on the geo-political dynamics of Central America, JTF-Bravo personnel regularly interact with heads-of-state, chiefs of the military, or senior diplomats while coordinating for or conducting their daily duties. While in most other parts of the world, Battalion or Brigade-level staff officers do not conduct business at those senior levels of government.

STRUCTURE

At its peak in the 1980s, over 2,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed at Soto Cano, most of who were assigned on a temporary basis. In 1995, the force in Honduras was restructured and downsized initially to 780 personnel, then to 500 soldiers with the deactivation of a helicopter battalion, and relocation of 20 aircraft.⁴⁵

Joint Task Force-Bravo itself is divided into four functional components. U.S. Army Forces (ARFOR) provides command and control, administrative and logistics support. ARFOR also supports a myriad of annual Deployments for Training (DFT), (where U.S. personnel visit to train both U.S. and foreign personnel), and is directly responsible for the command and control of all Operation Central Skies counterdrug operations. A Joint Security Force (JSF) is responsible for guarding task force assets, airfield security and law enforcement support. U.S. Air Force Forces (AFFOR) personnel maintain the airfield, execute air traffic control (ATC) duties, and provide cargo handling for Soto Cano and in-transit cargo (Hub & Spoke). The Medical Element (MEDEL), provides emergency and limited routine health care for U.S. personnel, and carries out recurring Medical Readiness Training Exercises (MEDRETES), bringing normally unavailable health care to thousands of people living throughout Honduras and the rest of Central America.⁴⁶

In July 1999, following the end of the Panama Canal treaty, and subsequent withdraw of U.S. personnel from Panama, U.S. Army South (USARSO), USSOUTHCOM Army component relocated its remaining aviation assets from Fort Kobbe to Soto Cano. The 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment consists of a command and control element, 14x UH-60 Blackhawk and 5x CH-47 Chinook helicopters. These aircraft provide JTF-Bravo with much needed lift and MEDEVAC support, and represent the only permanently assigned rotary wing aviation assets in the JTF-Bravo seven million square mile AOR, which includes the countries of Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Bleize.⁴⁷ Today, JTF-Bravo has about 550 troops present at any given time. With the exception of AFFOR, JSF, 1-228th and a limited number of the JTF-Bravo primary staff, the majority of remaining personnel are assigned or attached on short rotation temporary duty status.⁴⁸

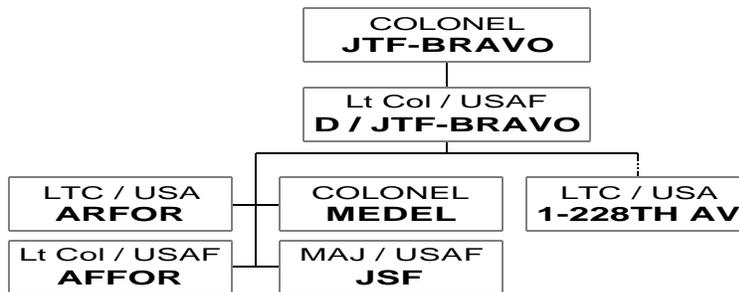


FIGURE 3: JTF-B WIRING DIAGRAM

Figure 3 above represents the current Joint Task Force-Bravo C2 relationship. The coordination (dotted line) between the JTF staff and 1-228th Aviation Regiment highlights that the aviation battalion, although technically a USSOUTHCOM asset, remains under direct control (assigned) to the U.S. Army South (USARSO) Commander (Fort Buchanan, PR), and only comes under the operational control (OPCON) or tactical control (TACON) to the JTF-Bravo Commander IAW USSOUTHCOM directed missions. Regardless of the C2 relationship, all U.S. forces at Soto Cano work with an unprecedented degree of unity of effort to accomplish all assigned missions at the tactical, operational or strategic level as determined by the Combatant Commander.⁴⁹ The only question that remains unanswered is “how much does this regional security and stability effort cost the U.S. taxpayer, and does the outlay justify the expenditure?”

BUDGET

There remains no question that Soto Cano sits in the center of the drug transit area between the poppy and coca fields of South America, and the streets and homes of consumers in the United States. In 1995, in an effort to trim unnecessary expenses across Department of Defense (DoD), JTF-Bravo underwent a review by Congress's General Accounting Office (GAO) to determine its post-cold war security relevance. The GAO determined that "U.S. military presence at Soto Cano provides useful and convenient support to some U.S. government activities, such as counter-narcotics, but was no longer critical to such activities or U.S. policy objectives in the region, such as economic growth and democratic reform."⁵⁰ Subsequently, the U.S. force structure of JTF-Bravo was reduced from 1100 to 500.

Cost Elements	1994
Contracts and fees	\$9,510.9
Army Flying Hours Program	7,900.0
Supplies and Equipment	6,075.6
Per Diem and Transport	6,000.0
Travel and Transport	1,012.2
Civilian Salaries	1,003.2
U.S. Air Force Costs	6,790.0
Total	\$38,291.90

TABLE 2: COSTS IN \$MILLIONS TO OPERATE SOTO CANO (1994)

During the 1995 review, GAO predicted that Defense Department resources associated with base operations and maintenance (i.e., human, financial, supplies and equipment, and contracts and fees) could be eliminated and costs would either decrease or be redistributed to other agencies. A subsequent GAO report (based on 1994 figures) released at the end of fiscal year 1995 found that the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano has grown steadily from about \$24 million annually in the mid 1980s, to a projected \$38 million in 1994 (Table 2). These figures represent an annual cost increase of about \$2.5 million since 1991.⁵¹ Funding for Soto are primarily financed through Army and Air Force operation and maintenance funds.⁵² Despite the current costs, U.S. presence at Soto Cano remains the only continued, long-term, credible U.S. force presence in Central America.

Today, upkeep of the Enrique Soto Cano Air Base now costs the United States about \$50 million a year. Interestingly, the Honduran Constitution does not permit a permanent foreign presence in Honduras, which means JTF-Bravo's "semi-permanent" status at Soto Cano is based on a "handshake" agreement between the United States and Honduras. This agreement, an annex to the 1954 military assistance agreement between the United States and Honduras, can be abrogated with little notice.⁵³ Based on the amount of local employment, base support and infrastructure maintenance, financial benefit to the local economy, and military assistance JTF-Bravo's presence in Honduras provides, it is unlikely that U.S. forces will be asked to leave anytime in the near future.

MISSION

Beginning in 1983, the joint task force was originally established to support U.S. efforts on behalf of Central American militaries and conduct joint and combined training exercises.⁵⁴ In late 1998 and early 1999, JTF-Bravo played a pivotal role in U.S. military efforts to help Central America recover from Hurricane Mitch. Personnel stationed at Soto Cano, along with a voluminous number of both Active and Reserve/National Guard temporary duty (TDY) soldiers executed a myriad of operations to include: infrastructure and construction integrity evaluation, emergency food distribution, search and rescue operations, and medical evacuation in the storm's wake. The base also served as a hub for U.S. military HCA infrastructure-rebuilding projects just as it continues to do.

Today, with the region at peace, USSOUTHCOM describes JTF-Bravo's current mission as "to enhance cooperative regional security through forward presence and peacetime engagement operations."⁵⁵ Specific activities include multinational exercises, humanitarian and civic assistance (HCA) projects (New Horizons and Medical Readiness Training Exercises or MEDRETEs), disaster relief, and support for counter-drug operations (Operation Central Skies), involving Active, National Guard and Reserve component personnel from all four branches of service. JTF-Bravo also assists Central American armed forces in "restructuring their militaries to fit changing security requirements."⁵⁶

JTF-Bravo considers the successful execution of the following missions as tantamount to the maintenance of regional security and stability. U.S. forces in CA conduct and support U.S. joint, combined and interagency operations designed to enhance regional cooperative security, while simultaneously supporting U.S. interagency operations (Counterdrug) in coordination with U.S. Military Groups and U.S. Embassy country teams. Additionally JTF-Bravo personnel support regional Humanitarian and Civic Assistance, disaster relief and contingency missions as directed by CDR, USSOUTHCOM. They exercise OPCON of selected deployed forces in the joint area of operations, other than those conducting security assistance related operations, in order to provide security support to USMILGRPs within the JTF-Bravo area of operations. Assigned forces at Soto Cano also plan, coordinate and conduct regional search and rescue operations, and provide support for regional exercises/deployments as directed by the USSOUTHCOM Commander.⁵⁷

JTF-Bravo and 1-228th forces collectively continue to provide disaster relief (Honduras 98, Hurricane Mitch; Belize 00, Hurricane Keith; and El Salvador 01, earthquake relief), assistance for Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) counter-drug operations, MEDEVAC support, mine clearing, and search and rescue. In addition, JTF-Bravo provides interagency support and media coverage to demonstrate U.S. commitment to the region. Together they provide strategic flexibility for USSOUTHCOM regional engagement, and represent the last formidable U.S. presence in the Central American region. Although austere, the operational infrastructure at Soto Cano represents the only remaining U.S. Air Force maintained C-5 capable runway in the AOR for strategic power projection, notwithstanding the improvements made to support the FOL in Comalapa, El Salvador.

Additionally, 1-228th Aviation Regiment provides a level of operational and tactical aviation acumen that cannot be readily recovered if U.S. forces are withdrawn from the theater. As an example, when two devastating, back-to-back earthquakes, hit El Salvador in January and February 2001, JTF-Bravo and 1-228th personnel responded within 18 hours. Often forced to

hover in brown-out conditions for extended periods of time, 1-228th aircraft and crews provided emergency MEDEVAC, aerial re-supply, personnel transport and regional food distribution, saving countless lives and easing the suffering of local populations. Out-of-theater aircrews would have taken days, not hours to arrive, and most likely would have required additional environmental train-up before they could have been employed. The loss of U.S. forces in Central America becomes equally significant when considering the use of inexperienced, out-of-theater flight crews to execute critical regional operations such as Operation Central Skies, the DEA controlled counter-narcotics operations.

OPERATION CENTRAL SKIES I & II

To assist in this endeavor, USSOUTHCOM has designated Joint Interagency Task Force-East (JIATF-East) in Key West, Florida as the operational headquarters specifically responsible for the execution of Central Skies missions. Operation Central Skies, initiated in June 1998, is aimed directly at the Central American and Caribbean countries with the intention of interdicting the innumerable tons of cocaine being shipped from Colombia, and marijuana being grown in many of the Central American host nations from reaching U.S. shores. JTF-Bravo stands alone as the only long-term U.S. military presence in Central America.

Operation Central Skies is a two-phased program designed to train host nation law enforcement (HNLEA) agencies on how to deal with the narco-trafficking problem using their own internal forces. Central Skies-I, which began in 1998, was initially a blend of U.S. DEA personnel linked directly to host nation drug enforcement/law enforcement agency (HNDEA/LEA) forces for intelligence, while U.S. military provided personnel (training) and equipment (helicopters, radios, etc). In comparison, Central Skies-II operations are expected to be less dependant on U.S. personnel and equipment, in an effort to ultimately get the HNLEA to become self-sufficient in the execution of interdiction and eradication operations.

Currently Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador participate in Operation Central Skies I deployments. Operation Central Skies continues to serve as a successful training mechanism for USDEA, HNDEA/LEA, DOS, Interagency and counterpart military personnel, and has achieved widespread successes in joint eradication efforts throughout Central America. In 2000 alone, Operation Central Skies deployments were responsible for the eradication of 2.2 million cannabis and 12,500 poppy plants during operations in Belize, Costa Rica and Guatemala.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, future successes like these are likely unachievable without the continued capabilities that U.S. aircraft and personnel from

Soto Cano provide to this important counterdrug effort. The “means” as Clausewitz describes are the “fighting forces trained for combat”; the “end” of which “is victory.”⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

Given the current downtrend of the U.S. economy, the ambitious campaign toward the global defeat of terrorism as articulated in the NSS, speculation on an impending full-scale preemptive conventional attack on Iraq, and a complete transformation for the Armed Forces of the United States, it seems unlikely that surplus resources will be available for inessential expenditures. In short, the U.S. needs to exploit every opportunity to maximize effects for dollars spent across all levels of government, especially where U.S. Forces are forward deployed.

From its rudimentary beginnings in 1903, when U.S. Forces first deployed in defense of Panama, USSOUTHCOM will repeatedly be tasked to employ forces throughout its expansive AOR in the future. The linkage between our forward presence and regional stability remains undeniable. Whether U.S. personnel are conducting disaster relief, counterdrug, interagency or multinational operations, USSOUTHCOM will carry the mantle of freedom and hope that the United States programs and policies represent. The linkage for the execution of those strategic programs and policies begins with the President, and is manifested down through the chain of command, first by the Combatant Commander, and finally by the forward deployed force on the ground. In Central America, the application of those strategic programs and policies established by DOS and DoD is achieved through the concerted efforts of the men and women of Joint Task Force-Bravo, the Military Groups (MILGRPS) and U.S. Embassies.

The continued regional security and stability of our closest hemispheric neighbors depends on our continued commitment and resolve to allow them to set the conditions to establish and maintain borders and societies free from the threat of terrorism, corruption, and the poison of narcotrafficking -- a place where prosperous economies flourish, and illiteracy and poverty are but a distant memory. The future challenges remain great, but destruction of the fragile balance that currently exists poses an even greater threat. The relevance of U.S. Forces for the regional security and stability of Central America remains unchanged and indisputable, and success will be achieved when all regional partners adopt the motto of “One Team...One Fight”. U.S. Forces at Soto Cano must be retained for their continued demonstrated ability to provide a stabilizing force in the theater, validate U.S. resolve in the AOR, and function as a role model for multinational cooperation and engagement in the region. As President Bush stated: “We must not only build a world which is safer, but better.”⁶⁰

Word Count – 8,325

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Mr. Chicola is currently the Director of the Office of Andean Affairs, Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, Department of State and has an extensive background in the Central American region. He has also held positions as the Deputy Political Counselor in at the American Embassy in Guatemala; Political-Economic Counselor at the American Embassy in Santiago, Chile; and Director of the Office of Policy Coordination in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement.

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