



(photo courtesy of ICE)

# Beyond Cocaine Cowboys

## Looking at Security in Latin America from a Different Perspective

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**L**ET'S PLAY A REGIONAL WORD ASSOCIATION GAME: I say "Latin America," you say "drugs." Perhaps you have visions of gun-toting 1980s Colombian drug cartel enforcers tearing up the streets of Miami as depicted in Billy Corben's documentary *Cocaine Cowboys*.<sup>1</sup> Since 1986, when President Ronald Reagan first designated drug trafficking as a threat to "the national security of the United States," U.S. counterdrug policy has come to dominate every aspect of U.S. security efforts in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, nearly 90 percent of law enforcement and military aid to Latin America was focused on counternarcotics.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there is so much more to Latin America than drugs; it is a dynamic economic region. The United States needs a broad security policy for Latin America that looks beyond a counterdrug focus to create stability and foster increased prosperity.

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Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen stated, “The most significant threat to our national security is our debt.”<sup>4</sup> Consistent with this true statement, U.S. security policy has a vital role in improving the economic prosperity of our nation. As “the third pillar of the West, alongside Europe and North America,” Latin America can have a significant economic effect on the United States.<sup>5</sup> Cultural ties with the region are rapidly strengthening; U.S. Latinos are expected to make up a third of the population by 2050.<sup>6</sup> The United States may find itself with more Spanish speakers than any other country. Economic opportunities are remarkable; last year, U.S. trade with the region exceeded \$700 billion.<sup>7</sup> The population of Latin America is nearly 600 million, roughly half the population of China.<sup>8</sup> Geo-strategist Parag Khanna makes a powerful argument for a U.S. focus not on Asia, but rather on Latin America. He argues persuasively that by increasing commerce with Latin America, the United States can significantly boost economic prosperity in the hemisphere.<sup>9</sup> The diplomatic and economic elements of national power are already deeply involved in development, but these initiatives will be stymied in the absence of a matching military and law enforcement effort.

If the United States is to pursue a more robust policy toward increasing our economic partnerships with Latin American countries, the security of their citizens will be a prerequisite. One need only look to Colombia to see the importance of security in economic development. A decade of successful security policies under presidents Alvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos have reduced the number of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia members by half. Colombia’s focus on “democratic security” has delivered positive results in virtually every measure of citizen security: kidnappings declined 89 percent, homicides 49 percent, and terrorist attacks 66 percent.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Colombia’s gross domestic product averaged a 4.54 percent growth rate from 2002 to 2012, increasing by \$244 billion.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. role in Colombia’s success was driven mainly by Plan Colombia counterdrug funding. However, not all destabilizing forces in the region fit into the drug trafficking mold.

Powerful criminal gangs are a serious problem throughout the region and especially in Central America. The most dangerous criminal gangs, often referred to as “third-generation gangs,” are militarized criminal groups that use guerrilla or rudimentary light-infantry tactics against the state.<sup>12</sup> These groups often engage in retail drug sales but do not reach the transnational level that would invite significant U.S. counterdrug interventions; yet, their impact on citizen security is tremendous. It is estimated that crime costs almost

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eight percent of Central America’s gross domestic product, some \$20 billion.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps worse is the loss of untold amounts of foreign direct investment that goes to safer locales.

Stability and security are crucial for developing extensive hemispheric economic infrastructure. Criminal groups limit the free flow of commerce, engaging in illegal taxation and extortion in cities, seaports, airports, and highways. The Darien region of Panama remains so remote and outside government control that the Pan-American Highway has yet to bridge the complex terrain. Given the economic benefit this highway would have for the region, it should be a priority for U.S. security efforts. Moreover, pipelines, mining, electrical grids, and other valuable economic infrastructure are often the target of attack by criminal groups and insurgents. Unfortunately, infrastructure security is largely a secondary priority behind counterdrug engagement. Security cooperation will need to expand outside the limitations of its current construction if stability is the overarching goal.

The need to contend with state threats and border tensions often becomes secondary to the



Former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visiting Colombia as a part of United States support of Plan Colombia. (DOD)

counterdrug fight, but such issues can have a significant and long-term effect on economic engagement. A dispute between Chile and Peru—two of the fastest growing economies in the region—over maritime boundaries continued for decades. Security cooperation that embraces setting the conditions for increased trade would examine this type of security problem and devote resources to alleviating tension through engagement.

The erosion of democracy is another major concern. Subversive elements following socialist or communist tenets—such as those of Lenin, Gramsci, and Verstrynge—are seeking to undermine democratic institutions. In some cases, they have caused significant economic disruption.<sup>14</sup> The ongoing political unrest in Venezuela has the potential to destabilize an important economic

player in the hemisphere and the 13th largest oil producer in the world.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, the United States and its regional partners have yet to develop a viable response to this type of challenge to the Democratic Charter.<sup>16</sup> Many countries that have fallen under this scheme are intensely focused on thwarting regional economic integration.

Of course, from any perspective, the fact is that drug trafficking will remain a serious threat in the region. Cocaine begins its journey in the Andean Ridge, passes through Central America and Mexico, and brings crime, violence, and corruption all along its way to the United States. Illegal drugs, according the 2012 *National Drug Control Strategy*, were estimated to cost the U.S. economy \$193 billion.<sup>17</sup> They create a tremendous burden on U.S. law enforcement,



the judicial system, and the health care system. Unfortunately, drugs and illicit trafficking are enduring problems that must remain a part of security policy in Latin America for the foreseeable future. Wherever possible, counterdrug programs should focus on targeting the drug trafficking organizations that are the most destabilizing. In other words, we should prioritize resources to fight drug trafficking groups that threaten stability over groups that simply traffic. The drug fight should be put into the context of stability whenever possible.

The counterdrug fight will continue, but it should no longer drive all engagement in the region. U.S. security cooperation must expand its aperture from a threat-based focus on the enduring problem of drugs to include setting the conditions for increased economic prosperity and regional integration.

The economic possibilities in Latin America are boundless. U.S. security professionals should embrace their supporting role in seizing these opportunities and change their perspective from one of defense against drugs to one of positive action to create opportunities. **MR**

*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

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#### NOTES

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