



WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES
2016 EDITION, No. 1 (MARCH)

REGIONAL INSIGHTS



Colombian National Army Commander General Alberto Jose Mejia is awarded the Legion of Merit by U.S. Army General Mark A. Milley during a ceremony in Washington DC on February 2, 2016. Photo credit: Courtney Dock, Joint Force Headquarters National Capital Region (JFHQ-NCR), Military District of Washington.

The Conference of American Armies: Interoperability through Shared Visions and Partnership

By Captain Alex Willard and Lieutenant Colonel Mark Lavin

The Conference of American Armies, “provides our armies the opportunity to increase cooperation and integration; establish the process to increase interoperability; and most importantly, identify the topics of mutual interest in defense-related matters to develop situations that are beneficial to us all”.¹

GEN Mark Milley

The Conference of American Armies (CAA) has a storied history unique to the diverse and dynamic character of the Western Hemisphere. Founded in 1960 to exchange ideas and experiences among American Armies, it serves as a bedrock of stability in a world where diplomatic, economic, and political relationships ebb and flow. Since its inception, the CAA witnessed the global expansion and collapse of the Soviet military, operated under the reality of mutually assured destruction, and ushered in an information age of transparency and collaboration never before seen in history.



Flags of the American Armies on display during a recent ceremony. The Conference of the American Armies (CAA) includes 20 armies of countries in the Western Hemisphere. Photo compliments of the Conference of the Americas webpage.

The Commander of the Colombian National Army, Major General Alberto Mejía, transferred responsibility of the CAA to General Mark Milley, the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, on 2 February 2016, at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall. The United States last assumed responsibility for the CAA in 1990, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. During that two-year period that the U.S. was the CAA lead, Germany was reunited, the Cold War ended, and a coalition of armies freed Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Today, conference armies face a complex operational environment that will challenge those unable to adapt while providing tremendous opportunity to those able to understand and learn from rapidly changing circumstances.

Since 1960, the CAA helped sustain historically low levels of state-on-state violence in the Western Hemisphere through strong partnerships grounded in shared security goals. Successfully addressing shared threats requires an enabled coalition networked by a common vision. The CAA recognized this and adopted interagency and multinational operations as the theme for the next two years. Up-

coming conferences and activities will focus on advancing human rights policy, responding to emerging threats, and interagency operations. How does a coalition land force command and control combined arms operations against a well-trained, equipped, and determined enemy?

For any coalition network to be successful, it must be interoperable. Emerging challenges and opportunities require continued partnership and collaboration of American Armies in three key areas: (1) global threats requiring regional solutions; (2) unpredictable humanitarian crises; and (3) forming a unified hemispheric approach to regional military powers' expansion into the Western Hemisphere.

Historical Composite

The Conference of American Armies emerged in 1960 in response to a growing communist influence throughout the Western Hemisphere. President Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress" initiative sought to improve living conditions in Central and South America, and he understood the necessity of a military component to reinforce hemispheric secu-

rity and prevent major conflict. The commander of U.S. Army Caribbean, the precursor to U.S. Army South, organized the first meeting of the Conference of Commanders which took place at Fort Amador in the Panama Canal Zone in August 1960. The CAA grew steadily during the next few decades, fostering relationships and adding organizational structure.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later, opened the world and the CAA to new possibilities. Seeking to embrace a new vision of global security, the 1991 CAA meeting in Washington, DC focused on exploring American Armies' responsibilities to support democracy and the rule of law. The regional security outlook quickly changed from a collective security system based on defense against a common threat to a cooperative system focused on building mutual trust within shared security goals and objectives. The cooperative system also considered non-traditional threats and broader human security dimensions like respect for human rights and the promotion of economic and social development.

The 21st century ushered in an era of increased modernization as the CAA grew into one of the pre-eminent security organization in the Americas. It developed an online platform to facilitate the exchange and dissemination of information, and agreed to write practical manuals on disaster response and conduct peace keeping and interagency operations.

Despite continued changes in the Americas' political climate, the Western Hemisphere remains a region of relative stability with no expectation of state on state conflict. However, the CAA recognizes the need to address emerging, global threats to citizen security like transnational criminal networks.²

Regional Solution to Global Threats

At the recent Commander's Conference held in November 2015 in Colombia, the Brazilian Army advocated a renewed emphasis on studying, identify-

ing, and exchanging ways for American Armies to operate with each other and within their countries' different security organizations. While the quest for interoperability is not new, the available technological mediums have changed. The CAA online database will store and share lessons learned, unify terminology, and encourage ongoing dialogue. This is the beginning of a long and difficult effort to develop hemispheric interoperability, the core of which is a shared vision and willingness to commit resources to shared strategies.

Over the last twenty-five years, technology catalyzed globalization and introduced a worldwide interconnectedness previously unknown. It linked ideas, economies, and cultures; enabled migration opportunities; and empowered individuals through information dissemination. However, corporations, countries, and criminals alike benefited from the impacts of globalization. The same global pathways that pushed legal goods from one part of the world to another also facilitated the passage of illicit goods and enabled the development of transnational organized crime. These illicit networks pose complex, transnational threats to the stability of the Western Hemisphere by transporting drugs, weapons, people, money, and counterfeit products through multiple countries, often across multiple continents.

Transnational organized crime endangers the Western Hemisphere by weakening citizen security, undermining basic human rights, corrupting the rule of law, eroding good governance, and hindering economic development. Within the Americas there are numerous transnational criminal networks that pose direct, sometimes existential threats to legitimate governments in order to operate freely in remote, un-governed areas. Their goal is financial profit in the pursuit of greater organizational power and less interference from legitimate, elected governments. Depending on the calculation, annual profits from illicit trafficking ranges up to six trillion dollars, greater than the GDP of most countries.³

Transnational organized crime revenue relies on a logistics backbone to transport illicit goods from suppliers to consumers. This backbone weakens legitimate, elected governments by breaking laws, catalyzing migration between countries, ignoring national boundaries, and fomenting violence. Although some debate the nexus between transnational organized crime and terror organizations, what is obvious is that both criminals and terrorists use the illicit marketplace to fund their activities. For example, the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) and Hezbollah have supporters and sympathizers in the Americas, many involved with illicit activities to fund terrorism globally.⁴ No single country can face these security threats alone. The Americas must work together to combat these threats and promote peace, democracy and stability in the region and throughout the world. Interoperability creates capacity for American Armies to confront transnational criminal networks and synchronize crisis response operations in support of threatened partners.

Coalition efforts for Crisis Response

Defeating shared threats, both transnational organized crime and natural disasters, requires an enabled coalition, networked by a common vision. Because of the randomness of natural disasters, nations must be continually prepared to respond domestically and abroad. However, managing disaster response operations across different languages and in unfamiliar terrain takes practice for even the most skilled and experienced personnel.

One way American Armies practice their ability to respond to natural disasters is through Fuerzas Aliadas Humanitarias (FA-HUM), a regionally-oriented humanitarian assistance and foreign disaster relief (HA/FDR) exercise. FA-HUM 2016 will be conducted in Honduras, and is designed to build partner nation capacity to respond to a major natural disaster and to strengthen hemispheric cooperation and collaboration between regional humanitarian entities and military forces. The operation's

primary objectives include: (1) exercising Honduras' humanitarian assistance contingency plans, procedures and techniques; (2) facilitating emergency operations center training between governmental and non-governmental organizations; (3) integrating and supporting operations of regional, interagency, non-governmental, and private organizations; and (4) exercising communication and information sharing systems between civilian and military organizations. During the exercise, U.S. Army personnel will train with regional partners to enhance the participants' knowledge, skills, and capabilities to collaboratively respond during disaster.

Eleven countries participated in FA-HUM 2015. Previous FA-HUM hosts included Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago. The U.S. Army is committed to working with its partner nations to build their capacity to respond to national, regional and international emergencies. Practicing crisis competencies before one occurs is necessary and vital to achieve interoperability.

PANAMAX is a means for American armies to work together to counter transnational threats by increasing the interoperability of a multi-national force. Chilean leaders originally proposed the idea of conducting an annual exercise focused on the defense of the Panama Canal, and to enhance cooperative efforts amongst Chile, Panama, and the United States. Since 2003, it grew to include the participation of twenty-two countries. Training objectives include: (1) exercising command and control of a multi-national force; (2) encouraging interoperability amongst American militaries as Combined Forces Land, Air, Maritime, and Special Operations Component Commands; and (3) responding to transnational threats in the Americas.

During PANAMAX 2016, Chile will lead and host the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) in Santiago, Chile. As the CFLCC, Chile will integrate multinational forces into a headquarters, coordinate with key stakeholders (IGOs, NGOs, etc.), and provide command and control of



Senior representatives of the American Armies participate in a signing ceremony. Photo compliments of the Conference of the Americas webpage.

all ground forces in order to deter, disrupt, and defeat threats in the area of operations. In 2017 and 2018, Peru and Colombia will take over CFLCC responsibilities, and will gain valuable military experience without the consequences of an actual crisis. Through these opportunities, countries gain the experiential depth and expertise of leading and working with partnered armies normally achievable only achieved through contingency operations.

Although not CAA sponsored events, Fuerzas Aliadas Humanitarias and PANAMAX build interoperability and promote positive military relationships. Partner countries will use these experiences to inform CAA conferences and venues. The unified hemispheric approach, fostered by the CAA, is a positive and convincing message, and regional powers external to the Western Hemisphere should take note of the CAA's cooperative strength.

Unified hemispheric approach

The social, economic, and security ties that connect Western Hemisphere nations are critically important.

Most American nations emerged from the tyranny of colonial powers with an inherently revolutionary spirit. As relatively young states, American nations share many values including strong commitments to individuals' inalienable rights and primacy of rule of law. Historically, this makes all Americans (North, Central, and South) unique. However, continued hemispheric strength requires a unified approach to safeguard citizen security and posture the Americas for non-Western military expansion.

Citizen security is foundational to American governments. It supports core characteristics of democracy such as an individual's freedom from violence, governmental transparency, equal protection under the law, and the ability to pursue a good life through financial prosperity. Without it, segments of society become disenchanting and quickly devolve into disparate factions who exist on the margins of society. These groups often establish competing security mechanisms and expand influence into ungoverned spaces or become vulnerable to exploitation by transnational criminal organizations. Professional armies must be able to defend their citizens and de-



A U.S. Army National Guard soldier holds the ensign of the United States alongside standard bearers of other nations during the Tradewinds 2015 exercise. A number of armies from Caribbean nations also participate in the Conference of the American Armies. Photo credit: Wimbish, Michael D CIV USSOUTHCOM/SC-CC (L)

feat existential threats to their nation’s sovereign territory. Militaries throughout the Americas are highly esteemed organizations, respected and trusted by their people. Even amidst political scandals, professional armies support the rule of law and protection of human rights.

Not all nations share these common values. Disreputable state and non-state actors exploit inhumane situations for short-term political advantage despite causing tremendous loss of life and exhaustion of resources. Over the past decade, the Western Hemisphere witnessed an expansion of influence in the Americas from regional powers such as China and Russia. Although their intentions may not be hostile, offers for aid and promises for partnerships with American armies that appear too good to be true may be just that.

China’s increased economic involvement also expands their political influence. What appear to be near-term advantages, such as rapid capacity acquisition or a surge of foreign investments, can

quickly become a long term liability. Russia’s power projection into the Americas may prove threatening because, “it does not respect the sovereignty of its neighbors and it is willing to use force to achieve its goals.”⁵ What may seem like a simple land lease for economic development may entangle a state in a dangerous web of *realpolitik*. In both cases, near term economic tradeoffs may unintentionally isolate nations and pressure them into reliance on states with divergent interests. It is possible that some countries, like Syria, may never fully recover from such arrangements.

New partners are always welcome in the Western Hemisphere; it offers boundless opportunity and prosperity to those willing to compete fairly and pioneer new ways to improve humanity. The addition of Spain as a special, extra-hemispherical observer proves there is additional opportunity for reconciliation, inclusion, and greater collaboration of responsible, global partners. However, American armies must build lasting partnerships and invest in



Major General K.K. Chinn, the U.S. Army South commanding general in 2016, and security leaders at the annual Central American Regional Leaders Conference in San Antonio, Texas from March 8-10, 2016. Photo credit:USSOUTHCOM

the future through informed decisions based on long-term goals and objectives. As we continue the tradition of American exceptionalism, it's important to remain unified and not allow short-term interests to derail long term, beneficial relationships.

Conclusion

The Conference of American Armies began as a unified response to a growing communist threat in the Americas; fifty-six years later, substantial hemispheric challenges remain. American Armies must work together to dull the effects of transnational organized crime, natural disasters, and the growing presence from non-Western Hemisphere countries. The United States Army is committed to continue in the spirit of camaraderie and partnership, and welcomes the positive contributions of all CAA member and observer armies.

The Americas are stronger than ever before because the countries in the region are more united than ever. U.S. Army South, the Secretary General for

the 32nd Cycle and organizer of the first CAA conference in 1960, has a fitting motto, *Juntos Podemos (Together We Can)*. Together the American Armies embrace complexity through common understanding and partnered learning. Although the Western Hemisphere faces difficult regional challenges, there are tremendous opportunities to achieve continued hemispheric stability through interoperability. ■

Notes

1. LTC Carol McClelland, “Army Leaders from South, Central and North America convene in Colombia”, *Joint Base San Antonio News*, December 10, 2015. Accessed on January 24, 2016, <http://www.jbsa.mil/News/News/ tabid/11890/ Article/633612/army-leaders-from-south-central-and-north-america-convene-in-columbia.aspx>.
2. The “Historical Composite” section is adapted from the *Defense & Fraternity* article: Bob Pike, “The Conference of the American Armies,” U.S. Army South, February 2016.
3. Renee Novakoff. “Transnational Organized Crime: An Insidious Threat to U.S. National Security Interests,” *Prism*, (vol. 5, no. 4), December 2015, p. 140. Accessed on December 12, 2015, http://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/ Documents/prism/prism_5-4/Transnational%20Organized%20Crime.pdf.
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5. “*The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*”, June 2015. Accessed on January 5, 2016, http://www.jcs.mil/ Portals/36/ Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_ Strategy.pdf.

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