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Address at the Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas

Thank you and good morning.

It is a great honor to join you here today on behalf of Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and the United States Department of War.

Let me begin by thanking Minister Flores and the Republic of Peru for hosting the 17th Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas in this beautiful, ancient city of Cusco. This conference is an important opportunity to engage with defense ministers from across the Western Hemisphere, our priority in the Trump Administration.

The situation we face in this Hemisphere has transformed from when this conference first met in 1995 in Williamsburg. 1995 was the height of the so-called “unipolar moment.” In that period, American and Western strategy and the perceptions that formed them were shaped by highly aspirational abstractions. It was widely hoped and indeed believed that we had found ourselves at the “end of history.” Serious challenges to our interests seemed remote. There seemed no credible alternative to neo-liberalism and democracy. Foreign policy was largely a matter of mopping up residual holdouts to these ascendant ideologies.

As a result, a realistic outlook based on geography and national interests took a back seat to liberal internationalism and the “rules-based international order.” Focusing on our own neighborhood with a real strategy that accounted for hard power seemed unnecessary and even untoward.

Three decades later, whether one likes it or not, that era is far gone.

President Trump faced that reality squarely in his first term. For the first time in over a generation, he publicly and firmly rebutted the notion that borders were a thing of the past, that unfettered trade was the inevitable end goal of economics, that narco-terrorism was an inevitable condition, and that geopolitical rivalry was outdated. These themes were clearly laid out in his 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy.

In his second term, President Trump and his administration are advancing that agenda decisively forward, not only acknowledging those realities but actively reshaping American and our allies’ strategy to address them. As the 2025 National Security Strategy and the 2026 National Defense Strategy make clear, America under President Trump’s visionary leadership will be guided by a flexible realism that prioritizes our most vital national interests. It will see the world as it is, as good strategy demands, and act accordingly to serve Americans’ concrete, practical interests.

As is evident for all to see, this involves a fundamental change in our approach to the Western Hemisphere.

For the last generation, the very Hemisphere where our own country is located has been – to be frank – a backwater in America’s strategic imagination. This was a product of that mindset of the unipolar moment. America’s leaders during this period were more than ready to spend America’s resources, power, and the lives of our service members trying to pacify distant regions, far from America’s shores. In a way, focusing our strategy and especially our military on the Western Hemisphere and the problems we face here seemed to many of the bien pensant

grubby, beneath the dignity of our armed forces. To those panjandrums of the global liberal elite, dealing with the growing scourges of drugs, unchecked migration, and rampant criminality was at best inappropriate and at worst improper.

You can still detect this sensibility in much of the commentary that criticizes our Administration and its focus on the Western Hemisphere. Many of these voices would prefer to go back to that failed approach. Yet that putatively benign neglect, in practice, turned malign.

The facts speak for themselves: In recent decades Latin America's scourge of narco-terrorism grew far worse, a record number of Americans and your own citizens – hundreds of thousands if not millions in total – were killed by lethal drugs and narco-terrorist violence. Hard-left regimes that enable narco-terrorists multiplied across our Hemisphere from Maduro's Venezuela to Ortega's Nicaragua to Evo's Bolivia. These same governments and their allies in the region enabled unchecked mass migration by failing in their own countries and then exporting that failure to our country. This led to the worst border crisis in the history of the United States and destabilized many of our societies. In recent decades, hundreds of thousands if not more Americans have been killed by the drugs that come from our south and the crime that is associated with that noxious traffic. The total death count rivals and may even exceed America's costliest wars, even our Civil War.

Under President Trump's leadership, we therefore see the Western Hemisphere differently. We look at it from the perspective of flexible realism, America First, and common sense. Through this lens, the Western Hemisphere, and especially the neighboring regions of Central America, the Caribbean, and northern South America, are critical in ensuring the security of the American homeland and thus the security and prosperity of regular Americans.

This is the epitome of common sense. No longer do we separate America's defense strategy from the concerns of regular Americans – from the flood of lethal drugs into their communities and the accompanying horrendous violence or from the impact of unchecked illegal migration into our nation. Addressing these threats to regular Americans is why President Trump was elected, in the face of intense resistance from the establishment in our country. And we are following through.

What this means in practice is that the whole Administration – very much including the Department of War – are focused on these concerns, and thus on the Western Hemisphere. This overall approach has been eloquently laid out in remarks by President Trump and Secretary Rubio at the Shield of the Americas, and by Secretary Hegseth and Homeland Security Advisor Stephen Miller at the Americas Counter Cartel Conference – or, as we call it, the A Triple C. And the Department of War is proud to be playing a critical role in this effort.

This is, to be clear, not a situation in which to a hammer everything is a nail. The Department of War's role is part of an integrated whole of government effort, one that involves actively working with partners throughout the region.

At the same time, though, it is a signal that the national defense assets of the United States will very much be a part of addressing these lethal threats to Americans. We will not treat the ISIS, the al Qaeda of this Hemisphere who menace American lives with kid gloves rather than the forcefulness the threat requires simply because they are in the Western Hemisphere rather than the Eastern.

Rather, we will bring all the assets of the United States to address these threats, including our armed forces. This has been amply demonstrated in Operation Southern Spear, where the Department of War has gone on offense against narco-terrorist threats – not to supplant other efforts but precisely to augment them. The lasting solution to these threats will not be generated solely or even primarily through American military force; instead, it will require close collaboration with our partners and interagency efforts by our government.

But our military force will help to enable, protect, and advance those efforts. This is why we see partner-led, joint kinetic operations with your militaries as force multipliers. They help set the conditions for other parts of the U.S. government and, more importantly, your own government to engage and find solutions to the deep systemic problems you and our region as a whole are facing.

The proof of the success and attractiveness of this approach lies precisely in how we hear regularly from partners throughout the Hemisphere, including many of you, on how important and welcome our augmented military efforts are.

I think this is all very clear to all of you. I would like to stress here, though, two additional key points.

First, the Department of War's Western Hemisphere efforts form part of an overall geopolitical and defense strategy, which I will seek to lay out in broad terms.

And, secondly but critically for all of you, we would submit that the success of this strategy and the defense elements of it are in your interests as well. Let me try to convince you why these efforts by America are not an imposition upon your countries – but rather, very much to the contrary, an invitation and opportunity for you and the region.

Allow me to explain.

First, our heightened and sustained Department of War activities in this Hemisphere are part of a larger geopolitical and defense strategy.

We call this the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine – or, perhaps more memorably, the Donroe Doctrine. As laid out in the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, this Trump Corollary states that the United States will “protect our Homeland and our access to key terrain throughout the region. We will deny adversaries’ ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities in our Hemisphere.”

This Corollary is rooted in the historical Monroe Doctrine. Now I acknowledge that the Monroe Doctrine has been controversial in Latin America and is a favorite alleged culprit for diagnosing the source of the region's ills.

We of course reject that contention. But we also differentiate what we are saying and doing from that caricature. We associate our efforts with what we might think of as the Monroe Doctrine properly understood. This understanding of the Monroe Doctrine is not the distorted version. Rather, the properly understood Monroe Doctrine is precisely about empowering, enabling, and supporting the independence, security, and prosperity of the Latin American and Caribbean nations.

Let us go back to the beginning. When the Doctrine was issued by President Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1823, it was evident what the Doctrine was designed to do: Prevent the states of Europe from re-subordinating the newly independent nations of Latin America. Following the defeat of Napoleon, it was designed to prevent Spain, Portugal, France, and others from turning back the clock on the heroic independence efforts across Latin America, from Santander in Colombia to Paez in Venezuela, and Hidalgo in the north to Bonifacio and San Martin in the south.

Now, importantly, the United States did not have the military heft at that time to back up that policy. America's functional strategy was actually to free ride on the power of Britain's Royal Navy to prevent France or Spain or Portugal from reacquiring their lost dominions. So, we know free-riding when we see it – we were the original past masters!

But, over time, as the United States grew in expanse, national strength, and ultimately military power, we came to assume the role of the guarantor of the Monroe Doctrine. Right at the end of our Civil War, as Napoleon III sought to implant a foreign monarch in Mexico, the United States supported the rebels seeking to overthrow Maximilian I of Mexico while mobilizing our battle-hardened forces on the border. And our last dangerous confrontation with Great Britain, when we almost came to blows, was in the 1890s when we enforced the Monroe Doctrine to ensure peaceful international arbitration over what became the sovereign borders of Venezuela and Guyana today.

During World War II, America's mighty military forces prevented the Axis powers from intruding into Latin America. And, during the Cold War, America stood with those in the region who opposed the imposition of Marxist-Leninism, whose baleful effects are visible for all to see in Communist Cuba, less than 100 miles from America's shores.

This is why, historically, Latin countries frequently understood America's role to be the enabler not the suppressor of their independence. It was during the state visit to Peru over a century ago of the great American statesman Elihu Root, key advisor to President Theodore Roosevelt who first led America onto the global stage, that a Peruvian President remarked with gratitude that: America "strengthened us from the first days of our independent life by the safeguard which the admirable foresight of another great statesman of your country placed around American soil."

That Peruvian leader was not alone. His foreign minister told Secretary Root that the Monroe Doctrine formed "an impassable gateway to a free and unconquerable America." Across the region, a Brazilian statesman told him that "it is necessary that the Monroe Doctrine triumph," while a famous Argentine general remarked that "the declaration of that American president was the culminating act of that grand epic...a record of honor."

I am not saying we have a perfect record. That would be foolish. But perfection is no reasonable person's standard in international politics, and we are ready to compare our record to any other's.

What I am saying is that the best tradition of the Monroe Doctrine is about protecting our own security and interests by empowering and enabling Latin American nations. And that is the tradition of the Monroe Doctrine that we have framed the Trump Corollary around. This is critical to what makes our approach different.

Now let me explain why that approach is consistent with your success in practical terms. I am not going to try to do this by drenching you in flowery rhetoric or presenting America as some Kantian do-gooder. That would not be credible. Nor would it be appropriate. Our job in America's government is to serve Americans' interests. In an enlightened and moral way, yes, but putting our people's interests first, just as you do and should do for yours.

So, I am going to present this case to you through the lens of candor and realism about our self-interest and yours. That is a hallmark of President Trump's administration. We engage with our counterparts from a position of honesty and clarity, which to us is a form of respect. Politeness and a good bit of decorum are all to the good. But, over the last generation, things have gone too far. Our rhetoric became wildly detached from the reality of our interests. We talked about the fate of people halfway around the world as if they were as important to us as our neighbors.

Thinking and acting that way manifestly didn't help our allies and neighbors. Fortunately, under President Trump's leadership, that has changed, and we make no bones about it.

In that spirit, our view is that good friends need to be honest with each other. And that is how I approach you today.

In that vein, my contention to you here is that America's enlightened self-interest in you is not your exploitation, subordination, or dependency. Rather, to the contrary, our interest as expressed in the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine is actually in your success – in your greater prosperity, security, and stability as free societies.

Why is this?

Well, to be very candid, the fact is that America doesn't need your assets or your dependency. The fact of the matter is that America is an enormous country, by far the world's most powerful state, with the world's largest and most dynamic market, its most productive economy, its dominant currency, splendid stores of raw materials, close security and economic relationships around the world, and so forth. The upshot of all this is that we do not need imperial possessions or dependencies, even from a strictly realpolitik point of view.

This differentiates the United States from most historical empires. Early modern England was a portion of a small island in far northwestern Europe; it needed imperial possessions and dependencies to be a great power. Indeed, we just celebrated 250 years of our independence, which was in large part motivated by our forebears' resolve not to become a dependency of England and its economic hegemony. Likewise, early modern Portugal was a small state on the west coast of Iberia. It too needed colonies and dependencies to be a great power.

We are completely different. We are already, as our Founders put it, an empire of liberty unto ourselves.

I say this with pride, of course, not arrogance. It is to provide you with a credible basis for what I am about to say.

Moreover, we are your neighbors. The region's former imperial overlords were not. Thus, those extra-hemispheric powers lacked the deep and abiding interest we have in your long-term security, stability and prosperity. Unlike them, we have a direct and enduring interest in your

good fortune.

For these reasons, our main interest is in your success.

We live in the same neighborhood. Thus we are directly affected by the choices you make for the security and defense of your countries. In particular, we are directly affected by negative externalities that spill from the region over into our country. Our people are dying in large numbers because of the drugs that come into our country and the crime that accompanies them. Our society has been harmed and upended by illegal mass migration. And I need hardly remind you of how much your societies have been harmed by this as well.

Thus our main interest in the region is in mitigating and addressing these threats. A critical part of this is securing our border and reversing the disastrous immigration policies of the past. So is cracking down on fentanyl precursors and other deadly drugs and degrading the narco-terrorist threat that profits from killing Americans. But, as Secretary Hegseth has said, our borders should be the last line of homeland defense, not the first.

We also recognize that the only lasting way in which those problems will be addressed is through your countries doing better. Only if your countries are growing, prospering, safer, and more stable will the drug trade be less attractive, will crime be less prevalent, and will people be more inclined to stay in their home countries. This makes it very clear that our interest is in your success.

Now, let me be clear, this has been said before, but usually by those promising a kind of “Peace Corps” vision of American policy toward Latin America or a “root causes” vision of spending your way out of bad policy. Those policies have failed in significant part because those that promoted them also viewed you as dependent – as recipients of American handouts, as opposed to partners who can and must take responsibility for your own security and development. What we offer is a more realistic and empowering option. One that does not juxtapose defense against development, like the visions of the past, but that recognizes that defense is a basic prerequisite for national economic development.

The Department of War plays a critical part here. Our government is not only offering opportunities for market collaboration and diplomatic meetings, as important as these are. Rather, we are reorienting our military and our security apparatus to help you bring greater security and stability and ultimately development to your countries. We seek your success in securing our neighborhood. This interest-based approach is a more durable basis for our collaboration and for a persisting American presence.

What this means is that we are here to offer a helping hand to recover control over your territory, secure your borders consistent with our own border efforts, dismantle and defeat the narco-terrorists who terrorize all of our people, and strengthen your sovereignty and stability, all of which are critical enablers of your greater prosperity.

But, as we have learned through hard experience across the world: This will only work if you demonstrate the political will, clarity, and seriousness needed for success.

It is an approach that calls on you to employ effective force and government action to dismantle narco-terrorists and secure your borders. Not merely because this is good for your public safety,

but because this allows you to optimize limited resources to enable the conditions for security and prosperity. This can and should include enhanced cooperation with the United States military where necessary, but it is also our goal that these operations become led by you with enhanced capabilities that we will assist you in obtaining and mastering.

Secondly, we call on you to protect your critical assets. Protecting those assets is a matter of national defense. These are matters that are and should involve you as defense leaders, but it will take your initiative to demonstrate that in your countries. This is not only a precondition for investment and development, which it is. It is also your part in ensuring lasting peace.

As the United States works with allies and partners around the world to ensure favorable balances of power in the world's most important regions, we will not ask for you to project power out of this region. Rather, all we ask of you is that you work with us to deny any actor the ability to claim and exploit such key assets here in this Hemisphere.

Third and finally, it is critical that you invest more in your own defense. There is no reason why any country, particularly those facing significant narco-terrorist threats, should spend so little on defense. Indeed, some even spend less than a single percent of GDP on national defense. This violates common sense, and we are showing the way under President Trump and Secretary Hegseth. Meantime, our allies around the world, including in Europe, are now moving toward significantly higher spending – 3.5% on core military spending and an additional 1.5% on security-related expenditures.

This is possible here, too. Take Peru, for example, which just made one of the largest purchases of F-16's in the world. Purchasing these planes is not just an investment in Peru's defense but an important step to align with America's defense industry that will bring investment and economic activity to both countries. This is a model for our Hemisphere.

Allow me to close by saying that the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine offers a model for hemispheric defense and prosperity. It means the restoration of a strong America in our hemisphere but is also an invitation to strong, reliable, and effective partners that take seriously their own defense. It is a realistic approach based on the alignment of our reasonably conceived interests with yours – and the resolve to pursue them.

Just over a decade ago, an American Secretary of State declared proudly that the Monroe Doctrine was “over.” What this approach meant in practice was American neglect of the real challenges of our neighborhood and neglect of our own homeland defense. The result was not a strong Hemisphere with stronger nations. It was, in fact, the opposite.

Under President Trump's leadership and with the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, we are taking a different and better approach – better not only for Americans but also for you. Together, we have a path not only to a stronger America in this Hemisphere but stronger, more secure, freer, and more prosperous futures for all of you. We want strong, reliable, and effective partners, not feeble and dependent ones.

We urge you to grasp the opportunity.

Thank you very much.

Elbridge A. Colby, Under Secretary of War for Policy



Elbridge A. Colby serves as the Under Secretary of War for Policy. In this role, he is the principal advisor to the Secretary of War on matters of defense and foreign policy. His duties include leading the development and overseeing implementation of the National Defense Strategy. He is responsible as well for a number of associated strategies and reviews focused on the planning, posture, and management of the Joint Force. Colby also represents the Department in the interagency and to foreign governments.

During President Trump's first term, Colby served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development from 2017 to 2018. In that role, he led the development and rollout of the Administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy, which reoriented the Department to prioritize the threat posed by China's historic military buildup and emphasized the urgent need for greater allied burden-sharing. Colby also served as the Department of Defense's primary representative for the development of the 2017 National Security Strategy.

Colby is a recipient of the Distinguished and Exceptional Public Service Medals from the Department of Defense and of the Superior and Meritorious Honor Awards from the Department of State. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Colby is a graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School.

