

The Slowly Boiling Frog: External State Actors and 21st Century Hemispheric Challenges

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Abstract

External State Actor (ESA) influence will fuel a variety of Hemispheric challenges in the 21st century. These non-Hemispheric nations vary in approach yet can negatively contribute to issues requiring Hemispheric responses to threats like Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), disinformation challenges, and harmful economic activities. Nevertheless, the Hemisphere cannot create strategies designed to cease all ESA participation. Rather, a comprehensive understanding of where Hemispheric nations must press for better ESA behavior from countries such as Iran, Russia, and China while seeking new ways to increase integration of positive ESA influences to reduce the likelihood of traditional interstate conflicts will be key. All this while minimizing the effects of ever-present Multi-Dimensional Security (MDS) threats and challenges as global economic uncertainties persist that will likely have outsized, negative impacts on various regions of the world.

Resumen

La influencia de los Actores Estatales Externos (AEE) alimentará una variedad de desafíos hemisféricos en el siglo XXI. Estas naciones no hemisféricas varían en su enfoque, pero pueden contribuir negativamente a problemas que requieren respuestas hemisféricas a amenazas como el Crimen Organizado Transnacional (COT), desafíos de desinformación y actividades económicas dañinas. No obstante, el Hemisferio no puede crear estrategias diseñadas para poner fin a toda participación de los AEE. Más bien,

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será clave una comprensión integral de dónde deben presionar las naciones del Hemisferio para que países como Irán, Rusia y China tengan un mejor comportamiento en el marco de los AEE, al tiempo que se buscan nuevas formas de aumentar la integración de las influencias positivas de los AEE para reducir la probabilidad de conflictos interestatales tradicionales. Todo ello sin dejar de minimizar los efectos de las siempre presentes amenazas y desafíos a la Seguridad Multidimensional (SMD), mientras persisten las incertidumbres económicas mundiales que probablemente tendrán repercusiones negativas de gran magnitud en diversas regiones del mundo.

Keywords: External State Actors (ESAs), Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), Information Operations (IO), Multi-Dimensional Security (MDS)

Palabras clave: *Actores Estatales Externos (AEE), Crimen Organizado Transnacional (COT), Organizaciones Criminales Transnacionales (OCTs), Operaciones de Información (OI), Seguridad Multidimensional (SMD).*

Introduction

The Hemisphere's defense and security system in the 21st century is replete with increasingly complex, nuanced, and inherently non-traditional challenges. And like the content frog slowly cooking in a pot of water ever-subtly, yet surely increasing in temperature is blind to the rising risks it faces, so too are the region's challenges with negative ESA influence because ESA effects on the Hemisphere's nations are not overtly existential. Further, in a more multipolar world of globalization and interdependence the political, economic, security, and defense decision calculus of the region's nations shape second and third-order effects having significant long-term consequences.

ESA influence through Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), Information Operations (IO), and detrimental economic activities will be the dominant challenges for the Inter-American Security System in the 21st century. These Multi-Dimensional Security (MDS) threats and challenges also increase the risk of wider, more complex interstate conflicts as emerging disputes and historical tensions rise. Nevertheless, opportunities exist to minimize the risk these challenges pose. This paper will provide specific insight into ESA activities in the region by identifying current challenges and

highlighting opportunities for the Hemisphere to incorporate positive ESA influence for the region's long-term security benefit.

Centuries of history illustrate the Hemisphere's destiny is heavily influenced by ESAs. ESAs are countries that are not geographically part of the Hemisphere yet play integral roles in the region. From defense, security, and economic frames ESAs like Iran, Russia, and China represent the most complex challenges to long-term security of the Hemisphere. Criminal, information, and economic challenges from ESAs loom large for a Hemisphere facing an uncertain future.

And while ESAs in the Hemisphere do not share any official alliance or pact, their geostrategic objectives in the region leveraging political, diplomatic, information, traditional military, and economic elements of national power can overlap. These areas of intersecting interests increase the challenge of effectively integrating ESAs in some sectors while deliberately preventing them from doing so in others. Integrating and effectively negating ESA influence where appropriate in the pursuit of preserving the integrity of the Inter-American System of democratic values and norms will be a daunting challenge given ESAs' current presence in the region.

ESA, Criminal State, and Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) Challenges

The characterization of how ESAs participate in Hemispheric TOC activities is important to consider when examining the complex threats and challenges they pose to the region. For example, criminal regimes such as Venezuela actively collaborate with ESAs like Russia and Iran to evade sanctions and incentivize TOC. Russia and Iran also take advantage of their mutual isolation with criminalized regimes to bolster their own political positions in the region providing havens for Transnational Criminal Organization (TCOs). The terror group Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy organization, also maintains an active money laundering and illicit market operation within various countries of the region. Conversely, China's role with TOC in the Hemisphere does not center on a single regime or sub-region. Rather, Chinese participation in TOC and its illicit markets is larger in scale and more indirect. These complex distinctions of the character of ESA TOC activities are critical in understanding the various challenges they pose to the region through a TOC frame.

TOC and the illicit markets they oversee undermine the rule of law in the Hemisphere's nations while negatively impacting human, citizen, and public security spheres as defined by the Organization of American States 2011 Working Group.² The illicit market incentives for ESA participation will only increase due to the financial benefits to ESAs suffering from robust economic sanction regimes such as Russia following their invasion of Ukraine.³ Iran is also providing Russia valuable lessons as Russia is further isolated from the global economy in the region to increase their officially sanctioned, negative activities in places such as Venezuela while simultaneously leveraging already-established TOC illicit markets.⁴ Consequently, the challenges of negative ESA influence in the Hemisphere from a MDS frame are highly likely to increase given the correlation between increasing corrupt Russian state presence in other regions around the world and the Russian TCO activity that historically follow.⁵ The failure of participating nations to reach a new accord surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ensures Iranian TOC activities will also increase in the Hemisphere, thus assuring MDS threats and challenges will continue to persist in the most vulnerable population centers.⁶

The Hemisphere's large Arabic diaspora provides dynamic diversity alongside a host of other communities originating from Europe and Asia. The populations of Arabic descent in Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina pass large sums via remittances primarily to Lebanon, accounting for 14% of their GDP.⁷ Lebanese-based terror group Hezbollah acts as a financial conduit to the Middle East from Latin America while garnering potential sympathizers in the Hemisphere for their operations. Iran, Hezbollah's main state sponsor, leverages the high levels of corruption and criminality in Venezuela

² Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, "The Concepts of Public Security and Citizen Security in the OAS Context" (Organization of the American States, May 11, 2011), https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-37.

³ Alberto Priego, "La Influencia de Irán (e Hizbulá) En América Latina," *Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos*, no. 68 (October 4, 2022): 25.

⁴ Miriam Berger, "Russians Look to Iran For Lessons on Life under Long-Term Sanctions," *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2022, pages 2-4.

⁵ Craig Deare, "Latin America 2020 Challenges to U.S. National Security Interests" (Washington DC: National Defense University, June 2020), page 9, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2266574/latin-america-2020-challenges-to-us-national-security-interests/>.

⁶ Douglas Farah, "Gangs No More: Reassessing Transnational Armed Groups in the Western Hemisphere" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 24, 2023). Note: Mr. Farah is a Senior Fellow at the U.S. National Defense University, former senior U.S. counternarcotics advisor, and *Washington Post* foreign correspondent.

⁷ Joseph Humire, *The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-Backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime*, page 4, (Atlantic Council, 2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29477>.

where logistical bases for TOC operations have protection via state institutions who have essentially co-opted TOC activities as a formal source of government economic revenue.⁸

TCOs and the ESAs who participate in their illicit trade networks destabilize the local populations within which they operate by diminishing government legitimacy through corruption while inflaming historical tensions between states in border regions. The recent escalations near the Colombia and Venezuela border illustrate how criminal state-sanctioned TOC with both direct and indirect ESA participation can exacerbate areas of continual strife. Thus, non-traditional threats and challenges nurture long-held state disputes elevating the risk of near-term, traditional state-on-state conflict.⁹

China is another source of ESA activity that indirectly yet actively enables TCOs in the region via criminal groups with money laundering know-how and the capabilities of producing necessary precursor chemicals key to manufacturing illegal synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.¹⁰ These Chinese-origin criminal groups primarily operate in collaboration with northern Mexico-based groups such as the Sinaloa cartel given the current demand signal for synthetic opioids residing in the U.S. Chinese suppliers also provide cartels and TCOs the prerequisite equipment to manufacture, transport, and ultimately distribute deadly synthetic opioids.¹¹

Precursor chemicals are specifically difficult to track and seize due to their innocuous nature. Precursors are dual use where legitimate manufacturing of certain products can require them for final production purposes.¹² The Chinese illicit precursor chemical market is thus given passive protection by a lack of policy and enforcement standards in the Hemisphere while Chinese domestic regulation and enforcement remains

⁸ AEI Working Group on Transnational Organized Crime in the Americas, “Kingpins and Corruption,” *American Enterprise Institute*, 2017, page 5, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep03288.7>.

⁹ Jose Gustavo Arocha and Joseph Humire, “The Venezuelan Crisis: A Conversation” (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin American Seminar, Washington DC, January 26, 2023). Note: Mr. Arocha is a Senior Fellow at the Center for a Secure Free Society and a retired Venezuelan Army officer previously imprisoned who fled Venezuela after confronting the current Maduro regime.

¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, “Illicit Fentanyl and China’s Role,” Congressional Research Service (Washington DC: US Congress, December 8, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10890>.

¹¹ Ellis, Evan. “Toward a Strategy for Responding to the PRC in Latin America.” *Global Americans*, October 6, 2022, 13, page 11.

¹² The International Narcotics Control Board, “INCB Report on Precursors,” Annual, Conclusions and Recommendations, 2020, https://www.incb.org/documents/PRECURSORS/TECHNICAL_REPORTS/2020/E/Report_Breakdown/10_Conclusions_and_Recommendations.pdf.

tepid. Nevertheless, the identification of this regional policy vacuum presents the Hemisphere with an opportunity to collaboratively address a current challenge that, if left unchecked, could spread to more vulnerable population centers of the region where other powerful TCOs are active.

Opportunities for Collaboration with ESAs Willing to Combat TOC

Possibilities to improve and increase collaboration with willing ESAs emerge when analyzing the increasing cooperative efforts of Chinese criminal groups, Mexican cartels, and emerging TCOs partnering in the precursor and synthetic opioid markets to expand the market to other parts of the Hemisphere. The societal impact of the opioid crisis in the U.S. and Mexico could spur a more proactive regional collaboration and policy formulation for detection, information sharing, and ultimately new legal frameworks to assist the counter-narcotics operations with specific emphasis on the precursor chemical market. This type of willing partnership could include China, Mexico, the U.S., and Brazil as the countries with the most to benefit in combatting the opioid market's damaging impact on the region's hardest hit populations and those most at risk for future exploitation by TCOs.

The Hemisphere's lack of institutional capacity to discern precursors' dual-use nature is a logical opportunity for TCOs to add scale, diversity, and larger profit margins to their illicit markets in the Hemisphere and beyond. A regionally based approach with emphasis on the social and economic security risks of the opioid epidemic destabilizing the Hemisphere could enable greater Chinese participation within critical detection operations, information-sharing agreements, Chinese domestic enforcement of export standards, and overall improvement to global market regulation of precursor chemicals. An approach of this nature could be led by the region's most affected nations such as the U.S., illustrating the exponential increase in deaths among its citizens due to the lack of a holistic policy framework centering on opioid abuse prevention, precursor chemical market regulation, and international enforcement standards amongst ESAs and the Hemisphere's nations. Nevertheless, ESA challenges in the Hemisphere will transcend criminal state and TCO activities to include less understood areas like the information space.

ESA Information Operations (IO) Challenges

Separate from TOC, but directly related to negative ESA influence in the Hemisphere is the challenge within the information domain. ESAs like Iran, Russia, and China conduct varying IO strategies that can overlap in objective yet differ in nature and scope. Understanding how each ESA undertakes IOs via disinformation and telecommunications while illustrating the synergies between ESA approaches is imperative to recognizing their challenge to the Hemisphere.

The Different Natures and Synergies of ESA Information Operations (IO)

Russian IO efforts in the region have direct ties with authoritarian and criminal regimes of the Hemisphere. Russian IO is also in collaboration with these governments within various social media platforms where states can affect amplification of messages using Russian technologies involving internet “bots” or “troll farms” acting under multiple fake accounts.¹³ Iranian IO within the Hemisphere typically centers on amplifying anti-Western sentiment, increasingly in line with Russian messaging due to the crisis in Ukraine. This approach enables message expansion into other countries of the region, particularly in times of elections. For example, credible evidence exists that Russian interference in elections or during times of social unrest heightened tensions and violence in Colombia, Chile, and Mexico.¹⁴

The nature of Chinese IO is less direct than both Russian and Iranian approaches. China’s strategy is global in nature and centers on information system architecture development, technology market dominance, and ultimately telecommunication standard setting. This strategy appears innocent and mutually beneficial to the region’s governments and populations alike who understate or misunderstand the current threat to democratic norms and the future challenges with protecting public and private information given the Chinese model’s inherent focus on surveillance of both public and private users. The challenge for Hemispheric nations who opt for Chinese information system solutions also includes the ability of states to make sovereign decisions on matters

¹³ Ellis, Evan. “Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin’s Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.” Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), July 20, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-western-hemisphere-assessing-putins-malign-influence-latin-america-and-caribbean>, page 5.

¹⁴ Ellis

of Chinese business operations while guarding the intellectual property of other private companies conducting business within the country.¹⁵

Despite the different natures of ESA IO, synergies still exist between them in terms of overall regional effects. For example, China can operate as they see fit within Russian media spaces without tarnishing their own image in the Hemisphere. Iran can also amplify their anti-Western messages through Russian media outlets. Couple this with the Chinese approach to developing information infrastructure and architecture enabling both Russia and Iran to expand and increase their IO effectiveness while not directly linking them to China. Further synergies exist for authoritarian regimes who can leverage Chinese information system advances to increase surveillance and social control on their citizenry while providing an example to export to other democratically backsliding governments of the region.¹⁶

ESA Disinformation Operations in the Hemisphere

The information element of national power ESAs leverage in the Hemisphere virtually unchecked is disinformation. Disinformation is the intentional propagation of false narratives via state and non-state mediums such as an official spokesperson or a more traditional, seemingly privately held media outlet. Disinformation enables the spreading of misinformation, which is the unintentional spreading of false narratives, typically by public citizens via social media platforms where standards of content are low or nonexistent. Misinformation is thus a key byproduct of disinformation that combines with it to change the public perception or opinion to improve one's position in the hearts and minds of the target audience.¹⁷

Inherently an asymmetric tool because of the relatively low cost and ease of propagation via various communication mediums like the Internet, social media, messaging applications, radio, television, and traditional publications is disinformation's principal advantage. Amplification of ESA disinformation from the Hemisphere's authoritarian regimes seeking to undercut democratic values and norms test the ability of nations committed to OAS principles with preference for a consensus-based approach.

¹⁵ Ellis, Evan. "China's Digital Advance in Latin America." *Revista Seguridad y Poder Terrestre*, Jul-Sep 2022, 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 14, pages 1-3.

¹⁶ Ellis, pages 6-7.

¹⁷ Ilan Berman, "Russia Disinformation in Latin America" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 25, 2023).

This approach is a historically difficult challenge given the Hemisphere's record of 'circumstantial regionalism.'^{18 19} Negative ESA influence in the form of disinformation will primarily seek to cast doubt on the efficacy of democratic institutions and their leaders.²⁰ This doubt attempts to fracture historically close nations in subtle ways absent national government regulation and legislation establishing standards of conduct from participating media and information outlets.

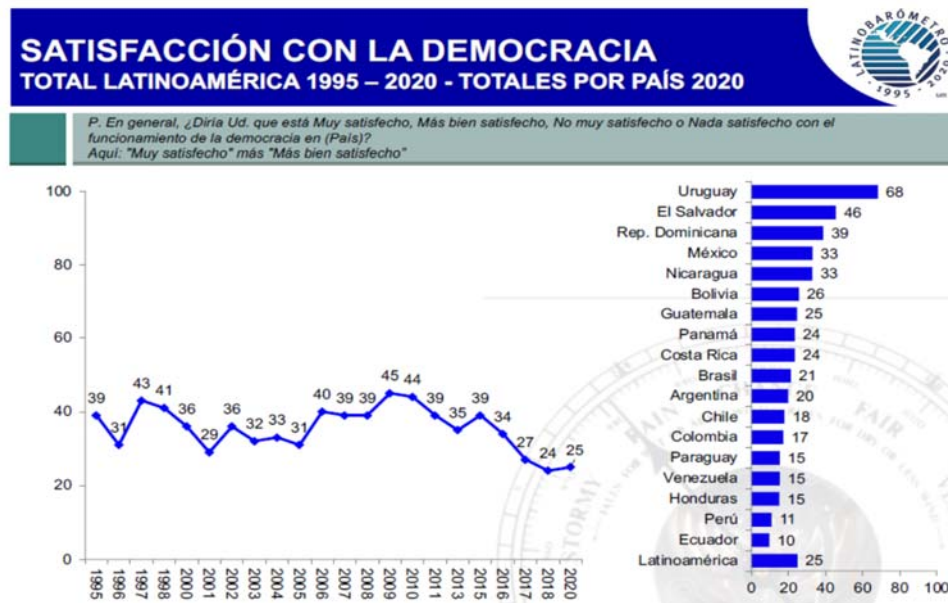
ESAs such as Russia and Iran conducting disinformation operations in regions such as Latin America and Africa do not necessarily provide an alternative to democracy. Rather, ESAs infuse uncertainty in the Hemisphere's populations while positively shaping their own image to undermine confidence and trust in democratic systems of government. The confidence in government institutions, particularly in Latin America, faces continuous decline due to relatively stagnant economic growth, increasing violence, and the negative impacts of the pandemic, according to the latest statistics from Latinobarometro.²¹

¹⁸ Morgus, Robert. "Chinese and Russian Use of Cyber Capabilities in Latin America and the Caribbean." *New America*, 2019, 10, page 9.

¹⁹ Ana Covarrubias, "Latin American Integration: Circumstantial Regionalism," *Inter-American Dialogue*, 2019, 123–39.

²⁰ Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau

²¹ "Latinobarómetro Informe 2021," Online Data Bank (Santiago, Chile: Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2021), <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>. Note: page 39 contains utilized graphic.



Source: Latinobarómetro 2020

Russian state-controlled media, historically robust in the Global South, remains the most expansive and effective source of anti-democratic disinformation in the Hemisphere. Russian disinformation activities in the region also demonstrates their commitment to ‘gray-zone’ operations. Formally codified in 2013 through what many understand as the Gerasimov Doctrine (coined after the Russian Chief of Defense), Russia seeks to asymmetrically employ non-traditional means below the threshold of war to improve their position against adversaries. This approach, especially in cyber and information domains, also allows operations to be more non-attributional to the state while furthering Russian strategic objectives.²²

The documented Russian interference in the presidential elections of the U.S. in 2016 is one of the most recent, comprehensive, and publicly documented examples. For over two years preceding the general presidential elections, Russian activities included cyber espionage as well as the distribution of false narratives specifically designed to diminish public confidence in the democratic electoral process while attempting to bolster the position of Moscow’s preferred presidential candidate.²³ Evidence collected during

²² Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight,” *Military Review*, February 2016, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf. Note: page 6 includes utilized graphic.

²³ Select Committee on Intelligence, “Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election” (Washington DC: U.S. Senate, November 10, 2020), pages 5-10.

the last Colombian and Mexican presidential elections also suggests Russian disinformation operations remain active in the Hemisphere at the national level.²⁴

Russian disinformation operations extend beyond elections as well. For example, their successful attempts to sway public opinion surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine (leading up to and after military operations began) via traditional television media like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik as well as social media communication outlets illustrate a commitment to state-sponsored 'shaping operations.' Shaping operations are those efforts seeking to establish more favorable conditions before commencing kinetic combat operations. Many experts agree that Russian IO was key to securing a wide swath of diplomatic support during the UN resolution vote where dozens of Global South countries voted in favor of, or abstained in, condemning Russian military action against Ukraine.²⁵ Russian disinformation in the Hemisphere also provides validation to the region's authoritarian regimes by fanning the flames of historical territorial disputes. This increases tensions across the political spectrum by stoking the coals of nationalistic fervor and perceived past transgressions which in turn stymies collaborative progress on shared regional challenges.²⁶

China also benefits within its 'Unrestricted Warfare' frame as Russian disinformation in the Hemisphere acts as a destabilizing force to the U.S. geopolitical interests China finds hostile to its own.²⁷ Authored by two Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers, the paper *Unrestricted Warfare* provides a new model to wage war through all elements of national power. The concept does not discern between military and non-military acts of aggression but identifies activities below the threshold of traditional hostilities across the spectrum of political, economic, and informational

²⁴ David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, "Russian Influence in Mexican and Colombian Elections," Educational, *German Marshall Fund* (blog), accessed February 3, 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russian-influence-mexican-and-colombian-elections>.

²⁵ The Economist, "How Russia Is Trying to Win Over the Global South," September 22, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/international/2022/09/22/how-russia-is-trying-to-win-over-the-global-south>

²⁶ Ilan Berman, "Russia's Propaganda Is More Persuasive Than We Think," *Newsweek*, January 5, 2023, pages 3-4.

²⁷ Gordon Chang, "Our Front Line With China: Latin America and the Caribbean" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 26, 2023). Note: Mr. Chang is an international lawyer, *Newsweek* columnist, and author focusing on China.

domains as critical areas for a state to actively, although many times indirectly, engage to defeat an adversary.²⁸

Lastly, the U.S. ‘benign neglect’ due to distractions in Europe and Asia are contributing factors to increasing negative ESA influence in the Hemisphere’s information domain.²⁹ U.S. policymakers simply do not yet understand how the effectiveness of ESA information domain influence negatively affects their own geopolitical goals in other parts of the world to include Latin America and the Caribbean. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has slowly ceded the information space in much of region to Russian and Chinese state-sponsored actors to the detriment of achieving a consensus on strategies to confront the IO challenges ESAs present in the Hemisphere.

ESA Information Operations (IO) in Telecommunications

ESAs are also influencing the Hemisphere’s most critical medium for information flows beyond disinformation to include telecommunications infrastructure development. Specifically, China’s efforts in the Hemisphere via 5G technology pose a significant challenge to the region’s democracies. 5G telecommunications and any future infrastructure seeking to improve speed, efficiency, and reliability of data and information flow within our digitizing societies is an integral part of a nation’s Critical Infrastructure (CI). CI security is thus part of a larger national strategy to ensure a state can provide basic services, effectively respond to MDS threats, and enable private entities to efficiently deliver products and services. These national strategic objectives maintain a standard of transparency and rely on public-private collaboration as a foundational guiding principle in the spirit of democracy.³⁰

Chinese technological know-how along with their relatively low cost and short implementation timelines offer the Hemisphere excellent opportunities to rapidly increase telecommunication development. For example, China's presence in developing African nations that possess similar requirements as some nations in the Hemisphere is largely

²⁸ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: Arts Publishing House, 1999).

²⁹ Greg Copley, “Geo-Strategy of Latin America” (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 25, 2023). Note: Mr. Copley is the President of the International Strategic Studies Association and Editor-in-Chief of *Defense & Foreign Affairs*.

³⁰ Kevin Newmeyer. “Elements of National Cybersecurity Strategy for Developing Nations.” *National Cybersecurity Institute Journal* 1, no. 3 (2015): 10.

viewed as a template for success in societal advancement despite the increasing skepticism of the long-term security efficacy of Chinese projects.³¹ Thus, the challenge for the Hemisphere will be how to best integrate these Chinese activities into a democratically-founded Inter-American System to address long-term MDS threats and challenges alike.³²

Brazil's approach to public-private 5G infrastructure development could be an alternative for nations to consider. Brazil intends to allow Chinese firms to develop parts of its 5G infrastructure while developing a separate network for government services to conduct public business and ensure integral state services remain within government control. However, the potential cost and challenge to implement this approach remains an unlikely option for many developing nations of the region lacking the requisite capacity and capital.³³

The specifics of the challenge are key to understand as few doubt the advantages to the normal citizen of Chinese development options in terms of increasing access to global economic markets, information flows and leveraging digitized government services. The challenge then is not about what China offers in terms of access and development, but rather what governments and citizens agree to give up in return for Chinese-developed 5G infrastructure that is fundamentally based on their authoritarian, surveillance state model.³⁴ The challenge will also be two-fold in this regard; will governments be able to negotiate terms to ensure transparency from China regarding the protection of their information? Additionally, will governments already experiencing democratic backsliding and high levels of corruption choose a Chinese model enabling domestic citizen surveillance without the awareness or consent of the public?³⁵

Although some countries are limiting Chinese 5G infrastructure due to security concerns of Hemispheric partners such as the U.S., there exists no regional consensus on

³¹ "The Economist Special Report: China, Meet Fourth Estate," *The Economist*, May 20, 2022.

³² Mark Hamilton, "Sistema interamericano de seguridad" en Seguridad y Asuntos Internacionales, eds. Alberto Lozano y Abelardo Rodríguez (Ciudad de México: Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Internacionales, 2020), 614-25.

³³ Chinese and Russian Use of Cyber Capabilities in Latin America and the Caribbean

³⁴ Adam Lowther and Brooke Mitchell, "China's Virtual Bamboo Curtain," *Real Clear Defense*, May 5, 2020, 5.

³⁵ Justin Sherman, "Authoritarians Are Exporting Surveillance Tech, And With It Their Vision for the Internet," Council on Foreign Relations, *Net Politics* (blog), December 5, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/authoritarians-are-exporting-surveillance-tech-and-it-their-vision-internet>, pages 3-5.

the second and third-order effects of telecommunications infrastructure development standards as set forth in documents such as the 2013 Wassenaar Agreement which aim to limit state use and proliferation of surveillance technology that negatively impacts citizens' rights of privacy within a human rights frame.^{36 37}

Opportunities in the Hemisphere to Improve ESA Information Operations (IO) Activities

A principal opportunity to improve ESA standards of conduct in the information domain is for the U.S. to break its cycle of historical neglect of ESA disinformation propagation in the Hemisphere. The U.S. could achieve this is by re-establishing a cabinet-level authority for strategic communication. Prioritizing strategic communication via institutionalization within the executive branch of government signals to ESAs who are negatively influencing the Hemisphere's information spaces that the U.S. will actively combat disinformation in conjunction with willing nations of the region.³⁸

A U.S. strategic communication cabinet position also sends two signals to the region's democratic nations. First, the U.S. formally recognizes the disinformation challenge and is willing to bolster its own institutions to counter it. Second, it would enable higher levels of information sharing at the executive branch of government facilitating greater collaboration in institutions such as the OAS where secretariats exist that have the capacity and technical abilities to develop a broader regional approach to shared MDS challenges.

A second opportunity for aligning ESA IO activities in the Hemisphere with democratic values and norms is to increase information sharing via official reporting of illegal collection, misuse, and theft of public or private information to include intellectual property theft at the regional level. Hemispheric nations could accomplish this first by formally codifying IO, or certain IO elements such as disinformation or information security, as specific MDS threats or challenges within the OAS MDS Secretariat. Specification of the challenge also could enable more technical work on developing a

³⁶ "Chinese Security Engagement in Latin America" (Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, November 19, 2020), page 7.

³⁷ Justin Sherman, pages 3-5.

³⁸ Ilan Berman, "Russia Disinformation in Latin America" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 25, 2023). Note: Mr. Berman is a Senior Vice President at the American Foreign Policy Council and is author of various global Russian disinformation expert who advocates for re-establishing a U.S. Strategic Communication cabinet position instead of the current sub-directory within the U.S. Department of State.

regional standard in line with organizations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) relating to information system architecture.³⁹ With institutionalization of this nature, the Hemisphere can better position itself to understand how to reduce negative ESA influence in the information domain while increasing information security awareness for political, military, business, and civil society leaders.

In sum, the largely misunderstood nature, and synergies with ESA activities in the information domain of the Hemisphere represent an enormous security challenge. Further, the growing power of disinformation and the unresolved question of developing vital telecommunication infrastructure within a framework of democratic norms and principles will only increase the security challenges for the Hemisphere to effectively integrate other positive, long-term ESA activities such as economic trade and development.

ESA Economic Activity Challenges in the Hemisphere – The Dragon of the East

Economic activity in the region, particularly from China, grew significantly since the turn of the 21st century. For example, Chinese trade with Brazil now doubles trade with the U.S.⁴⁰ Along with increasing trade, Chinese development aid, loans, and projects follow a similar increasing trend. In fact, infrastructure projects and the financial support necessary to complete them are emblematic of China's primary influence in developing regions of the world including Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. 21 nations in the Hemisphere are currently a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which seeks to globally deepen economic ties with willing partner nations for mutual benefit.⁴¹ Chinese economic activity growth in the region also translates into growing diplomatic and multi-lateral organization participation. For example, China became an OAS observer in 2004, an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) member in 2009 and are active

³⁹ "ITU-T Technical Report." Security in Telecommunications and Information Technology. International Telecommunication Union, September 2020. https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-t/opb/tut/T-TUT-ICTSS-2020-4-PDF-E.pdf, pages 7-8.

⁴⁰ Ryan C. Berg, "China in Latin America and the Caribbean," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep37529>, page 4. Note Berg's comments are derived from his citation #2 of his linked written testimony.

⁴¹ "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape." OECD Business and Finance Outlook 2018. Paris: The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018. www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf, pages 17-18.

participants in several other multi-lateral fora such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) focusing primarily on economic issues.⁴²

China's capacity to marshal their resources swiftly and effectively is unique as well as formidable. This capacity is due to the combination of cultural collectivism and state authoritarianism. China is then able to achieve an advantageous geostrategic position in the Hemisphere creating a daunting challenge for developing nations who cannot recognize the long-term negative implications of accepting quickly accessible Chinese financing terms and seemingly mutually beneficial infrastructure aid for development projects with questionable long-term value.⁴³

How China's Development Model Functions

Chinese economic activities are inherently different from private businesses or historic multi-lateral development and financing organizations. China's approach is unique because of their government-controlled State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), Chinese development financing institutions, and private sector businesses who lack traditional liberty to conduct business like other free-market private firms. Thus, China can leverage its position to out-compete because it comes with a "total package approach," offering nations deep discounts and promises of long-term value while achieving virtual monopolies in designated markets.⁴⁴

Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)

Chinese SOEs can vary by sector and size, but the Chinese government, enabling market dominance in infrastructure development where the Chinese imperative is securing long-term natural resource extraction, heavily subsidizes many. Other SOE sectors include the requisite infrastructure for roads, ports, and energy grid modernization. These projects serve Chinese interests in both facilitating logistical movements of resources to China and promising local host nation infrastructure

⁴² Ellis, Evan. "China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations." Understanding and Responding to Chinese Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington DC: Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. Accessed January 23, 2023. https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/9-Chinese_Activities_in_Latin_Ameria_and_the_Carribean-Ellis.pdf, pages 10-11.

⁴³ Gordon Chang

⁴⁴ Ellis, pages 7-8

improvements. China further bolsters its market positions by SOE and government collaboration in key technology sectors, enabling positions of ‘additive value’ in strategically identified sectors.⁴⁵

Chinese Development Aid and Financing Institutions

Complimentary to SOEs, Chinese development bank and financing institutions enable China to offer significantly lower upfront project costs and many times more favorable aid and financing packages than competitors. And although claims of Chinese ‘debt trap’ diplomacy in developing regions are technically unsubstantiated, there are specific instances where borrowers were likely never going to be able to repay in accordance with signed loan agreements, inevitably drawing the borrowing country into challenging debt restructuring processes.⁴⁶

Challenges to Sovereignty and Democratic Principles

Chinese financial support in the form of what many describe as predatory loan tactics where default risk is high from the borrowing nations enables China to gain controlling stakes of the projects they agree to finance.⁴⁷ Sri Lanka offers a recent example to consider where China was able to ‘re-possess’ a deep-water port due to Sri Lankan loan default and effectively take sovereign control of Sri Lankan territory against the government’s will.⁴⁸ This example is useful when considering Chinese expansion in and around ports near the Panama canal as well as a possible dual-use naval facility project in Tierra del Fuego.⁴⁹ These efforts to establish maritime footholds in key geographic Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Hemisphere demonstrate Chinese interest in having the option of complicating a potential adversary’s interests from a geographic, geopolitical, and geostrategic perspective should a future conflict erupt. The increasingly large Chinese development initiatives within CI power grid projects in several countries also raise the risk of sovereignty challenges with an ESA

⁴⁵ Ellis, pages 6-7

⁴⁶ Mauricio Claver-Carone, “Latin American Economics: Challenges, Opportunities, and Risks” (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin American Seminar, Washington DC, January 25, 2023). Note: Mr. Claver-Carone is former President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and an international development financial policy expert.

⁴⁷ Mauricio Claver-Carone

⁴⁸ Ryan C. Berg

⁴⁹ Guillermo Saavedra, “China Pressures Argentina to Build Naval Base,” *Diálogo Americas* (blog), January 3, 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-pressures-argentina-to-build-naval-base/#.Y925Y-xKiDU>.

potentially monopolizing critical sectors responsible for producing and distributing energy inside another nation of the Hemisphere.⁵⁰



Arguably the biggest challenge to economic development in the Hemisphere is China's agnostic view of how it interacts with governments from autocratic regimes to democratic nations. This distinct Chinese approach further illustrates China's disinterest in adhering to any specific set of democratic values to achieve its geopolitical objectives.⁵¹ Examples of this pattern of disinterest with democratic principles are illustrated in the opacity with which China undertakes loans with other nations along with the lack of labor and environmental regulatory safeguards typical of development loans from established western-styled financial institutions like the World Bank or Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This lack of transparency risks increasing

⁵⁰ Margaret Myers, "The Red Line," Chinese Influence in South America, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-red-line/id1482715810?i=1000561472485>. Note: Margaret Myers is the director of the Asia & Latin America Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

⁵¹ Jorge Sanz, "La Influencia de China en Latinoamérica: El Consenso de Washington y El de Beijing," *Fundacion Para El Analisis y Los Estudios Sociales*, Cuadernos de Pensamiento Político, January/March, no. 37 (2013): 23, page 2.

corruption and diminishing long-term public utility of development projects while reducing environmental protections for sensitive areas.⁵²

Non-Traditional Threats and Challenges Raise the Risk of Traditional Conflict

Another aspect of harmful ESA economic influence in the Hemisphere is Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing activities in the South Pacific primarily affecting Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru.⁵³ IUU damages fishing stocks, and undermines conservation efforts, thereby threatening overall sustainability practices. IUU also disincentivizes rules-based behaviors from otherwise law-abiding fishermen operating within agreed international laws and norms.⁵⁴ U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Mike Studeman, Director of the National Maritime Intelligence Integration Office (NMIO) describes common practices of ESA IUU fishing vessels within Hemispheric fisheries stating:

“To obscure their presence from local authorities, Chinese fishing vessels sometimes turn off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) signal, then operate in other nations’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) without consent to exploit fishing opportunities, and then reactivate their AIS once out of the EEZs. One study reported nearly 90 percent of 300 fishing boats “going dark” near Argentina’s EEZ in 2019 were Chinese flagged.”⁵⁵

IUU fishing represents a significant challenge to economic and development security in the Hemisphere. China IUU occurrences in and around South American EEZs are the largest of any nation, and the challenge for the Hemisphere in the 21st century will

⁵² Diana Roy, “China’s Growing Influence in Latin America,” Backgrounder (Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), April 12, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>.

⁵³ InSight Crime and American University’s Center for Latin American & Latino Studies, “IUU Fishing Crimes in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *InSight Crime*, CLALS Working Paper Series, August 2022, 77, pages 7-9.

⁵⁴ Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing,” United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.fao.org/iuu-fishing/background/what-is-iuu-fishing/en/>.

⁵⁵ Diálogo Americas, “China’s Rampant Illegal Fishing Is Endangering the Environment and the Global Economy,” Special Report, January 26, 2023, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/chinas-rampant-illegal-fishing-is-endangering-the-environment-and-the-global-economy/#.Y93BzezMKDV>.

continue to be enforcement due to a lack of capacity in projecting a suitable naval or coast guard presence to dissuade Chinese vessels.⁵⁶

The non-traditional security challenge of IUU fishing represents another area where escalation into a traditional state-on-state conflict is more likely in the 21st century. For example, Chinese fishing fleets in and around the South China Sea are many times accompanied by, or intermingled with, state security service vessels acting as escorts. These quasi-coast guard ships are sources of continuous tension in the already-congested South China Sea fisheries where several other states seek to participate. Should this model be exported to the eastern Pacific region encompassing the Hemisphere's EEZs as fishery congestion rises along with the increasing IUU incidents of EEZ penetrations, flashpoints for traditional conflict will only increase.⁵⁷

A Probable Scenario of Future Chinese Economic Engagement in the Hemisphere

The MDS threats and challenges of the Hemisphere represent second and third-order effects of waning Chinese economic activity in the region. China will thus be the driver of the biggest challenges to defense and security in the Inter-American System because of the high probability of a looming domestic Chinese economic decline.⁵⁸ China's ability to develop and fund infrastructure projects is predicated on its sustained domestic growth. The Hemisphere's largely static or declining economic position vis-à-vis other developing regions due in part to a one-dimensional commodity-centric model since the end of 2013 facilitated by Chinese demand for natural resources is also important to recognize.

⁵⁶ Margarita Seminario, Linnea Sandin, and Isaac Parham, "Development Solutions to Address Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing in Latin America and the Caribbean," Foreign Policy, Center for Strategic & International Studies, July 19, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/development-solutions-address-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing-latin-america-and>.

⁵⁷ Paul Angelo, "The Red Line," Chinese Influence in South America, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-red-line/id1482715810?i=1000561472485>. Note: Mr. Angelo is Director of the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the U.S. National Defense University.

⁵⁸ "Navigating Uncertainty: China's Economy in 2023," China Economic Update (Washington DC: The World Bank, December 2022), pages 12-28, <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/b8644c8a79ee3376b2cd3c16a9f90cc7-0070012022/original/CEU-December-2022-ENG.pdf>.

Factoring in the devastating economic damage from the COVID-19 pandemic also adds a key layer of complexity and urgency in understanding the level of economic risk.⁵⁹ Although the end of China's "zero COVID" policy will soon usher in a short-term period of increasing demand for the Hemisphere's commodities, Chinese domestic fragilities will not enable favorable demand levels beyond this decade.⁶⁰ China's current demand for the Hemisphere's natural resources and commodities will likely ebb in various sub-regions as domestic pressures push more towards resources enabling greater levels of technology and innovation, such as gold, copper and lithium. Essentially, China must seek to avoid the 'middle income trap' of a developing nation transitioning from a primarily manufacturing country to one centering more on technology and services.⁶¹ Thus, the probability of the current decade acting as the apex for Chinese economic participation in Latin America for the remainder of the 21st century is exceedingly high when taking into account current trend data and the inability to adjust course for at least another generational cycle.⁶² The following figure from the International Monetary Fund's Regional Economic Outlook for the Western Hemisphere Report corroborates lingering challenges are likely to persist.⁶³

⁵⁹ Afshin Molavi, "Global Mega-Trends and Latin America" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 26, 2023). Note: Mr. Molavi is a Senior Fellow within the Foreign Policy Institute at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

⁶⁰ "What Does China's Reopening Mean for Latin America?," *The Economist*, January 18, 2023.

⁶¹ Note: Many experts see the 'middle income trap' phenomenon occurring in Latin American and the Caribbean's, thus China aids in exacerbating the Hemisphere's plight of a stagnant middle-income demographic.

⁶² Greg Copley

⁶³ "Regional Economic Outlook Western Hemisphere: Navigating Tighter Global Financial Conditions," International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, Oct 2022, pages 3, 18.

<https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docNA89D9EED358436fd282e874f3b7bcfec6ca27114dd3af621d2d49f8e46ff41c1c99401150ab9>. Note: Graphic on page 18 of report.

Table 1. Western Hemisphere: Real GDP Growth
(Year-over-year percent change)

	2020	2021	Projections		Difference from April 2022 WEO	
			2022	2023	2022	2023
United States	-3.4	5.7	1.6	1.0	-2.1	-1.3
Canada	-5.2	4.5	3.3	1.5	-0.6	-1.3
Latin America and the Caribbean	-7.0	6.9	3.5	1.7	1.0	-0.8
LAC excluding Venezuela	-6.6	7.0	3.4	1.7	0.8	-0.8
South America	-6.6	7.3	3.6	1.6	1.3	-0.5
CAPDR	-7.1	11.0	4.7	3.6	-0.1	-0.4
Caribbean						
Tourism Dependent	-14.7	7.8	5.2	3.6	0.5	-0.3
Other	1.3	3.4	16.7	9.3	2.8	-2.7
Of which: Commodity Exporters	4.0	6.1	24.6	12.8	4.4	-3.6
<i>Memorandum</i>						
LA5	-6.2	6.3	3.0	1.2	1.1	-0.9
Brazil	-3.9	4.6	2.8	1.0	2.0	-0.4
Mexico	-8.1	4.8	2.1	1.2	0.1	-1.3

Sources: IMF, World Economic Outlook (WEO) database; and IMF staff calculations.

Note: Regional aggregates are purchasing-power-parity GDP-weighted averages. For country group information, see page 46. CAPDR = Central America, Panama, and the Dominican Republic; LA5 = Latin America 5 (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru); LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean.

Chinese domestic real estate market stagnation, aging populations incurring higher costs, and demographically troubling indicators of China's falling birth rates point to large-scale retraction within higher-risk foreign investment and development ventures in regions such as Latin America and Africa. This likely final chapter of the robust Chinese engagement will pose significant challenges for many countries in the region with specific nations likely to suffer more extensively due to the depth of their economic ties with China.⁶⁴ An economically uncertain future due to competing Chinese domestic priorities will leave some of the Hemisphere's countries overexposed and underprepared for effectively adapting after nearly two decades of robust Chinese economic activity.⁶⁵

Opportunities for Improving ESA Economic Activities in the Hemisphere

Despite the various challenges ESA economic activities present, there are ways in which the Hemisphere can better integrate ESAs into the region's economic and security systems to hedge against a probable Chinese economic decline. For example, opportunities to integrate China's activity with the Inter-American Development Bank

⁶⁴ Matthew Taylor, "Whither Brazil: Politics, Economics, and Society" (Alan L. Freed Associates Latin America Seminar, Washington DC, January 25, 2023). Note: Mr. Taylor is an Associate Professor in the School of International Service at the American University and author specializing in Brazil foreign affairs.

⁶⁵ The Economist. "What Does China's Reopening Mean for Latin America?," January 18, 2023.

(IDB) via technical assistance and information sharing do exist. To ensure Chinese projects meet established long-term value metric standards, the IDB can provide nations examples of successfully funded projects positively impacting host nation citizen security.⁶⁶ Development banks like the IDB with a track record of delivering long-term value development financing can work with nations to validate whether Chinese projects can meet promised expectations.⁶⁷ Undertaking this process of transparent collaboration before agreements are concluded is imperative to ensuring enforcement of standards are attainable by the host nations in areas of labor and environmental protection where Latin America maintains some of the loftiest goals in the world.⁶⁸

When looking outside the Hemisphere for opportunities to collaborate and learn about IUU, potential solutions for the Hemisphere to pursue are found in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN recognizes the current and evolving threats and challenges within IUU activities posed by geopolitically powerful and assertive nations such as China.⁶⁹ By developing guidelines to prevent the harmful effects of IUU as well as outlining methods to dissuade the practices of states utilizing security forces through collective action, ASEAN members are more advanced than the Pacific-facing nations of the Hemisphere.⁷⁰ Thus, an ASEAN-OAS transregional IUU strategy seeking a more holistic Pacific approach to IUU through a MDS frame could better align nations suffering the most harmful effects of IUU threats and challenges. OAS nations like the U.S. have the institutional capacity to lead the formulation of a transregional strategic framework of this nature; however, nations most acutely affected within the OAS must have the will to form an effective consensus much like that of ASEAN.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Mauricio Claver-Carone

⁶⁷ Margaret Myers and Rebecca Ray, "China in Latin America: Major Impacts and Avenues for Constructive Engagement: A US Perspective" (Washington DC: The Carter Center, August 29, 2019), https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/china/china-in-latin-america-june-2019.pdf.

⁶⁸ Ryan C. Berg

⁶⁹ Malik, Asmiati. "IUU Fishing as an Evolving Threat to Southeast Asia's Maritime Security." *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, Evolving Threats to Southeast Asia's Maritime Security, November 6, 2022, 6.

⁷⁰ "ASEAN Guidelines for Preventing the Entry of Fish and Fishery Products From IUU Fishing Activities Into the Supply Chain, August 24, 2015. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/App-9-ASEAN-Guidelines-IUU-SSOM36th-AMAF-final.pdf>.

⁷¹ Biden, Joseph. "Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States." The White House, September 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

Conclusions

The Hemisphere's challenges with ESAs are complex, diverse, and long-term in nature. A comprehensive understanding of how ESA activities in the region affect Hemispheric security, for better or worse, must be part of a broader collective strategy buttressed by strong institutions possessing agile and adaptable legal frameworks across the political, diplomatic, military, security, and economic spectrums. Leaders within the Inter-American System must be aware of the challenges and opportunities alike to craft effective regional security policy to provide reliable technical security advice and assistance.

Collectively countering negative ESA influence within Transnational Organized Crime, Information Operations, and harmful economic practices represent key MDS threats and challenges that the Inter-American Security System can explore while simultaneously pursuing and communicating opportunities to collaborate with willing ESAs for mutual benefit will be imperative given the critical historical and future roles ESAs play in the region.

The 21st-century security situation of the Hemisphere will continue to be uncertain. Thus, adopting a regional geostrategic position vis-à-vis ESAs that is capable of weathering the storms of non-traditional security threats due to persistent global economic challenges will be of paramount importance. In this sense, the biggest security challenge of the Hemisphere may be how best to avoid the type of comfortable complacency that sealed the fate of the slowly-cooking frog.

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