China and International Crime Cartels Threaten U.S. Influence in the Americas, Commanders Say



The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf (WMSL-750) offloads approximately 7,500 pounds of seized cocaine and marijuana in San Diego, March 20, 2021. The drugs, worth an estimated $126.7 million, were seized in international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean between January and February representing 10 suspected drug smuggling vessel interdictions off the coasts of Mexico, Central and South America. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 2nd Class Travis Magee*

ARLINGTON, Va. — The chaos created by transnational organized crime groups in Central and South America is creating opportunities for China and Russia to undermine United States influence in the Western Hemisphere, top U.S. military commanders say.

“Two of the most significant threats are China and transnational criminal organizations,” Navy Adm. Craig S. Faller told a House Armed Services Committee hearing April 14.

China is the “Number One strategic threat of the 21st century,” said Faller, the commander of U.S. Southern Command (Southcom), adding “the Chinese Communist Party with its insidious, corrosive and corrupt influence seeks global dominance.”

Faller said China was increasing its influence in the Western Hemisphere with more than 40 commercial port deals, making significant loans for political and economic leverage, pushing its IT structure and “engaging in predatory practices” like illegal fishing by industrial fleets.

Southcom’s 2021 posture statement to Congress notes that South and Central America have been reeling under a wave of challenges, including the coronavirus pandemic that has savaged Brazil, political instability and corruption in Venezuela and back-to-back hurricanes that devastated Central America, prompting mass migrations north. The statement notes external state actors like China and Russia are “looking to exploit the conditions posed by these threats.”

Russia has been pushing narratives on social media about U.S. mismanagement of COVID-19 and claiming U.S. government sanctions are choking the Venezuelan people at their most vulnerable time. Meanwhile, China is offering $1 billion in loans to the region for their COVID-19 vaccine and improvements to medical infrastructure, securing agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela. “This will further indebt the region to the PRC [People’s Republic of China], which already holds $165 Billion in loans,” according to the posture statement.

“Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) pose a direct threat to our national security,” Faller testified. “They traffic in arms, humans, drugs and claim tens of thousands of

lives here in the United States each year. Their murderous tactics has resulted in 43 of the 50 most violent cities of the world in this hemisphere. They drive illegal migration, and they allow bad actors like China to gain influence."

Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, commander, U.S. Northern Command (Northcom) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, agreed, saying the rise of TCOs "and subsequent instability they create has generated opportunities for our competitors to exploit."

He noted China has been very active making deals in the Caribbean including a facility in the Bahamas, part of Northcom's Area of Operations. China has new and very aggressive ambassador and the largest embassy in the Bahamas. "They do have access right now to an over watch, if you will, of Navy test and training facilities, [off Florida] which is very concerning," VanHerck said.