

SOUTHCOM Chief: Maintaining Ties with Latin American Partners is Key in Great Power Competition



Peruvian navy divers check diving equipment prior to entering the water, during a subject matter expert exchange with U.S. Navy divers from Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit (MDSU) 2, as part of Southern Partnership Station 2019. Competition with Russia and China is spurring the United States to seek a global advantage through partnerships in Latin America. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Peter Lewis
ARLINGTON, Va. – Great power competition with an emerging China and a resurgent Russia is driving the United States to seek an all-domain, global positioning advantage, through alliances and partnerships in Latin America, the head of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) says.

“Russia has interest in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, and some legacy interests in other [Western Hemisphere] countries,” U.S. Navy Adm. Craig Faller, said Jan. 14 at the Surface Navy Association Virtual Symposium. “Their interest really is to counter U.S. interest, while China’s interest “is economic dominance,” he said.

There are 31 countries in SOUTHCOM’s area of responsibility – Central and South America, south of Mexico, and the Caribbean Basin – 28 of them democracies, and the United States has good relations with most of them, the admiral said. However, China has been actively engaging several of those countries with economic and land deals leading to large infrastructure projects with possible military and diplomatic implications.

“Why would China want to achieve a deep-water seaport off El Salvador, Jamaica, perhaps the Dominican Republic?” Faller asked. “Their long term interest is economic dominance, and they’ll do what it takes,” he said.

“The Panama Canal is key terrain in all of this,” Faller said, noting China is negotiating deals for ports at either end of the canal. “South America has a positive water ratio and much, much excess arable land. China has none of that,” Faller said, noting that China “is working river access, energy access. Access to soybeans.

“Additionally, hundreds of Huawei systems are in place, in Latin American cities, well ahead of any competitor in that space,” Faller said. The Chinese telecom giant is the world’s second largest phone maker. American officials are concerned Huawei networks will give the Chinese government new avenues of surveillance. Huawei says that it does not spy for the Chinese government. The Pentagon is worried Chinese telephonic equipment sold to South American governments could make communication between the U.S. and partner nations less secure.

“The U.S. is responding in a good way with a clean network program by the State Department,” Faller said.

The best way to counter Chinese influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is to build and maintain military-to-military partnerships, continue joint naval exercises, cooperate in counter narcotics operations and maintain constant U.S. presence in the region, Faller said.