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United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)

United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), headquartered in Miami, FL, was officially established in 1963. Prior to that, U.S. military elements in the Western hemisphere had been organized under the U.S. Caribbean Defense Command. SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility (AOR) begins at the southern Mexican border and contains the remaining elements of Central and South America, adjacent Atlantic and Pacific waters, as well as the Caribbean Sea, ultimately encompassing 31 countries and 16 dependencies and areas of special sovereignty. The region represents about one-sixth of the landmass of the world assigned to regional unified commands. SOUTHCOM is led by U.S. Navy Admiral Craig S. Faller.

Figure 1. U.S. Southern Command



Source: Congressional Research Service.

SOUTHCOM and National Strategic Priorities

During the Cold War, SOUTHCOM undertook a variety of missions intended to prevent the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from gaining a strategic foothold in the Western hemisphere. After the end of the Cold War, the command pivoted its focus to containing and/or countering narcotics trafficking and humanitarian assistance missions. Today, SOUTHCOM states that the command seeks to advance national strategic objectives in three primary ways:

- **Strengthening partnerships** with other countries and agencies in the region through activities including (but not limited to) building their respective security institutions and capacities, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and advancing human rights.
- **Countering threats** by increasing cooperation and information sharing with allies and partners to understand and counter threats from transnational criminal organizations, violent extremist organizations, and malign actors.
- **Building SOUTHCOM capabilities** by prioritizing a workforce that is trained, highly competent, educated in the history and cultures of the region, and capable of shifting from warfighting to security cooperation tasks.

DOD is not the lead U.S. government agency for many of the activities that fall under this mission set. As a result, SOUTHCOM has designed its posture to support, rather than lead, other agencies and countries in the region. Security cooperation—a term describing DOD engagements with other countries to improve their respective defense capabilities and capacities—is used by SOUTHCOM to advance U.S. objectives in the region.

The Evolving Geopolitical Context of the Southern Hemisphere

Despite its geographic proximity to the United States, and despite periodic incidents that have attracted the attention of U.S. leaders, the SOUTHCOM AOR has generally remained a lesser priority for DOD relative to other strategic challenges, particularly after World War II. Looking at recent trends, though, some observers contend that Latin American should factor more greatly into U.S. strategic plans. In the Trump Administration's view, effectively competing—economically, diplomatically and militarily—with Russia and China is the most pressing national security challenge the United States faces today. According to SOUTHCOM, both these actors appear to be gaining a greater foothold in the region—particularly in Venezuela—raising the question as to whether SOUTHCOM's AOR is, or will become, a key arena for strategic competition. Other observers, however, contend that Chinese and Russian activities in Latin America do not rise to the level of strategic concern given the extent and depth of U.S. engagement across the region. Regardless, contending with various manifestations of strategic competition has become a mission for the command that is in addition to other extant regional priorities, such as countering the trafficking of narcotics.

SOUTHCOM Posture Review?

On January 23, 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper initiated a COCOM-by-COCOM review to determine whether the posture and resourcing in each are sufficient to meet extant and emerging challenges. The review of U.S. Southern Command is underway; a central question in this analysis is whether USSOUTHCOM has sufficient resources and capabilities to counter increasing Russian and

Chinese investments and activities in the Western Hemisphere. Other questions include whether SOUTHCOM has sufficient assets (ships, information, surveillance and reconnaissance assets, and so on) to perform interdiction missions.

SOUTHCOM Subcomponents

As with other COCOMs, SOUTHCOM is a headquarters; no military units are permanently assigned. SOUTHCOM operates through component commands—one for each of the U.S. armed services, along with a joint special operations component. Each component command may or may not have military forces assigned to it in theater.

- **U.S. Army South (ARSOUTH)** is located at Ft. Sam Houston, TX.
- **U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. Fourth Fleet (COMUSNAVSO/ COMFOURTHFLT)** is located in Mayport Naval Base in Florida.
- **Air Forces Southern/Twelfth Air Force (AFSOUTH)** is located at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona.
- **U.S. Marine Forces South (USMARFORSOUTH)** is located in Miami, FL.
- **Special Operations Command South (USSOCSOUTH)** is located at Homestead Air Reserve Base near Miami, FL.

Three task forces also report to USSOUTHCOM:

- **Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-Bravo), Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras.** JTF-Bravo organizes multilateral exercises and supports, with U.S. partner nations, humanitarian and civic assistance, and counterdrug, contingency, and disaster relief operations in Central America.
- **Joint Task Force Guantanamo, U.S. Naval Station Guantanamo Bay (GTMO), Cuba.** TF-Guantanamo conducts some detention and interrogation operations in support of U.S. counterterrorism operations, coordinates and implements detainee screening operations, and supports law enforcement and war crimes investigations, as well as Military Commissions for Detained Enemy Combatants. JTF-Guantanamo is also prepared to support mass migration operations.
- **Joint Interagency Task Force South, Key West, Florida.** JIATF-South is an interagency task force—often viewed as a model for interagency cooperation—that serves as the catalyst for interagency counter-drug operations and is responsible for the detection and monitoring of suspect air and maritime drug activity in the Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico, and the eastern Pacific. JIATF-South also collects, processes, and disseminates counter-drug information for interagency operations. According to public reporting, as of

September 2019, 20 countries also send liaison officers or other representatives to JIATF-South.

SOUTHCOM Funding

DOD budget documentation does not break out total funding by combatant command. Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military services (either in their *base* budgets or with funding designated for *Overseas Contingency Operations*, or OCO). Combatant command funding is, with some exceptions, limited to Operation and Maintenance (O&M) accounts for headquarters and mission support activities.

In the case of SOUTHCOM, the U.S. Army is the Combatant Command Support Agent (CCSA) and primarily responsible for funding its headquarters. For FY2021, the Army requested \$197.8 million in the O&M subactivity group for U.S. Southern Command, all of which was requested in the base budget, according to DOD. The FY2021 request is \$11.3 million (5.4%) less than the FY2020-enacted amount of \$209.1 million.

For FY2021, the command requested additional funding for civilian compensation, personnel for the Identity Intelligence Program to assist other agencies and partner nations in countering threat networks, and travel and training; and decreased funding for Military Information Support Operations to local audiences and personnel to support the establishment of U.S. Space Command, among other program changes.

Further Reading

CRS In Focus IF10982, *China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*, by Mark P. Sullivan and Thomas Lum

CRS Report R44313, *What Is "Building Partner Capacity?" Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Kathleen J. McInnis

CRS In Focus IF10460, *Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy Overview*, by Mark P. Sullivan

CRS Report R45120, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Issues in the 115th Congress*, coordinated by Mark P. Sullivan

CRS In Focus IF10580, *Transnational Crime Issues: International Drug Trafficking*, by Liana W. Rosen

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