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United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)

United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), headquartered in Miami-Dade County, 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, and 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. Army General Laura Richardson.

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 Soviet Union (USSR) from gaining a strategic foothold in the Western hemisphere. After the end of the Cold War, the command changed 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 that enhance access and presence, such as (but not limited to) building their respective security institutions and capacities (including through advancing human rights),

integrated officer/enlisted leader development; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

- **Countering threats** by increasing cooperation and information sharing with allies and partners to understand and counter threats from transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), violent extremist organizations, and malign actors.
- **Building the SOUTHCOM team** by prioritizing a workforce that is trained, highly competent, and educated in the history and cultures of the region; is fit and disciplined; and takes into account quality of life issues of the families of SOUTHCOM personnel.

The Department of Defense (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 respective defense capabilities and capacities—involves key programs used by SOUTHCOM to advance U.S. objectives in the region.

The Evolving Geopolitical Context of the Southern Hemisphere

The Biden Administration's 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) notes that “our vital national interests compel the deepest connection to the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere.” The document goes on to argue,

Because the vital national interests of the United States are inextricably bound to the fortunes of our closest neighbors in the Americas, we will expand our engagement and partnerships throughout the Western Hemisphere – and especially with Canada and Mexico – based on principles of mutual respect and equality and a commitment to economic prosperity, security, human rights, and dignity. This includes working with the Congress to provide Central America with \$4 billion in assistance over four years, and taking other steps to address the root causes of human insecurity and irregular migration, including poverty, criminal violence, and corruption – problems made exponentially worse by COVID-19 and the deep recession and debt crisis it has wrought throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Strategic Challenges?

SOUTHCOM maintains that the main threats with which it must be prepared to contend include the Peoples Republic of China, Russia, Transnational Criminal Organizations,

corruption, climate change, and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. With respect to Russia and China, according to SOUTHCOM, both countries 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, in addition to other extant regional priorities.

- **China’s** engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean has grown significantly over the past 20 years, particularly in terms of diplomatic and economic ties. This growth reflects China’s global “soft power” efforts and “influence operations” worldwide. According to SOUTHCOM, China also increasingly pays for the security forces of countries within its AOR to attend Spanish- and Portuguese-language military education programs.
- **Russia** has increased its engagement with Latin America over the past decade, although this engagement is relatively limited compared with China’s economic activities in the region. Russia has resuscitated relations with former Cold War allies Cuba and Nicaragua, and expanded relations with countries that have had antagonistic relations with the United States, especially Venezuela.
- **TCOs** in the region are known to engage in the trafficking of drugs, weapons, and people, as well as human smuggling, money laundering, and other forms of illegal activity. As described in the INSSG, a priority for the Biden Administration is assistance to Central America that addresses “the root causes of human insecurity and irregular migration, including poverty, criminal violence, and corruption.”

SOUTHCOM Subcomponents

As with other Combatant Commands, 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-Dade County, FL.

- **Special Operations Command South (USSOC SOUTH)** is located at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Miami-Dade County, 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, and humanitarian and civic assistance. It also organizes 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, and coordinates and implements detainee screening operations. It also 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 that organizes and leads 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.

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. 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 FY2022, the Army requested \$196.7 million in the O&M subactivity group for SOUTHCOM, according to DOD budget documents. Congress provided \$202.1 million for this activity—\$5.4 million (2.7%) more than the request, according to the explanatory statement accompanying the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022 (Division C of P.L. 117-103).

For Additional Reading: CRS In Focus IF10982, *China’s Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*; CRS Report R44313, *What Is “Building Partner Capacity?” Issues for Congress*; CRS In Focus IF10460, *Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy Overview*; CRS Report R46781, *Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy and Key Issues in the 117th Congress*; and CRS Report R47028, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean: FY2022 Appropriations*.

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