

ROBBINS: Welcome, and thank you for joining today's events hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. It's Wednesday, October 11th, and we are honored to host U.S. SOUTHCOM Commander, General Laura Richardson.

Our discussion today will focus on the U.S. response to China's increased activity in Latin America and the Caribbean. I'm Elizabeth Robbins, FDD's Vice President of Communications. We're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in person and others tuning in live. So let's set the stage.

The People's Republic of China is undertaking a massive military buildup and wielding its growing might to expand its military access abroad. The growing threats from China's buildup in the Indo-Pacific have expanded well into our hemisphere and U.S. Southern Command's area of responsibility.

SOUTHCOM is one of the Pentagon's six geographic commands and is responsible for U.S. contingency planning, operations, and security cooperations in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. General Richardson brings to her command more than 37 years of service, as a leader, soldier, aviator, and combat veteran who has commanded from the company to theater Army level.

A few highlights of her career to date include command of an Assault Helicopter Battalion in Iraq, service as military aide to the Vice President, and leadership of the Army component of U.S. Northern Command.

Moderating today's discussion is my friend and colleague, Bradley Bowman, the Senior Director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. Before coming to FDD, he served as National Security Advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees – nearly nine years in the U.S. Senate, and including six years as the top defense advisor to Senator Kelly Ayotte.

He also served as National Security Advisor to Senator Todd Young and worked as a counsel and Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Previously, Brad served on active duty as an Army Officer, Blackhawk pilot, and Assistant Professor at West Point.

Before we dive in, just a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website, FDD.org, and follow us on Twitter [@FDD](https://twitter.com/FDD), or shall we say X?

With that, I welcome what will be a fascinating discussion on a timely topic.

Over to you, Bradley.

BOWMAN: Great. All right. Thank you, Beth. Thank you so much for the introduction.

General Richardson, welcome back to FDD. It's so great to have you here. It seems like just yesterday, in December, when we were doing the podcast. Time flies. And then just yesterday, when I think we first met when you were a Colonel, leading Army Senate liaison. So it's a lot of water under the bridge since then. But it's so good to have you back. Thank you ...

RICHARDSON: Thank you very much, Brad.

BOWMAN: ... for making time. Really appreciate it.

Before we move on to the topic at hand, I just want to make a quick comment about the horrific terror attack on Israel that's been consuming a lot of attention of folks here in recent days. Our thoughts are with the victims of that barbaric act perpetrated by Hamas.

For those who are here or watching online, I just want to flag that FDD has been publishing a lot of analysis on what happened, the strategic context, and how the US should respond. In fact, since Saturday, we've published more than 26 pieces of analysis, just since Saturday on what's happened with Hamas and the strategic context. So if you're interested, I'd encourage you to go to line, and that doesn't include numerous podcasts.

But that's not our topic today. Our topic today is Latin America's China problem, and there's no one better here to talk about that I think than you. And so welcome again. And with your permission, I'd love to just jump right in.

So for Americans busy with their lives, who aren't as focused on the region as you are – can you – I'd love to hear your thoughts on why you think Americans should care about what happens in U.S. Southern Command's area of responsibility?

RICHARDSON: Well, thank you for that, Brad, and thank you for having me here today to be able to speak about this very important region. And certainly when we talk about why should America be, you know, concerned about what's happening in our region and you say America because we're part of the Americas...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... and the Western Hemisphere. This is our homeland. So we live in America but we are part of the Americas.

And I think the – just the proximity – proximity matters. And I like to refer to the Western Hemisphere as our neighborhood. I know that doesn't resonate with everybody but when I talk about neighbors as part of the Americas, we are all neighbors and neighbors take care of each other. And we have 28 likeminded democracies in this hemisphere and we work together on a daily basis and we have a lot of strategic competition going on in the region.

But, you know, all of the things that are – make this hemisphere very rich – just family ties, the remittances that come back to countries from all of the family ties, our culture – again, we are neighbors. We have a history with our neighbors. We have fought together in war with Colombia and also with Brazil. And so we have a very deep, rich culture with this hemisphere.

And so as I travel around and meet with leaders and just see the concern in their eyes from our 28 likeminded democracies as we work – you know, you acknowledged the horrific attacks. My condolences go out as well to those who lost their lives and the families that are reeling from this. And we still have people that are in danger – but rich in resources.

And so what I worry about is the extraction of resources from these reserves of heavy crude oil, light sweet crude that was discovered off the shores of Guyana, the largest growing economy – 25 percent GDP is anticipated for Guyana over the next five years.

You have 60 percent of the world's lithium in the Lithium Triangle – Argentina, Bolivia, Chile – and copper, gold. You have a lot of transnational criminal organization activity. They've become more powerful.

They've diversified their portfolio. It's not just countering or drug trafficking now. It's also humans, as we see with this irregular migration that's happening in the hemisphere – illegal mining, gold, copper, illegal logging, deforestation, the illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing, the money laundering in the region – cleaning the money to be able to support that over \$300 billion annual revenue business.

We have the Amazon. We just had the Amazonian leaders meet together a couple of months ago, and the eight leaders that have the Amazon in their countries, very concerned about the biodiversity, very concerned about the illegal logging, the deforestation that's happening. It's known as the lungs of the world.

The Amazon isn't just a place where we talk about it. You know, I've actually been to the Amazon. I can say that now, having been in this job and seeing how important it is. But when you think of lungs of the world and what the Amazon does for our globe, the damage that's being done to it, it was important enough for those presidents, all eight of them, to get together a couple of months ago in Brazil to talk about and discuss a way forward on how to protect the Amazon.

So the resources are so rich. And when you look at the strategic competition globally but then also in this hemisphere, you want to make sure that – that things aren't – adversaries and strategic competitors aren't trying to go there for nefarious reasons to extract.

This hemisphere has the potential to feed and fuel the world. I say that again, to feed and fuel the world. We used to talk about that in the 2014 timeframe and we haven't really talked about it since. But when you talk about the agriculture and the fisheries, by 2028, Latin America will have 25 percent of the agriculture and fisheries in the globe. You know, who knew?

So we should be talking about the potential of this hemisphere, not the insecurity and the instability that can take it in another direction.

BOWMAN: Thank you. Great overview in challenges and opportunities, and I think that's important to be highlighted.

I do want to drill down on what the People's Republic of China is doing in a number of areas. You've said that the – quoting you, "the PRC is investing in critical infrastructure, including deep water ports," which, among other things, can have a potential dual use for maligned commercial and military activities.

Would love to hear just a little bit more about what you see the PRC doing in terms of deep water ports in the area.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, in the over 17 countries, deep water ports – it's all the critical infrastructure, and that's what really is concerning to me. So largest military build-up since World War II of any country in the globe, the military build-up, conventional and nuclear.

And then you look at – what looks to be investment through the Belt and Road Initiative. 22 of 31 countries in the hemisphere have signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative. And I would say that for the countries, they're really looking for economic assistance. And you have, as I mentioned before, 28 likeminded democracies – democracies trying to deliver for their people – and we have got to show that democracies do deliver for people.

And our leaders in the hemisphere are generally in one term in the seat, one term for four years. They're working on a stopwatch, not a calendar, and they're trying to make things happen very, very quickly in the midst of insecurity and instability.

And I would say with COVID, you know, the economics, for these countries with COVID, a lot of them rely on tourism. And I would say during COVID, we all know what happened during COVID. There wasn't a lot of tourism going on.

And so these countries are still reeling from the impact of COVID. We are as well in the United States. We see how we've been impacted too. And so how do we economically help these countries?

I go back to the potential of feeding and fueling the world. We want our neighbors around us. We want our neighbors, all of the Americas, to be secure. We want them to be economically able to support themselves. We want them to be able to have the security to be able to defend themselves, right? The stronger that they are, the stronger we all are in the Americas. And so the ability to help with that.

So in my mind, it starts with the economics. As I've been in this position for about two years and traveled around, meet with leaders, see the security challenges, see it first-hand, talk to leaders, look them in the eye and understand, I have to understand their challenges through their lens, not how I see it. It's how they see it. And then how do we support that?

So I've been working, you know, really hard to, you know, not just pressurize our abilities and – from the military perspective, you know, and military equipment and helping their militaries and their public security forces.

Number one, that's, you know, how we build a strong deterrence, is through the strength of all of us together. And I call that Team Democracy. Secretary Austin uses integrated deterrence, you know, as a term that we have in our National Defense Strategy.

But I – when I talk to my partners and our partner nations, I use the term Team Democracy because that's really what it is. It's an integrated team that works together for likeminded goals to promote democracy and the security of the region.

And so ...

BOWMAN: Thank you. I've seen you discuss elsewhere what some Chinese-linked entities are doing in and around the Panama Canal. So speaking of maritime infrastructure, that strikes me as somewhat concerning.

But I want to pivot to some space issues, which I know have been an area of focus for you. Senate Armed Service Committee Chairman Jack Reed said in March that the PRC has set up, quote, “a network of space-tracking stations in your region, which are probably doing more than space tracking.”

And my colleague, Craig Singleton, has published a visual that I highly recommend folks look at, that details China's efforts to establish military bases around the world. And in that, he highlighted the fact that Argentina signed a secret, 50-year agreement a few years back that is managed by the China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General Organization, which reports to the PLA's [People's Liberation Army] Strategic Forces.

Based on our research, with deference to you, I would love to hear kind of your assessment of what you think Beijing is up to in the space domain, in your area of responsibility.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, so as we talked in the last question just about all the critical infrastructure, you mentioned the deep water ports, space, most space infrastructure. So I'm one of six geographic combatant commands. And we have the most PRC-enabling space infrastructure in this hemisphere, that's number one, that's a concern for me.

Obviously, I go back to the largest military build-up, conventional military, conventional nuclear forces for the PRC since World War II. But again, what I worry about is what looks to be as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, and then all of the investment, it looks to be investment in the critical infrastructure.

But then being able to use it for dual use. So it looks to be these are state-owned enterprises controlled by the government – a communist government, by the way, doesn't respect the human rights of their own people and they won't respect the rights – human rights of the countries that they're working with.

And so in Argentina – the PRC has three deep space stations. Two are in mainland China. The other one is in Neuquen, Argentina. Fifty-year lease, as you said. They [Argentina] don't have daily access to that facility, the Argentines.

And so when you look at the space-enabling infrastructure, the telemetry and tracking, what we call TT&C sites, the SOSI sites, which are the space objects surveillance sites, tracking of their satellites for the PRC, but then also the ability to track U.S. satellites, partner nation satellites as well, and possibly be used for targeting of those satellites eventually. So that's a concern.

BOWMAN: That is. You've been talking about this for a while, and some of these installations have been there for a few years. You've traveled extensively throughout the region and met with who knows how many leaders.

When you raise these concerns about PRC activities where there's clearly either currently a military component or potentially a military component and express our concerns, what kind of responses are you getting? Do they understand that China is often leading with what seems like a civil or commercial guise, but behind it there's real military equities? Do they get that? And what kind of responses are you getting from the leaders there?

RICHARDSON: I think the – thank you for that question – I think the – eyes wide open – as we go along and we see a history, Latin America isn't the first, – Latin America and the Caribbean aren't the first to have Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese projects and things like that. We've seen that across the globe.

But I think what we have seen is now a track record by the PRC that is not – with the projects' design flaws, cost overruns, of course the debt traps.

BOWMAN: Yes.

RICHARDSON: Now, leaders – as one president told me from the region, former president, you know, he said, – “when you need a rope and someone throws you the rope – you don't necessarily look to who's throwing you the rope – and ask questions later.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: And so again, the security challenges are here and now and we've got to be able to deliver help, help our 28 likeminded democracies counter all of the insecurity and stability that is happening, from the transnational criminal organizations – I look at them as plowing the ground and creating that insecurity and instability which then allows the PRC to come in with the Belt and Road Initiative or with projects.

We have four other countries that aren't signatories on the BRI but that do have projects by the PRC that are happening in their countries because they need to show progress.

BOWMAN: Yes.

RICHARDSON: And so in terms of, you know, trying to bring team USA together, I think that the PRC, through the Belt and Road Initiative, bring their instruments of national power. We're able to do this through that guise, that economic guise which looks, you know, to help on the economic side of the house which our countries desperately need.

But then when you get into these costs – you know, the projects, the cost overruns, the design flaws, some have ended up in environmental hazards.

BOWMAN: The dam as well.

RICHARDSON: That's right, in Ecuador. And we've been able to bring the Corps of Engineers in to be able to help fix that project. But leaders are more wide open. They say it's only for economics, it's only on our – not on our defense side, it's on the domestic side –we're keeping, you know ...

BOWMAN: Right. I've heard that around as I look at, you know, Europe and even Middle East and other regions. It's like, oh, it's just commercial, it's just civilians. Well, have you read the PRC's Military-Civil Fusion doctrine? It's an explicit doctrine – they're telling us what they're doing. They're leading with a commercial front for the purpose of creating national champion Chinese companies to put our companies out of business and siphon technology to the People's Liberation Army which will be used against US and other forces in the Taiwan Strait.

RICHARDSON: Right.

BOWMAN: So, it's quite explicit. So, when in doubt, just read what they're saying, I would say. Anyway – but ...

RICHARDSON: So as we do that— how do we do the same thing with Team USA and Team Democracy? How do we bring the instruments of national power to Team USA in a coherent fashion that saturates? We're already doing so many things.

When you talk about the economic front, we have so many U.S. companies that are already working in the hemisphere. They're on the ground. They hire local workers. The Chinese don't do that with Belt and Road Initiative.

I mean, number one, you don't even – you – when I say extract, when you don't hire local workers to work on your projects or you bring in your own folks, outsourcing your own, you know, problem with employing people, your unemployment problem – number one, I mean, just look there.

But we've got to bring that. I use the simple term DIME – diplomats, informational, military and economics – your instruments of national power. We already have a very good working relationship with all of our Team USA embassies in the region. I host an annual Chief Emission Conference. I have a former ambassador that is on my staff. She's the civilian deputy of the commander. We've had that for over a decade, having a civilian deputy. We talk almost daily with our ambassadors in the region.

So we have that, informational. But I will put a plug in that we have over – close to 50 ambassadors that still need to be confirmed.

BOWMAN: Right. Speaking of the Senate ...

RICHARDSON: Globally, not in the hemisphere. I have about half a dozen that still need that, right? But that that continues to happen.

BOWMAN: And that matters when someone's a confirmed ambassador coming in with that title...

RICHARDSON: That's right. Honestly.

BOWMAN: ... that matters, in these engagements.

RICHARDSON: Your number one diplomat has to be on the seat. That's your ground game in our countries. And we can't have gaps of years. I've had gaps of years of U.S. ambassadors in the seat, and you can tell what countries that we have ceded ground to our strategic competitors because our number one diplomat hasn't been in the seat.

So I would just say that over many years, that's the first holds that take place. And so I would say that that – that's blocking our own field goals from Team USA and we need to do better. It's a national security issue.

Informational – the information domain, I'd say we're in conflict in the information domain. In Latin America, we have over 31 million followers with *Sputnik Mundo*, *Russia Today Espanol*, and *teleSUR*. They don't run justification or verification journalism. They spread disinformation. It undermines democracies across the hemisphere, and we've got to do better than that. We have got to get something in the region that is a very specific, promulgating democracies and how democracies deliver for people.

Military side of the house – again, we're doing a lot of things to pressurize the system. Our foreign military sales, foreign military financing, excess defense articles, speeding that process up, working very closely with not just Department of Defense and the services – and we have FMS [Foreign Military Sales] cases with all of the services, predominantly Army, though. I would say two-thirds of the cases. But then also within the interagency because there's a lot involved, you know, because we want to make sure that the equipment that we give militarily is used for the right reasons and it continues to be used for the right reasons.

All of this, with the respect for human rights, the rule of law, professionalization of the militaries, which is what we bring to the table as the U.S. military, and then economics. So I've been working very, very hard on the economics side of the house.

U.S. companies, what are their barriers to outcompete? I've talked to Secretary Blinken in May at the Cities Summit of the Americas. I've traveled with Secretary Raimondo to Panama a couple of months ago. We have over 150 U.S. companies in Panama. We have over 200 companies – U.S. companies in Honduras, for example.

We need to raise the profile and the branding of Team USA for our companies. What do you get with a U.S. company? You get transparency, you don't get cost overruns and design flaws and things like that. You know what you're getting with a U.S. company. They hire local workers. They invest in the community. They usually adopt schools, participate with hospitals. They become part of the community, right?

So bringing all of these things together, how can we do that better for Team USA, as part of Team Democracy in this hemisphere?

BOWMAN: You and I talked about in December and you referenced earlier with the rope that, you know, if you're a leader that has a one four-year term and you're wrestling maybe with poverty in some places and you're eager to deliver for your people, that's all good, but you put out a tender and there's only PRC entities bidding on those tenders – newsflash – we know who's going to win the tender.

And I asked you directly in December, you know, are Americans there to compete? And you basically – I don't want to put words in your mouth – you said in many cases, no. And so what's the problem? I mean, what's the problem? Why don't we have – America, and we're proud of our economy, we are proud of our free market.

RICHARDSON: Right.

BOWMAN: Why aren't there more American companies down there? And are we taking steps to fix that? Because we've been talking about this for a while. Are we seeing progress?

RICHARDSON: Right. So we are taking steps to fix that as part of Team USA. And again, as Secretary Raimondo said, economic security is national security. Said that while we were on our trip in Panama.

Panama and Costa Rica were just identified – and this was the day before our trip to Panama – as two of seven countries that will partner with the United States on semiconductor supply chain. So they're emerging leaders in the region in tech supply chains.

So how do we help enforce that? Again, back to feed and fuel the world, tech, you know, how are we bringing that into the hemisphere, and how are we making sure that Team USA isn't blocking our own field goals, right?

I've mentioned a couple things already. I've been to the Inter-American Development Bank to partner with them, tell them about what I see in the hemisphere, how can we work better together? Are you able to reach the U.S. companies that are in these countries when there are projects from the IADB [Inter-American Development Bank], that they can get a hold of these companies to participate in the tenders and actually compete. Are all these U.S. companies aware and are they competing? How do we get them to compete?

Been to the Developmental Finance Corporation to talk with the CEO there, and they have projects. They get individual investors to do projects in the hemisphere. And between the IADB and the DFC [U.S. International Development Finance Corporation], these are big money projects. This is what these countries need. And so how do we facilitate that? DFC is global, though. It's not just, the Western Hemisphere ...

BOWMAN: Right.

RICHARDSON: ... right? So how do we make it attractive there? They have what's called political risk insurance at the DFC, right? So when you have concerns about insecurity and instability in the countries, you know, it might not look so lucrative as a business is looking at the landscape of the countries. So that offers – I think that's huge. But we have to turn the corner on this balance of insecurity and instability or feed and fuel the world, right?

How do we get over this hump? How do we go this direction and realize that potential versus just continue to wallow in the insecurity and instability that is really plaguing a lot of the countries?

If you just take irregular migration, right, irregular migration is off the charts. We see it. Families are on the move. Make no mistake, they're on the move in the hemisphere.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: And it is only projected to increase.

BOWMAN: Can I ask you about that ...

RICHARDSON: Yes, absolutely.

BOWMAN: That's one thing I was planning for later but I'll go to it now because you raised it.

You know, I think it's fair to say and certainly not a partisan statement to say that, you know, we're confronting a real migration crisis on our southern border. A large portion of migrants trying to cross our southern border are coming from your area of responsibility. I saw that New York City Mayor Eric Adams had visited Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia recently.

Just very briefly, what is the core cause of the mass migration that we're seeing from your area? I remember years ago in the Senate talking about, you know, these issues, and that's kind of my theme here. It's like, gosh darn, we've been talking about a lot of this for a long time.

You know, what are the causes of migration? How can we address issues there so folks can stay at home and not risk the dangerous journey to our country?

RICHARDSON: Right. So the seven million migrants have poured out of Venezuela so far, a terrible humanitarian crisis that continues and is ongoing as we speak. And then having just been to the Darien on the Panama side and on the Colombian side, and working with our military and public security forces – so Colombia has obviously a military, Panama has public security forces, border forces – working with both of those countries as part of the trilateral agreement that the United States signed with Colombia and Panama back in April, prior to the expiration of Title 42 in May, and trying to work.

And the three pillars to this – a security pillar, legal pathways pillar. So it was – Administrator Power had made the comment we have to get the strategic messaging out there. Everybody knows how to get a hold of a smuggler to illegally make a journey through the Darien, a very dangerous jungle, but nobody seems to know legally how to get to the United States. And so that's the other pillar, is the legal pathways, and the third pillar is development.

And so since April, the military and public security forces have been conducting operations against the criminals that are – but again, I talk about the transnational criminal organizations. They're not just trafficking people, and that's become very fruitful in terms of resources, but drug trafficking, in some cases the migration. The migrants carry drugs for the cartels. They're able to go after them.

But I think what's a really important point is that a lot of these countries don't have laws and authorities for the military and the public security forces to reduce the flow of migration or stop it. They'll go after the – countering the human trafficking, but their job isn't to stop or reduce the flow of migration.

And so it starts with the laws of the countries. Some of them have TPS [Temporary Protected Status] agreements where they allow migrants to stay in their own country and assimilate and have programs. But as I mentioned at the beginning of this, they're already reeling from COVID and the economic impacts of that.

Then you add on seven million into the hemisphere from Venezuela. And at the top of our list, going through the Darien, are Venezuelans. I've been to the migrant shelters there on both the Colombia and the Panama side. And they're families, little kids, babies with their parents that are making this treacherous journey. Families are on the move. Insecurity, instability, climate change, drought. Can't get food, can't get healthcare. It's not safe.

And they – they have their eye on the American Dream. They either have family that's already in the States and I go back to strategic messaging. You know, if you just look at the strategic messaging, you can Google what folks are saying. "It was well worth the journey because, you know, we have our – we have the American Dream. We want to be there. We want to be safe. We want to have food. We want to take care of our kids. We want to drive a car. We want to have a house. And we want to be safe." And they say it's well worth the journey.

We've got to do better than that. It can't just be the American Dream, it has to be the Americas – the western Hemisphere Dream. How do we do that? That's a big tall order ...

BOWMAN: Yeah

RICHARDSON: ... but I'll tell you, democracies can deliver for people, absolutely, but how do we bring all of our instruments of national power? How do we work stronger together? How do we make sure that we're not blocking our own field goals?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: We can do this...

BOWMAN: Yeah – yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... and we are doing this. We just got to – we've got to ramp it up ...

BOWMAN: A lot of it is ...

RICHARDSON: ... we've got to step up ...

BOWMAN: ... outside the Department of Defense, right ...

RICHARDSON: It's a call to action ...

BOWMAN: ... yeah.

RICHARDSON: Well, it's ...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... – it's part of what team USA does.

BOWMAN: Yeah, sure.

RICHARDSON: I think just by virtue of the fact that I can – I meet with leaders all of the time, that's my – you know, the – what SOUTHCOM does, what we bring to the table, we're able to do that. There are other things that are happening in the globe that take our time and attention from our senior leaders, right?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: So, you know, I'm talking to all of you because we can do this...

BOWMAN: Yes.

RICHARDSON: ... and we are doing it. We've just got to do better, and it's a call to action.

BOWMAN: Thank you.

I want to go to – we have a distinguished audience here of congressional staff and reporters and folks from embassies, so I want to go to questions here in about five minutes or so. Just maybe a few last quick, lightning round questions if I may, General, on Cuba.

The Wall Street Journal reported on June 20th that China and Cuba are negotiating to establish a new joint military training facility on the island, sparking concern that in terms of Chinese troops potentially and other security and intelligence operations just 100 miles off Florida's coast. That's not too far from your headquarters in Miami, ...

RICHARDSON: Proximity matters.

BOWMAN: Proximity matters.

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

BOWMAN: So did that news in June surprise you? And can you provide any update on what China's doing in Cuba?

RICHARDSON: So we continue to watch the PRC very closely with everything that is going on in the hemisphere, everything that – you know, less than an hour flight from Miami. As I said, proximity matters. I can fly into 80 percent of this AOR [Area of Responsibility] in three to four hours. And I think we've forgotten that, quite honestly, how quickly that we can fly there, how close everything is. And we're watching that very closely.

But the – and it's – you know, how do we – we've had several things. It's not just what the PRC is doing, you know, it's what's Russia's doing in the hemisphere, with Minister of Foreign Affairs' trip to the region in the spring, going to Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, but then also to Brazil for meetings, the Iranian President coming to the hemisphere in June...

BOWMAN: Hezbollah activities in the hemisphere.

RICHARDSON: Hezbollah activities obviously are a concern, and the diaspora that's in Latin America making the rounds at Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela. We had the Iranian warships that were making the global tour. They came into the hemisphere from the Pacific and tried to do port calls at numerous cities, and those were denied and the frigate ended up doing a port call in Rio. We've had a Russian warship in the region and in the hemisphere.

So we're seeing a trend up of hardware that is coming into the region as well from our strategic competitors. And again, it's very concerning because I think that the region, with the insecurity and the instability, that we can do better in this vulnerable time ...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: to keep out strategic competitors that have maligned intentions.

BOWMAN: You know better than me, but I know from my background a little bit, you know, if you – if you're – you can't see a problem if you're not aware of it, you can't address it, and that makes me think of ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance.

You testified in open session in March that SOUTHCOM gets about two percent of the Department of Defense's ISR, and that that meets only about 17 percent of your requirements for ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. Are those numbers still accurate?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, they're still about accurate, of course.

BOWMAN: Yeah ...

RICHARDSON: And again, we're not – – the SOUTHCOM is not – they're – there are ...

BOWMAN: Yeah – no I get it...

RICHARDSON: ... things taking the resources and there's a finite...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... amount of resources, so...

BOWMAN: No, I get it. And I would – I have argued that, you know, INDOPACIFIC is a priority and we have important interests in EUCOM and CENTCOM, and the essence of strategy is coordinating ends of means and making tough decisions and allocating finite resources and mitigating risks. I get it.

RICHARDSON: Right.

BOWMAN: That's the essence of strategy. But it's also important, I think, for Americans and their representatives in Congress to understand how we could better protect our interests with just a little bit more, and that's where I'd love to go now.

In your response to Senator King in March, you said, quote, "we believe that we are getting after about 10 percent of what we know is the known flow of narcotics flow." So I just want to be clear – we have members of – congressional staff here and others listening in. Are you essentially saying that out of every 10 drug shipments you can see, we only have the means to interdict one? So 9 of 10 are getting through that we see?

RICHARDSON: So in terms of the resources that I get for SOUTHCOM and for counter-narcotics, we do the detection and monitoring mission, and then hand that information over to law enforcement or to the Coast Guard for the finish. And with the resources we have, we utilize those very, very specifically and to the best of our ability, which is the most that we can get out of that.

Can we do more if we had additional resources? Yes, we can do more – we could do more. But yes, about – we anticipate – and the analysis that we've done is we get after – we're able to get after, with the resources we have, about 10 percent of what we know is the cocaine flow, which is the problem an issue I have in the hemisphere, not fentanyl yet. I give a caveat there because that can change – but with the known drug flow, so cocaine and marijuana.

BOWMAN: So just a few more interdiction asset could make a big difference?

RICHARDSON: But I would say with the – you know, to go back to your point about ISR, Brad, is we look for innovative ways – I advertise this region as a test bed of innovation, a laboratory test bed for the services to utilize.

We have a exercise that my Navy component – I have a component from every one of the services, including Special Operations Command South, so SOC South. I have three joint task forces. I have JIATF South, Joint Interagency Taskforce South, which does the detection and monitoring for illicit drug activity coming to the United States. That's based out of Key West, Florida. I have JTF [Joint Task Force] Guantanamo Bay. I still have the law of war detainees that I'm responsible for. And also JTF Bravo, Joint Task Force Bravo in Soto Cano, Honduras.

And –those are just headquarters. We don't get a lot of assigned and allocated forces. So I advertise, you know, what services bring – they've got a lot of testing —they need to do. Always looking for ways to innovate technology.

I was here speaking yesterday at the Army's Convention, AUSA, bringing the joint flavor to the Joint Force, right, to the Army's Convention. We will also go to the Air Force Convention, but again, to get the word out.

Again, my Navy component is conducting –an exercise, where we're layering in 20 different technologies – new technologies that they're going to test for the vendors as part of this flex week that we're doing.

Secretary of the Navy has taken Task Force 59, which is a unmanned hybrid fleet out in the Middle East, and replicated that now in the hemisphere, helping with domain awareness. That's what we all struggle with, right, is this vast area – when you take the Caribbean, Central America and South America, it's huge and all the waters, right?

If I just talk about illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing, on any given day – and there are many countries –that participate in that, but –the predominant violator of that is the PRC. I will have anywhere from 250 to 642, which was the high, deep water fishing vessels raiding the fish in my AOR.

They hang out on the other side, on the ...

BOWMAN: Just from China ...

RICHARDSON: ... other side of the EEZs [Exclusive Economic Zones] ...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... for the countries. They follow the fishing migration patterns...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... right, and then they'll turn the tracking system off the AIS [Automatic Identification System] and go inside of the EEZs and raid continue to raid the fish. And these are big vessels, these aren't little fishing boats.

New York Times did an article on the PRC's deep water fishing fleet. You can see the big pictures of these big vessels in the region. But that's just one of many examples.

BOWMAN: Well, thank you.

I wish we had more time. I would have loved to talk about Chinese arms sales in the region, how a lot of folks in the region are sending military folks and civilians to China for training, and then also PRC safe cities...

RICHARDSON: Right.

BOWMAN: ... but we'll have to save those for another day. So let's go to questions. Please wait for the microphone, and please identify yourself and ask a question in the form of a question if you wouldn't mind. Right here, please.

SEVASTOPULO: Thank you. General, I'm Demetri Sevastopulo, the US/China Correspondent of the *Financial Times*. You said about the space station in Argentina that China doesn't have daily access. Can you explain a little bit more what do they have access to? How are they working with the Argentinians? And how important...

RICHARDSON: Not – not China ...

BOWMAN: Argentina doesn't have data ...

RICHARDSON: Argentina doesn't ...

SEVASTOPULO: Oh, Argentina's...

BOWMAN: The country hosting it doesn't know necessarily what's going on there...

RICHARDSON: Right.

SEVASTOPULO: Sorry, my misunderstanding. Can you talk a little ...

RICHARDSON: They can make an appointment.

BOWMAN: Shuffle all the papers, put them away before they show up. ...

SEVASTOPULO: But can you talk a little bit more about what they're actually doing right now? And how important is that facility for their hypersonic program?

RICHARDSON: So I would say, again, I go back to what I said originally – three deep space stations that the Chinese have, two in mainland China on – and one in Argentina.

So when we talk about telemetry, the TT&C sites, the SOSI sites, being able to track their own satellites but then also being able to track everybody else's satellites, and the concern for the targeting of that and then what that eventually leads to.

BOWMAN: Yeah, I mean, the first step to destroying a satellite is being able to detect and track, right? I mean so we don't have to be rocket scientists to understand why they might want to track satellites.

RICHARDSON: Thank you for the question.

KATZ: Good morning, General. Justin Katz with *Breaking Defense*. Yesterday, during AUSA, one of your officers during the Warriors Corner briefly discussed that SOUTHCOM was considering a heavy airlift unit, kind of loosely based off of a multinational one in EUCOM.

I was wondering if you could discuss a little bit of what's driving the need for heavy airlift in your AOR right now and – I mean, heavy airlift is always useful obviously, but why right now?

RICHARDSON: Well, thank you for the question. Thanks for being there yesterday. I'm really excited about this.

So –the overall program is called the Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative. And – you know, the – going back to being responsible and accountable, that through our foreign military sales program, FMF [Foreign Military Financing], EDA, Excess Defense Articles, and then when they go to countries, making sure that they're being used for the purposes that they were intended because we have a very rigorous process on Team USA's side of the house.

And that equipment – and that is tracked very closely by us, by Congress. And so we want to always make sure – but to get back to that, maintenance is hard. So it's not an airlift wing. We have – let me ask you this question – how many C-130s in the hemisphere do we have by our partner nations? We've got over 50.

And so if we can bring them up to a NATO standard, right, have the maintenance, the certifications that meet the NATO standard and then being able to have airlift – we had some countries, for example – the Haiti earthquake a couple of years ago in 2021. There was some countries that wanted to participate in that recovery effort but couldn't get there. And we weren't able to fly in from Team USA but they had forces on the ground, they were ready, they had the equipment. They were ready to go and they couldn't get there.

But in an airlift wing, right, if we pool together our resources – none of us have the resources together, but again, I go back to Team Democracy. This fits right in line with, you know, how do we not just have individual countries doing internal things but how do you bring that forward for the betterment of the hemisphere and partner nations working together?

So the Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative, it will have nine centers of excellence. We will go through the centers of education that are already established in some of our countries. And we started with the first three – two in Columbia, one in Jamaica.

And we go to the – for example, in Jamaica's military academy – and we proposed this to them. I mean, they don't – you know, if they want to do it and be a part of it – and then they can train and export that capability to the other countries in the region.

Colombia, for example – I'm a helicopter pilot. When I went to flight school at Fort Rucker, Alabama, the Spanish-speaking countries came to Fort Rucker for flight school. So some of them were in my class. Now, as of 2019, Colombia took that over, the Spanish-speaking flight school. They teach it in Colombia.

So we have very capable militaries – Colombia, Brazil, Chile, very capable. But how do we help them with maintenance? Maintenance is hard for the U.S. military, it really is. And so if it's hard for us, I know it's hard for everybody else.

Being a helicopter pilot, I know what it means to keep all your aircraft when you're in combat. You want as many that can fly in the air and not broke on the ground. So how do we help inculcate that culture from the tactical level of operator maintenance all the way to how – logistics and sustainment, which is really hard.

But it's the supply chain, right? How do you run that in your militaries and public security forces? That's hard. And so that's what we're getting after in the hemisphere. And I was just talking to Honorable Lowman – Chris Lowman yesterday, who's the Secretary of Defense's Advisor for Logistics, and we had talked about this last year, about this idea.

We've been working on it a year and a half in SOUTHCOM. We went and pitched it in the Pentagon, briefed over 20 different offices and stakeholders. We were able to get some seed money and now we're implementing it. It's a seven-year program. It's seven years only because we haven't thought of what's next, because we want to see how this goes. And the countries are excited about this, really excited. It'll touch on aviation maintenance, radio maintenance, vehicles, all of it. And I think it can really, really help in the hemisphere with our countries.

BOWMAN: That's exciting. Great question, Justin. Thank you. And it reminds me of foreign military sales. I would argue one of the great advantages of U.S. foreign military sales, it's not just like a Russian style, hey, we're going to give you something and then, you know, adios, we're gone.

RICHARDSON: Right – right.

BOWMAN: We're going to be there for decades to come, with the logistics, maintenance, and sustainment.

RICHARDSON: With the parts.

BOWMAN: So it's flying not just today but it's flying 10 years from now, and that's something I think might take a little long to get the American weapon, that might be a little bit more expensive, but if you go –

RICHARDSON: No, but you got the supply chain, you got the parts.

BOWMAN: Yes, exactly.

RICHARDSON: And now you'll have the – the education and training.

BOWMAN: Other question, right here. Yes?

SELDIN: General, thank you very much for doing this. Jeff Seldin from VOA [*Voice of America*]. I was wondering, you mentioned the migration crisis. To what extent are the migrants coming not just from South America but are pouring in from other countries, from other parts of the world into South America to get to the US? And if you can, where are those places that they're coming from?

And then also with the concerns about what's going on right now in the Middle East, Israel at war with Hamas after the terror attacks, what are you seeing in this hemisphere from Iranian contacts, Iranian proxies, Hezbollah in the region?

RICHARDSON: All right, so obviously very, very – watching very, very closely. And in terms of working with our partner nations, obviously they're concerned too and they're watching very closely.

I would say that, you know, just this – our Team Democracy network is very, very much alive and well and working with each other, sharing of information. Again, we go back and forth on the – we, you know, talk about the lack of ISR, but we focus a lot on not just trying to continue to get ISR and complain about not having what we need or we need more but looking for non-traditional ways of getting ISR. And how do we get information, how will you utilize AI and ML [Military Law]?

And we have a couple of programs that we do that with unclassified information, open source information that's out there, but using AI and ML to put that all together to help us understand better what's happening in the hemisphere.

And then also being able to share information through our sharing agreements that we have with our partner nations of what's happening in the hemisphere.

So we're watching very closely but in terms of indicators and things like that right now, as a result – immediate result of the attacks that have taken place, I think we've seen the condemnations that have come from the region regarding the attacks and we will continue to be very poised and watching the environment very, very closely.

BOWMAN: It's a great question, Jeff. Thank you.

With – you know, given Hezbollah's activity in the region, you know, the – or I would – just – you don't have to respond, General, if you don't want to, but not being able to secure our southern border not only has implications for drugs and other things but you can imagine those same networks could be used by terrorist organizations to infiltrate people into our country who wish us ill.

So this isn't just a drug issue, I would say it's a national security issue myself.

OK, other questions?

MARTINA: Yes. Thank you, General, for being here. I'm Michael Martina with *Reuters*. I wanted to ask again about the Panama Canal situation in the context that, you know, Panama has sovereignty over the canal.

What does the operation by Chinese companies – Chinese state-owned companies of the ports on those canals, from your perspective, strategically allow or could allow, you know, China to do in the event of a crisis? What – maybe you could spell that out for us. What is the threat there?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, so the – just in – in terms of just going – re-rolling the tape back a few years, in terms of the countries in the region, we have, as I mentioned before, 22 of 31 that have signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative. Panama signed on, and in 2017, signed 47 bilateral agreements with the Chinese.

But I would say this in terms of the work that we have been able to do, I'll go back – oh, by the way, I'll go back to our instruments of national power. Not having our number one diplomat in the seat for five years in Panama put Team USA behind the power curve as well.

And so, again, I can't stress – our number one diplomat makes a difference. That's our ground game. The leader of our ground game for Team Democracy and Team USA is our number one diplomat in the seat. Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte is in there as the Ambassador. She got there end of November last year. And she has made – she has covered a lot of great ground but we lost some.

But the current administration that we're working very closely with, we have a very good relationship. Probably 50 percent of the projects that were planned and were started on both sides of the Panama Canal and on both ends have been halted, either due to cost overruns, design flaws, those sorts of things.

But there are still five state-owned enterprises from the PRC that are along each side of the canal, and that is a concern for the Panama Canal Authority and how do they maintain being independent and not being concerned about cyber intrusion, being concerned about a lot of different things for the canal?

And so they have a board of directors and they watch that very closely, they work that very closely. That is a – very important for the global economy, for the Panama Canal. And so it's a very – it's all about relationships, at the end of the day, and how we work with our countries.

And again, I go back to the significance of Panama and all of the state-owned enterprises. And you know, my concern, in terms of being able to use it for dual use, for military application, very quickly, and that's what my concern is.

So we have to work . We have to, you know, work with – very closely with our partner nations and with the leaders and through our instruments of national power.

BOWMAN: Yeah, right here.

TANG: Didi Tang with the *Associated Press*. I have a question regarding the economics part. You know, it's part of the DIME, right? It's the last one, but still it's there. And then the US cannot do this alone. And, you know, you're talking about those projects and you're talking about rope, you know they're not looking at who is throwing the rope.

But anyway, on some of the projects, you know, China probably can be very competitive. And then the Chinese, they say, "we'll come in to help with the local economy." My question is, like, do you see any benefits of China's – those kind of economic activities, you know, in the area?

Now, you were talking about, you know, migration. You know, you want to stabilize the economy, to grow the economy. Well, that actually – you know, you see some benefits, you know, for China to be there, to help with the local economy. Or even, you know, do you see any kind of room even for the Americans, for the US to work with China, right, on some economic issues there, for the better – some kind of outcome?

RICHARDSON: Right, so I'm – I'm actually going to – thank you for the question. I'm going to participate in the American Chamber of Commerce Conference that's happening on the week of the 23rd and 24th. And so myself and Secretary Raimondo are going to speak at that event and talk to our U.S. companies about the importance of investing in the hemisphere.

And then, you know, when we were in Panama, we met with several companies for a meeting, that were there, and talked about their barriers to outcompete or what their challenges were. And so just bringing that time and attention – I'm also speaking to the Corps of Engineers.

So, you know, in SOUTHCOM, we – as part of Team Democracy, it's like scanning the whole area. Who can be part of Team Democracy? You want to be on Team Democracy? You're welcome to join, and what do you bring to the table?

For example, 5G – 5G is another critical infrastructure. 24 countries in this hemisphere have 3G and 4G. PRC technology, and then they get offered almost a zero cost upgrade to 5G.

BOWMAN: Maybe even a deep discount on that upgrade, I would imagine.

RICHARDSON: Or a deep discount, which is – so how do you – you know, I had one president – "General Richardson, what do I tell my people? I'm getting offered almost a zero cost upgrade to 5G from PRC. What do I tell them? That you want me to choose another company, right, that is not the Chinese, and I'm going to have to pay for all of this infrastructure."

And then I go down the list, right, of what the – what our companies, and it's not any U.S. companies for the 5G, right? It's Nokia, it's Ericsson, it's Samsung. They're Western solutions but part of Team Democracy solutions, right?

So advertising, again, as Team Democracy, what can we bring to this hemisphere? How can we raise the profile of U.S. companies, of international companies? Because we all have standards, we all respect the rule of law, human rights. We don't have cost overruns, we don't have design flaws. We have proven what U.S. businesses and Western businesses bring to the table. How do we up gun that profile?

So the leaders in the hemisphere see the investment that's happening. They don't see it. We don't talk about it. They don't see it. We've got to talk about it more, and that's why I'm here talking to all of you today, because I think that we can do better. It's a call to action.

And there's a lot of things going on in the hemisphere. It's just not being brought together to where leaders in the region can see it and our strategic competitors can see it.

BOWMAN: Thank you. Last question from me and then we need to wrap up, but just a quick 30 second one if I may. I'd feel remiss if I didn't ask it. What would be the negative impacts of a long-term Continuing Resolution on your command and its ability to conduct its mission, if Congress doesn't pass a – an appropriation – new appropriation?

RICHARDSON: It – it's just the – there's a whole host of things, and we've got to – it's predictability. Again, I go back to blocking our own field goals ...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: ... and economic security's national security. And as we work with, you know, in terms of just Department of Defense, and as I tell the services, use SOUTHCOM AOR, we can plow the ground, you know, and work on things and give you feedback, put it into our real world exercises, our real world missions. Close to the homeland, you don't have to go far away. You know, folks are watching very closely in EUCOM AOR, INDOPACOM. We can do that here in our AOR very close to the homeland, at a cheaper cost, I would think.

But just in terms of a long-term CR [Continuing Resolution], you can't have new starts ...

BOWMAN: Right.

RICHARDSON: ... you can't start anything new. You get your dropper feed of funding as you go. You don't get your budget. We've got to be able to pass a budget.

And I would say also for the holds that are currently on the military, our military holds, it's impacting readiness, it's causing unpredictability. We need leaders at echelon in the right place, where they're supposed to be, and not blocking our own field goals again, which is what we're doing. We could do better than that.

BOWMAN: So there's three congressional items, confirmed ambassadors, pass an appropriations, and stop holding the U.S. military accountable for policies they don't control, in what I would call as someone who worked in the Senate for nine years, an unprecedented hold that is a self-inflicted wound on our military readiness.



Latin America's China Challenge: A Conversation with SOUTHCOM Commander General Laura Richardson

*Featuring General Laura J. Richardson, moderated by Bradley Bowman
Introductory remarks by Elizabeth Robbins*

All right. Well, with that unsolicited comment, let me just say thank you, General, so much for being here. I really enjoyed our conversation. I learned a ton. And I just want to thank you personally for your service to our country over many decades, you and your family.

I want to thank the men and women that you lead. I can't think of a better person to be in this job right now. I know it comes at great sacrifice, and I want you to know that you have friends here at FDD that want you to have everything you need to fulfill your mission.

RICHARDSON: Well, thank you. I'm honored to be in this job. And thank you so much for your service and your continued service. Thank you, Brad.

BOWMAN: Thank you so much. Thank you. For more information on FDD and the latest analysis on these issues, we encourage you to visit FDD.org. We also welcome you to look at our Center on Military and Political Power.

Thank you so much for being here in person and for tuning in online. We look forward to seeing you again soon. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

END