

An Analysis of the Position of the US Southcom Commander on Latin American and Caribbean Security

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Admiral Kurt W. Tidd Commander, Southcom spoke at the Atlantic Council's Brent Snowcroft Centre on International Security on July 13, 2016 where he outlined the threat environment of Latin America and the Caribbean and the strategy of Southcom to counter these threats. In his address Adm. Tidd states: "we're in the middle of a strategic transition that touches every corner of the globe. Today's security environment is profoundly different from those of previous generations. Uncertainty, unpredictability, and transregional linkages are the defining characteristics of the world today. That is true for the Asia-Pacific region, for Europe...and truer for the Western hemisphere." The security environment of the Caribbean is now in transition relegating previous strategies of response to the boneyard as the extinct dinosaurs. It is then national security lunacy to keep applying security measures that do not resonate with this new reality on the ground or complicity or both. The operational environment is then uncertain, unpredictable and transregional because of the globalised threat posed by the globalised illicit players. The question arises of the existence of the necessary political will in the Caribbean to respond globally to a globalised threat. The commander insists that the reality he depicts is having the greatest and gravest impact on security in the Western Hemisphere where the Caribbean is situated but throughout his speech the commander does not name a major player in this security uncertainty: The Mexican Transnational Trafficking Organisations (MTTOs) but he later describes their operations as threats that must be tackled. The commander continues: "we have to first recognize there's no longer any such thing as a 'regional' challenge...from the activities of China and Russia...to the illicit flows of drugs, weapons, and people...to natural disasters and humanitarian crises, the challenges we confront in this part of the world have one thing in common: they are transregional." There are then three broad threat horizons of concern to Southcom impacting the region: the activities of states external of the Western Hemisphere in the region, the trafficking of drugs, weapons and people and natural disasters and humanitarian crises. It is then of crucial importance to understand how does Southcom visualise these threat horizons and formulate strategic responses.

The commander states on this as follows: “I asked out teams at USSOUTHCOM to help me think through three questions...questions whose answers will inform our strategy for engaging with this increasingly important region.” These three questions then present an insight into the worldview of Southcom and the rationale of its strategy of engagement. Question 1: “how should we view the activities of China, Russia, and Iran in the Western Hemisphere?” The admiral states on these three states as follows: “There are aspects of their approach to engagement that are concerning, especially if you care-like the United States does-about the importance of human rights, good governance, and rules -based international order. Keep in mind there’s no Chinese, Russian, and Iranian equivalent of a Leahy law...no comparable congressional conditions on security assistance...little transparency when it comes to defence cooperation...” These three states are not functional Western liberal democracies and they don’t play by the accepted rules of the international order which means at minimum their activities in Latin America and the Caribbean will be disruptive of the international order and its peace thereby creating regional tension and possible conflict between states of the region. This threat demands: “So it is important that we closely scrutinize, and clearly understand, the activities of these actors in the Western Hemisphere.” Surveillance, understanding and response but what of the countries in the region closely aligned to a country or all three countries of the named group as Venezuela on this the commander is silent.

The commander poses Question 2 on the illicit flows in the region as follows: “how do we address those complex challenges? In Latin America and Caribbean, the overarching security challenge is a very big one indeed: the destabilizing operations, corruptive influence, and global reach of transnational threat networks.” In the Caribbean the dominant, and hegemonic threat to security emanates from the operations of globalised “threat networks” as they have the resources to destabilise the social order especially through the instrument of corrupting the state and the rule of law by extension. Have then Caribbean politicians responded adequately to this threat? The commander enumerates and details the threat as follows: “You want to transport cocaine and heroin from South America into every major global market? In our region, there is a network for that. You want to smuggle weapons from the United States to the Caribbean and Mexico? We’ve got networks for that, too. You’ve illegally mined

some gold...and you want to sell it for several million dollars in the booming international gold markets? We've got networks for that. You want to traffic tens of thousands of women and children, many of whom wind up prisoners of the sex trade? We have, appallingly, all too many networks in this region for that." The commander lists the activities of globalised threat networks that are all operational in the Caribbean. Gold smuggling is a viable illicit activity in Guyana a member of the CARICOM group. The trafficking of women and children is a known frontline illicit activity in the Dominican Republic and Haiti and throughout the Caribbean. The commander indicates the threat of illicit weapons sourced in the US and trafficked to the Caribbean the impact of which is already being experienced in the Caribbean indicating that small arms trafficking from the US to the Caribbean is now linked to trafficking to Mexico. This raises the issue of small arms trafficked to the Caribbean then to Mexico and vice versa which is an entirely new dynamic that will impact the balance of power on the ground and ultimately between Caribbean states and the illicit economy. This new arms smuggling dynamic has already triggered an arms race in the illicit economy. But what the commander doesn't state is the hegemony of the MTTOs over this illicit trade in weapons. Whilst the trafficking of illicit drugs has been operationalised in the Caribbean since the decade of the 1960s and it's now in its fourth evolutionary stage which is the hegemony of the MTTOs. The reality today is the dominance of the MTTOs of these illicit trades which has resulted in a dramatic change in the scale and expanse of these trades in the Caribbean and the failure of Caribbean politicians to embrace this reality and deal with it. The states of the Caribbean are now in the grips of a concerted threat never faced before since decolonisation it is in fact an existential threat and the response does not assure that a future without endemic violence and state collapse is realisable.

The gravest statement by the commander dealt with terrorist networks that are operationalised in the region. The commander states: "You need to move some people with known terrorist ties from the Middle East, up through south and then Central America, and over the US-Mexico border? We've got networks for that, too. You want to spread an extremist message in the Caribbean and recruit fighters for ISIL? We've a worrisome number of networks for that." The commander names and flags the Caribbean as an area of noted activity in the region to disseminate Salafi Jihadi extremism and for the recruitment of foreign

fighters especially for Islamic State in this threat environment Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is the pinnacle player given the number of nationals that have migrated, continue to migrate and seek to do so from T&T to the Islamic State. Given this Caribbean operational base it is then a stopover point, a way station and an in transit zone for those seeking to enter the US illicitly. Again the response of the politicians doesn't illustrate the capacity to accept the nature of the threat and to act accordingly with despatch. Finally, the commander ends his description of illicit networks with money laundering as follows: "You need to legitimize millions dollars in illicit profits every year? Well you're in luck, we have many networks for that, including sub-networks that specialise in laundering dirty money, exploiting free trade zones, and, in some cases, helping to funnel cash to international terrorist organisations. I could go on...but I think you get the picture." The Caribbean is not only a trafficking transition zone but a laundering zone, a laundry, for illicit funds which intensifies the strategic importance of the Caribbean to illicit networks including extremist networks. Again the question arises of the response of Caribbean governments to this reality which is especially illustrated by the tardiness in shoring up the financial sector of Caribbean states in light of this most potent threat.

Admiral Tidd presents in his speech a description of the organisational nature of the premier illicit networks of the region. The commander states: "the most sophisticated of these networks are marketing two things: first, a highly efficient logistical infrastructure that spans the globe. These networks control the distribution hubs and smuggling routes that span the Western Hemisphere and lead into the United States, Europe, and Africa. They have enough capital to buy off judges, police officers, and entire villages to ensure freedom of movement. And second, the most powerful networks offer what all powerful networks offer: a dense, web of social connections to facilitators, enablers, and supporters, here in the region and around the world. This can come in the form of corrupted local officials, unscrupulous accountants...and, in the case of extremist networks, ideologues and influencers who nurture the radicalisation process and foster the spread of violent ideology." The commander is cogently describing the organisational characteristics of the MTTOs and their affiliate organisations indicating the reality that no illicit organisation can thrive and wield hegemony without the complicity of state officials, the political elite and members of civil

society. To engage with these networks without purging the state agencies, the political structures and civil society of corrupt elements is an exercise in public relations spin doctoring. Failure to deal with complicity results in a war only on drugs that only polices the poorest echelons of the social order filling the prisons with the casualties of this war that is in fact a spin doctored phony war. The commander illustrates the inherent weaknesses of extremist networks in the region which when properly exploited they can be dismantled as the key is the operation of the ideologue/recruiter. The commander ends this section of his speech by sending a most potent message to the Caribbean when he said: "But simply stopping the drugs is no longer enough." When you articulate a paradigm of the drug trade in public that is relevant to the first decade of the 1990s you can never hope to stop the drugs much less to deal with the reality of 2016. That is the condition of the netherworld we are condemned to in the Caribbean.

The commander posed the final question: "are we ready for what comes next? Are we at USSOUTHCOM prepared to respond to the inevitable natural disaster or epidemic that lies in wait, just around the corner? Are we prepared to play our role as part of our larger national security enterprise dedicated to disrupting, as Chairman Dunford puts it, transregional, multi-domain, and multi-functional threats?" Admiral Tidd is questioning the readiness of US Southcom to disrupt this globalised multi-faceted organised crime threat that exists now and is impacting US national security now. His answer to the question is: "At USSOUTHCOM, we're training hard to get to 'yes'" Admiral Tidd openly states NO as it's a work in progress which means Southcom is presently playing catch up with globalised organised crime and extremist networks that are constantly evolving and evolving rapidly. What then for the national security apparatuses of the Caribbean especially those in the public domain that continue to articulate an early 1990s reality of the illicit drug trade for the reality of 2016, glib statements on money laundering and on extremist networks and on people smuggling in spite of the huge budgetary allocations handed to this apparatus year after year without fail? Where is the concerted action to dismantle these networks?

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