

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY
POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS
FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

LT Kevin Spillman



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Kevin Spillman^a

SUMMARY

This article examines the recent U.S. policy shift de-emphasizing climate change as a security priority in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), particularly its implications for SOUTHCOM and regional partnerships. Despite climate change acting as a significant threat multiplier in the region, exacerbating resource scarcity, economic disruption, and migration, current U.S. policies have curtailed climate-focused initiatives, contrasting sharply with previous strategies.

This policy divergence risks misaligning U.S. priorities with those of LAC partners, who widely view climate impacts as critical security concerns. Such misalignment could reduce partner engagement, undermine the effectiveness of security cooperation programs, and erode trust. Furthermore, it creates an opening for the PRC to expand its influence by positioning itself as a more responsive partner on environmental issues. The article recommends a nuanced implementation of policies, enhanced strategic communications, active monitoring of PRC narratives, and internal impact assessments to mitigate these challenges and preserve U.S. strategic interests.

KEY WORDS:

Climate security, SOUTHCOM, security cooperation, humanitarian assistance, strategic competition

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^aLT Kevin Spillman is a U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officer, currently in training to serve as Combat Systems Department Head onboard the USS WICHITA (LCS 13) in U.S. Fourth Fleet. He is a senior fellow at the Naval Postgraduate School's Global Resilience and Security Fellowship and recently earned a master's degree in international security from King's College London with a focus on U.S.-Latin America relations. <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5028-0314>

INTRODUCTION

The United States possesses enduring strategic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), a region with historically strong geopolitical ties to U.S. homeland security and its economic prosperity. National Security Strategies have consistently recognized this linkage, emphasizing the benefits gained from a stable, peaceful, and democratic Western Hemisphere. Despite this acknowledged importance, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the combatant command responsible for the region, has historically operated within a comparatively resource-constrained environment relative to commands directly facing adversarial states, such as U.S. Central Command or U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. The absence of near peer competitors and active interstate conflicts in LAC for over half a century is likely a key factor in the scarcity of allocated resources. In FY25's budget request, SOUTHCOM received the second smallest allocation for security cooperation¹, which has

Disaster Response (HA/DR) missions to infrastructure development and capacity-building initiatives aimed at climate resilience². This stands in stark contrast to the 2025 posture statement delivered by her successor, Admiral Alvin Holsey, which contained zero explicit mentions of "climate change," although it did acknowledge threats from "natural disasters" and "environmental degradation".³

This shift within SOUTHCOM coincided with broader policy changes within the Department of State and the Department of Defense. An internal State Department memo authored by Secretary Marco Rubio outlined a strategic redirection away from "climate policies that weaken America" and towards achieving "energy dominance"⁴. While conceding that environmental threats require attention and supporting "sensible environmental protections," the memo prioritized actions aligning with core national interests defined as making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous. This coincides with broader departmental reorganization

“Climate change acts as a threat multiplier through several interconnected mechanisms”

become one of the most effective soft power tools in the DoD's toolbox. Yet despite receiving this small allocation for security cooperation initiatives, SOUTHCOM has been extraordinarily effective in partnership building through humanitarian assistance, disaster response, and emergency preparedness. In a region increasingly impacted by the effects of extreme weather, natural disasters, and resource scarcity, these programs have come to be instrumental in building partner relationships, capacities, and capabilities.

Recent shifts in U.S. policy and rhetoric indicate a clear departure from the previous administration's approach to climate security in the LAC region. In General Laura Richardson's 2024 posture statement, climate change was prominently featured, referencing it nearly a dozen times in contexts ranging from Humanitarian Assistance and

efforts that have the potential to impact the DoD, such as the dissolution of USAID and the closure of U.S. embassies and consulates around the globe. At the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth issued a memorandum detailing a revised mission focus for the DoD, explicitly calling for the "elimination of the 'Climate' distraction"⁵. This directive included removing climate-related terminology from DoD mission statements and prohibiting DoD components from planning, programming, or budgeting for climate-specific initiatives. Notably, however, the Hegseth memo contained language permitting the assessment and mitigation of "weather-related impacts on operations", creating a potential semantic distinction between permissible activities focused on immediate weather events and prohibited activities framed around long-term climate change.

¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 President's Budget."

² Richardson, "SOUTHCOM's 2024 Posture Statement to Congress."

³ Holsey, "SOUTHCOM's 2025 Posture Statement to Congress."

⁴ Rubio, "Priorities and Mission of the Second Trump Administration's Department of State."

⁵ Hegseth, "Mission Focus Of the Department of Defense."

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The rapid and explicit nature of this policy realignment across key national security departments, marked by strong rhetoric dismissing climate action as a "distraction" or detrimental to national strength, suggests a coordinated, top-down shift driven by ideological considerations rather than an incremental adjustment based on evolving threat assessments or resource allocation debates. The policy change has been carried out without regional feedback or observation of changing environmental realities on the ground, and further, the deliberate distinction between addressing "weather-related impacts" while forbidding "climate change" terminology introduces semantic ambiguity. This ambiguity could generate inconsistent implementation across government agencies, including SOUTHCOM, and potentially generate friction with regional partners who explicitly link intensifying weather events to the broader phenomenon of climate change and utilize standard climate terminology in their own security planning.

This article analyzes the implications of this recent U.S. policy shift de-emphasizing climate change as an explicit security priority within the SOUTHCOM AOR. It examines how this divergence from previous policies, programs, and stated regional partner concerns affects the efficacy of U.S. security cooperation, the strength of its partnerships, and the dynamics of strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in LAC. To help frame this analysis, the article utilizes Principal-Agent Theory, whose theoretical lens conceptualizes the relationship between the United States (the principal) and LAC partner nations (the agents) in security cooperation endeavors. The theory suggests that successful cooperation, where the principal provides resources or support to the agent to achieve mutually desired outcomes, relies on factors such as the alignment of interests and objectives, information symmetry, and effective incentive structures.¹ This analysis will explore how the U.S. decision to downplay climate security, a documented priority for many regional actors², potentially misaligns principal and agent interests, thereby complicating cooperative security efforts and potentially undermining U.S. strategic

goals in the hemisphere.

A COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Persistent Traditional and Non-Traditional Threats

The security landscape in LAC can be best understood as a complex interplay of persistent threats that extend beyond traditional state-based conflict. Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) represent a dominant challenge, drowning peaceful societies with violence and corruption. These organizations have demonstrated significant adaptability, diversifying their portfolios from narcotics trafficking to include human smuggling, illicit logging, and illegal mining, often leveraging global networks for illicit finance and logistics. The pervasiveness of this threat is reflected in regional perceptions, where the 2022 William J. Perry Center survey found that 72% of responding security professionals ranked organized crime as a top security threat in the hemisphere.³ These criminal enterprises often thrive in environments with weak governance and institutional fragility. Historical instability, endemic corruption, democratic backsliding, and limited state capacity create vacuums that TCOs readily exploit and the state's absence or inability to provide security and basic services in certain areas allows these criminal enterprises to thrive.

Additionally, deep-seated socio-economic issues act as significant drivers of insecurity. Persistent poverty and inequality coupled with economic stagnation limit opportunities and foster conditions where crime may appear as a viable alternative for impoverished communities. Food and water insecurity, exacerbated by environmental factors, adds another layer of vulnerability. Together, these socio-economic pressures contribute not only to criminality but also to irregular migration flows, as individuals seek better opportunities and security elsewhere. The high ranking assigned to economic problems and poverty/inequality by regional security professionals in the Perry Center survey strongly

¹ Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency."

² Paterson, "Results of the Perry Center Threats Survey."

³ Ibid.

suggests that a security cooperation relationship that is focused solely on traditional military or law enforcement responses, without addressing these underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities, vulnerabilities acutely worsened by climate change, may be perceived by regional partners as insufficient or fundamentally misaligned with the root causes of instability.

Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier

Since 2007, experts within the DoD have recognized that climate change intersects with and amplifies existing security challenges across the globe.¹ It acts as a threat multiplier through several interconnected mechanisms:

- **Resource Scarcity and Competition:** Climate change intensifies competition over dwindling resources. Droughts impact water availability for agriculture and critical infrastructure like the Panama Canal, which has had to drastically decrease the number and draft of ships permitted for daily passage². Degradation of

“A U.S. policy that focuses narrowly on specific threats while simultaneously de-emphasizing programs addressing climate impacts risks being ineffective”

- arable land and changing rainfall patterns threaten food security, particularly for vulnerable agricultural communities. This scarcity can fuel local conflicts, social unrest, and forced migration.
- **Economic Disruption and Vulnerability:** Climate impacts directly undermine key economic sectors. Agriculture, a significant source of exports and livelihoods in LAC, suffers from droughts, floods, and rising global temperatures. Fisheries face threats from ocean warming, acidification, and the exacerbation of unregulated fishing, impacting critical portions of coastal community economies. Tourism-dependent economies, particularly in small island states, are devastated by increasingly powerful hurricanes.³ Damage to critical infrastructure, including ports, transportation networks, and energy facilities (such as

hydropower dams potentially affected by altered river flows), disrupts trade and development, deepening poverty and inequality.

- **Displacement and Migration:** Acute climate-related disasters, such as hurricanes in the Caribbean, floods in Bolivia and Ecuador, forest fires in Brazil and Chile, and droughts across Central and South America, force immediate displacement. Even slow-onset changes like sea-level rise can force coastal communities to migrate. This internal and cross-border migration strains resources in receiving areas, potentially increasing social tensions and creating new security dilemmas for governments.
- **Exploitation by Illicit Actors:** Climate-stressed communities, facing economic hardship and resource scarcity, can become more vulnerable to recruitment by TCOs. Criminal groups may exploit migration routes, control access to essential goods like water or food after disasters or deepen their involvement in environmental

crimes such as illegal logging and mining, often facilitated by corruption and used to finance other illicit activities.

The profound interconnectedness of these threats, where TCOs engage in environmental crime, climate impacts drive migration flows managed by criminal networks, and corruption enables myriad illicit activities, highlights the limitations of a traditional security cooperation approach. A U.S. policy that focuses narrowly on specific threats, such as TCOs or PRC influence, while simultaneously de-emphasizing or eliminating programs addressing climate impacts, deteriorating infrastructure, or underlying economic vulnerabilities, risks being ineffective precisely because it ignores these critical linkages.

¹ Goodman, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*.

² Dahl, “The Panama Canal Is Running Dry.”

³ “Climate Migration and Displacement No Place to Run.”

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

By attempting to isolate and remove the "climate distraction," such a policy might inadvertently undermine progress against other prioritized threats that are inextricably linked to environmental and socio-economic stability.

CLIMATE SECURITY AS A U.S. PRIORITY: SOUTHCOM UNDER GENERAL LAURA RICHARDSON

Integrating Climate into Strategy and Rhetoric

During General Laura Richardson's tenure as Commander of SOUTHCOM, addressing climate change evolved into a prominent component of the command's strategic discourse and activities. Posture statements delivered in 2023 and 2024 explicitly integrated climate change and environmental degradation as significant security challenges impacting both the region and U.S. interests. The 2024 statement, for instance, directly asserted that climate change and environmental degradation diminish military readiness by expanding operational requirements while potentially reducing available resources.¹ It further highlighted the disproportionate effect of extreme weather events and natural disasters on the LAC region, particularly the Caribbean and Central America, impacting fundamental access to food, water, healthcare, and energy.

This integration was framed within a broader emphasis on partnership and collaboration. General Richardson frequently invoked the concept of "Team Democracy," positioning the United States and its like-minded regional partners as working collectively to counter shared threats, including those stemming from environmental instability. This rhetoric suggested an approach where climate security was not merely an environmental issue but a domain for cooperative security engagement, aligning U.S. efforts with perceived partner needs.

Climate-Related Programs and Initiatives

This strategic framing translated into tangible programs and initiatives undertaken by SOUTHCOM and its component commands during this period. Several activities explicitly

incorporated climate considerations:

- **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response:** While HA/DR has long been a core SOUTHCOM mission, exercises and operations were increasingly contextualized by the rising frequency and intensity of climate-driven disasters. Annual exercises like Tradewinds and Resolute Sentinel, as well as humanitarian missions like Continuing Promise and the Lesser Antilles Medical Assistance Team (LAMAT), provided platforms for practicing joint response to events like hurricanes and floods, implicitly building climate resilience.
- **Resilience Infrastructure:** SOUTHCOM invested in projects aimed at enhancing partner capacity to withstand and respond to disasters. This included the construction and equipping of Emergency Operations Centers and Disaster Relief Warehouses in vulnerable locations. Collaboration with entities like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) developed critical infrastructure projects that considered climate resiliency and environmental sustainability.
- **Capacity Building and Planning:** The command actively engaged in building partner capacity linked explicitly to climate security. This involved subject matter expert exchanges with SOUTHCOM's Situational Assessment Team and the Pacific Disaster Center (PDC), focused on disaster planning and emergency response. Further, the deliberate incorporation of climate security scenarios into tabletop exercises such as Precipitous Storm, Pervasive Crux, and Jaguar Sentinel, developed training programs to assist regional defense and security partners in planning for climate contingencies using data-driven tools.

These SOUTHCOM-led efforts can be seen as a cooperative effort with broader U.S. government initiatives at the time. The U.S.-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030 (PACC 2030), launched in 2022, aimed to bolster regional climate adaptation, resilience, and clean energy transitions through various programs involving agencies like USAID and the State Department. That same year, the DoD released its

¹ Richardson, "SOUTHCOM's 2024 Posture Statement to Congress."

Climate Adaptation Plan and Climate Risk Analysis, both focused on how the military branches could train, fight, and win in a changing environment. Thus, the integration of climate security considerations under General Richardson represented a conscious effort to adapt the region's security cooperation initiatives and humanitarian assistance programs to the broader non-traditional threat landscape of LAC. It signified a move beyond purely traditional military-to-military engagement to encompass interconnected challenges, especially those identified as priorities by regional partners.

Rationale and Perceived Benefits

The rationale for elevating climate security within SOUTHCOM's strategy was multifaceted. Primarily, it aimed to address factors directly contributing to regional instability, which in turn pose risks to U.S. interests and homeland security. Building partner capacity to respond to climate-related disasters was seen as enhancing regional stability and reducing the potential need for large-scale U.S. responses. Furthermore, joint HA/DR operations and climate resilience training served to both expand interoperability between military forces and to improve civ-mil relations for countries dependent on their armed forces for emergency response.

Addressing climate security was also framed as a means of countering malign regional influence, particularly from the PRC, whose investments in the region were sometimes associated with negative environmental consequences, such as the controversial Coca Codo Sinclair dam in Ecuador.¹ By offering support for sustainable development and climate resilience, the U.S. could present a contrasting, more responsible model of international development, admittedly, at a smaller scale.

Crucially, this focus was perceived as beneficial for strengthening relationships. By aligning security cooperation efforts with an issue of high importance to many LAC nations, particularly vulnerable Caribbean and Central American states, the U.S. aimed to build trust and solidify its position as the

"partner of choice" in the hemisphere. Many of these climate-related activities, while falling under security cooperation, inherently possessed strong soft power features. Providing disaster relief, building resilient infrastructure, and offering training directly benefited local populations and enhanced the U.S. image. This potentially provided a competitive advantage against PRC engagement models that are often perceived as more transactional and less focused on addressing the root causes of regional instabilities.

THE U.S. POLICY REALIGNMENT: REFOCUSING NATIONAL SECURITY PRIORITIES IN 2025

SOUTHCOM Command Transition and Posture Shift

The change of command at SOUTHCOM from General Richardson to Admiral Alvin Holsey in 2024 coincided with a palpable shift in the command's public posture regarding climate change. Admiral Holsey's 2025 Posture Statement, submitted to Congress in early 2025, maintained continuity with his predecessor in identifying key threats such as strategic competition with the PRC and Russia, the destabilizing impact of TCOs, and the challenge of eroding democracies in the region.² The command's overarching lines of effort: Strengthening Partnerships, Countering Threats, and Building our Team, would also remain consistent.

However, the explicit framing of climate change as a security threat, prominent in the 2024 statement, was absent in the 2025 document. While Admiral Holsey's testimony and statement acknowledged challenges related to natural disasters, environmental degradation, and food and water insecurity, these were presented as lesser issues rather than consequences explicitly driven by or integrated under the umbrella of climate change.³ This omission represented a significant departure from the Richardson strategy and signaled an alignment with broader administration policy shifts occurring simultaneously.

¹ Aguilera, "China's Global Footprint | Controversy in Ecuador's Largest China-Built Infrastructure Project."

² Holsey, "SOUTHCOM's 2025 Posture Statement to Congress."

³ Vergun, "Leaders Describe Host of Threats to Homeland, Steps to Mitigate Them."

Changing DoS and DoD Policies

The State Department, under the new leadership of Secretary Marco Rubio, also articulated a clear policy realignment concerning climate change and energy. A key departmental memo outlining the department's priorities emphasized the need to "do away with climate policies that weaken America" and instead leverage diplomacy to achieve "American energy dominance".¹ This policy cited previous climate initiatives as detrimental to U.S. strength and economic interests while the emphasis on "energy dominance" introduced a new dynamic into U.S. relations with LAC. The region holds significant reserves of both fossil fuels and rare earth minerals that are crucial for renewable energy transitions. A U.S. policy heavily favoring fossil fuel exploitation may align with the interests of some regional energy producers like Venezuela but could potentially clash with nations committed to decarbonization under the Paris Agreement or those seeking investment in renewable infrastructure. This creates

and fundamentally inconsistent with the military's "core warfighting mission".³

The administration's stated rationale for this significant policy realignment centers on several key themes. Primarily, it reflects a desire to refocus the State Department and DoD on what are defined as their "core" missions: diplomacy that advances specifically defined U.S. national interests (safety, strength, prosperity) and military preparedness focused on warfighting and lethality. The prioritization of "energy dominance" serves as both an economic goal and a strategic objective, replacing climate action as a key pillar of national policy. Further, the shift aligns with a broader "America First" foreign policy that questions the value of certain international agreements and multilateral initiatives, particularly those perceived as burdening the U.S. economy or infringing on sovereignty. Finally, the focus remains squarely on countering strategic competitors, primarily the PRC and Russia, with resources and attention redirected

“This integration was framed within a broader emphasis on partnership and collaboration”

a complex scenario where the new U.S. policy might simultaneously foster alignment with certain partners while creating friction with others, potentially increasing regional competition with China, which is also heavily invested in the region's diverse energy sector.

Shortly after Secretary Rubio's memo was released, newly nominated Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth implemented a more sweeping shift away from climate considerations. A widely disseminated memo directed the "elimination of the 'Climate' distraction" across the department with specific mandates including removing the term "climate change" and related concepts from mission statements and forbidding components from planning, programming, or budgeting for climate-related initiatives.² Secretary Hegseth's public statements reinforced this policy, framing climate work as "woke," wasteful ("climate change crap"),

towards traditional geopolitical and military competition.

DIVERGING PRIORITIES AND THE IMPACT ON SECURITY COOPERATION

Applying Principal-Agent Theory

The relationship between the United States and its partners in LAC can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Principal-Agent Theory, with particular attention paid to security cooperation initiatives. In this framework, the United States acts as the principal, providing equipment, funding, training, and interagency coordination tools. LAC partner nations act as agents, expected to utilize this support to achieve objectives presumably shared with the principal, such as enhancing regional

¹ Rubio, "Priorities and Mission of the Second Trump Administration's Department of State."

² Hegseth, "Mission Focus Of the Department of Defense."

³ U.S. Department of Defense, "This Week."

stability, countering TCOs, and strengthening democratic institutions. The success of this relationship, according to the theory, depends heavily on the alignment of interests and priorities between the principal and the agents.¹

The recent U.S. policy shift introduces a significant challenge to this dynamic. The U.S. has demonstrably altered its stated priorities by de-emphasizing climate change as a security concern and curtailing related programs and funding. However, a substantial number of LAC partner nations continue to perceive climate change and its compounding socio-economic impacts, such as heightened poverty and inequality, as significant, high-priority threats to their national security and stability. This divergence creates a potential misalignment of interests at the core of the security cooperation relationship.

Consequences of Misalignment

This misalignment between the U.S. principal's revised priorities and the persistent concerns of many LAC agents can lead to several negative consequences for the effectiveness and sustainability of security cooperation:

- ***Reduced Partner Buy-in and Engagement:*** When partner nations perceive that U.S.-led initiatives ignore or downplay threats they deem critical (like climate vulnerability), their enthusiasm for participation may wane. They might prioritize allocating their own limited resources (financial, human, political capital, etc.) towards addressing those threats through other means or with other partners, potentially reducing the uptake and impact of U.S. programs.
- ***Decreased Effectiveness of Cooperative Programs:*** Security cooperation programs designed without adequately accounting for the influence of climate change as a threat multiplier may prove less effective in achieving their stated goals. For example, counter-migration strategies that ignore climate-induced displacement, or counter-TCO efforts that overlook the links between organized crime and environmental degradation, may only address symptoms rather than root causes, limiting

long-term success.

- ***Erosion of Trust and Goodwill:*** Abrupt policy reversals and rhetoric dismissing partner concerns can damage the trust and mutual respect essential for strong partnerships. The perception that U.S. policy is driven primarily by domestic political shifts rather than a consistent commitment to shared regional challenges can undermine U.S. credibility and make future cooperation on any issue more challenging. This creates a potential credibility gap: if the U.S. must inevitably respond to climate-linked disasters through HA/DR while its official policy dismisses the underlying cause, partners may view U.S. actions as reactive and inconsistent rather than strategically grounded in genuine partnership for long-term resilience.
- ***Information Irregularity and Planning Deficits:*** If U.S. agencies adhere to these policy directives, and consequently cease collecting, analyzing, or incorporating climate security data into their planning, the principal may eventually lack a comprehensive understanding of the operating environment faced by its agents. This information deficit hinders the ability to design relevant and effective cooperation strategies and exacerbates the challenges inherent in the principal-agent relationship.

Furthermore, the impact of this policy shift is unlikely to be uniform across the diverse LAC region. LAC is not monolithic; individual nations face different threats and possess varying levels of vulnerability and differing priorities. Governments grappling with acute TCO violence or those eager for U.S. support in developing fossil fuel resources might align more readily with the current U.S. focus, as has been seen through the warming relations with El Salvador's Nayib Bukele.² Conversely, nations highly vulnerable to climate impacts, particularly smaller developing islands in the Caribbean, for whom climate change represents an existential threat, are likely to feel alienated by the U.S. de-emphasis. This divergency means the U.S. policy shift could selectively strengthen ties with some partners while simultaneously weakening relationships with others, potentially fragmenting

¹ Biddle, "Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency."

² Farah, "What Bukele Wants from Trump."

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

regional cooperation efforts and creating strategic vulnerabilities.

Impact on Security Cooperation Programs

The policy shift is likely to have tangible impacts on various types of security cooperation programs conducted by SOUTHCOM:

- ***Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response:*** While HA/DR operations are almost certain to continue due to the high visibility and immediate necessity following frequent natural disasters in the region, the framing and focus may change. Emphasis might shift from building long-term climate resilience to providing short-term disaster relief. Funding for proactive measures, such as climate-proofing infrastructure or developing early warning systems explicitly linked to climate trends, could be reduced or eliminated, even if reactive aid persists. The Hegseth memo's allowance for addressing "weather-related impacts" might provide a loophole for some continuity, but the scope and intent remain constrained compared to the previous focus on climate resilience.
- ***Capacity Building:*** Programs specifically designed to build partner capacity in climate adaptation planning, environmental monitoring, or integrating climate considerations into defense strategies (activities highlighted under Gen. Richardson), are prime candidates for elimination or significant modification under the new directives forbidding climate-related budgeting. Training priorities may revert solely to traditional military skills and counter-TCO/counter-narcotics tactics.
- ***Military Exercises:*** Joint exercises like Tradewinds or Resolute Sentinel might see the removal or reframing of climate-related scenarios previously included to enhance realism and preparedness. Scenarios might focus purely on the military threats, divorced from the context of changing climate patterns, potentially limiting their value in preparing forces for future operating environments.
- ***Funding Streams:*** While overall defense appropriations may remain stable or increase,

specific funding lines relevant to climate security cooperation within SOUTHCOM's budget are likely to face cuts or reprogramming. Accounts like Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) might see continued funding, but potentially with stricter guidelines preventing its use for explicit climate adaptation projects. Security assistance funds like Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Military Education and Training (IMET), and Section 333 Building Partner Capacity will likely be steered away from any climate-related objectives towards counter-PRC, counter-Russia, or counter-TCO priorities. Because of their direct ties to climate security, programs like the Defense Operational Resilience International Cooperation (DORIC) could be wiped away altogether.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC COMPETITION WITH THE PRC

China's Expanding Presence and Strategy in LAC

The United States' policy shift occurs against a backdrop of steadily increasing engagement by the PRC in Latin America. Over the past two decades, China has transformed from a marginal economic player into a primary trading partner and a major source of investment and financing for many countries in the region with bilateral trade surging from \$12 billion in 2000 to over \$445 billion in 2021.¹ While the pace of state-to-state lending and overall Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) may have moderated or shifted in recent years, China remains deeply integrated into regional economies. With the recent addition of Colombia², twenty-three LAC nations have formally signed onto China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), facilitating large-scale infrastructure projects.³

China's interests in LAC are multifaceted. Economically, the region is a vital source of natural resources crucial for China's economy and food security, including oil, soybeans, copper, and lithium. LAC also represents a significant market for Chinese-manufactured goods and, increasingly,

¹ Shullman, "China Pairs Actions with Messaging in Latin America. The United States Should Do the Same."

² Reuters, "China, Colombia Sign Belt and Road Cooperation Pact."

³ Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America."

higher-technology exports. Strategically, China seeks to build political influence, secure access to critical infrastructure (ports, energy grids, telecommunications networks like 5G), and advance its technological footprint through investments in telecommunications and space facilities. Notably, Chinese investments are increasingly targeting sectors related to the energy transition, such as renewable energy generation (solar, wind, hydro) and the critical minerals required for batteries and green technologies. Geopolitically, a key objective is the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan, where the PRC has been successful in persuading several LAC nations in recent years.

However, China's engagement is not without controversy. Concerns persist regarding the sustainability of debt incurred through Chinese loans, the environmental and social impacts of extensive infrastructure and extractive projects, a lack of transparency in contracts, potential cybersecurity risks associated with Chinese

environmental track record within LAC and globally is complex and often criticized¹, the contrast with an actively dismissive U.S. stance could still work in Beijing's favor perception-wise.

Secondly, if the U.S. policy shift leads to a reduction in relevant security cooperation programs or makes U.S. partnership less attractive due to misaligned priorities (as suggested by the principal-agent analysis), LAC nations seeking assistance for climate adaptation, disaster resilience, or clean energy development might become more receptive to Chinese offers. Facing urgent needs and potentially diminished support from their traditional U.S. partner in this specific area, governments may view Chinese investment or technical assistance as a necessary alternative, even if it comes with associated risks. The mere existence of a policy vacuum created by U.S. retrenchment could passively benefit China, as LAC nations needing climate solutions may turn to Beijing by default if Washington appears unwilling or unable to engage substantively on the issue.

“Climate security matters”

technology (particularly Huawei and 5G networks), and the potential dual civilian-military use of critical infrastructure like ports and space facilities. China's close ties with authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela also raise concerns, as much of the region views these countries as integral parts of the organized crime and forced migration that regional organizations have fought to eradicate.

How the U.S. Policy Shift Creates Openings for China

The U.S. decision to deprioritize climate change as a security issue creates potential openings for China to enhance its influence and advance its strategic objectives in LAC. Firstly, it allows China to position itself, rhetorically at least, as a more attuned and responsible partner on environmental and climate issues, which are significant concerns for many regional governments and populations. As the U.S. steps back from climate leadership, China can amplify its own climate-related messaging and highlight its investments in renewable energy projects within the region. While China's own

Potential Impacts on U.S. Strategic Objectives

This dynamic holds several potential negative implications for core U.S. strategic objectives in the hemisphere:

- ***Weakened Partnerships and Coalitions:*** Alienating partners over climate policy could undermine the trust and cooperation necessary to build effective coalitions. Strong partnerships are frequently cited by U.S. officials as America's key advantage in competing with the PRC. If climate becomes a significant point of friction, it could weaken the foundation of these partnerships.
- ***Reduced U.S. Influence and Leverage:*** A perception of the U.S. as an unreliable partner whose policies are subject to abrupt, domestically driven shifts, or as a partner unattuned to critical regional concerns, could diminish U.S. leverage on other issues. This might make it harder for Washington to

¹ Hoehn and Shanker, *Climate Security Is National Security*.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

influence regional decisions regarding PRC infrastructure investments, adoption of Chinese technology standards (like 5G), or alignment in international forums, such as the Organization of American States (OAS).

- ***Ceding Strategic Ground:*** China is actively investing in sectors crucial for a rapidly advancing global economy, including renewable energy technologies and the critical minerals needed for them, many of which are abundant in LAC. A U.S. policy that de-emphasizes climate action and clean energy transitions could inadvertently cede influence and economic opportunities in these strategically vital sectors to China.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

The analysis shows that the recent U.S. policy shift, characterized by a deliberate de-emphasis on climate change as a security priority within the SOUTHCOM AOR and broader U.S. foreign policy, represents a significant departure from the previous administration's approach. This realignment, driven by top-down directives from the State Department and Department of Defense under the current administration, creates a complex set of challenges and potential negative consequences for U.S. interests in LAC. In the realm of security cooperation, initiatives and efforts tied to climate resilience, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid have been the backbone of SOUTHCOM's portfolio; however, by deprioritizing climate security, these programs could be made significantly less effective or removed altogether.

Furthermore, the policy creates a potential vacuum in climate security leadership and support that the PRC could exploit, either actively or passively, to enhance its own influence in the region. By downplaying an issue of significant regional concern, the U.S. risks undermining its own goal of being the "partner of choice" and could inadvertently cede ground to China in strategically important sectors related to energy transition and sustainable development. The attempt to simplify the security landscape by eliminating the "climate

distraction" may prove counterproductive, as climate change is deeply intertwined with other prioritized threats like instability, migration, and illicit economies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing these challenges requires navigating the constraints of current U.S. policy while mitigating potential negative impacts on partnerships and strategic objectives. The following recommendations are offered for consideration by the U.S. government, particularly SOUTHCOM and the wider DoD enterprise.

- ***Adopt Nuanced Implementation and Terminology:*** While adhering to directives against budgeting for climate-related activities, leverage the permitted focus on "weather-related impacts" and "resilience". Ensure that efforts to mitigate damage from natural disasters and extreme weather result in enhanced infrastructure resilience by substantively incorporating forward-looking climate science and projections. Focus on tangible outcomes like enhanced HA/DR capacity, resilient infrastructure, and improved disaster preparedness that address partner needs without explicitly violating policy constraints. Success may hinge on semantic flexibility in program design.
- ***Enhance Strategic Communications:*** Actively communicate how U.S. security cooperation, despite its shifting priorities, continues to address the interconnected nature of security challenges faced by LAC partners. Explicitly link efforts against TCOs, support for democratic governance, and economic engagement to regional stability. Avoid rhetoric that dismisses or trivializes regional concerns about environmental security and climate impacts. Emphasize shared values and long-term commitment to the hemisphere's security and prosperity.
- ***Actively Monitor and Counter PRC Environmental Narratives:*** Systematically track PRC investments, projects, and diplomatic initiatives in LAC related to the environment, climate, energy transition, and natural resources. Develop evidence-based counter-messaging that

highlights the benefits of U.S. partnership (transparency, sustainability standards, respect for sovereignty, etc.) while critically evaluating and, where appropriate, exposing the potential downsides of PRC engagement (environmental damage, debt burdens, lack of local benefits, etc.).

- ***Conduct Internal Policy Impact Assessments:*** Regularly evaluate the real-world impacts of the climate policy shift on U.S. operational readiness, the effectiveness of security cooperation programs in SOUTHCOM's AOR, the health of regional partnerships, and the trajectory of strategic competition with the PRC. Based on these assessments, be prepared to adjust program implementation or push back against restrictive policies to better protect long-term U.S. interests.

Ultimately, the lasting success of U.S. strategy in LAC, including its ability to effectively compete with the PRC, may depend less on narrowly defining threats and more on demonstrating consistent, reliable partnership across the full spectrum of security challenges prioritized by the region itself. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of these challenges, including the profound influence of environmental factors, may be essential for building the resilient partnerships necessary to navigate an increasingly complex future.

The United States possesses enduring strategic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), a region with historically strong geopolitical ties to U.S. homeland security and its economic prosperity. National Security Strategies have consistently recognized this linkage, emphasizing the benefits gained from a stable, peaceful, and democratic Western Hemisphere. Despite this acknowledged importance, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the combatant command responsible for the region, has historically operated within a comparatively resource-constrained environment relative to commands facing direct state adversaries, such as U.S. Central Command or U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. The absence of outwardly hostile governments and active interstate conflicts in LAC for over half a century is likely a key factor in the lack of allocated resources.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE EVOLVING U.S. CLIMATE SECURITY POSTURE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHCOM AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

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