

**Admiral Craig S. Faller
Commander Southern Command**

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DWG: Ladies and gentlemen of the Defense Writers Group, welcome to our session today with Admiral Craig Faller, the Commander of U.S. Southern Command. Admiral, we had you once before I guess under more pleasant circumstances with breakfast and so forth, but here we are in the middle of a pandemic and very grateful to you for taking some time right now to talk with the journalists of the Defense Writers Group about Southern Command.

It's all Q&A. I'm going to ask the first question and then I'll start recognizing people. Why don't I start by asking you, we've had the most active Atlantic hurricane season on record as I understand it this year. I'm not even sure it's over. You can perhaps tell us what you think on that. But talk to us about the work of your command the impact the hurricanes have had on it and the work that you've done in relation to it as Southern Command, please.

Admiral Faller: Good morning, Dave. It's good to see you again too, and under these circumstances thanks for continuing to hold these venues. It's good to see so many names on the screen here who I recognize and have worked with in the past.

One of our missions in United States Southern Command, it's a mission of any combatant command, is to be able to rapidly respond to contingencies and particularly in SOUTHCOM those are weather related events.

Most recently, a month ago, Hurricane Eta slammed into the Nicaraguan coast, a Cat 4 hurricane. Then about two weeks later in almost the same location a Cat 5 hurricane, Iota. These hurricanes have been truly devastating. One long-time USAID supervisor said it's the worst he's seen in 20 years in this region with half a million personnel displaced, many many thousands of homes destroyed, crops destroyed, billions of dollars of damage and hundreds of lives lost.

We have under United States Southern Command Joint Task Force Bravo in Soto Cano, Honduras. It's a task force that's been in place for many years. I think about 600 soldiers, airmen

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principally, some marines and helicopters. And we immediately started flying to save lives. The mission continues, now one month in. This will be our last day, we're transitioning away from supporting USAID today, but we saved approximately a thousand lives and delivered about a million pounds of relief supplies from Colombia to Panama to Honduras, Honduras being the worst hit after Nicaragua and into Guatemala.

We have not been asked for response in Nicaragua but USAID has provided a considerable amount of financial support to Nicaragua.

Across the region the U.S. government's led the way with over 50 percent of relief, about \$20 million to date. But that figure's going to get driven higher as the relief continues.

Bridges damaged, roads destroyed, houses, a lot of infrastructure concerns long term. So we're happy to be there, happy to respond and it's an example of the long term investment in a partner that pays off when something bad goes wrong.

Look at that, honestly, on top of COVID. COVID has just punched the entire world, Latin America being what is described as the epicenter. In mid-October I visited the region. Visited Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Costa Rica. The study that we did and all the conversations we had with our partners were validated when you just looked in their eyes and how exhausted they were, truly, and how it's impacted them physically, their forces are stretched, their security forces, and their budgets are devastated. So really concerned about the instability here in the hemisphere on COVID on top of an already fragile situation.

When you look at the young democracies, young institutions, very susceptible to corruption and very susceptible to external state actors -- China, Russia, Iran, growing influence in the region.

I'll end with this vignette. In 1997 I was part of a Pentagon study, Navy study, looking at China and we were working in the Navy Strategy shop. I was not the study lead. We were looking at what China's ambitions were. The study leader was very aggressive. He said look, I think they're going to start building islands and expanding in the South China Sea. Everybody was like no, that's not going to happen and kind of shelved that study. I look at what China's doing in this hemisphere, in the Caribbean, in Central America, in South America today and I have

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déjà vu of what I was thinking as part of that study group in 1997.

So the sense of urgency when you connect these proximate threats with the longer term security threats posed by this great power competition has fueled us and our sense of urgency to get after it here at SOUTHCOM. Thanks.

DWG: If I could follow up then on China and just ask you what are some of the things that China is doing in the hemisphere that cause you the greatest concern.

Admiral Faller: China is working for their version of the world order globally. And here in the hemisphere, if you look back four years ago there was no one signed up for One Belt One Road, now it's pushing 20 different countries, One Belt One Road.

They've come in with the same type of infrastructure deals, loans that they've used globally to gin influence. We have to recognize and I mentioned this I think last year when I spoke to you as a group, David, that there's got to be a role for China legitimately as an economic world power, but they've got to play by global rules. We don't see that.

They have a playbook, they're exercising that playbook. They try to undermine local elections, pay off mayors, influence the larger provisional province-wide elections or government elections. They come in with deals that no one can compete with because U.S. industry has to compete fairly by law and when you don't respect the rule of law, how do you compete?

I've visited every country in the region now except a couple, and obviously not Venezuela, Cuba or Nicaragua, and I hear it everywhere I go privately.

Then you get into the military realm, offering free, no-cost JPME. They don't concern themselves with Lahey vetting or any of the things that are so important to us, the human rights that are rightly important to us. And that just continues. Free equipment, free gear, free training, no strings attached.

And then in their COVID response, immediately they came in and I think anybody would welcome legitimate international aid and COVID response, but I would just say that's an area I'm proud of the U.S. government. We stepped up not because China stepped up,

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we stepped up because it was the right thing to do. It's not well advertised, but our response in this region, USAID led, far exceeds any nation. \$220 million, for example, in response to COVID in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In SOUTHCOM ourselves we have close to 400 project, \$24 million in COVID response from hospital tents to small amounts of cleaning gear.

DWG: Fascinating.

I'll start with Stew Magnuson of National Defense Magazine. I see you're on, do you have a question?

DWG: I didn't expect to be first, but good morning, Admiral. Thanks for doing this.

What's the latest on those drug smuggling semi-submersible submarines that kind of plagued the region in the past. Are you still seeing that? What are you doing, if so, to mitigate that? Technologically is there anything out there that you're doing to find those?

Admiral Faller: Thanks, Stew. I guess you sign up first, you get to be first, so good on you.

The transnational criminal organization's a \$90 billion a year industry. They have the resources, often better funded than the partner nations that they face, and armed, and resources to build things like the semi-submersible submarines that you have talked about as well as rapidly produce smaller craft or buy engines or pay off local fishermen to leverage fishing fleets are refueling points. We've seen that continue.

We have seen an impact with COVID to the amount of narcotics flow and activity as borders shut down and precursor chemicals became more difficult. We've also seen the impact from our counternarcotics operation. So COVID hit, the U.S. stepped up, we didn't step down. So we stayed on the field. Our partner nations stayed on the field. And our U.S. government law enforcement agencies stayed on the field.

As a result of the enhanced forces, just the enhanced forces that we put in play was 50 metric tons. And overall we're on pace for what we did last year. That's significant because there are less

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drugs moving. So we're taking more drugs off the streets and we're putting more pressure on the transnational criminal organizations. Ultimately we want to defeat them. We estimate that we've taken off the streets 224 metric tons total which equates to a couple of thousand lives saved and about probably \$6 billion if you do the math on street value. So making an impact.

We're still seeing those semi-submersibles. The addition of Navy P8s and Navy units is significant because they're very capable at finding those semi-submersibles.

DWG: Can you say about how many a year you see? Submersibles. Or has it dropped off or increased?

Admiral Faller: I would have to get you exact figures on the number. It was a spike earlier this year. We had some significant detections with partners. They took some out before they ever got underway which is the best case, and it highlights the excellence of our Colombian partners. I can't speak enough about their professionalism, how good they are in employing the tactics and what they've done in Operation Orion 5 and now Orion 6 to work in the littoral regions and out at sea to stop the flow.

A year ago, 50 percent of all our targeting, all our disruptions were partner involved. Now it's up to 60 percent and that's indicative of the long-term payoff of our security cooperation programs but also our partners stepped up.

DWG: Thank you.

DWG: Phil Stewart of Reuter. I see you're on, do you have a question?

DWG: I had a question.

In this era of great power competition have you looked at the question of whether in a major global conflict you believe you'd be able to access the Panama Canal and how much does China's influence over the Canal concern you?

Admiral Faller: Thanks, good to hear your voice, Phil. Thanks for the article today about the importance of the drug fight. One thing on the article, what we're really getting to sign an MOU on is track sharing. We're going to share air tracks. I

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know you characterized it as intelligence, but I consider air tracks different than sharing intelligence.

On great power competition -- thanks for recognizing that it is alive and well here in the hemisphere and truly is global, and the Panama Canal being a significant global choke point.

We're concerned as we watch China working port deals on either side of the Canal, and on the previous administration in Panama trying to sign over 40 different deals, including at one point they were going to outfit all the command and control centers in Panama with Chinese IT technology. The current administration under President Cortizo is very U.S.-leaning and we've made significant strides in enhancing our security cooperation with them to include exercises and training.

I'll start with Panamex which is our biggest SOUTHCOM exercise. We do it annually in some form. We're working through the virtual world to figure out how that looks coming into '21. But it's all about defending the Canal. We've had over 20 nations support that.

We don't name the country who the threat to that Canal would be, but certainly in a global Chinese fight that would be one of the key considerations is how do we defend that Canal.

One of the key plans that I am required to have by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs/SecDef is a defense of the Panama Canal plan and we review that plan and we test that plan on a continuous basis. So that is a key focus area for us as one of the choke points.

Looking more broadly as we see China working on I said 40 agreements in Panama, it's 40 port deals in the hemisphere. So why is China looking for a deep water port in Mexico, Bahamas, El Salvador, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Panama? Maybe somewhere emerging along the coast of Surinam, Guyana. They're working lots of options further south.

What does it look like if China has strategic control of the Strait of Magellan, the Panama Canal or the approaches to the Gulf of Mexico through a Caribbean port? What does that look like in a global conflict? So we're looking at these things and exercising with tabletops.

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Then globally space and cyber and intelligence access, what is China's access there? How do they leverage their smart city/safe city investments which are significant in this hemisphere through ZTE and Huawei?

For me as we look at this from a competition standpoint which as you know, Phil, the NDS tells us to do, I worry about ZTE and Huawei. Huawei equals one way when it comes to how I see countries' data going back to Beijing.

So in a global conflict we have to plan. That's what one of our primary missions at COCOM is and look at all these factors. So we work in military factors prudently into our planning. So in our exercises, in our plans principally.

DWG: Julian Barnes, New York Times? Are you on? Would you like to ask a question? Oh, he's dropped.

Let me go to Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal then. Michael, do you have a question?

DWG: I do. Admiral, can you tell us the latest of what Russia, Iran and Cuba are doing in Venezuela? What you're trying to do about it? And why Maduro's been so successful at holding onto power despite all of the sanctions and the efforts to put pressure on him?

Admiral Faller: Good morning, Michael, good to see you. Thanks for that important question.

When we analyze those factors, as you know we call them the center of gravity factors that keep someone like the dictator Maduro in power, we also go back and look at how long of a history there was that tangled him up in the glide slope of misery that the country's on. So Chavez and Maduro. And there's still a core percentage of the population, while it's small, in the 15-20 percent range that has [Chavismo] leaning, that plus the Cubans basically owning the intelligence service and the Cubans owning the Guard forces around Maduro give him like a Praetorian Guard of protective power.

On top of that Russia which is actively involved in providing just enough support to keep key elements of Maduro's military just ready enough, and Cuba in there as well in that endeavor, has I think given him a sense that he can have that center of

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gravity and feels pretty comfortable in his power base. The top generals, two stars and above, that surround him are all as corrupt as he is and that also gives him that center of gravity.

So while in the past I think the U.S. strategy of pressure has been the right approach, it hasn't untangled all those military factors, those security factors in a manner that's been effective in moving him out of power and we're staring at here later this week, beginning next week, another illegitimate election.

Those are the principal factors. I mentioned Iran. We see growing Iranian influence in there to include the Quds force which is alarming and concerning and some weapons ties.

The Russian influence has been pretty steady. It's picked up this year. It characterizes around \$17 billion in assistance over the last 15 years. SU's, air defense, Spetsnaz training, SIGINT, cyber.

You left off China, but China's in there. In addition to their economic leverage which is considerable, they have an involvement in cyber through the same sort of safe city/smart city, social engineering projects that they use to keep their own population in check. They've been using to help Maduro.

So you have a dictator, an autocrat, a convicted narco-terrorist drug dealer that has as his best friends Iran, China, Russia, Cuba. And that's been what I would say from a security intelligence factor standpoint why he's been able to cling to power and keep his center of gravity.

DWG: Do you see any change in his ability to hold onto power? Any reason to think that this would be different in the coming year than it's been in the past year?

Admiral Faller: There were some really good approaches put forward by Elliot Abrams. Back in April he laid out a way forward that included not only the negative incentives but a path forward for democracy. I think, there's really some value in considering both the negative and positive incentives. I'll leave that to any future policymakers but I think there can be a way. The international unity is still very significant. Over 60 nations aligned. That's unprecedented in this hemisphere. I think the key is again, unity, international unity, international pressure and some path forward as we look to get the objectives

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right and the policy right to move forward.

From a military standpoint we continue to focus on our partners, sharing information, sharing intelligence. What I've learned, a lot of what I've just told you I learned my best from the Colombians, the Brazilians and other folks in the neighborhood. It's brought us closer together as we've talked about what the day after looks like and how we can exercise better together and plan better together.

DWG: Tara Copp of McClatchy, would you like to ask a question?

DWG: Hi, Admiral Faller. Good to talk to you again.

With the departure of Secretary Esper, can you give us an update on the status of the Combatant Command Review? Are those changes or cuts still going to be implemented? And what does that mean specifically for GTMO and for SOUTHCOM?

Admiral Faller: Thanks, and good to hear your voice, Tara and speak with you today. Thank you.

The Combatant Command Review was a really good process. It was a fair process. It caused us all to reflect deeply on what the guidance, the documents, the unified command plan law and other governing documents told us to do. Were we doing that? Where were our inefficiencies? Where did we need extra support?

And as Secretary Esper stated when he came here for a visit, it really was about when the process kicked off, he said review does not mean reduction. So for us the process validated the importance of Joint Task Force Bravo as an expeditionary element, and look, it just played out in a big way with Eta and Iota. I think that was a good, very modest investment.

The process added security force assistance brigades to SOUTHCOM. So you think brigade, but really what it's been is about 50 U.S. Army soldiers that are trained in security force assistance. So think training. It's a training mission. And we have some of those folks deployed now in Honduras and in Colombia training, working alongside our partners.

We looked at our exercise program, we looked deeply at whether we were funded at the right level for education, International Military Education and Training, IMET. I recommended an

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increase. We received an increase there. So the process continues. Whatever happens in any future Secretary of Defense leadership will be up to the policymakers, but the process was good, it has continued, and it is continuing to drive investment decisions and budget decisions that reflect in the Department's budget submissions and programs of record.

I don't know what the future brings forward, but I think it's healthy as an organization to always look at yourself across the organization, in this case all 11 of the combatant commands, and really think broadly about what's working for the most pressing high end mission which is great power competition and for the day to day competition which is so important. That's our partnership with our friends.

All 28 democracies in this region in educating and training and working on professional military education and human rights. Those are all included in that day to day competition which we do very well.

So I hope the process continues, but that's a policy decision.

Oh, you mentioned GTMO. Joint Task Force Guantanamo is our mission set. Safe, legal, humane treatment of detainees. Part of the process was to look at the manning, the footprint. And as I stated on the record and in front of Congress and in a previous interview with you, we determined there are some efficiencies to gain there, so we looked at right-sizing some of the physical footprints and we're working through all that. It's about being more effective with taxpayers' money for that safe, effective, humane treatment. However that goes forward again will be a policy decision.

DWG: Sam LaGrone of USNI News. I see you're on, do you have a question?

DWG: Hi, Admiral Faller. How are you?

Admiral Faller: Sam, good to see you. Thanks for joining.

DWG: Can you talk a little bit about sort of the next steps for the Navy in SOUTHCOM? Right now you've got an unprecedented level of surface forces down there in terms of destroyer presence that might not continue into the near future. Can you talk a little bit about planning for sort of the next steps? Is that

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more partners with allied nations down there, is that more littoral combat ships, is that more other resources in terms of the anti-trafficking fight when those destroyers might be retasked in the future? Thanks.

Admiral Faller: Thanks. When asked by Secretary of Defense Esper to come forward with options for what a real true campaign would look like against transnational criminal organizations, for the military mission which is detecting, monitoring and then handing off that information to law enforcement or partner nations, we put together a campaign approach. Instead of just find a specific transit or drug smuggler approach, we put together a campaign approach which included building partner nation capacity, which is working on their training, their professional military education, interoperability, domain awareness, sharing information. Because that's important. Fighting transnational criminal organizations, that's important in any future fight we get in. That was the approach of our campaign.

We determined a number of assets, ships we needed to source that with, and we determined it needed to be a mix of Coast Guard and Navy.

Our partner nations are very capable, some of them very capable and some emerging capabilities that have Coast Guards. Only some, like Costa Rica. Some have Coast Guard and Navy. And when our Navy, the U.S. Navy comes, it's recognized as the gold standard. Partner nation navies will step up and we brought that forward in our concept that was approved and that has proven out. So when the U.S. Navy comes, our partners step up and they have participated in a more robust manner both on the Coast Guard side and the Navy side.

In addition the Navy assets have allowed us, our Navy assets, to participate more in exercises. So we've got really high end diesel submarines in this theater. We've been able to utilize with just a phone call partner nation diesel submarines at a very cost-effective manner to come out and do small training exercises with U.S. Navy destroyers on really high end submarine capabilities. I think that's been a true benefit for the ships in the U.S. Navy.

So how this is sourced moving forward will be, there's a process for that. I put in my requirement. It goes up. There are many

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more requirements globally than our U.S. Navy has ships for. That gets adjudicated out in what's called the Global Force Management Process. I think you're aware of that process. And I think we can make the case that transnational criminal organizations are a threat to the homeland and the United States of America. It is a threat that needs to be recognized in National Defense Strategy and that threat is tangibly connected to great power competition because transnational criminal organizations thrive on corruption and any type of illicit trade. It's not just drugs. Guess what? External state actors -- China and Russia -- thrive on corruption too.

So if we've got transnational criminal organizations that control wide swaths of territory in Mexico and Central America and they're undermining democracies, that sets conditions for others to come in and undermine democracy too. There is a connection here. It doesn't mean we need an entire battle force but we have to have the right modest amount of presence to do that and that includes U.S. Navy presence.

That's the case we make, that's the case I'm making and I think it's a valid strategic argument. Then our Navy and our leadership will look at that with the Chairman and the SecDef and make sourcing decisions moving forward. But it is important and it's important we get it right right here in our neighborhood. Thanks for the question.

DWG: Nick Schiffrin, I see you're on. PBS NewsHour. Do you have a question you'd like to ask?

DWG: Hi, Admiral. Thanks very much, and thanks David, for doing this.

I want to go back to Michael's question and zoom in a little bit on Russia and Venezuela. You said it had picked up this year. Have you specifically seen an increase in support recently? And if so, what does that look like?

And I wonder as we talk about great power competition throughout the region with China, whether the Chinese vaccine for COVID has come up and how much of a player is that in your discussions going forward as the Western vaccines get approved? China obviously wants to send those vaccines to that region. Thanks.

Admiral Faller: Thank you, Nick. Russian involvement in

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Venezuela in the two years that I've been in the job has gradually increased. I wouldn't want to characterize any periods, and I'd be starting to get into very sensitive areas if I did. But when I overall characterize the level of efforts in people, which does not necessarily equate to capability, but I think of Cubans in the thousands and tens of thousands in Venezuela, Russians in the hundreds, and Iranians in a lesser number. So that number of Russians, to the best of our estimate, stood about that and they've focused on those kind of capabilities that I mentioned at the outset. They have been working.

We've seen flights come and go. We saw bombers not this past year but the previous year. We saw Russia do a global, their most advanced nuclear missile capable frigate do a global transit. Oddly didn't stop in Venezuela. We thought they might. They stopped in some of the neighboring countries. They had a lot of trouble getting people to frankly allow them to stop. And they came along with a tugboat and another support ship to ensure they didn't break down. But they did make that transit. We watch it really closely.

Overall, if you look broader across the hemisphere, you look at Nicaragua and the Russian counternarcotics training center they have there, we've seen a steady increase in their activity. We see a real increase in the disinformation space, the Spanish language efforts. They make no effort to completely twist anything SOUTHCOM is doing or the U.S. government is doing into a bold-faced lie to try to draw the ire of our partner nations and their countries.

We have stepped up our efforts in the information space under some increased authorities, funding that we have in MISO, Military Information Support Operations program, in the Public Affairs arena, to just amplify the facts as best we can to try to counter that negative narrative. We've also tried to amplify the goodness that our partners are doing by whether it's just simple things as retweeting partner successes or posting so that the truth, the facts are amplified as opposed to Russian disinformation.

On China's vaccines, look, we're in a global pandemic. I've taken the approach here that any legitimate help is welcome help, so I don't make any judgment on that. If the vaccine works, folks need to do what they need to do as a nation.

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They are active in the billions of deals to try to get the vaccine deployed and employed and out into globally. I've obviously been watching the hemisphere. We do a daily rundown of what the U.S. is doing per country. U.S. SOUTHCOM, USAID, we track our other friends -- UK, Taiwan, Canada. And we get a sense for China. We look at where are they focusing, why are they focusing on that country not this country? I get a daily update on this and it helps us make some investment decisions so we ensure we don't leave friends out. Vaccine distribution is very technical, very complicated. It's really not in my view a military U.S. SOUTHCOM effort outside the U.S. but I know that from an Operation Warp Speed standpoint they're looking at taking care of the U.S. first. I think that's appropriate.

We're keeping an eye on it. I don't have a judgment on China's efforts being somehow other than what they are, offering a vaccine. Thank you.

DWG: Jeff Seldon of Voice of America, do you have a question?

DWG: I do. Admiral, thank you very much for doing this.

A couple of questions. First, you mentioned that we have déjà vu with what the Chinese are doing in the SOUTHCOM AOR compared to the warnings you get about what they're going to do in the South China Sea. Are you seeing there's some evidence so far that they're starting to do stuff like build islands? Are they building bases? Is there anything physical you can point to that the Chinese military is doing to establish a foothold in the SOUTHCOM area?

Admiral Faller: We have a lot of global examples of what the study, to look at what the future is. They're building a global military and building a global fleet to use globally in, I think in our estimation. So start with logistics and access. Throughout the hemisphere they're working on 40 seaport deals. These have started as commercial entities and so we're watching it very closely. They work airport deals. In the military we call them seaports of embarkation and airports of debarkation/embarkation. S pods and A pods. They're working infrastructure access -- bridges and railways. So that type of logistics access.

Then in the IT space. That is the one that is very pressing in

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my view and any IT we know by law is tied to the Communist party, therefore the linkage to the PLA is direct.

There's significant investment in intel and space, and that's all I can say.

Illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing. Significant threats among the top two to three threats that every nation in this hemisphere brings up, their Chiefs of Defense bring up with me, and China's the biggest player in that space. We have hard proof of violations of EEZs. We share that information.

Our Coast Guard recently came out with a strategy for that globally and I participated in that. It's principally a Department of Homeland Security mission set, but we would be in support for whatever asked.

In the military realm, significant increases in PME, modeling, Spanish language version of Leavenworth, Brazilian PME, Brazilian language and we have hard evidence on that.

Significant increases in gifts. They've recognized that cash-strapped nations can't pay for things so they'll offer things for free, at low cost or no cost and we track that.

We've even found them teaching a course on why the U.S. is not a partner of choice in the military, taught by the PLA, the partner nation militaries here in the hemisphere. That I find alarming and shocking.

Looking at the military, I talked about the infrastructure, I talked about the IT. Look at what they're trying to do in rare earth, locking up rare earth supplies and access to water.

Latin America has a positive water ratio. It's very high. So look at where China's investing in access to agricultural resources, lithium sources, gold mining both legal and illegal. All factors that we're watching in this hemisphere.

So I think what they're doing matches what they're doing globally. It's a full court press to have China become the world's dominant power. Again, in the competition sphere I focus on the military element and I think anybody would welcome humanitarian assistance or legitimate economic support where competition globally is fair and free.

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DWG: If I can follow up quickly, you also mentioned the influence operations -- Russia, China, Iran. How have those evolved? You've talked about it previously when you've talked to us, but how has that evolved? And what type of impact? Is there any way to measure the impact that the Russian disinformation, Chinese disinformation, Iranian disinformation, that it's actually having among the populations of the U.S. partner countries in the region?

Admiral Faller: All three of those countries have significant disinformation campaigns in the social media sphere and they have significantly upped their disinformation in that sphere.

We do make an effort to measure it, just as we try to measure our own impact.

We all know how challenging it is to measure the impact of words on social media, radio and TV and changing the attitudes of populations. We think actions speak in many respects louder than words so we look at the kind of things we just did in response to Eta and Iota as the real gamechangers for continuing to be the trusted partner. In that respect I think from a mil to mil standpoint that we're winning with our partner. But I think the edge, our competitive edge of being the trusted partner is eroding particularly when it comes to the Chinese influence.

DWG: Steve Trimbball, Aviation Week. Do you have a question?

DWG: Thank you, Admiral.

SOUTHCOM I know has been sort of dabbling with a new form of ISR, with these high altitude balloons called Stratolites. There was some flight testing in 2017 that was announced by your predecessor. We saw some FCC licensing documents that indicated there were some flight test last year.

I'm interested in if you see a particular role for that technology going forward in SOUTHCOM and what the path is to achieving that if so.

Admiral Faller: Thanks for the question. Intelligence drives everything we do so it's really the currency of military operation. So striving to understand the environment, what our enemy's up to. And that is, as you know and everyone knows,

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challenging. So we look at all types of intelligence and what our gaps are. So having intelligence that can look over wide areas for long periods of time, know what's happening on the ocean, on the sea, in littorals is really critical to us.

The area of operations in the counter transnational criminal organization fight is the size of the U.S. and on any given day we may have four to eight various platforms flying, looking at various things. Because of the enhanced fight, we've had some additional P8s. But not significant enough to really get a complete track on what's happening.

So we have a robust innovation program using the ACTDs through the Department of Defense to try to find an innovative way that we might transition to program of record so we can get lower cost, longer dwell type of look on the battlefield. So we're continuing to look at all types of innovation like that.

I think there's a real future in that of very expensive flight hours on some of our high end aircraft and what we need I think is longer dwell, innovative type technologies, unmanned. Whether it's on the sea or above the sea and we continue to press forward on those types of innovative solutions.

There's also a role here, we think platforms a lot and what you mentioned there falls into the platform route, Steve, but there's a big role too for what we call non-traditional ISR. So how do you use machine learning and big data to plow through -- it's a data-rich environment. I think data is the new ISR. And I'm not alone in this. So how do you plow through the mountains of data to determine what you need to know about the enemy? And then based on that, what works best in the case of criminal organizations, to hand it off to a partner or a U.S. law enforcement agency.

In the case of a terrorist, take the right action when needed. In the case of a future fight, understand the enemy's capabilities and intent and then develop plans that can counter those and ultimately be so good at what we do we deter the fight that we never really want to have happen.

The non-traditional ISR, big data look is really a big push for us too.

DWG: Carol Rosenberg, New York Times. Do you have a question?

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DWG: Thanks, David, and thanks Admiral.

Back to Venezuela, do you have anything about vessels carrying [inaudible] oil to Venezuela? And what can or is SOUTHCOM doing about it?

And a related question, do you have any concerns about retaliation in the region, in the AOR for the weekend assassination of the nuclear scientist?

Admiral Faller: Carol, good to hear your voice and thanks for joining.

I want to just clarify, on your first question was it Venezuela oil or ships carrying oil to or from Venezuela? Was that the first question?

DWG: Do you see any vessels carrying Iranian oil to Venezuela.

Admiral Faller: Thanks for the question.

We track, and it really relates back to the last question from Steve about tracking air flights and things on the ocean. So we're tracking all things in the region the best we can. That includes vessels in and out of Venezuela and flights in and out of Venezuela. And as you'd expect us to do, we try very hard working to determine what those flights and those tracks are all about. Is it legitimate humanitarian cargo? Is it legitimate trade? Or is it something that would be counter to U.S. or international sanctions?

So as has been widely report in the media, and Elliott Abrams has mentioned, we're concerned about what we see as the interactions between Iran and Venezuela. It's not just oil shipments. It's arms shipments as well. So we have been tracking that. We saw an uptick in that this year. We're watching the rate of change very carefully to see if it connects to any other Iranian malfeasance around the globe.

I wouldn't want to go any further to characterize any of the details of that. It would be tipping into classified information. But we're real concerned about what Iran is up to, not just globally but here in this hemisphere.

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Connecting that to your other question about the report of the death of the Iranian nuclear scientist. The combatant command mission, along with plans and intelligence at the top of that pyramid is force protection of our own teams and then being able to be responsive to threats against U.S. persons and particularly our embassies in the region. We watch very closely world events and any impacts that would have with the increase Iranian presence to include Quds Force in Venezuela, and the connection into this hemisphere with a very large Lebanese Diaspora population that has financial linkages back to Lebanese Hezbollah and the past history of Iranian-sponsored attacks, attempted assassination in Washington of a Saudi Ambassador and then the attacks in the '90s in Argentina. We know there's capability. We know they have intent. And so we try to keep our head on a swivel and use every one of our resources to look for warnings and indications, and then look at how we would provide warning and indications so our teams get into the right posture to keep themselves safe.

So we're watching it, Carol, very, very closely. Working with CENTCOM and our intelligence agencies. It has our attention. Thank you for the question.

DWG: Richard Abbott of Defense Daily, are you on and do you have a question?

DWG: I don't have a question at this time, thank you.

DWG: How about Chris Woody of Business Insider? Do you have a question?

DWG: I do. Hi, Admiral. Thanks for speaking with us today.

I have two specific questions about China's engagement. Regarding China's educational exchanges and the programs they have that bring Latin American military officials to China, what does your command hear about those? Are they legitimate? Or is it an extension of Chinese influence programs on a one on one level?

Admiral Faller: I'll start with our program here, our International Military Education program which I've been very vocal in testimony before Congress and elsewhere that we could see an increase in that. That's money well spent because we focus on human rights training, professional military education

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training, all the right things and right skills. And whether it's Naval War College, Marine Corps War College, Air War College, Army War College, it's the gold standard.

China's tried to copy that. So clearly they're trying to achieve a value-added training. I would not want to denigrate the current level of their training. The reports I get are that they're striving to reach a level that adds value, but at the current level they're heavily influenced with Chinese political philosophy, commentary, and very, very controlled. They don't stimulate the sort of free intellectual, innovative thinking that goes along with our core professionalism in our programs. So I would offer ours remains the gold standard. But we're watching it very, very carefully and closely in terms of numbers and volume and of course it's a concern for recruitment, it's a concern when you don't vet students for Lahey vetting which is a wonderful program which ensures we get the right people to the training that are going to do the right things in the future. And it's a concern when that's growing in volume.

DWG: Thank you sir. And to --

DWG: There are a number of you who signed on on the telephone, so I don't see who you are. At this stage with just a few minutes left to go, does anyone on the telephone want to ask a question? There are about five of you, I think. No?

This has been a fascinating and broad-reaching session. I think we'll close it at this stage in that case. You've got a very complicated command on your hands in the middle of a lot going on. Everyone was very polite and didn't ask you about the transition, so maybe I'll just take a moment to see if you have anything to say about it. We're about to have a new President in January. How does this affect a combatant commander if at all?

Admiral Faller: It's business as usual, David. The threats don't stop. The partner needs don't stop. Our exercises, our planning all that continues. So we maintain course and speed and full steam ahead, so no impact.

DWG: You suddenly had a new Defense Secretary recently, and I wonder whether any new orders have come from the new man for your command.

Admiral Faller: Again, as I mentioned in the previous answer,

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full steam ahead. We press on with our mission. That's what we do in the Department of Defense. I think I've been 38 years in the military and I've changed jobs every two to three years, so you can do the numbers of transitions, and then all my bosses. So our organizations are good at transition.

The Acting Secretary will speak tomorrow at CDMA, the Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas. The Acting Secretary's been very involved in ensuring that our missions maintain the focus that they need given the global security threats that we face. So again, no change, full steam ahead.

DWG: Very good, sir. Thanks again for taking time with the Defense Writers Group. I hope we can do it again in the future. Good luck with all those challenges.

Admiral Faller: Thank you, David. Have a great day.

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