

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

“Looking South: A Conversation with General Laura Richardson on Security Challenges in Latin America”

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FEATURING

General Laura J. Richardson

U.S. Army, 32nd Commander of the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By

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Dr. Kathleen
McInnis:

Central and South America is, arguably, a decisive region in today's strategic competitions with authoritarian actors. For example, the People's Republic of China is doing things like investing in critical infrastructure across the region, including strategically useful ports, as well as cyber and space facilities that could be used by Beijing's civilian and military agencies. Russia continues its supports of authoritarian and malign actors across the region, including through disinformation campaigns. And those are only part of the strategic challenges to the United States that are emanating from that region. Migration, transnational criminal organizations, illegal fishing – all of these are on the agenda of United States Southern Command.

I'm Dr. Kathleen McInnis, the director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative, and my colleague – I'm joined by my colleague Kari Bingen, the director of the Aerospace Security Project at CSIS. And we are delighted to welcome General Laura Richardson, the commander of United States Southern Command, to CSIS today to talk about her perspective on what's happening down south.

Kari.

Kari A. Bingen:

General Richardson is an Army aviator, flying Blackhawk helicopters. She's trained soldiers. She's deployed into Iraq and Afghanistan in combat. She's seen policymaking at the highest levels of the White House and understands the role of Congress. I was fortunate to meet her first while she was in the key role of legislative liaison, where she built relationships with members of Congress to establish policy and, importantly, fund the Army. And I also got to meet her again during her deployment to Afghanistan, where I saw her lead in a very complex and challenging security environment. So I can think of no better leader than General Richardson to tackle these tough issues and strengthen our relationships in the region. It really is a privilege to have you today.

General Laura J.
Richardson:

Well, thank you very much. It's my honor to be here and have the opportunity to be able to talk about the great opportunities that we have in the Western Hemisphere, talk to you about the – what this region has to offer, the great partners that we have and the work that we do with our allies in the region as well, and just be able to share some of that. But also, the security challenges that I think that if we partner better together and bring the entire whole of government together to bear, as they say, with all the instruments of national power for team USA, that we have a great shot of promoting and continuing to be at the forefront with team democracy in the Western Hemisphere.

Dr. McInnis:

I get – yeah. So to start off our conversation, we'd like to get a sense of people's origin stories, right. So what inspired you to join the military

and also what over the years has inspired you to stay in the military with this extraordinary career?

Gen. Richardson: Well, I think the – my folks had a lot to do with me joining the military in the first place and I think the – I was an athlete growing up and all of us kids were. I'm the oldest of four. I have two sisters and a brother and athletics was part of our life from being very small kids so – and that translated very nicely into the military. But then also I had an aspiration for flying and was able to go into ROTC and advance that by being commissioned into the aviation branch in the United States Army.

And so what an opportunity. I mean, you can't make it up what you get to do in the military and that's why I really like to talk about all the great things that you get to do because I couldn't have picked what the Army has provided for me and allowed me to be able to do. But to be able to be a helicopter pilot, to be able to go and travel the world, seriously, be able to go everywhere – (laughter) – and you've seen – you've seen great things and you see where you can help where things are not so great in other countries and things like that, and just as I talk about team democracy you'd be able to help with that and that's what's so powerful.

It's the soft power about team democracy, about democracy, and really what that means for our globe and I think that it's hugely important right now.

Dr. McInnis: I mean, yeah, the contest with authoritarian actors and the way that, you know, the stakes are becoming so clear.

Well, and I guess that leads me to my next question. What is – for the benefit of our viewers what is SOUTHCOM? What are your priorities? How is the command's area of responsibility – how are you interacting with the region and what do you see as priorities for moving forward?

Gen. Richardson: This region is – there's so many things that come to mind but it is very powerful. I mean, in our National Security Strategy from President Biden this hemisphere – there is no other hemisphere that is inextricably linked to our homeland like the Western Hemisphere and the importance of the region cannot be overstated enough, the proximity, number one, but all of the resources.

This hemisphere is very rich in natural resources, rare earth elements. Climate – you talk about the Amazon. Eight countries have the Amazon in these countries, lungs of the world that we, I don't think, still fully appreciate and quite honestly I think the – also in Colombia – that was my most recent trip – talking about where we – and this is something

that a very wise person told me while I was there, you know, we need to start respecting Mother Nature as not someone that's below us but someone that's either at par with us or of a higher being because if we lose the Amazon that will impact the world, all of us, as the lungs of the world.

But rare earth elements. Lithium Triangle – 60 percent of the world's lithium is in this region. Gold, copper. We see significant illegal mining, illegal logging, deforestation, all of these criminal elements that are happening in this region.

And so what we've tried to do is work with our partner nations as well as our allies. We have allies and partners throughout National Security Strategy and our National Defense Strategy. Working with our allies and partners we do nothing alone. We do it as partners and, again, I talk about team democracy because as we think about the 28 like-minded democracies in the region partnering together that's really our strongest defense against malign activity in the region.

Ms. Bingen: Well, if I can dive into that a bit further and ask you to talk more about what that strategic environment looks like in your area of responsibility. The key focus in our National Security Strategy right now it's strategic competition with China.

We tend to think of that as an Indo-Pacific regional challenge but China has global reach. So what are you seeing in your area in the countries that you deal with on a daily basis?

Gen. Richardson: Well, thanks for that, Kari, because the – absolutely – it is absolutely global and right under our nose and so close to our homeland. I'd like to say what the PRC is doing – the People's Republic of China – looks to be investment but really I call it extraction, at the end of the day. And I say that it's in the red zone, just to use, you know, an analogy there. They're on the 20-yard line to our homeland. Or, we could say that they're on the first and second island chain to our homeland. And the proximity in terms of this region and the importance of the region, I think that we have to truly appreciate what this regions brings, and the security challenges that these countries face.

Now, China isn't at the top of the list as a – as a pacing challenge to the adversary to the countries. Transnational criminal organizations are. But as I talk about the – and educate and inform our partners in terms of what I see from U.S. Southern Command – because I think we're in a very unique position to be able to put together all of the things that are happening in the region and be able to present that – countries make their own decision. They are sovereign countries, and we respect that

absolutely. They make their own decisions, but I always try to make sure that they have all the facts. Because they aren't sometimes presented all the facts. And we have that, as another democracy.

I see these authoritarian regimes using democracy to get elected and then use that position to dismantle democracy. And so we have to show how we align with the priorities. As nations go through democratic processes and changes, free and fair elections, if those are free and fair elections then we're going to figure out how we work with those administrations. And what we find, especially in the security realm, is a lot of things that we do align with our – you know, our new administration's priorities in the hemisphere. And so we just have to explain that and show that, the advantages that that has.

But in terms of the critical infrastructure that the PRC is investing in the hemisphere, it's all the critical infrastructure. And when you look at that and present it, it's in the deepwater ports, it's in space – most space-enabling infrastructure by the Chinese. It's in the globe. It's in my hemisphere. It's in my SOUTHCOM area of operations. 5G technology, five countries have the PRC backbone for 5G. Twenty-four countries have PRC 3G or 4G backbone. And so what usually comes to happen is they're offered almost a zero-cost upgrade to the 5G. And so it's really hard for these leaders that are in the seat, usually one term of four years, they're working on a stopwatch not a calendar. And we have to be able to have alternative methods, alternative companies, alternative options for them to be able to select to the Chinese competitors. And that's where we're getting out-competed by the Chinese right now.

Ms. Bingen: And that's a playbook that we're seeing in the rest of the world too, so thanks for highlighting that in the Latin American region in particular. Because it doesn't seem like we are paying enough attention to that. Can I – you hit on something as well, on space, that I'd really like to get to, as I lead the Aerospace Security team here at CSIS. So you just returned from a trip to South America with NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, Senator Bill Nelson. And, as you mentioned, space is another area of that competition that we're in with the People's Republic of China. What was the purpose of your trip? What reflections do you take back with you? And how was your and Administrator Nelson's message received down in the region?

Gen. Richardson: Well, I think it was – it was – it was a game-changer for me. It was such a great opportunity for Administrator Nelson to travel in the region. And he has traveled – as a senator, he has traveled with many other SOUTHCOM commanders before and to the region. And we spoke about that. But I had invited him to the region about five months ago. And when I was talking to him about the PRC space-enabling infrastructure

that's already in the hemisphere, with more planned for that number to increase.

And so he scheduled a trip, went to Brazil, met with President Lula on the collaboration. Brazil has already signed up as a member of the Artemis Accords. He traveled to Argentina, met with President Fernandez there. And they signed the – Argentina signed the Artemis Accord while he was there. And then to Colombia. And I met the administrator in Colombia for his visit there. And last year the country of Colombia had signed the Artemis Accord.

But being able to – in terms of Colombia's case, they have – all of these countries have huge space programs. And having our NASA administrator be able to come there and talk about more collaboration, what NASA is doing, what they are doing, how can we collaborate better together? I mean, it's really – we are only limited by the ideas that we come up with of how we can collaborate better together. And as I look at that, that's part of what the power of team democracy brings. And that's how we out-compete our adversaries, is like-minded democracies working together on collaborative ideas to make things happen.

In Colombia's case, one of the top priorities of President Petro is climate change. And so space has a number of different things that are going on to help countries identify problems from space with agriculture, for example. And so as you think of the drought corridor in this region, a thousand-mile drought corridor, you're talking about food insecurity. How can we change that? How can we change disease in crops, identify it? Deforestation, which impacts the Amazon and the lungs of the world, and being able to achieve carbon neutrality, right? Colombia and the U.S. want to achieve being carbon neutral by 2050. I mean, how do you achieve all this?

But from space, you can identify all of these things on the ground that are happening. And the healthiest countries counter the illegal mining that can be seen from space, the illegal logging that's impacting the Amazon. And so we also went to see a project in Cali, Colombia that was an effort with NASA and USAID to get after exactly this. Five years that this program has been in place. And then also in Cali is Colombia's Aerospace Force Operations Center. And President Petro had just renamed this earlier this week, the Colombian Air Force to the Colombian Aerospace Force. And so just to see all the initiatives.

They don't have a commercial space program yet in Colombia, just a military program. And so obviously opportunities with NASA for possibly a civilian space agency. And then also, Administrator Nelson offered to train – as part of the international program that NASA has –

train and put into space a Colombian astronaut. So as part of that international program. And so certainly I'm sure that would be – that would be available to Brazil and Argentina too, because they're part of the Artemis Accords. So again –

Dr. McInnis: It just seems ripe for partnership.

Gen. Richardson: I know, right? Exactly. So really excited about that.

Dr. McInnis: Alright. Changing the subject a bit. Fentanyl. It's involved in an increasing number of deaths of Americans under 50, and as a result is becoming a national security concern for many policymakers and legislators. What is your assessment of SOUTHCOM's activities to combat illicit trafficking, and including fentanyl?

Gen. Richardson: Well, I think we have a great – a great template for success. And that's with our component command, our JTF, which is Joint Interagency Taskforce South, or better known as JIATF South. And really, where we have over 16 whole of government interagency folks that are embedded in that headquarters, as well as in U.S. SOUTHCOM. They have over 20 foreign liaison officers that are also in JIATF South. I have a complement of about 16. And really, when you get that synergy together to work right there in operations and be able to – we do the detection and monitoring of illicit traffic – drug trafficking heading to the United States. And so – and then we turn that information over to law enforcement and/or partner nations.

And so our partner nations in the hemisphere are able to – their percentages of interdictions and disruptions have gone up in this past year 76 percent. So if we can see it, they have – they can't see everything. But if we can point to where there is activity and where they can make a finish on a law enforcement for a disruption or interdiction, they absolutely go after it. And so – but I think we have the template for that. The fentanyl crisis and certainly in the hemisphere that I have, cocaine.

We can't interdict our way out of this problem, though. And so it's very important that we go after – go after the money, all of those things that contribute. That whole of government process that follows the money and they're able to go after the drug labs as well. It's really important, because if you're just getting the little semi-submersible that has – yeah, it has some kilograms of cocaine on it, and maybe some marijuana. But the thing is, is that's not going to stop the problem. You got to get after the bigger things. And that's exactly what we're doing. But we can also always use, I think with this great command that we have with JIATF

South, is be able to get after that problem. We have to continue to do that and build relationships to do that.

Dr. McInnis: I mean, looking forward, in addition to, you know, looking at the upstream effects or actors, right, and getting at the bigger sources of financing, where do you think, in addition to that, SOUTHCOM ought to be prioritizing its efforts looking for when it comes to narco-trafficking and countering narcotics?

Gen. McInnis: Yeah. So I think the continuing to partner with our partner nations, being able to expand our reach, being able to identify barriers to outcompete amongst the interagency and the whole of government, and being able to bring those things that are needed to change.

I think that that's – you know, when you're the tip of the spear, it's really important, you know, as you both know, to inform our Congress. If there are barriers to outcompete or what are keeping us from actually achieving things or the interagency team, Team USA, being able to do that, or Team Democracy, it's important that we be able to identify those barriers to outcompete, but being able to see innovative ideas of how to go after building networks with low-cost, high-return-on-investment types of capabilities that are out there.

That's why I try to speak to industry as well, because with the technology that's being developed today, there are a lot of things out there with AI and ML that you're able to utilize that helps you put these networks together and be able to counter them, whether through Team USA or Team Democracy, with our partner nations.

Dr. McInnis: Well, given your background working in Afghanistan, are you bringing some of those lessons learned or those sorts of insights into your approach to countering narcotics? Because, you know, both areas have significant counternarcotics problems.

Gen. Richardson: Right. Absolutely. And so being able to share the information, the intelligence sharing, the information sharing, having those sharing agreements in place. And then that's where we get to, you know, having a 3G, 4G, or 5G network backbone that you can share the information on –

Dr. McInnis: Right. Yes.

Gen. Richardson: – that is not a PRC network, that we know has back doors into being able to get information that we don't want the Chinese to have, absolutely. So the – we've got to be able to continue with those sharing agreements and continue with being able to work very seamlessly with

our partners.

Dr. McInnis: And thank you for making that point. I think with Huawei, the actual national-security implications, what it actually means in terms of brass tacks, it kind of gets lost in the discussion. So thank you for illuminating that for us.

I'd like to turn to another thorny issue, to put it mildly – (laughs) – migration and illegal migration. It's – migration from countries in your area of responsibility is putting pressure on U.S. southern borders. Many observers, therefore, think that SOUTHCOM should be playing a leading role in contending with the migration challenge. But the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility ends at the southern Mexican border. And many of the root causes of population migration, they're due to nonmilitary issues like poor governance, natural disasters, lack of economic opportunity, those sorts of things.

So with that background in mind, I'd love to know your thoughts on how should we be – how should SOUTHCOM and how should we be thinking about the issue of migration and that nexus between security and migration?

Gen. Richardson: So I'll answer your question in two parts, Kathleen. But amazing question, because the – we're doing a lot, actually, in SOUTHCOM. And so in terms of the migration – so in April I traveled with Secretary Mayorkas and Samantha Power from USAID to Panama, and that was to bring Colombia and Panama and the United States together to sign a trilateral agreement.

First it was to present the idea of the trilateral agreement and then to get an agreement and sign it. And all three of us actually did that day, on the 11th of April. And that was three pillars. There was a security pillar. There was a legal-pathways pillar on how we – Samantha Power said it best. Everybody knows how to get in touch with a smuggler to get across the Darien jungle, but no one knows how to – not too many know how to get to where do you sign up for legal pathways, how to achieve that.

Dr. McInnis: Right, yeah.

Gen. Richardson: And so that's the second pillar. And then the third pillar was development. And it was in communities around the Darien jungle. And so that's what we're really in tune with Colombia and Panama and the dangers of crossing through that very expansive and very dangerous jungle.

And so, on the security pillar, since the end of April, Colombia and Panama, the Colombian military and the Panamanian public security forces, have been conducting operations, security operations, to go after the transnational criminal organizations who are doing the human smuggling.

Dr. McInnis: OK.

Gen. Richardson: And those operations have been very successful. As I said, I was in Colombia earlier this week and received an updated briefing from Colombia on their Operation Hefesto, which they have been – they have 23,500 Colombian military that are involved in this operation. It's the entire military. It's the army, navy and air force that are conducting operations. And they're being very successful on the security side of the house. Now, they aren't going after – the intent is not for the security forces going after the migrants. It's to go over or go after the smugglers and the human-trafficking piece of that.

In addition, what they're finding is they're being successful with other things in terms of the counternarcotics, the illegal mining, the illegal logging. All of these countries in the hemisphere are dealing with all of these security challenges. And so the – just had a trilateral meeting with Panama minister of public security, Colombian minister of defense and myself. And we just conducted that about a month ago. I was in Panama for that one. And we were supposed to go to the Darien, but the weather was too bad to get in there with a helicopter, so we did it virtually.

And then we continue to have those engagements. I routinely talk to Panama, Colombia ministries and also the military and public-security forces weekly. And that's being successful. But again, it's three pillars that come together as part of that whole of government; and so that's why, segueing into, you know, all of the things that are causing migration.

There are families on the move, people on the move, at all-time highs. And the prediction by 2050 is it's just going to continue to increase. When you think of not being able to get health care, food, security and instability – and this is how I see what the transnational criminal organizations do. They make – they stir the pot, make things very insecure. They scare the populations. And then that allows China to come in with their Belt and Road initiative to look like it's economic recovery and those sorts of things.

I go back to these leaders who are only seated usually for one term, four years. They're working on the stopwatch, not the calendar. They need help now, not in two or three years. And some of our processes from

Team USA are slow. And so we've really been pressurizing those systems, identifying the barriers to outcompete that are keeping – as I say, blocking Team USA's own field goals. You know, what is not allowing me to be, you know, instantaneous or pretty quick in delivery? And then working with the whole of government.

So I went to – as part of the instruments of national power for Team USA, diplomats, information, military, which is what I do, the security cooperation, which is my main lever, working with our partners, conducting conferences, conducting exercises where I can bring over 20 partner nations together.

We've had five exercises in the region over this past month, five of them at the same time in different places; Guyana with Tradewinds, Colombia hosting UNITAS, the 64th year we've had that maritime exercise; Southern Star, a special-operations exercise in Chile; Resolute Sentinel, which is Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, a two-and-a-half-month exercise. And all of these bring partner nation – over 20 together.

And then – that's the military side of it. And then to finish it off, DIME is economics, the E part that you mentioned, Kathleen. And this is where I see that we can raise the profile of companies that are already investing in the hemisphere, but then also double down on what's out there for the projects. These countries are really hurting from Covid. They are still digging out from Covid. And when you talk about 8 percent to 18 percent drop in GDP for some of these countries – Panama was 18 – it's huge; over 200 million thrown into poverty in the region. They are digging out and they're having a hard time doing it, and so we've got to be there – Team USA, Team Democracy, Western solutions, U.S. solutions.

But what is keeping companies, U.S. companies, from competing on tenders for these countries' contracts? What is – what are the barriers? Because when there are only six Chinese companies that are competing on a tender, why is that?

Dr. McInnis: Right.

Gen. Richardson: What is happening? Something's happening, and we have to get Western solutions, U.S. solutions, democratic solutions on the economic side because there are barriers out there and that's why I mentioned Senator Menendez's bill, Senator Cassidy's bill. There are initiatives out there to make a difference with how we are able to invest with the region and be good partners.

This is part of our hemisphere. These are our neighbors. Their success, as I go back to our National Security Strategy that I completely think is right on target, is inextricably linked. Our security and the United States' is inextricably linked to the security of the – of this hemisphere.

Dr. McInnis: Well, and as you mentioned, you know, the – what is security is so much more broad, because the game is being played by other actors in the information space, in economic space, and that's not necessarily the place where the United States –

Gen. Richardson: Right.

Dr. McInnis: – is best prepared to act, right?

Gen. Richardson: Yeah.

Ms. Bingen: Exactly. I wanted to tee off that as well and dive in to exactly that. I mean, I remember being at the Pentagon. SOUTHCOM never fared well in terms of assets and resource priorities. So you have to be much more creative with your toolkit. That isn't always military. I mean, it is very much soft power and those other elements – diplomatic, information, economic. So how are you approaching that in the region?

Gen. Richardson: Well, thank you, Kari. So the – we've been on a full court press to talk about Team USA and the branding and my meeting with Secretary Blinken in the spring at City Summit of the Americas in Denver, Colorado, and then I went to meet with Secretary Raimondo of Commerce, and we get our Commerce liaison officer in SOUTHCOM this month. I'm so excited to get that.

Dr. McInnis: Fantastic. Congratulations.

Gen. Richardson: But she had a great idea, the secretary of commerce, and I pitched to her if she would consider coming to the Western Hemisphere. She said, I'm coming to Panama, and we ended up traveling together a couple of weeks ago and that was with the announcement of President Biden that Panama was selected as one of the seven partners for the U.S. to partner with on semiconductor supply chain.

And so Panama is an emerging leader in the region with so much promise on this initiative, and then also Costa Rica and their ability to be one of those seven countries as well. But this is exactly what we're talking about – how do we get more investment, raise the profile of our – very important countries that are doing huge, great things democratically as part of Team Democracy.

I mean, you can't – you can't make an argument any stronger than that. But we have to continue full court press to bring all of the instruments of national power and I think that that's what the Chinese do so well with the Belt and Road Initiative. They do it with these huge economic projects and I'm talking like billion – when they sign on – countries sign on to the Belt and Road Initiative it's usually for billions of dollars of projects.

Dr. McInnis: And they can be done so quickly.

Gen. Richardson: Now – and they can do it so quickly. Now, some of the things, as we were talking earlier, that there's a little bit of buyer's remorse. There are examples in this region not just – as well as globally for sure where projects have not gone well – design flaws, cost overruns, huge delays – and these countries, you know, now they're having the buyer's remorse.

But, again, as someone put to me earlier this week, you know, when you are desperate for help you're going to turn to whoever's there. Someone throws you a rope you don't necessarily look at who's giving you the rope. You just grab it.

And so we need to have alternatives to the PRC and if we're not there competing then they're going to choose. It's not a matter of a choice. They're going to – they're going to have to take it.

Dr. McInnis: Yeah. I mean, you take whatever life raft is available, right?

Gen. Richardson: Right.

Ms. Bingen: Can I shift gears? I want to – well, it's related to this as well but maritime domain awareness I want to hit on, which I know SOUTHCOM has a tremendous role in. We have incredible interns here at CSIS who will go into careers in national security. And one of our interns this summer, Kallysta Jones from Georgia Tech, posed a question on MDA that I want to present to you, which is: When you're looking at the area of responsibility assigned to SOUTHCOM, it is clear to see the need for maritime domain awareness. Can you talk about SOUTHCOM activities in this area? And then tying back into the space discussion, do you see a near future where space and satellite data, thinking about some of the capabilities of these new space companies that can move fast, do you see a role where they can aid SOUTHCOM in its objectives to bolster maritime domain awareness in the region?

Gen. Richardson: Yeah, absolutely. So just the ability to see in this huge area of operations when you're talking about the Caribbean, Central America, and South America – huge. And so to be able to see – and our partners want to be

able to see as well. They can't see everything that they would like to see. And so the ability to be able to – again, I go back to sharing agreements, having partners that we can share information with, that they don't have the PRC backbone for technology and their telecommunications, and then being able to make them aware of that. So we're very innovative.

So I could talk about traditional ISR, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, traditional. But then we have been very successful, I think, in SOUTHCOM. We don't sit around and just wait for someone to give us something. We figure out innovative and, you know, how do we – how do we come up with ideas and approaches ourselves in whatever technology is out there. And I think we've been very successful in doing that. Congress has also helped us out in terms of the ability to provide capability in place of military capabilities. That is not as good, but it's a capability and we certainly exploit that, and take advantage of that, and then look for ways that we can expand it.

And then, as I said, the ability of our partners to be able to see. Because working with like-minded democracies, sharing of the information, what they see, what we see, and having that good connectivity is really what it's all about.

Dr. McInnis: Well, on the subject of regional partners, I guess taking a step back, how do you assess, you know, efforts to build partner capacity? That is, build the capacities of our security and military institutions of the partner countries with which you work? When you think of success stories, which ones come to mind?

Gen. Richardson: Well, I could use – I could use several, but we've been a leader with our senior enlisted leader development program. I think that's what makes our U.S. military so strong, is our senior enlisted leaders and our enlisted force that's educated and understands their role, the importance of the constitution for our country, for their country. And the – and as we see the security challenges with the police of the – our partner nations that are – that are dealing with these security challenges and the capabilities.

But those militaries are being asked to help reinforce the police as they try to counter these. And so their role in dealing with the population, which is not – you know, that's not their normal role. But I think that our senior enlisted leader program being able to empower and educate first to empower that force. So when they are in small teams reinforcing election – the police with elections in their countries, which are so important and, in some cases, so close, as we've seen in previous

elections that have occurred with Colombia, with Brazil, with Chile. I could go on and on.

And so – and so that’s a program that has been very successful and very well- received. I could take our Women Peace and Security Program. And the integration of women into public security forces and into the militaries has been very well-received. We’ve got a lot of women leaders in positions – presidents, prime ministers, vice presidents, ministers of defense. We have the only female CHOD right now, chief of defense. That’s in Jamaica. I mean, we have huge examples of many successful women. And so being able to highlight that program.

And we’re just rolling out a theater maintenance – Theater Maintenance Partnership Initiative across the whole hemisphere. We’re going to, with the help of our partner nations, from the tactical level, at the individual operator level, all the way up to the institutional capacity-building of the logistics and sustainment. It’s hard for us in the U.S. military to do logistics and sustainment, and so I imagine it’s hard for our partners. And with our foreign military sales and our excess defense articles, and we have a lot of U.S. equipment that is in this hemisphere. And so we want that equipment not just to get it to them, but help them in the ability to maintain it, keep it ready, so they can actually use it and counter the security challenges.

Dr. McInnis: Well, if I can follow on, because you mentioned Women, Peace, and Security. And we actually have a couple of questions from the audience about that. Joanna Lane from the U.S. Embassy Bogota asks: What are your objectives with respect to gender equality within Latin American military forces? And what obstacles do you see that impede progress towards achieving those goals?

Gen. Richardson: So the – every trip I do, I do a Women, Peace, and Security event. So my little, small office of three in my headquarters at SOUTHCOM is traveling all the time, because they’re putting on amazing events and opportunities for us to highlight. We bring together all women that we can for an event, and we bring the leaders together too. And we talk about their barriers to opportunities, their barriers to be able to be more successful in their roles. And so just being able to hear that and hear how articulate they are, smart. But it’s not just having women there. It’s also having the – you know, their colleagues, and being able to provide what they see, and then all of us leaders be able to hear that.

And I think it’s just a continued press. And then also, you know, the old saying of you can’t be what you can’t see is very true sometimes. But there are many examples. They’re doing great in the hemisphere. But we have to continue to show them that they’ve got to create the

opportunities. In my mind, from Richardson's perspective, it's always about the opportunity. If you don't allow someone the opportunity, and have 50 percent of your talent pool be able to participate, and be able to raise the level and the readiness level of military and security forces, then we're – that's a barrier. And we got to realize that, because we shouldn't be surprised when they opportunities are opened how well women do.

Dr. McInnis: Right. Well, and it's interesting how many of the topics and issues you're working with, moving forward and progress is very much about removing barriers to collaboration – gender collaboration, gender opportunity, interagency collaboration. It's just very interesting that that seems to be the theme of – that you're running into quite a lot.

Gen. Richardson: Right. But it's good for the leaders to be able to hear that. I mean, there's – you talk about flattening all the layers and, you know, the folks that are right there on the frontlines being able to communicate with their leaders and talk about the things that are impeding their success, or being – from being more successful, I think is a huge benefit.

Ms. Bingen: Well, if I can jump in here with a few audience questions. And, Kathleen, I'll ask you to do the same. This first one from our live audience comes from Alice Zhang from Voice of America.

And she asks – she notes that AidData recent published a report that explores the potential for China to establish permanent overseas naval bases. So we've seen it in Djibouti. There's consideration in Sri Lanka and UAE, elsewhere. So what does that look like in Latin America? Will China set up a military base there in the near future? If so, where and when? And then, what are those military and strategic consequences for the United States?

Gen. Richardson: Yeah. So great question. Thanks, Alice. And the – to go back to the investment – what looks to be investment by the Chinese in critical infrastructure in all of these countries. And when you're talking about deep-water ports, telecommunications, safe city, smart city technology, and also space infrastructure – if I just take deep-water ports, I would take the Panama Canal. There's five state-owned – Chinese state-owned enterprises along the Panama Canal. And so what I worry about is the – is the being able to use it for dual use. Not just civilian use, but flip it around and use it for military application.

So what is the – why are the Chinese investing so much in the critical infrastructure in this hemisphere. Why do they do it in Africa? I see that the Western Hemisphere is about five to seven years behind Africa. They've done it other places, other than just African, and in the Western

Hemisphere before. But why? Why, with the biggest increase in conventional and nuclear forces on mainland China, is there such investment going on in this region? And so absolutely concerned about it.

And then, if you take the Panama Canal, and what the Panama Canal means to the global economy, and then the other strategic sea line of communication that I have in the SOUTHCOM AOR is the Strait of Magellan, and also the PRC building capability in these waterways and along the opening and along the way on these waterways. Yeah. And so I worry about the flipping and using it for a military application. There's not a Chinese base yet in this hemisphere, but I see with all of this critical infrastructure investment with these BRI projects that there could possibly be someday.

Ms. Bingen: And that includes Cuba as well.

Gen. Richardson: That does.

Ms. Bingen: OK.

Dr. McInnis: Another question from the audience. Kristin White asks: How are you in SOUTHCOM broadly viewing climate change as a security challenge? Can you provide any examples of events or disruptions you're seeing as a result of climate change? And how has it impacted the movement of peoples in the region?

Gen. Richardson: Well, as we were talking about earlier with migration and climate change and the severity of storms, the frequency of storms are getting stronger. They're more frequent. And so we have to – the five lines of effort, the climate adaptation plan that Department of Defense has developed. I've got some seed money for, you know, just starting out with climate change and being able to put that to use. That's why it was important for me to travel with Administrator Nelson and see that joint project that NASA has with USAID that was going on in Cali and what space can provide to help with climate change with the countries. And so we will carry that forward to be able to see if – the implementation across the region because we have that thousand-mile drought corridor in the hemisphere.

Argentina, when I was just there in April, they are struggling with an unprecedented drought that has occurred. Chile had a once-in-a-thousand-year fires the entire month of February that we were able to help them with being able to share imagery and share where – so they could help predict where the fires were going to continue to go, as well as do some humanitarian assistance donations that the U.S. ambassador

was able to do as a result of some of that OHDACA funding that we have access to from Department of Defense and Congress.

So we have – you know, Kari mentioned it and, Kathleen, you mentioned it. You know, just in terms of the – all of these things that SOUTHCOM is able to help countries with when they have crises, we may not be asked – you know, we support USAID in terms of if there's a formal request by a country for assistance, but we don't wait until we get formally asked. We're thinking: OK, how do we help our partner nations? What can we do with what's out there right now to help team democracy and help our teammates get through this chaos that they're going through?

Ms. Bingen: Well, and that reminds me, is there's so much that our military does and supports that you don't see but are so consequential – so, on the humanitarian front, USNS Comfort. Can you just talk a little bit more about how are we engaging in the region on those fronts that you don't necessarily see?

Gen. Richardson: Yeah, absolutely. So I have – we're constantly doing – other than having the – you know, you can't beat the USNS hospital ship, the Comfort, and we had the Comfort in the – in the region going to five countries last October through December. And that was off-the-charts amazing. But I was not able to get the Comfort this year, so, OK, so we didn't get it, so we – so we're taking one of our – one of our two Littoral Combat Ships that I get allocated. And so we're going to put a(n) innovative capability that we discovered. It's called Clinic in a Can. And we're going to put these clinics that we're able to roll off the ship when it comes into port, and set those up just like we do with the – with the Comfort, and so those setup activities, several clinics that we're able to provide different sorts of just quality-of-life treatment for our partners.

But we're constantly – JTF-Bravo – Joint Task Force-Bravo – is a brigade-sized element that has been – it's my most forward-deployed entity. It's out of Soto Cano in Honduras. And they have helicopters that provide immediate disaster response for Hurricanes Eta and Iota, I could say, the earthquake in Haiti a couple of years ago in 2021. And they're right there. They have a medical capability. We do medical exercises all the time, clinics. We do eye clinics. We do surgery clinics. This also keeps up the surgical skills of our – of our military medical providers to be able to do things in combat, so it's a win-win. But we're constantly doing that.

We just don't wait until there's a big hospital ship that's able to come into the hemisphere. I'd like to get it every year and the CNO knows that – (laughter) – so I continue to work that. And Secretary Del Toro from the secretary of the Navy has been very helpful, traveled in the region

numerous times. But those capabilities of the soft power – the humanitarian assistance, being able to do that – we’re working right now – Bailey bridge is a bridge capability, because Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama have had severe flooding from El Niño. You’re either getting the drought from El Niño or you’re getting the flooding, and so many bridges have been knocked out going to indigenous populations. That also creates a problem with farm to market for their farmers.

And so you think of – you know, it’s just, how can we help them? And again, we’re just limited by our ideas of how we can help. And so it’s to the big military kind of things with the hard power, but a lot of how do we get after that soft power and help our partners through their challenges.

Dr. McInnis: We are just about out of time. But as the director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Program at CSIS, I can’t – I can’t resist the opportunity to ask you the question: Do you think that being a woman has affected how you approach your decisions and your leadership style as the combatant commander of United States Southern Command? And if so, why – if not, why not?

Gen. Richardson: Well, I think the – just the skillsets that women bring to the table, and as I said before about 50 percent of the talent pool. Being able to build teams, solve things. Always bringing the team together; how can we figure this out? And try to find workable, peaceful solutions that – you know, you got to listen to your partners. I think that’s a really big thing, is to be a good listener. And you got to be able to understand their challenges through their eyes, not my eyes. That’s not how they see things. I need to fully understand how they see it, and I think that’s – you know, just that intuitive and just being able to understand through another country/human’s eyes their challenges that they have.

And so I think that I’m glad to say I might be the first woman commander of SOUTHCOM but I won’t be the last. So really excited for that, so.

Dr. McInnis: Well, thank you so much for joining us for this incredibly rich discussion this morning. We really appreciate the time. Your schedule is so, so jam-packed, so we’re very grateful that you were able to spend some time with us this morning.

Gen. Richardson: Thank you, Kathleen. Thank you, Kari.

Ms. Bingen: Thank you.

Dr. McInnis: Thank you.