

# Regions of Enduring Interest: Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa

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**T**he United States has an abiding geopolitical interest in both the Latin America/Caribbean region and Africa, an interest that derives from America's close economic, cultural, and demographic ties with these two regions. Though their security challenges do not rise to a level at which they threaten the vital national interests of the U.S., numerous destabilizing forces still plague these regions, posing substantial hurdles to their economic development and political stability.

Challenges aside, these areas also present great opportunities. The U.S. certainly remains engaged with the governments and peoples of the states that comprise Africa and greater Latin America, but so too do competitors of the U.S.—rivals who seek to gain access to these regions' markets and resources and, for good or ill, cultivate relationships that support competing security agendas. As the U.S. considers just how much it should invest in its defense, it should remain mindful of these regions and the role that they play in geostrategic affairs.

## Latin America and the Caribbean

Due to geographic proximity, high levels of trade, persistently growing demographic and cultural ties, and a lengthy history of diplomatic connections, the U.S. has strong links to and strategic interests in Latin America. Although regional security threats of the type that plague the Middle East and Africa and major threat actors like China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are absent from Latin America, the U.S. still has a vested interest in the region's economic and political stability.

Transnational organized crime continues to proliferate throughout Latin America, fueling violence, eroding the rule of law, and hindering economic development. While overall homicide rates have decreased around the world, this region has experienced a very different trend: Excluding anomalies like Chile and Costa Rica, the Central American and South American subregions are among the most dangerous in the world.

Successes in eradicating Colombian cartels and increased counter-crime initiatives in Mexico have pushed drug trafficking organizations into Central America, where smaller and poorer governments are ill-equipped to deal with such violent entities. In addition, a resurgence of illicit smuggling routes in the Caribbean corridor has raised concerns about the future of U.S. maritime interdiction efforts.

Violence and associated criminality continue in Mexico's ongoing drug war, affecting not only Mexico, but also the U.S. because of the cross-border trafficking of illicit drugs that links the Mexican cartels with U.S.-based gangs. In many regions where police have failed, vigilante and militia groups have emerged—an attempt to restore order that only highlights the deficiencies of the central government. Venezuela has emerged as a major regional and international drug trafficking hub, with established networks throughout Central and South America, the Caribbean, and West Africa.

U.S. instruments of foreign policy vary throughout the region. Free trade agreements and bilateral economic assistance play an important role

in expanding markets for U.S. exports as well as in building partner capacity. While security cooperation between the U.S. and regional partners plays a critical role in combating transnational criminal organizations, such arrangements are quite uneven across the region as a whole, with the bulk of assistance going to Colombia and Mexico.

### Current U.S. Military Presence in Latin America and the Caribbean

The United States' Northern and Southern Commands (USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM) handle U.S. military engagement with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

- **U.S. Northern Command.** NORTHCOM, headquartered at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado, focuses on Mexico and much of the Caribbean: the U.S. Virgin Islands, British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, Puerto Rico, The Bahamas, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. NORTHCOM's Joint Task Force North (JTF North), based at Biggs Army Airfield, Fort Bliss, Texas, provides support to federal law enforcement agencies interdicting potential transnational threats within and along approaches to the U.S. (e.g., narco-trafficking, alien smuggling, and international terrorism).
- **U.S. Southern Command.** USSOUTHCOM's area of responsibility for U.S. security interests includes the continental landmass south of Mexico, its surrounding waters, and the Caribbean Sea. Headquartered in Doral, Florida, USSOUTHCOM oversees the coordination of U.S. military efforts with 31 countries and 15 territories. USSOUTHCOM focuses on supporting federal and foreign agencies countering transnational organized crime, working with the militaries of the region, contingency planning, and terrorist detention (Naval Station Guantanamo Bay).

### Trade and Energy in Latin America

High levels of trade and integrated economies have created strong connections between Latin America and the United States. The region is America's fastest-growing regional trade partner: The U.S. sells more goods to Latin America and the Caribbean than it sells to the entire European Union (EU). Out of the 20 free trade agreements (FTAs) that the U.S. has entered into force, 11 are with countries in Latin America.

Approaching its 20th anniversary, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico surpasses America's trade with the EU and Japan combined—and even with China. The U.S. is also party to the Dominican Republic–Central America–United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA–DR) with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. Bilateral FTAs with Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Panama also have been implemented.

Aside from trade, the U.S. energy sector is heavily reliant on the Latin America/Caribbean region. The U.S. imports about 40 percent of the crude oil and petroleum that it consumes, and more than half of this 40 percent comes from the Western Hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> The largest suppliers of these imports are Canada (28 percent); Mexico (10 percent); and Venezuela (9 percent). In comparison, Persian Gulf countries Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates supply 29 percent.

Strategically, the region's geographic proximity to the U.S. increases its importance to America's national interests. The U.S. shares an almost 2,000-mile border with Mexico that spans Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. In 2013, the U.S.–Mexico border was crossed by over 166 million people and nearly 72 million vehicles, making it the most heavily trafficked border in the world.<sup>2</sup>

### Mexico: Transnational Criminal Organizations, Gangs, and Violence

With the dismantling of Colombian cartels in the 1990s, the illicit drug trade in Latin America shifted northward. Mexico is a large producer, supplier, and transit zone for U.S.-bound cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and marijuana. Over 95 percent of the cocaine sold in the U.S. is transported through Mexico. At the helm of this destabilizing threat are transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and gangs that operate throughout Mexico. Competing TCOs—in this case, Mexican cartels—vie for control of key smuggling routes into the U.S. and critical transshipment points within Mexico.

Mexican cartels operate as full-scale criminal enterprises, controlling vast systems of illicit networks throughout the U.S., Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. In addition to wholesale distribution of the majority of illicit drugs in the U.S., Mexican cartels also engage in human smuggling and trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and arms trafficking.

The illegal drug trade alone accounts for roughly \$30 billion in annual revenue for the cartels,<sup>3</sup> an amount equal to the gross domestic products of Honduras and Nicaragua combined,<sup>4</sup> thus enabling them to corrupt local authorities or overwhelm them by force. While noteworthy cartel-related violence has yet to spill over into the U.S., the corrosive effect that these criminal organizations have on the rule of law, citizen security, and good governance affects U.S. security and national interests.

High-level corruption within the Mexican government and security forces continues to undermine U.S.–Mexico cooperation. The United States has provided Mexico with counter-drug assistance since the 1970s, but after the assassination of a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency agent in 1985, bilateral cooperation slowed. Following the signing of a Binational Drug Control Strategy in 1998, however, collaboration improved.

To date, the most significant cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico has come through the Mérida Initiative, which emphasized the shared responsibility of both countries to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. Between fiscal year 2008 and FY 2014, over \$2.4 billion was allocated to Mexico for this security initiative, with additional supplements as needed.<sup>5</sup>

### Central America's Northern Triangle

All three of Central America's Northern Triangle countries—Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—are facing a number of chronic crises. Rampant corruption and weak state institutions have rendered central governments incapable of combating threats posed by violent transnational gangs and organized criminal groups. These illicit groups have embedded themselves into these governments and are creating criminalized states. All three countries have been unable to respond effectively to their security problems.

Located along a critical trafficking route, Honduras alone is a layover spot for upwards of 79 percent of northward-bound drug flights. Much of the U.S.-bound methamphetamine supply is produced in Central America.

Historically, this region is also one of the most violent in the world. Honduras has the world's highest annual homicide rate, averaging 91 deaths per 100,000 people. El Salvador is fourth with an average of 41 per 100,000, and Guatemala is fifth at 40

per 100,000. In comparison, the U.S. registers five homicides for every 100,000 people. A shaky gang truce in El Salvador reduced overall homicide rates from March 2012 to mid-2014, but these gangs still perpetrated other violent crimes. A multitude of transnational criminal organizations like the Mexican Zetas and Sinaloa drug cartels have capitalized on the weak governments of the Northern Triangle and are now fully operational within the region.

Much like the trend seen in Central America, islands like Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are increasingly becoming layover spots for U.S.-bound illicit drugs. Because it is a U.S. territory, shipments coming in from Puerto Rico are subject to less scrutiny than are international shipments, a fact that further undermines maritime interdiction.<sup>6</sup>

### Interference of Foreign Adversaries and Countering of U.S. Influence

America's geopolitical foes have exploited and will continue to exploit the region's proximity to the U.S. homeland by seeking relationships with willing regional partners to counter U.S. influence. Although these activities do not pose a direct security threat at the moment, these foreign adversaries are finding receptive hosts within countries that view the U.S. as an ideological opponent: specifically, the Bolivarian Alliance (ALBA) countries of Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Bolivia.

One of America's primary adversaries, Russia, is developing strategic regional partnerships in the form of military cooperation, arms sales, trade agreements, and even cooperation in counternarcotic operations. In addition to high-profile visits by the Russian Navy's Interfleet Surface Action Group to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Russia used a regional exercise to deploy two long-range strategic bombers to Venezuela and Nicaragua and, following its annexation of Crimea, announced plans to build military bases in Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela.

Activities like these have not been seen for over three decades. Venezuela has purchased a noteworthy amount of weapons from Russia, including tanks, "Sukhoi fighter jets, combat helicopters, and over 100,000 light weapons" as well as "a license to produce them in Venezuela."<sup>7</sup> Reports also indicate that in 2008, Russia sold a batch of Igla-S (SA-24) shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles to Venezuela.<sup>8</sup>

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been another active player in the region. Much of Chi-

na's engagement has focused on expanding bilateral economic relations and major investments in infrastructure development projects. Currently, the PRC has proposed to invest \$40 billion in constructing an interoceanic canal in Nicaragua that is set to rival the Panama Canal. Joint military exercises have largely been of a humanitarian nature, such as exercises with regional armed forces in which medical services are provided in rural villages.

In 2013, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted a three-country visit and had its first naval exercise with the Argentine Navy.<sup>9</sup> Visits to the region by senior PLA leaders are common, and virtually every country in Latin America maintains a permanent defense attaché in the PRC. The bulk of defense sales have gone to ALBA countries, illustrating China's intent to leverage relationships with Latin American countries that are explicitly anti-U.S.

Iran's growing presence in Latin America has raised concerns in the U.S. Tehran has spent the past decade increasing its regional economic relations and diplomatic presence, particularly in the ALBA countries. Within Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina, it has found hospitable allies and has developed favorable relations.

Credible unclassified reporting indicates that Hezbollah's presence in Latin America is limited to ideological or religious sympathizers and criminal facilitators who see opportunity in linking drug, contraband, and weapons trafficking to the illicit network and external market access managed by Hezbollah.<sup>10</sup> Regional supporters of other international terrorist organizations engage in money laundering and, quite possibly, even recruiting.

Financed by Venezuela and initiated by late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, the socialist ALBA bloc has spearheaded a wave of anti-Americanism throughout Latin America. Uniting the countries of Latin America to reduce the U.S.'s regional power and presence has been the core tenet of the 21st century socialist movement. ALBA member countries Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia have expelled some U.S. diplomats, shut down U.S.-led counternarcotic programs, and hampered bilateral trade negotiations. In 2011, the president of Ecuador revoked the U.S.'s access to its Manta military base—the only forward operating location in Latin America, from which U.S. forces have worked alongside the Ecuadorian military on Andean counternarcotic and surveillance programs.

The rise of regional groups that purposefully exclude the U.S. indicates the movement's pervasiveness. Multilateral organizations like South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) seek to circumvent the power of the Organization of American States (OAS), the only one to which the U.S. is a party.

The government of Venezuela continues to sustain the Castro regime in Cuba. Caracas annually provides Havana with an average of \$10 billion in subsidized oil and currency—more than twice the amount that Cuba received from the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. In exchange, Cuba provides Venezuela with critical military and intelligence resources as well as civilian slave labor.

Of a more sinister nature are the government's connections to regional and international terrorist groups. For example, the Colombian narco-terrorist organization, the FARC, has long enjoyed sanctuary within Venezuelan territory, reportedly with the support of Venezuelan officials. High-ranking members of the Venezuelan government have provided support to Hezbollah as well. Venezuela's equivalents of the U.S. Attorney General, Secretary of Homeland Security, and FBI Director are considered to be "Significant Foreign Narcotics Traffickers."<sup>11</sup> In 2008, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) found that Venezuela's most senior diplomat at its embassy in Syria facilitated the travel of two Hezbollah representatives who were attempting to raise funds and open a Hezbollah community center in Venezuela.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of conventional military power, ALBA member countries do not pose a major threat to the U.S., but the radical form of socialist populism that they promote has undermined traditional U.S. foreign policy objectives. The regional bloc continuously seeks to create a hostile environment for the U.S., undermining America's attempts at regional cooperation. In addition to using regional proxies to unite the Americas against the U.S., ALBA nations have consistently provided sanctuary to regional and global terrorist organizations, transnational criminal organizations, and international pariahs. Currently, Iran and Syria are observer states in ALBA.

## Africa

The United States has strategic, economic, and historic interests in Africa. Although there is a high probability that regional security risks will not

directly threaten the territorial integrity of the U.S. homeland or result in a major regional war or significant loss of freedom of maneuverability of the commons, the U.S. continues to have a vested interest in countering threats on the African continent and maintaining regional stability.

Small and local problems can quickly become large and regional in ways that would threaten U.S. vital national interests. One needs to look no further than Afghanistan in Central Asia or Syria in the Middle East to see the potential for states and violent non-state actors (terrorist groups) to pose such threats far beyond their local origins. Destabilized and ungoverned areas often serve as sanctuaries for organizing, planning, maturing, and training for activities that eventually reach far beyond these sanctuaries. Accordingly, religious extremism, ethnic conflicts, authoritarian regimes, ungoverned space, and insecure energy supply lines define the direct areas of concern for the United States and its partners within the region.

In 2013–2014, the African continent saw an uptick in violent conflict in the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, and South Sudan, as well as the ongoing conflicts in Somalia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Additional areas of concern include the increase in maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, illicit drugs, wildlife and arms trafficking, and terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda. The threat of terrorism and the additional pressures from refugees on governments such as Niger and Cameroon also have added to an increasing potential for future conflict hot spots.

### Current U.S. Military Presence in Africa

In October 2007, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established to effect better coordination of all U.S. military engagements with the countries of Africa (except Egypt, for which the U.S. Central Command has responsibility), including the continent's island nations and surrounding waters. AFRICOM is responsible for the Pentagon's relations with African countries; the African Union (a regional union that consists of 53 African states but excludes Morocco);<sup>13</sup> and African regional security organizations such as the Economic Commission of West African States' Department of Defense.<sup>14</sup> While its headquarters is not physically located in Africa, AFRICOM is the primary instrument by which the U.S. works with Africa's various militaries.

AFRICOM is headquartered at Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart-Moerhringen, Germany. The newest geographic combatant command, AFRICOM, initially a sub-unified command under U.S. European Command, officially became a separate combatant command in October 2008. AFRICOM supports a broad range of U.S. agencies and supports the Department of State in outreach and relationship building.

AFRICOM addresses a multiplicity of threats emanating from Africa—challenges that require non-traditional military solutions and encouraging long-term partnerships aimed at addressing the root causes of problems that plague the region. During the initial rollout of AFRICOM, one U.S. official claimed that the command would be a success “if it keeps U.S. troops out of Africa for the next 50 years.”<sup>15</sup>

AFRICOM currently serves as a test case for the Army's program to develop regionally aligned brigades. Such brigades would focus on an assigned region and align their unit and personnel training accordingly to include language skills, cultural familiarity, exercise scheduling, and analysis of evolving security conditions. Missions assigned to these brigades would range from two-person teams working closely with local counterparts to accomplish sensitive tasks to more than 300 soldiers conducting airborne and humanitarian training with partner country forces. These units will have conducted more than 100 missions in 2014.<sup>16</sup>

AFRICOM is supported by six subordinate commands:

- U.S. Army Africa (USARAF), operating out of Vicenza, Italy;
- U.S. Naval Forces Africa (NAVAF), headquartered in Naples, Italy, and with its staff shared with U.S. Naval Forces Europe;
- U.S. Air Forces Africa (AFAFRICA), located at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, with its staff shared with U.S. Air Forces in Europe;
- U.S. Marine Corps Forces Africa (MARFORAF), located in Stuttgart, Germany, with its staff shared with U.S. Marine Corps Forces Europe;
- Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA), headquartered at Camp Lemonier, Djibouti; and

- U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCAFRI-CA), co-located with AFRICOM in Stuttgart, Germany.

Notably, CJTF-HOA serves as one of the most critical subordinate commands, both for AFRICOM and for U.S. military operations in Africa, because it is physically present in Africa. CJTF-HOA consists of approximately 2,000 military personnel from the U.S. and allied countries at its headquarters in Djibouti. Its assigned area of interest includes all of East Africa and the Horn of Africa, as well as operations in Mauritius, Comoros, Liberia, and Rwanda; its efforts are aimed at improving African countries' capacity to sustain a stable environment, including effective governance systems that provide a degree of economic and social advancement to their citizens.<sup>17</sup> Recent missions include the East Africa Response Force (EARF) that was deployed to Juba, South Sudan, for three months to secure the U.S. embassy after conflict broke out between government and rebel forces in December 2013.

Despite the creation of AFRICOM and the diverse set of tools and programs intended to support African-led solutions to African problems, serious challenges remain. U.S. military efforts in the region face a shortage of key capabilities, including persistent wide-area intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR),<sup>18</sup> that result in a severely limited understanding of what is happening on the ground in such areas as Northern Nigeria, deep in Central Africa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or on the open Indian Ocean well beyond the Seychelles.<sup>19</sup>

The relatively small number of AFRICOM forces and engagement opportunities across the extraordinary expanse of Africa means that AFRICOM has to rely on platforms instead of people to collect intelligence and develop and maintain situational awareness of evolving security conditions. Consequently, the fewer high-endurance ISR platforms there are available to AFRICOM, the less awareness it has in high-interest areas of Africa.

While the U.S. has not involved itself with "boots on the ground" in many of Africa's civil wars, the U.S. supports many international response efforts in places like Mali and the Central African Republic indirectly, usually with airlift, reconnaissance, and refueling support. AFRICOM continues to hold large exercises with African partner nations, including the annual "Flintlock" exercise. Flintlock has

been conducted each year since 2005 and brings together about 6,000 African troops, 300 U.S. trainers, and another 200 Western partners. The 2013 exercise was conducted in Mauritania, and the exercise in 2014 was held in Niger.<sup>20</sup> And the U.S. military provided logistical, construction, and medical support in the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that began in 2014

### The Arc of Instability in Africa

Africa is a global center of emerging threats. The dangerous mix of religious extremism, ethnic conflicts, authoritarian regimes, ungoverned space, and arms proliferation is driving modern-day conflict in the region. Furthermore, historical divisions manifest themselves to the benefit of global Islamist terrorists. Local grievances (whether perceived or real) that were previously believed to be locally contained conflicts in places such as northern Mali or northern Nigeria have been co-opted and exacerbated by terrorist groups and affiliates linked to al-Qaeda.

Terrorists threaten not only U.S. partners in Africa, but U.S. citizens and assets, as evidenced by the September 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. Al-Qaeda has a history of attacking U.S. interests in Africa, including the 1998 embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, where more than 230 people were killed, including 12 Americans.

For global terrorists, much of Africa is ripe for the picking. For example, poor governance, untrained and inexperienced militaries, and a disgruntled and growing youth population provide fertile ground for a group like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Although such organizations have been frustrated in their operations as a result of the U.N.-backed French intervention in Mali (for which strategic airlift and refueling were provided by the U.S. in coordination with the United Kingdom, Canada, and Sweden), the threat from Islamist terrorists remains real and credible, particularly within the zone known as the "arc of instability" in Africa.

This arc extends from the coast of West Africa, across the Sahelian zone, along the northern reaches of the continent, and down through East Africa to include Ethiopia and Somalia. As a result of cross-border raids and kidnappings, Islamist terrorism is bleeding into Cameroon. The metamorphosis of the conflict in the Central African Republic for control of state resources and a vast

illicit economy<sup>21</sup> into a conflict that is defined primarily in religious terms highlights the extent to which religious extremism and ethnic conflicts are mixing to create an even more dangerous threat to regional stability.

Given the proximity of the arc to NATO allies and the heavily trafficked waters of the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden, the region should continue to be monitored closely. Libya's rapid descent into chaos is a special cause for concern given the country's potential to become another global launching pad for terrorism akin to Yemen and Pakistan.

Of equal concern to the United States are countries that are contributing foreign fighters to the conflict in Syria, such as Libya and Tunisia, as well as countries that are serving as destination points for foreign fighters as seen in Somalia.<sup>22</sup> Somalia is a notorious destination for American foreign fighters intent on joining the al-Qaeda-linked group al-Shabaab.<sup>23</sup> Reports also indicate that the Nigerian-based terrorist group Boko Haram trained alongside AQIM and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).<sup>24</sup> Such groups provide ample battle experience to committed fighters that either return home to the United States or move along to other fronts for global terrorism, thus posing significant threats to the United States at home and to its interests abroad.

## Maritime Security

Africa has become a hotbed of maritime piracy and armed robbery at sea. Despite the gains made in recent years, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has begun to draw considerable attention because it is heavily oriented around the oil sector. The theft of oil from the oil distribution infrastructure (the pipelines and storage facilities that connect drilling rigs with collection and refinery facilities), an activity known as "oil bunkering," is widespread and often occurs within the territorial waters of Nigeria. While each regional situation varies significantly from the other, both of these activities are harmful to global commerce and freedom of the seas.

The expansion of maritime piracy in Africa is closely connected to poor governance and lackluster law enforcement on land—problems that are enabled by and in turn worsen the region's widespread corruption and entrenched criminal and illicit networks. West African criminal networks are partic-

ularly well-organized and intelligence-driven and purportedly include high-powered political, business, and military participants.<sup>25</sup>

The expansion of piracy in West Africa is linked not only to the expansion of the region's illicit oil market, but also to the increase in international shipping to and through the region, which has led in turn to a "backlog" of ships waiting either to load or to unload.<sup>26</sup> Growing numbers of ships waiting in territorial waters without adequate protection are vulnerable to corrupt law enforcement authorities who tip off criminal gangs.

The disruption of maritime transport and access to markets can have a direct impact not only on vital economic activity in the immediate region, but in distant markets as well. Piracy has a negative impact on economic investment in affected regions, disrupts energy flows, slows global trade, damages critical infrastructure, and hinders the protection of marine resources. Given that many of the countries in West Africa are economically dependent on energy revenues, the growing scope and effectiveness of maritime piracy directly affect overall economic security in the region and the main consumers of sub-Saharan African crude: Europe, China, and various U.S. partners in the region.

## Arms Trafficking and the Illicit Economy

Several other illegal activities such as arms trafficking, drug trafficking, wildlife trafficking, and human trafficking also serve as cancers across the region, undermining governance and disrupting economic growth. Illicit trafficking networks, particularly in West Africa, Northwest Africa, and the Sahel, are funding criminal gangs and terrorists alike.

The region serves as a conduit for the transnational drug trade. Drugs are produced in Latin America, shipped to West Africa, trafficked through West and Northwest Africa, and consumed in Europe. According to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "It is estimated that at least 50 tons of cocaine transit through West Africa annually, heading north to European cities, where they are worth almost \$2 billion...."<sup>27</sup> East Africa is also becoming an increasingly key transit route for heroin that is being trafficked to Europe from Asia.

Organized crime and the income generated from illicit activities help to fund extremist groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and AQIM in North Africa. In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped nearly

300 girls and reportedly sold a number of the victims as slaves, exploiting the region's porous and unpatrolled borders. The region's terrorist heavyweights—Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, AQIM and the MUJAO—all have links to lucrative illicit activities including drugs and human trafficking.<sup>28</sup>

Al-Shabaab in Somalia also engages in the illegal charcoal trade,<sup>29</sup> estimated to generate somewhere between an estimated \$38 million and \$56 million per year for the terrorist group.<sup>30</sup> The black-market charcoal trade thrives on Somalia's instability and feeds a vicious cycle that both deprives Somalia's legitimate government of revenues and funds terrorism.

Additionally, wildlife is among the five most valuable illicit commodities, with poaching generating "an estimated value of \$10 billion a year..."<sup>31</sup> The illicit traffic in ivory finances al-Shabaab<sup>32</sup> and supports other non-state actors such as Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA),<sup>33</sup> which operates in Uganda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic. Sudan's Janjaweed militia also derives funding for its destabilizing activities in Darfur through illicit ivory sales.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the revenue generated by the traffic in these various commodities and the logistical network that spans the entire continent of Africa, arms trafficking and sales make it possible for criminal gangs, militias, and terrorist groups to prolong conflicts that destabilize entire regions. For example, after the fall of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi, a significant number of armory storage sites were looted, and their contents subsequently proliferated throughout the region. AQIM acquired anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles and transferred arms to other groups in the region including Boko Haram and Ansar Dine. Arms proliferation, a strengthened AQIM, and the return of Tuareg mercenary fighters from Libya in 2011 led to the current conflict in Mali.

Arms trafficking in the Sahel and trans-Sahara region remains largely unmonitored by responsible governments and credible law enforcement entities due to a severe lack of ISR capabilities. Complicating matters is the fact that not all illicit activity occurs above ground. In Nigeria, for instance, Boko Haram uses a series of underground tunnels to traffic in weapons, drugs, and other commodities.<sup>35</sup>

The growth of illicit economies in Africa and their expansion across borders and entire regions under-

mine governance and stability in Africa. Transnational criminal gangs, local violent non-state actors, and terrorists all benefit financially and materially from such illicit economies—wealth that inevitably corrupts local governments and, in particular, law enforcement. This corruption in turn fuels a distrust of government, creating a spiral of additional corruption, abuse of power, and worsened popular grievances.

### **Maintaining Stability and Curbing Adversarial Influence**

The Arab Spring created a new dynamic in North Africa that has affected the stability and long-term future of many of the region's states: Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya among others. Many of the region's entrenched authoritarian regimes, fearing for their own survival, ruthlessly cracked down still further on their populations.

Most of these repressive governments remain under U.S. or even U.N. arms embargos, but many, such as Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and Sudan, look to such foreign partners as China, Russia, and Iran for financial and military support. While China may be pursuing economic interests through investment and resource extraction in Africa, it has risen to be the number one arms supplier to Africa, cornering 25 percent of the market.<sup>36</sup> China also supports autocratic regimes at the U.N. Security Council, blocking sanctions against Zimbabwe in 2008 and continuing to defend Sudan despite the growing spillover of violence from that country into its neighbors.

Ironically, while China's weapons sales to odious regimes enable and sustain repression and instability, the PRC also supports regional security efforts and, to some extent, is building credibility with African governments.<sup>37</sup> Notably, China committed 395 troops to the U.N. Peacekeeping operation (PKO) in Mali in June 2013. Since 2003, China has been active in PKOs in Africa, providing military observers or functional units and using the operations to gain power with local leaders and populations—and thereby gaining access to natural resources.<sup>38</sup>

Congruent with U.S. security interests, China continues to engage on cooperative security initiatives, including counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Guinea (bilaterally with Nigeria); the Horn of Africa (international counter-piracy patrols); and the Indian Ocean (bilaterally with Tanzania and South Africa). While China's involvement does contribute



to the larger good of reducing piracy, participation in these partnerships and training opportunities ultimately provides the People's Liberation Army Navy with "a platform to enhance its expeditionary capacity" in a region of significant interest to China.<sup>39</sup>

### **"African Solutions to African Problems"**

Many of the challenges in Africa have global reach, and while they will not directly threaten the territorial integrity of the U.S. homeland, result in a major regional war, or result in the loss of freedom of movement in or access to the commons, the U.S. still has a vested interest in countering threats on the African continent and working to improve regional stability. "African solutions for African problems," a mantra repeated regularly by U.S. officials since AFRICOM was established in 2008, remains far from being a reality.

Africa's problems remain pervasive and continue to increase in virulence. Terrorism in Africa affects not only U.S. interests and citizens in Africa, but also the U.S. itself. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, known to many as the "Underwear Bomber," was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. If America does not take Africa seriously both as a security threat and as an opportunity to be seized, individuals like Abdulmutallab will continue to represent a serious threat to the U.S.

Absent a serious U.S. investment in time, attention, and resources, governments such as China and Russia will continue to build influence with Africa's authoritarian leaders—thugs who increase rather than eliminate grievances. Such oppressive regimes drive more individuals into the arms of extremists and illicit economic opportunists, ultimately downgrading the security environment of the entire continent.

**Endnotes:**

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