

# The Fourth Fleet

A Tool of U.S. Engagement in the Americas

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# THE FOURTH FLEET

## A TOOL OF U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE AMERICAS

Jeffrey D. Maclay, Matthew Potter, Robert R. Scott, and Matthew W. Sibley<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The future of U.S. engagement will be under review as the Obama administration advances its own vision of U.S. foreign policy for the Western Hemisphere. With Venezuela promoting closer military relations with Russia, an ongoing conflict in Colombia, and the rise of a number of populist governments in the region that are antagonistic to U.S. policies, assessing what tools the United States has to manage these relationships will be critical in the coming administration. Among the most flexible of these tools is the U.S. military.

With Latin America in a state of relative peace, U.S. military presence has in recent years been less of a tool of projecting U.S. power and more a means of providing technical support and training to the region's militaries to strengthen civil-military relations, develop professionalism, and help these countries respond to external threats. U.S. military power has also played an important role in advancing some of the broader socioeconomic agendas in the region—such as providing access to health services and humanitarian assistance in times of natural disaster. The U.S. military forces have also partnered with national law enforcement agencies in the region for counternarcotic and counterterrorism initiatives.

The role of the U.S. military presence in this region reflects a wider acceptance of the changing role that our armed forces are now playing around the globe. This form of engagement has become a critical component of a “smart power” approach—the combination of “hard” military assets and “soft” diplomatic and development tools to most effectively advance U.S. security interests around the world.<sup>2</sup> With an abundance of resources, the U.S. military has come to serve at the nexus of security and development in this dynamic period of global transformation.

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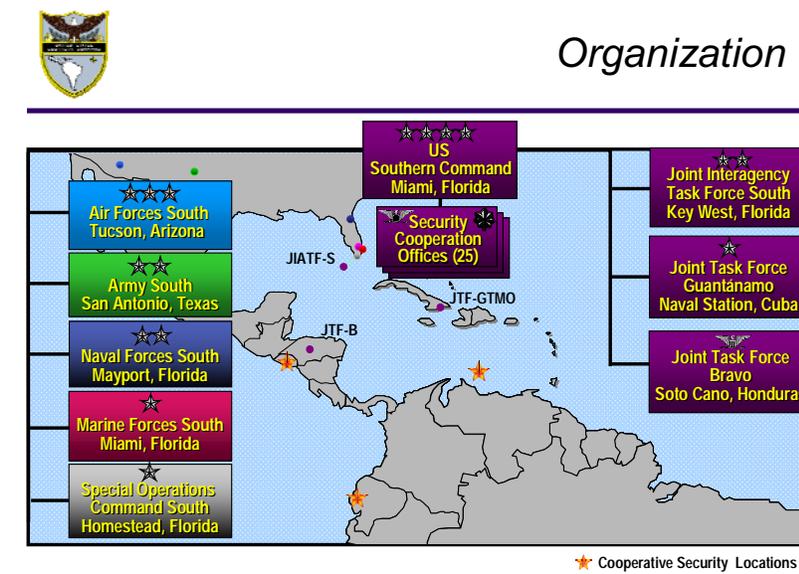
<sup>1</sup> Our special thanks to Johanna Mendelson Forman for directing the project and also to Peter DeShazo, Steve Flanagan, Jessica Horwitz, and Leslie Taylor for their valuable editorial and research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *A Smarter, More Secure America: A Report of the CSIS Commission on Smart Power* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2008), p. 7. See also Robert Gates (Landon Lecture,

The recent creation of the Fourth Fleet in July 2008 as part of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) reflects this approach. The Fourth Fleet is responsible for U.S. Navy ships, aircraft, and submarines operating in the SOUTHCOM area of focus. Its aim is to strengthen cooperation and partnerships using five primary missions: support for peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, traditional maritime exercises, and counterdrug support operations.<sup>3</sup> No vessels or aircraft will be permanently assigned to the Fourth Fleet. The reestablishment of the Fourth Fleet is intended to address the increased role of maritime forces. It is staffed to fulfill a planning and coordination mission. It also serves to demonstrate U.S. commitment to regional partners.<sup>4</sup>

Under U.S. regional command structure, SOUTHCOM's area of focus encompasses more than 30 countries, covers approximately 15.6 million square miles of the Earth's surface, and represents about one-sixth of the world's landmass. Current conditions in this vast region, coupled with SOUTHCOM's geographic dispersal and competing combatant commanders' requests for forces, require SOUTHCOM to take a unique approach in theater security cooperation and engagement in Latin America. Its focus on smart power rather than merely conventional hard power reflects SOUTHCOM's pragmatic approach through the employment of its service component commands (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Organization of SOUTHCOM**



UNCLASSIFIED

Source: SOUTHCOM, command brief, Oct 17, 2008.

Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, November 26, 2007), <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command–U.S. Fourth Fleet, “Mission,” [http://www.cusns.navy.mil/command info.htm#Area%20of%20Responsibility](http://www.cusns.navy.mil/command%20info.htm#Area%20of%20Responsibility).

<sup>4</sup> Alan Gragg, “Navy Reestablishes U.S. 4th Fleet,” U.S. Navy, April 24, 2008, [http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story\\_id=36606](http://www.navy.mil/search/display.asp?story_id=36606).

Unfortunately, the benign rebranding of U.S. naval forces at SOUTHCOM as the “Fourth Fleet” has been viewed by U.S. friends and allies in the region with great skepticism.<sup>5</sup> Adversaries of the United States, particularly heads of state such as Raúl Castro and Hugo Chávez, have been even more critical of U.S. intentions, alleging a new age of imperialism. Not only has news about the Fourth Fleet attracted negative attention, it has also provided part of the rationale for the creation of a South American Defense Council (CSD) under the leadership of Brazil.

The negative attention that the Fourth Fleet has received is mostly a result of misinformation over why the Fourth Fleet was recreated and what its mission will be. In spite of public statements by the U.S. military to articulate its mission, skepticism remains about the true intent behind the fleet’s reestablishment.<sup>6</sup> However, aside from the problem of negative image, there remain fundamental questions in the United States over whether the fleet is the most effective means of accomplishing broad U.S. policy goals in the region. At its core, this question raises the issue of whether or not the use of a military structure to achieve goals not necessarily military in nature undermines the Fourth Fleet’s objectives—to assure regional partners about the U.S. commitment to maritime security in the southern part of the Western Hemisphere. It also raises the question of whether more effective public diplomacy can and should be able to ameliorate any concerns about the fleet’s military mission. Because the fleet was actually established as a planning and coordination mechanism with no ships assigned to it, the concern that it might be perceived as a genuine military threat by our partners in the hemisphere is actually misplaced.

The 2008 *National Defense Strategy* described the Department of Defense’s strategic concept as a means to “strengthen alliances, and build new partnerships to defeat global terrorism and prevent attacks against us, our allies, and our friends; prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends with weapons of mass destruction (WMD); work with others to defuse regional conflicts, including conflict intervention, and transform national security institutions to face the challenges of the 21st century.”<sup>7</sup>

By conducting the Partnership of the Americas 2008, an annual training exercise, SOUTHCOM addressed the tasks in the 2008 *National Defense Strategy* in a manner focused toward building goodwill among the populations of the hemisphere. The exercise emphasized interoperability and cooperation through a variety of events at sea and shore between U.S. maritime forces and partner nations’ navies. Training and bilateral exchanges, such as those conducted by Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force–24 (SPMAGTF-24) and the Fourth

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<sup>5</sup> Héctor Luis Saint-Pierre, “La Activación de la IV Flota de los Estados Unidos y las Hipótesis Evitables,” Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Estratégicos, <http://www.idepe.org/foro5.html>.

<sup>6</sup> According to Admiral Gary Roughead, U.S. chief of naval operations, “Reconstituting the Fourth Fleet recognizes the immense importance of maritime security in the southern part of the Western Hemisphere, and sends a strong signal to all the civil and military maritime services in Central and Latin America,” said Roughead. “Aligning the Fourth Fleet along with our other numbered fleets and providing the capabilities and personnel are a logical execution of our new Maritime Strategy.” Alan Gragg, “Navy Reestablishes U.S. 4th Fleet.”

<sup>7</sup> *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 2008), p. 2, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/2008NationalDefenseStrategy.pdf>.

Fleet, provided opportunities for participating nations to counter maritime activities that could threaten stability in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the observed negative reaction in Latin America to the Fourth Fleet necessitates some serious thought over what it will take to ensure that the United States remains a welcome and constructive interlocutor in a region where security interests are evolving from concerns about bilateral conflicts to transnational threats. The new administration will have to consider how to reassure U.S. friends in this hemisphere that the smart power approach is only enhanced by a strong civilian leadership, accompanied by democratic military assets that can support the development of the region.

## Rationale behind the Fourth Fleet

To better understand the rationale for reestablishing the Fourth Fleet, one must first recognize how the importance of the region meshes with the evolving nature of security threats around the globe and with the evolution of the *National Security Strategy*, the *National Defense Strategy*, and SOUTHCOM's supporting *Command Strategy 2018*. More than 500 million people—one-half of the hemisphere's population—live in Central and South America and the Caribbean, accounting for approximately 8.6 percent of the global population. While this percentage is expected to remain static, the actual population in real numbers is expected to grow to 768 million by 2050.<sup>9</sup> Trade between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean totaled more than \$341 billion in 2007,<sup>10</sup> and in the same year, foreign direct investment from the rest of the world topped \$100 billion for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, in recent years, trends in public perceptions of the United States in Latin America have progressed inversely to the volume of trade. As illustrated in Figure 2, favorable opinion of the United States diminished markedly from 2002 to 2007 across the hemisphere due largely to the invasion of Iraq and the war on terror. This overall decline, while demonstrating the need for increased involvement in the region, may well have contributed to a poor reception of the Fourth Fleet on its announcement.

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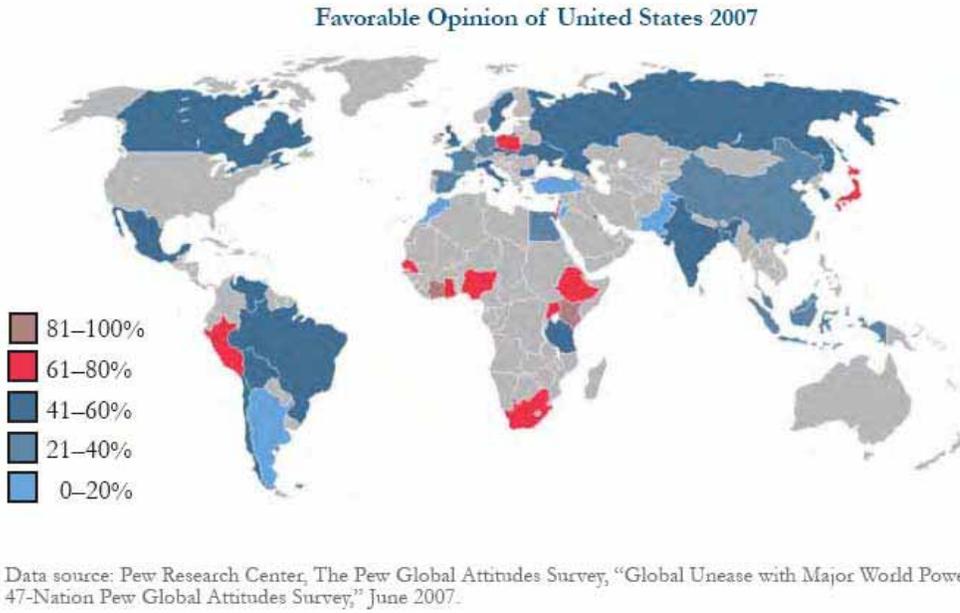
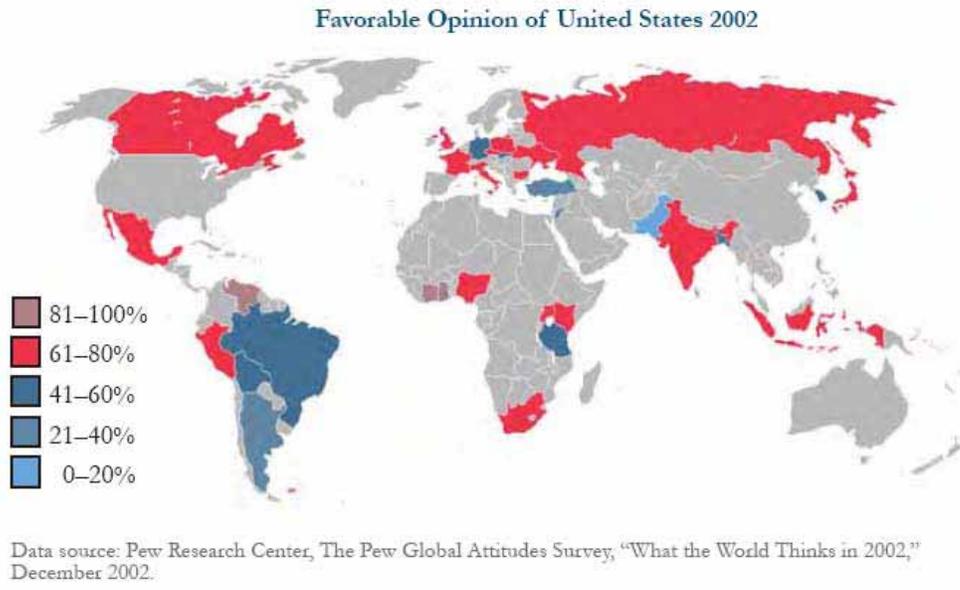
<sup>8</sup> U.S. Southern Command, "Partnership of the Americas 2008," <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/factFiles.php?id=48>.

<sup>9</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population to 2300* (New York: United Nations, 2004), p. 33, <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/longrange2/WorldPop2300final.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> International Monetary Fund, Direction of Trade Statistics Database, <http://www.imfststatistics.org/dot/> (November 11, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> UN Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, *Foreign Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2007* (Santiago: United Nations, June 2008), abstract, <http://www.eclac.cl/cgi-bin/getProd.asp?xml=/publicaciones/xml/1/32931/P32931.xml&xsl=/ddpe/tpl-i/p9f.xsl&base=/ddpe/tpl/top-bottom.xsl>.

Figure 2. Favorable Opinion of the United States, 2002 and 2007



# The Importance of Latin America to U.S. Security Interests

At the end of the Cold War, no great external threat to democratic consolidation in Latin America existed. However, by 1991 SOUTHCOM had flagged economic inequality as something that could give rise to increased conflict and violence. Internal threats arising from narco-trafficking and an insurgency in Colombia and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru led the list of security concerns in the region. While this fear of intrastate conflict spilling over into other countries has not been borne out, Latin America remains a region with the highest income inequality in the world, which has spawned criminal activity that erodes civil and human security. This inequality also fuels support for populists offering various alternatives to capitalism and democracy.

Since September 11, 2001, transnational threats have come to be seen as a growing component to security challenges in Latin America as in the rest of the world. Included in these threats are security challenges such as drug trafficking and terrorism, energy and trade dependence on potentially unreliable partners, regional instability arising from poverty and social injustice, the impact of climate change, and the growing influence of external actors in the region. Of these threats, some will require military responses, but most are more appropriately addressed by civilian authorities such as the police in the case of crime, and by other civilian agencies in the case of rising poverty or threats to the environment or energy security. Policymakers cannot think about transnational threats in terms of national security alone, as they require a multifaceted set of tools to counter them. Not only will the involvement of the region's militaries be needed to address these challenges, but greater coordination and collaboration between the military and civilian institutions will be central to resolving immediate crises and finding long-term solutions.

We are now entering an age of multipolarity where the United States, while still preeminent in the Western Hemisphere, will face greater economic and political competition for influence in the region. U.S. policy over the last eight years has begun to reflect that multipolar reality, as succeeding National Security Strategies have adopted more balanced approaches to the capabilities of national power.<sup>12</sup> As emerging powers like China and India seek influence in the hemisphere, the potential for tensions with the United States could increase. Similarly, Russia is seeking to establish a greater role as an arms supplier to the region's armies. Iran is also flexing its diplomatic reach through its recent engagement with Venezuela. The growing influence of Brazil as a key global economic player, biofuels powerhouse, and potential major oil producer presents both opportunities and challenges to U.S. interests. These emerging trends could stimulate the development of new economic and political alliances that can be viewed as either an important opportunity for globalization and development or as a broader threat to U.S. security.

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<sup>12</sup> The strategic visions of the 2006 *National Security Strategy* and 2008 *National Defense Strategy* have operationalized a more balanced approach to the capabilities of national power. As journalist Fareed Zakaria argued about recent broad U.S. strategy, "for whatever reasons and through whichever path, the foreign policies in place are now more sensible, moderate, and mainstream." Fareed Zakaria, "What Bush Got Right," *Newsweek*, August 18–25, 2008.

**The 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States on Transformational Diplomacy and Effective Democracy*<sup>13</sup>**

Effective economic development advances our national security by helping promote responsible sovereignty, not permanent dependency. Weak and impoverished states and ungoverned areas are not only a threat to their people and a burden on regional economies, but are also susceptible to exploitation by terrorists, tyrants, and international criminals. We will work to bolster threatened states, provide relief in times of crisis, and build capacity in developing states to increase their progress.

**The 2008 *National Defense Strategy*<sup>14</sup>**

On Promoting Security:

Our strategy emphasizes building the capacities of a broad spectrum of partners as the basis for long-term security.

We will work with and through like-minded states to help shrink the ungoverned areas of the world and thereby deny extremists and other hostile parties sanctuary.

On Strengthening and Expanding Alliances and Partnerships:

We will assist other countries in improving their capabilities through security cooperation, just as we will learn valuable skills and information from others better situated to understand some of the complex challenges we face together.

We must broaden our ideas to include partnerships for new situations or circumstances, calling on moderate voices in troubled regions and unexpected partners.

By helping others to police themselves and their regions, we will collectively address threats to the broader international system.

## Reestablishment of the Fourth Fleet

Over the years, the United States has frequently had to confront changing balances of power in the Western Hemisphere. In 1943, during World War II, the U.S. Navy chose to expand its presence in the region through the creation of the Fourth Fleet, which waged war against raiders, blockade runners, and submarines in the south Atlantic, in addition to protecting the Panama Canal and defending against Nazi and Japanese actions. The fleet was decommissioned in 1950 as part of the

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<sup>13</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *National Defense Strategy*, pp. 9 and 15.

greater U.S. demobilization following the conclusion of the war. Since then, maritime military relationships have typically been exercised by conducting bilateral and multilateral exercises.<sup>15</sup>

Those exercises have been complemented by stepping up operations, when necessary, during times of crisis. This approach proved successful in many instances ranging from Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis to Haiti in 1994, just as it was for U.S. ground forces in Baghdad in 2007. However, the smart power approach recognizes that partner “*trust and cooperation cannot be surged*” but instead take long-term engagement.<sup>16</sup> The reestablishment of the Fourth Fleet embodies this principle, outlined by the U.S. Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard in *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, with an aim toward using sea power as a unifying force.

Through cooperation with the Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and other interagency and interdepartmental partners, the Fourth Fleet will exemplify U.S. maritime power by controlling the sea lanes, ensuring maritime security, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster response throughout the region.

For nearly 20 years, the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATFS) based in Key West, Florida, has conducted extremely effective interagency/international counter-drug operations, consequently improving security throughout the region. With an emphasis on partner nation participation, the Fourth Fleet will coordinate with JIATFS to enhance cooperative international relationships. This kind of integrated military-civil-police cooperation is essential to dealing with emerging transnational threats. The 2008 *National Drug Control Strategy* links the drug trade with other transnational threats. “Over the years, the drug trade has grown more sophisticated and complex. It has evolved in such a way that its infrastructure—including its profits, alliances, organizations, and criminal methods—help facilitate and reinforce other systemic transnational threats such as arms and human trafficking, money laundering and illicit financial flows, and gangs. The drug trade also serves as a critical source of revenue for some terrorist groups and insurgencies.”<sup>17</sup>

As U.S. efforts to stem the flow of illegal narcotics have become more and more successful through airborne and boat-to-boat use of force coupled with better and more specific intelligence,

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<sup>15</sup> The exercises include PANAMAX and UNITAS. PANAMAX is one of the largest multinational training exercises. SOUTHCOM has sponsored this annual exercise since 2003 with key objectives that include exercising command and control in a multinational force to conduct maritime interdiction ops, surveillance ops, monitoring, and operational planning to achieve regional naval control and shipping protection. PANAMAX 2007 focused on ensuring the defense of the Panama Canal, one of the most strategically and economically crucial waterways in the world. SOUTHCOM, “Fuerzas Aliadas PANAMAX 2007,” <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/factFiles.php?id=25>. UNITAS is a combined South American and U.S.-sponsored annual exercise series that incorporates several South American nations in addition to each phase’s host nation. It is the U.S. Navy’s longest-running annual multilateral exercise and has been aimed at building ties with partner nation navies since 1960. In recent years, UNITAS has evolved from strictly bilateral exchanges to multilateral exercises in an effort to produce more tangible benefits. SOUTHCOM, “UNITAS Pacific 2008,” <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/factFiles.php?id=65>.

<sup>16</sup> *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (U.S. Navy, Marine Corp, and Coast Guard, 2007), p. 10, <http://www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *2008 National Drug Control Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2008), pp. 34–35, [http://www.ondcp.gov/publications/policy/ndcs08/chap3\\_pref.html](http://www.ondcp.gov/publications/policy/ndcs08/chap3_pref.html).

drug-trafficking organizations continue to adapt to these changes (such as by using semi-submersibles and sophisticated hidden compartments) to increase profits. Similarly, innovative seaborne methods to smuggle arms and migrants to and from the United States create additional opportunities for terrorist organizations to use these well-rehearsed routes to cause harm on U.S. soil. At a recent SOUTHCOM conference on the illegal drug threat in the Americas, conferees noted that Latin America is a “fertile ground” for cooperation between terrorist organizations and drug traffickers, and “the key to preventing such an alliance is increasing cooperation between government agencies and with nations in the region.”<sup>18</sup>

## Evolution of SOUTHCOM’s Engagement in Recent Years

Building on the principles outlined in the 2006 *National Security Strategy* and 2008 *National Defense Strategy*, Admiral James G. Stavridis, the commander of SOUTHCOM, released his *Command Strategy 2018* in December 2008. This document outlines a strategy that recognizes “the increasing importance of integrating all instruments of national capability to meet the challenges of the future throughout the hemisphere.”<sup>19</sup> Strongly embedded in this strategy are overarching goals to:

1. Ensure security through collective partnerships.
2. Enhance stability beyond traditional security cooperation activities by actively seeking support from interagency, nongovernmental entities and public/private institutions.
3. Enable partnerships by employing all available instruments of power, including enabling effective sovereignty.

In releasing *Command Strategy 2018*, SOUTHCOM based its strategic concept on the two pillars enumerated by President George W. Bush in the 2006 *National Security Strategy*: “The first pillar is promoting freedom, justice, and human dignity—working to end tyranny, to promote effective democracies, and to extend prosperity through free and fair trade and wise development policies. ... The second pillar of our strategy is confronting the challenges of our time by leading a growing community of democracies.”<sup>20</sup>

The employment of the Fourth Fleet and SPMAGTF-24 exemplifies this approach and recognizes the fact that the problems in SOUTHCOM’s area of focus “from the threat of pandemic disease, to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to terrorism, to human trafficking, to natural disasters—reach across our borders.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Curt Anderson, “US Officials Fear Terrorist Links with Drug Lords,” Associated Press, October 8, 2008, <http://wiredispatch.com/news/?id=414189>.

<sup>19</sup> *Command Strategy 2018* (U.S. Southern Command, 2008), pp. 3, 11–14, <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/files/0UI0I1177092386.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> *National Security Strategy*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> “The President’s National Security Strategy,” U.S. Department of State, press release, March 16, 2006, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63319.pdf>.

A recent example of this previously outlined approach was engagement by the Fourth Fleet and the U.S. Marine Corps' SPMAGTF-24 in July 2008. Both participated in the exercises Continuing Promise 2008 (Pacific Phase) and Partnership of the Americas 2008, where the objectives to improve U.S. and partner nation capacity were met with either limited or negative host nation press coverage, demonstrating the public relations problems that confront the deployment of the Fourth Fleet.

Continuing Promise 2008 (Pacific Phase) was conducted by the amphibious assault ship USS *Boxer*. The *Boxer* conducted missions in three nations: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru. Similar to the Caribbean Phase, *Boxer* embarked a medical/dental team of more than 150 military medical professionals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as 60 navy seabees. A stated key objective of this deployment was to address health service support requirements and promote clinical information sharing across the region.

Partnership of the Americas 2008 was conducted by SPMAGTF-24 from April 18 to June 23, 2008, in support of SOUTHCOM's engagement plan. As previously described, this recurring annual exercise with partner nations in the Southern Hemisphere resulted in training with marine corps from partner nations in six training locations: Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These exercises included high-level military engagement with heads of partner nation services and with brigade- and battalion-level commanders. Superior training for all participating forces built capacity for partner nations in expeditionary operations and live-fire training. This concept was mirrored by the U.S. Navy through the Fourth Fleet, with a focus on the Caribbean and Central America.

## The Fourth Fleet and Continuing Promise 2008 (Caribbean Phase)

Adhering to its dual role of defense and support to development of partner capabilities, the Fourth Fleet is maintaining a softer approach toward its unifying mission. After its formal reestablishment in July 2008, it has overseen a collaborative effort between what is normally a U.S. capital warship, the USS *Kearsarge*, and partner militaries in five countries (Nicaragua, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago). Titled Continuing Promise 2008 (Caribbean Phase), this goodwill medical mission was aimed at building strong partnerships that can be called on in the event of a regional situation requiring cooperative solutions. In addition, to advance its smart power agenda, SOUTHCOM created a civil-military force that included not only U.S. service members but also their counterparts from the Canadian Army and Air Force in addition to medical personnel from the U.S. Public Health Service and partner nations. Representatives of NGOs, such as Operation Smile and Project Hope, which brought greater depth to the goodwill and civic assistance effort, also participated on this USS *Kearsarge* mission.

The same flexibility and configuration that makes the USS *Kearsarge* an effective tool for hard power also makes it an excellent platform to provide partner nations a mobile, flexible, and rapidly responsive medical and engineering capability to support civil authorities. The

amphibious carrier ship has the capacity to transport large amounts of medical and engineering supplies and equipment to most locations around the globe. Furthermore, naval vessels like the USS *Kearsarge* can remain on location indefinitely, providing requested support and humanitarian assistance to NGOs and partner nations affected by natural disasters.

## Regional Reaction to the Fourth Fleet

Despite the unthreatening rationale behind the reestablishment of the Fourth Fleet, its reappearance has caused a significant public diplomacy challenge to the United States in Latin America. Even though the United States executed a well-considered public diplomacy plan that included consultations with governments and militaries throughout the hemisphere, countries normally receptive to U.S. diplomatic initiatives are viewing the Fourth Fleet's reappearance with polite suspicion at best. Countries in the area that are normally adverse to U.S. partnering activities have used the fleet's stand up as an amplifier to further anti-imperialistic rhetoric. A primary source, or at least justification, of this skepticism is widespread distrust in Latin America of the instrument being used—the Fourth Fleet—rather than the objectives of the fleet itself. Had the United States created an interagency task force on Western Hemisphere affairs charged with the same objectives, it would most likely not have raised the same level of outcry without compromising its mission.

Instead, since the announcement of the rebirth of the Fourth Fleet, a series of criticisms has been raised across the Western Hemisphere. Some of these fall along predictably ideological grounds—particularly in countries with whom the United States has strained relations—but others are shared by important U.S. allies as well. These include a renewed wave of warnings against another phase of U.S. imperialism. Led by Fidel (and later Raúl) Castro and Hugo Chávez, but not constrained to leftist governments, the age-old fear of American interventionism in Latin American affairs has received an injection of life with the reappearance of the Fourth Fleet. They call the fleet “a threat to our waters”<sup>22</sup> and “an expression of desperation in Washington...incapable of stopping the wave of revolutionary governments outside their sphere of influence.”<sup>23</sup>

However, the anti-imperialist critique is by no means the most prominent. That honor most likely falls to suspicions that a renewed U.S. military presence in Latin America is directly related to the ever increasing importance of energy supplies. On the one hand, many argue that the United States is fearful of the impact of PetroCaribe and the potential loss of oil supplies from Venezuela that may be redirected to China, Russia, or elsewhere. Others point to the recent discoveries of vast new oil deposits in Brazil and allege that the Fourth Fleet is a mechanism to ensure U.S. control of that oil when it reaches the global market in the next few years. Brazilian officials, including President Lula da Silva, Defense Minister Nelson Jobim, and opposition

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<sup>22</sup> “Chávez Dice que Envío de Cuarta Flota Es una Amenaza,” *El Universal*, July 1, 2008, [http://economia.eluniversal.com/2008/07/01/pol\\_ava\\_chavez-dice-que-envi\\_01A1746321.shtml](http://economia.eluniversal.com/2008/07/01/pol_ava_chavez-dice-que-envi_01A1746321.shtml).

<sup>23</sup> Fidel Castro, “Respuesta Hemisférica Yanqui: La IV Flota de Intervención,” *Diario Granma*, May 4, 2008, <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/secciones/ref-fidel/art17.html>.

members of the Brazilian Senate, have all been vocal in linking the Fourth Fleet to Brazilian oil finds and have used the announcement to push harder for energy independence of their own and the creation of a South American Defense Council (CSD).<sup>24</sup> They have also demanded that the United States explain the logic for a new fleet in a region of the world that is largely at peace<sup>25</sup> and insisted that the forces will not be allowed to enter Brazilian waters, the borders of which are in some dispute, without authorization.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, some critics point to a discrepancy in the official mission attributed to the Fourth Fleet and how the United States has actually gone about recreating the fleet. Others question the timing of the announcement of its rebirth, which came less than a month after the regional diplomatic crisis caused by Colombia's cross-border incursion into Ecuador to attack a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) encampment and in the midst of a supposed campaign to support the breakup of Bolivia.<sup>27</sup> These critics also question why a U.S. Navy SEAL and former commander of the Naval Special Warfare Command, Admiral Joseph Kernan, was chosen to head the Fourth Fleet, if its mission is peaceful as is claimed.<sup>28</sup> As a result, the fleet's supposed hidden agenda continued to receive extensive attention even while it undertook its first official endeavor. The USS *Kearsarge* made visits to Nicaragua, Colombia, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic on a variety of medical, disaster relief, and other humanitarian missions. The response to its arrival in Nicaragua was underwhelming and typical: a brief welcome from local military officials followed by notable silence and apparent disinterest during the remainder of its call.<sup>29</sup>

## Integrating the Fourth Fleet into a New Strategy for Hemispheric Engagement

This range of criticisms exposes a fundamental flaw in U.S. efforts to improve its image in Latin America. Across the hemisphere, support for the United States has dropped steadily in recent years thanks not only to unfavorable U.S. policies but also to the rising financial influence of Venezuela, which has replaced the United States as the largest source of aid in the region. However, this may change soon given the dramatic drop in oil revenues in late 2008. When the Bush administration stepped up its effort to turn the tide of public opinion and improve the United States' reputation in Latin America, it turned to the military as one means of promoting goodwill as part of a regional cooperation and public diplomacy campaign.

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<sup>24</sup> "Cristovam Cita Episódio da 4ª Frota dos EUA para Pedir Fortalecimento da Marinha Brasileira," Senado Federal, October 7, 2008, <http://www.senado.gov.br/agencia/verNoticia.aspx?codNoticia=76845>.

<sup>25</sup> Elonora Gosman, "Lula Quiere Saber qué Hará la IV Flota en Brasil," *Clarín*, July 14, 2008, [http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/07/14/el\\_mundo/i-01714630.htm](http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/07/14/el_mundo/i-01714630.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Flynn, "United States Announces IV Fleet Resumes Operations Amid South American Suspicions," *Americas Program*, July 11, 2008, <http://Americas.irc-online.org/am/5362>.

<sup>27</sup> Fidel Castro, "Respuesta Hemisférica Yanqui: La IV Flota de Intervención."

<sup>28</sup> Héctor Luis Saint-Pierre, "La Activación de la IV Flota de los Estados Unidos y las Hipótesis Evitables."

<sup>29</sup> David Axe, "Winning Hearts, Minds in Latin America," *Washington Times*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/sep/07/soft-power-for-hard-problems/?page=2>.

Not surprisingly, many Latin Americans are wary of “military diplomacy.” The broad civilian-military cooperative approach to security envisioned by the new strategy is useful, but senior U.S. officials must do a better job of including civilian apparatuses in that approach. The U.S. State Department, including its public affairs offices abroad, needs to improve its coordination with the military and be more proactive throughout Latin America. In addition, the entire U.S. government could go a long way toward assuaging suspicions simply by keeping foreign governments better informed of its decisionmaking and consulting them when necessary. The announcement of the recreation of the Fourth Fleet caught most analysts and many Latin American governments by surprise, many noting that they had received no advance notice that such an action was even being considered.<sup>30</sup> It is only natural for them to question the motives of an action that seemed to have been taken without warning. U.S. military authorities argue that briefings of the region’s defense ministers were undertaken. Whether the communication chain broke down is unclear.

This paper suggests several opportunities for furthering U.S. policy objectives in the region.

1. The Fourth Fleet can contribute to the pursuit of a smart power strategy for the United States. It brings together the training and skill of the U.S. Navy to provide a wide range of security activities in the Western Hemisphere while also serving as a complement to U.S. civilian support for humanitarian activities throughout the Caribbean and South America. Coordination among agencies—the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Defense—over the integrated missions of the Fourth Fleet will ensure that this military asset fulfills its stated missions.
2. To reduce the skepticism and negative responses of the United States’ Latin American partners in this hemisphere, SOUTHCOM should coordinate with the Department of State to create a public diplomacy campaign to dispel any further unease about the role and mission of the Fourth Fleet. Consultations among relevant organizations and agencies at embassies in each country where the Fourth Fleet will operate can reduce misunderstandings. These meetings will also encourage confidence and collaboration among regional counterparts, both military and civilian.
3. Natural disasters in the region are on the rise as a consequence of climate change. The Fourth Fleet can serve as a training tool and vehicle for joint exercises with regional actors to share lessons learned and develop common practices and interoperability to enhance military support to future humanitarian relief operations in the Western Hemisphere. SOUTHCOM should use the Fourth Fleet as a force multiplier for military work with civilian agencies like the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance of the U.S. Agency for International Development to ensure seamless support in times of emergency.
4. The new regional security climate in the Western Hemisphere includes many new actors taking on new roles in arms transfers and the pursuit of natural resources. As

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<sup>30</sup> Héctor Luis Saint-Pierre, “La Activación de la IV Flota de los Estados Unidos y las Hipótesis Evitables.”

transnational threats remain a factor in this hemisphere, SOUTHCOM should undertake a review of how the work of the Fourth Fleet addresses emerging threats and the dynamic nature of regional security issues that affect U.S. interests.

What remains is a situation where general mistrust of U.S. policy in the region is reinforced by perceptions of a new military agenda that is no different than before but is being repackaged in a new way. However, there is an opportunity for the Obama administration to overcome this perception and still use the Fourth Fleet as a valuable element of U.S. engagement strategy. While a recent poll by Latinobarometro reflected the loss of U.S. influence in the hemisphere, it also revealed a strong desire for a more collegial relationship with Washington. During his campaign, President Obama called for a new era of activist diplomacy and engagement in the Western Hemisphere. As the administration undertakes its policy review, the president should articulate a vision for a more sustained U.S. engagement in political, economic, and security cooperation with countries in the region. The U.S. military, with its substantial resources and global capacity, should complement the traditional diplomacy that the United States uses to help rebuild strong regional relationships. This would reinforce the United States' good intentions, strengthen the resolve of partners to do more, and provide an effective antidote to populist demagoguery and the search for new partners outside the hemisphere. U.S. regional security policy should embrace a renewed commitment to multilateral approaches to addressing transnational challenges.

## About the Authors

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