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'A Community of Interest' to Tackle Crime in Central America

by George Rodríguez

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Just over three months after having taken charge of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), Adm. Kurt Tidd proposed to his Central American colleagues the creation of what he described as a community of interest, to ensure that his country's and the region's efforts in fighting organized crime are on the same wavelength.

In his opening statement at this year's Central American Security Conference (CENTSEC), hosted by Costa Rica, Tidd announced he has already taken some steps to improve the command's support to its regional partners.

His initiative is in full coincidence with the area's security and military authorities, who show themselves eager to unite individual efforts—and together work with the US— against the international criminal networks, mostly drug-trafficking structures, that are operating throughout Central America.

The concept, promoted by the US, includes a military-police convergence, so the two top actors in the anti-crime struggle team up in a more powerful, more efficient structure. Within this framework, SOUTHCOM has opened space for police chiefs in the Central America Regional Leaders Conference, an event organized annually by SOUTHCOM's US Army South (ARSOUTH), so countries such as Costa Rica and Panama, which don't have armies, can take part in the conceptualization and the implementation of regional anti-crime initiatives by the military.

The idea has opponents, who consider that bringing together soldiers and police is tantamount to militarizing Central America's police forces. Most of these police structures, conceived as civilian security forces, were created as a result of the agreement known as the Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica (Procedure to Establish Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America), signed in 1987 to end the wars that for decades deeply affected the region.

Opening this year's CENTSEC, held April 7-8 at a luxury hotel in the outskirts of San José, Costa Rica's capital, Tidd reminded the participants that he was not new to working with partners in the region.

Improving information sharing

"From our end, we've taken some initial steps to improve SOUTHCOM's support (...) to our partners throughout Central America, as well as to regional governments," he said. "I've tasked our Joint Task Force Bravo to look at improving our common understanding and information sharing, so that we can better address the destabilizing operations, corruptive influence, and trans-regional reach of criminal networks."

He added, “We’d like to work with all of you to create a community of interest—una comunidad de intereses mutuos—where all of us can come together and share ideas and perhaps develop a regional strategy that will help align our respective efforts.”

He said his hope was that this community was something the US and the nations in the region could build. He said his goal for the meeting was that it would open roads “to find new ways to work together, whether by repurposing a multilateral exercise to improve our collective interoperability (...) or redoubling efforts to standardize human rights training for our militaries and police.”

Tidd stressed the need to “be creative and bold” in thinking about the issues at hand.

Criminal gangs in ‘constant restructuring’

Also during the meeting’s opening, Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata highlighted what he described as the urgent need for regional security structures to promptly respond to “the constant restructuring criminal organizations undergo to cope with the action we, the states, implement.”

He said the integration of institutions was essential “in order to correct our strategic guidelines so they respond to agreements, commitments and joint work as a common denominator for all our security bodies.”

In statements to journalists after the opening ceremony, Mata said he expected to see growth in the volume of drugs, mostly cocaine, going this year from South American producing countries through Central America to the US, the main consumer market. On an average, the crop per hectare, per year, has grown threefold, Mata said, adding that the volume of cocaine to be trafficked through Costa Rica in 2016 is estimated to reach 1,400 to 1,600 tons. He said that 85% of the cocaine leaving South America goes to the US and the rest is shipped to Europe, adding that drug destined for the US follows a Pacific route. Thus, “the idea is to implement common strategies to be able to armor our seas,” he stated.

Referring to the fact that Costa Rica abolished its Army almost seven decades ago, Mata pointed out that instead of thinking of this as a weakness, “we’re going to turn it into a strength,” adding that “what we want is teamwork, a union of countries working as a bloc against this crime.”

In this regard, he later told NotiCen that, since Costa Rica does not have all the equipment needed to combat drug trafficking, it has held talks with countries such as Colombia and neighboring Panama, about “working as a bloc.” He pointed out that countries, including the US, are fighting individually against drug-trafficking organizations, and that existing agreements and alliances, which he did not identify, have not been exploited.

Gen. Félix Núñez, chief of the Estado Mayor Conjunto (joint staff) of El Salvador, told NotiCen that, in their search of more secure routes, drug-trafficking organizations are moving more by sea than by land in the Central American region. Coinciding with Tidd and Mata regarding regional work, Núñez said that none of the countries could say that they’re self-sufficient to find a solution to this type of problem. Asked about military-police unity, he said, “We’re an example that, yes, it’s a fact,” both security sectors should work together.

He said that in El Salvador, the military works with the police, backing it specifically to reduce crime caused either by gangs, locally known as maras, or by other illegal groups.

These organizations, operating in the countries making up the Triángulo Norte de Centroamérica (Northern Triangle of Central America)—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—account for the dramatically high levels of violence in this area ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#), [July 30, 2015](#), and [Jan. 7, 2016](#)).

Among its most recent actions to counter rampant violence by maras, which also target military and police personnel, the government of leftist President Salvador Sánchez Cerén launched on April 26 a joint Army-police group labeled as Fuerzas de Intervención y Recuperación Territorial (Territorial Intervention and Recovery Forces, FIRT) made up of 600 soldiers and 200 police officers. “It’s evident that in situations such as this (...) in Central America, there’s need for very close work between the armed forces and the public [police] forces,” Núñez said.

“The Southern Command has always been attentive to the situations related to any illegal, criminal activity—drug trafficking or any other activity—and it has always backed strengthening the capabilities of both police and armed forces, with a vision for coordinated and joint work, to reduce [criminal] activity within the region,” he added.

Within this context, Commissioner Juan José Andrade, director of Costa Rica’s Fuerza Pública, the country’s police, took part in the March meeting of the Central America Regional Leaders Conference, hosted by ARSOUTH at its headquarters in San Antonio, Texas.

Police authorities have been increasingly present at the essentially military regional gathering, said Andrade, a promoter of having police and military forces working closer together. As an example, he mentioned that Honduran, Panamanian, and Salvadoran police authorities were also present at the conference, and stated that SOUTHCOM also regards bringing policemen and military closer together as a positive step.

But Costa Rican Congressman Francisco “Frank” Camacho, of the leftist Frente Amplio and a member of the congressional Comisión de Seguridad y Narcotráfico (Security and Drug-Trafficking Committee), is skeptical. Joining soldiers and police to combat crime poses the treat of militarizing the region’s police forces, Camacho told NotiCen.

He expressed particular concern regarding Costa Rica’s Fuerza Pública, which is a civilian outfit and a preventive, not a repressive, security body.

Pointing out what he described as a “pro-armament situation taking place in the region,” Camacho warned: “Our police is also somehow getting too close to these military-oriented, weapons-oriented movements (...) something that doesn’t define us as Costa Ricans... Getting policemen so close to the military (...) somehow becomes contagious, and creates a need for our police body to get, somehow, military instruction along with the military.” He said the process needed to be reviewed.

“Supposedly, there’s a war against drug trafficking, in which the United States is cooperating with us, but the data and the statistics the Security Ministry (...) is giving us is that, rather, drug-trafficking is stepping up,” Camacho said. “We need to consider again this so-called war on drug trafficking, because at this point in time, it’s not yielding results. And what we’re doing, by getting our civilian police so close to armies, is to, somehow, militarize our police force.”

In Camacho’s view, the Southern Command is taking advantage of the situation to interfere, with a very strong military presence in the area.

“So, yes, what’s happening is dangerous,” he said.

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