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Fireside Chat with General Laura Richardson on Opportunities and Challenges in the Western Hemisphere

General Laura Richardson, Commander, U.S. Southern Command

Moderator: Dafna Linzer, Executive Vice President and Editorial Director, *U.S. News and World Report*

Session link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lzm4IGM91Y>

Dafna Linzer

Thank you. I'm delighted to be back. I'm truly honored to be back here today with the commander of us, Southern Command, General Laura Richardson. I had the privilege of speaking a little bit with her yesterday and getting a good sense of her and I think you will be as as impressed and hopefully as grateful getting to hear a little bit about the tremendous responsibilities on her shoulders and how they are going. So with that, I think we'll, we'll get started. There are some specific areas of focus that are critical right now, and I hope we can, we can really focus on those, especially the policy makers, the industry leaders with us today. And of course, I'm talking about the the migration challenges, the drug trade, the security piece around that, the strength of the democracies in our hemisphere, and and the foreign, foreign influence and and and our role there. So, um, so you know, just really light topics today, but General, please, you start us off here. Take us around. Take us around the region. Explain what you're seeing in terms of China moving in, many of you know they're buying up strategic assets, ports, satellite launch sites, serious stuff, and connect the dots for us.

General Laura Richardson

Well, thank you so much, Dafna for for this interview, and as well to the Aspen security group for showcasing that the Western Hemisphere is important and and it definitely is. It's a hemisphere with which we all live in, and so it behooves us to be good neighbors, as I like to say, and everything that being a good neighbor in a neighborhood, all those responsibilities, really is how I look at our relationship with the region. We have so many cultural ties, family ties, so many things that connect us to the region. This region wants to partner with the US we are part of it. It's called the Americas for a reason, and and anyway, it's been my pleasure to work as the commander of us Southern Command. It is a vast region. I am one of six geographic combat commands in the Department of Defense. It has the Caribbean, Central America and South America. And so all the work that we do to work with the militaries and the partner Nation Security forces in the region, all based in human rights, the rule of law, the professionalization of the militaries. We take that very seriously. SOUTHCOM has been around for 60 years, and I'm just lucky to be one of the commanders of the long line of commanders that have done this, done this job, but done it in a way that we build partnerships and we build teams and teammates. This is all part of Team democracy, as I call it, very important team right now, as we see, democracy is under attack across the globe, and so the more people that want to join Team democracy, the better. And so that's how I talk about what we do in ussoftcom to build out that team now, certainly I also work

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on building out Team USA, right? Because Team USA, in support of Team democracy is very, very important. And I found just on covering the military side of the house of that instrument of national power. And I've used the acronym dime to describe our instruments of national power, diplomacy, information, military and economics. And I'm at empact and that when we bring that together in a couple of different ways, not just the hard power, but also the soft power. And I know you know that you're going to lead a panel tomorrow that talks about, you know, the end of soft power, I would say absolutely not in our region, absolutely not. And it can't be, because really, this is where it wins hearts and minds, and this is what you do. It's all part of the shaping, all part of the team. Democracy. Everything that we do to keep from getting to a situation where you have a crisis. And trust me, as we see, having a war is way more expensive than the deterrence and the soft power and the work that we do building partnerships and teams across the region. And so really, in terms of of this region and the strategic competition that we have, which is very stiff we have, I have 42 countries that I work with, 31 countries, 11 territories and dependencies with the Caribbean and and we can't get around fast enough. So what I would ask you, all of you and who you know, I need more visitors to the Western Hemisphere. I know. I need more visitors to the Caribbean. I need more visitors to Central America, and I need more visitors to South America to tell them and show them how important they are to this region and to the hemisphere that we all live in. Even in our national security strategy, we talk about how this hemisphere is inextricably linked to the security of our own homeland, and so that's what we do on a daily basis, is we work with the military's public security forces. But as I've traveled around, and we don't have enough visitors or high level visits, the US ambassadors sometimes tee me up with the Presidents I meet. I've met with at least two thirds of the presidents of my region, but they don't see what Team USA is bringing to the countries and the investment, even though the foreign direct investment is really high, it actually is really high. They don't see it. All they see are the Chinese cranes and all the development the Belt and Road Initiative projects. 22 of the 31 countries in the region have signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative. And these projects are in the billions of dollars, not in the m not in the millions. They're in the billions. They are big time projects. Now they don't do the projects well each and every time, but they're projects nonetheless. And these leaders that are elected, usually for one term of four years, they're working on the stopwatch, not the calendar, and they got to show results fast. They can't wait for some of our processes, some of my processes that I deal with, foreign military sales, excess defense articles, those types of things, they'll take two years to produce a capability. Two to three years. They don't have two to three years. They're talking like months. And so that is really in terms of that investment, and why do I worry about the Chinese investment with the Belt and Road Initiative? If it's for doing good in the hemisphere, then I'm all for it. But it makes me a little suspicious when it's in the critical infrastructure. A lot of it in the critical infrastructure of the countries in this region, deepwater ports, 5g cybersecurity, energy, space, there's a lot of lot of investment and so anyway, and I worry about the dual use nature of that, these are state owned enterprises by a communist government that I worry about the flipping of that to a military application very quickly, if something were to happen, maybe in the Indo PACOM region, or something like that.

Dafna Linzer

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So thank you for that. I love when you talk about that, that acronym, dime where, but you kept yourself in the in the in the military, in the M but the truth is, you're doing a lot of diplomacy and a lot of economic development too, and a lot of information you're you're wearing a lot of, a lot of those, those four hats you talked about the value of your relationship with ambassadors and and that importance. There's a lot of empty seats, and there's been a lot of empty seats. There haven't been a lot of us ambassadors in their in their positions in your region. Can you talk a little bit about how that affects the military?

General Laura Richardson

So the you know, the part of the dime diplomacy and our ambassadors, that's my number one teammate in the region, are the ambassadors. I have a US ambassador, that is the civilian deputy to the United States Southern Command. She's right there in the audience. Raise your hand. US ambassador, Sarah Ann Lynch. She came to us SOUTHCOM after being the ambassador for four years in the country of Guyana and and through that special relationship, it's not new. It's been in US Southern Command for two decades now we have a absolute connect, connective tissue with all of our US, ambassadors that are in the region, and we are teammates together as part of Team USA. And unfortunately, the sometimes our ambassadors are have hearings, and then it's months before they are confirmed, and could be years. And in some cases, on my strategic countries of Colombia, Brazil and Chile, we're going on two years now without a US ambassador. It was three years in Chile, it was three years in Brazil, five years in Panama, five years. And there's plenty blame to go around on both sides of the aisle. So that's not, that's not, we just got to do better. And when we talk about Team USA, we can't be blocking our own field goals. And sometimes we get in our way too much. And that is, again, my number one teammate to help organize. That's our ground game for team USA in all of the countries and all of these panels that we talk about, the one that General cavoli was just talking about Europe, and all of the things that Europe brings, all the countries we have to have our number one diplomat in the seat. The leaders Look at that. The presidents of countries look at that as that we are ignoring them when we can't get our number one diplomat, their primary liaison to the United States in the seat, and so we got to do better at that. Dafna,

Dafna Linzer

Thank you for that. You mentioned two countries I wanted to talk about right away, which the first one is just Colombia. You have spent so much time there. Why are you doing that, what's going on?

General Laura Richardson

Well and I was talking about Senator Coons. And by the way, we have Senator Coons, and by the way, we have Senator Coons and Senator Cornyn here, great teammates in Congress that have helped tremendously in the western hemisphere. And just talking about Plan Colombia and Colombia, and the state that Colombia was in in the late 90s, and the partnership of planned Colombia, which was a lot of investment that the United States made into Colombia, but also the reciprocal investment that Colombia made too, and with that partnership together, and now to see where Colombia is, with a very strong military, a huge partner to me, and you know, as we, as we work together on security issues. I was just there a couple of weeks ago. We had the Navy's aircraft carrier, the George Washington sailing around

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the hemisphere. I don't get a lot of assigned or allocated assets from the Department of Defense and US SOUTHCOM, so it makes us pretty savvy and scrappy to get out there and be looking for ways that we can build team democracy and build up Team USA with all of the counterparts. Our State Department is a huge lever for me and the partnership that we have other entities as well. I mean, USA ID partnered with the Secretary of Commerce. She's traveled in the region three times as part of the chips Act and the partnership of us semiconductor supply chain. Panama and Costa Rica are two of the seven countries that the US partners with and as part of the chips act, getting funding to assemble, test and package semiconductors. But just that relationship, NASA Administrator partnered with him to get him into visit because we have all that PRC space enabling infrastructure. We got to do better with the partnerships. We got to talk about what democratic space faring operations is, Safe Space Operations. So it's across the gamut, but but the partnerships and working on trying to bring more economics into the region, I will tell you that I think from covid, the impacts on the GDP, we do not understand how severe the impacts were in this region, anywhere from eight and a half percent, GDP decreased to 18 and a half percent, a couple of countries fared Okay, and they were able to make it, but, and we're in that window, but that's a severe economic downturn. The transnational criminal organizations, I feel, have taken advantage of that. They've diversified their portfolio in terms of not just doing drug trafficking, but also human trafficking, which is almost just as profitable, illegal mining, illegal logging, illegal fishing, counterfeit goods. It's over a \$300 billion annual revenue business, and we're not going to interdict

our way out of this problem. We have got to get after the money laundering. We've got to get after going where the labs are. We've got to follow the money. I'll go back to the money laundering, because that money is getting cleaned and fueling that business. I think it stirs up the insecurity and the instability in these countries to allow then Chinese and Russian strategic competitors to get in there and offer Belt and Road Initiative, offer cash, and we don't, we don't have those kinds of tools in our kit bag. So how do we help with that? I firmly believe that we need a Marshall Plan for the region, or, aka, an economic recovery act of like 1948 but instead, 2024 2025 the administration has the American prosperity for American partnership for economic prosperity Apep, that was rolled out about a year ago. They just had a foreign affairs ministerial yesterday in Washington. And there are big projects that are rolling out as a result of that, as part of the Inter American Development Bank and developmental Finance Corporation that helps with the projects. But how are we competing Team USA and team democracy with the tenders that are coming out from countries? How are we getting our US, quality investment and talking about our US companies investing in the region. We got a lot of US companies in the region. I don't think we're branding Team USA as we should. It's got to be better. We got to be bragging about what us, quality investment does, developmental Finance Corporation DFC, that was created by Congress, I think, is operating on all eight cylinders now, and this is a mechanism for getting investment into the region very, very quickly, along with the Apep and the leadership of that also, there's some legislation, bipartisan legislation called the Americas act, Senator, Senator Cassidy from Louisiana, along with Senator Bennet from Colorado, as well as Congresswoman Salazar and Congressman espiac, are sponsoring that legislation, very comprehensive legislation. It's known as the China's act. Senator Cassidy has been on CNBC multiple times talking about it, but I think that this year, maybe this is the year that it's going to get through, but I see that very comprehensive and ways of attracting investment into the region. I really

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believe that economic security and national security are going hand in hand here in this hemisphere, and we have got to work both of them together very, very quickly.

Dafna Linzer

Thanks for that. I think it's, you know, one spot where that's, I think quite glaring is just in in supply chain security, just in the Panama Canal, and just efforts to prevent that from falling into into Chinese hands. Can you just talk a little bit about the Panama Canal and that kind of that sense of security? It was, it also really struck me when you said five years without an ambassador in Panama,

General Laura Richardson

Five years 2017 to 2023 we have a great ambassador there now she's awesome, and she makes it's like a 180 change when you have your ambassador on the ground, our number one diplomat, our ground game for team USA and but I will tell you that during that five years without an ambassador, that's where Panama signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative, 47 bilateral agreements with the Chinese. This is when we when we are not there. This is what happens. And I would say that it's not a matter of not being there because our US Embassy had a great DCM, right, a charge that was trying to lead the charge. But again, it's not showing it's it's our number one diplomat for that President of that country is not there on the ground. I'll tell you that with the with the previous president, President cortiso, that they just had an election and changed administrations, but the partnership there. But you know, I look at this as you have to show that you're a good teammate, right? And I don't talk about all the concerns that I have until I built a relationship and I built my credibility to show that I'm a good partner, and I partner with my State Department colleagues who are always in the region, my developmental colleagues, USAID INL, AmCham, non governmental organizations, human rights organizations. I mean, we get the whole gamut, so we can get all the different perspectives, but then also work as a team, because the leaders don't see SOUTHCOM and State Department, all they see is us or not. And so trying to build that team and support a team democracy is really, really tried to focus on that quite a bit.

Dafna Linzer

So I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about two things. One, how concerned were you about the Russian flotilla off Cuba? And also, I should ask you something about Haiti too, and the plan there.

General Laura Richardson

Yeah, so the Russian hardware coming into the region continues to happen. It came last year as well, but there was a little bit more this time that the Russians brought and they did a port call on the port of Havana, 90 miles from Florida and certainly the US NORTHCOM, the partnership with EUCOM and then NORTHCOM sharing and transferring of assets as we shadowed those vessels with our US vessels to make sure that our United States remains safe as they're sailing around very close in our region and so, but they continue to show up with hardware. They continue to do the high level visits with their foreign affairs minister and also the their Duma, the head of their Congress, typically go to Venezuela, Cuba Nicaragua. And they do that every year. They do it sometimes a few times a year. And so you know,

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what's our counterpunch from Team USA? Who are we bringing into the region after those visits happen, right? And I think that we could do better in that aspect.

Dafna Linzer

And Haiti.

General Laura Richardson

And Haiti, so I think Haiti has another chance, and I'm excited about it, because we don't, in terms of the insecurity and the instability in that country, you shouldn't have to leave Haiti to be successful. There are so many successful Haitians just in where I'm my headquarters is in Miami, and now we have 400 Kenyans on the ground that will be in support of the Haitian National Police, able to give them the capacity and some capability, there will be additional forces, arriving. And so I think that this is promising. And it gives them another chance. I'm excited about that.

Dafna Linzer

Thank you so much, please help me thank General Richardson, who's right out there for all of us.