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Wednesday, July 20, 2022

Fireside Chat on Latin America with General Laura Richardson, Commander, U.S. Southern Command

Moderator: David Ignatius, Columnist and Associate Editor, *The Washington Post*

Ignatius (00:28):

Uh, it's a pleasure to be here to interview, uh, general Richardson. I am a frequent freeloader in my job as wash most columnist with combatant commanders, but I haven't yet, uh, traveled with general Richardson and I I'm, I'm hoping to just a brief, uh, introduction of general, general Richardson. She's a classic army success story. She was an all America swimmer in high school. She joined the army, uh, after college. She, uh, was a helicopter pilot deployed to a rock. She commanded, I believe an aerosol battalion for the hundred first airborne. She is a parachutist. And if you're wondering about work life balance general Richardson's husband is a Lieutenant general and they were both deployed to Iraq at the same time as their daughter was becoming a teenager. So, uh, she managed to figure that out on a lot, uh, else general, um, your command SOUTHCOM, uh, covering Latin America is in some ways the most O overlooked combatant command, I think, and that reflects a general, uh, problem for our country, which is that we just don't spend enough time thinking about our backyard. So I want to ask you to, to open our conversation by giving us a, a basic SOUTHCOM 1 0 1. What concerns you in your area of responsibility? Uh, what are the problems that are on your to-do list and how would you define this part of the world? Uh, and what matters there, uh, in terms of national security interests to the country.

Gen. Richardson (02:10):

Okay. Well, thank you. Uh, it's really good to be here and see everybody here. So, uh, and thank you for being here for this presentation. Uh, I call the, uh, I, I call the, uh, our region, uh, that, uh, consists of the Caribbean south America and central America. Uh, but we tend to look east and west a lot and, uh, not so much south and I call it south blindness. Uh, you know, the, uh, we just get wrapped up in east west, and really this is our neighborhood. And when you really think about what that means, uh, in a neighborhood, what does it mean to you? And it means that you have friends and neighbors very close by. You have neighbors that you rely on. You have neighbors that you rely on for security, for safety of the neighborhood, right? You're in it together. And that's how I look at, uh, the SOUTHCOM area of responsibility and this very, very important region.

Gen. Richardson (03:08):

I look at it like the 20 yard line. If you wanna talk about sports and do a sports analogy, uh, we are on the 20 yard line to the Homeland and to the United States and our, uh, competitors know that our adversaries know that this region is so rich in resources, it's off the charts rich, and they have a lot, uh, to be proud of and our competitors and adversaries also know how rich in the resources that this region

is. 60% of the world's lithium is in the region. You have heavy crude, you have light sweet crude, you have rare earth elements. You have the Amazon, which is called the lungs of the world. You have the 31% of the world's fresh water here in this region. Uh, and there are adversaries that are taking advantage of this region every single day, right in our neighborhood.

Gen. Richardson (04:07):

And I just look at what happens in this region in terms of security, uh, impacts our security, our national security, uh, in the Homeland and in the United States. And so we have to be as part of the neighborhood, we need to strengthen our partnerships. Uh, and secretary Austin talks about this, the integrated deterrence. And I know it's been talked about a little bit, uh, earlier today, but I can expound upon that as well as we go forward, because I think it's really important. And everybody in this, in this room, uh, is a part of that. You're a part of this call to action that we need to strengthen our neighborhood. And we need to realize how, uh, resource rich this neighborhood is and how close our competitors and our adversaries are in the region.

Ignatius (04:58):

So we may not be, uh, focused on our neighborhood, but, uh, another country is, and that's China. Uh, I noted recently that I believe 21 countries in your AOR are members of the belt and road initiative, which is extraordinary. And I wanna ask you to first to describe what that looks like, um, what you see as you travel around the region, in terms of China's efforts to, to expand its influence, uh, make, make friendships, make ties. And then what as, as SOUTHCOM commander you're trying to do about it.

Gen. Richardson (05:39):

So I say the, uh, uh, China is playing chess. Uh, they have a long term view. They are setting the theater, which is what we use as a doctrinal term, uh, or way I could say it, uh, in layman's terms, uh, setting the table when I show, uh, a map of the region and the 21 of 31 countries that have, uh, have signed on as signatories to the belt and road initiative, uh, it covers almost the entire region, 25 of the 21 countries. There are 25 countries that actually have projects, uh, uh, inside of their country, a Metro station, a railway, a highway tele communications, a dam, uh, very, uh, projects, uh, under the guise of, uh, economics, right? It looks like there's investment in this region. These countries are starving for investment. They are starving, uh, for having, uh, and showing that they are delivering for their people.

Gen. Richardson (06:42):

COVID has really, uh, made a tremendous impact and had a tremendous impact negatively, uh, on this region, 22 million people, uh, into poverty as a result, they've, uh, suffered an, um, huge, um, proportion of the deaths, the world COVID deaths. And so these, uh, these governments are trying to deliver for their people. People are getting impatient. And so these projects are, you know, when they have nothing else to choose from, you know, they're dire to show some progress, uh, for their countries, then they sign up for these projects. And as we know, that gets into a debt trap, loans are taken out multiple loans in some cases for some of these projects, uh, that eventually, uh, they either have to payback or other things they have to give up, uh, in terms of their sovereignty. And so it's, uh, it's just, it's a spiraling trap, uh, that we see a lot of these nations, uh, that get into as a result of this,

Ignatius (07:43):

A and yet that's not how the countries often describe their relationships with China, uh, Brazil, the biggest economy in the region, uh, its biggest trading partner is China and president Bolsonaro, uh, was asked recently about China. And he said, China's a good partner. We don't see China as a threat. And, and I'm, I'm curious, um, what you see as a combatant commander that may not be obvious to president Bolsonaro or other leaders in the region that you'd wanna warn them about specifically, you talked about the problem of indebtedness, but what else?

Gen. Richardson (08:23):

Well, um, as I see the investment in the critical infrastructure in the region, deep water ports, telecommunications space SI these infrastructure projects often under the guise of economic and, uh, for research, uh, countries giving up 50 year leases, uh, to put up a space facility. Why do we have, uh, the most space facilities from the PRC in this region, in the Homeland, in China? What are they going through right now? The largest military buildup in history. So one should ask themselves why, when they have this very capable military, are they putting, uh, and trying to gain access to critical infrastructure in other countries across the planet.

Ignatius (09:21):

So just to take this one, one more step, and then we'll, we'll turn to other parts of your, uh, other issues in, in your, uh, AOR. I'd be interested in your, uh, assessment of what you see China's long term military ambitions, uh, in Latin America, for example, should the United States be worried about the security of the Panama canal? Uh, in, in, in immediate, we gotta get ready for a challenge terms.

Gen. Richardson (09:53):

Well, I think so. I think that, uh, I was just in Panama about a month ago, uh, and the, uh, flying along the Panama canal and looking at all the state owned enterprises from the PRC on each side of the, uh, Panama canal, I worry about the, uh, you know, they look like civilian companies, they, or state owned enterprises that could be used for dual use and could be quickly changed over to a military capability if they needed that to. And so, as I look at this, uh, the investment that they make, it looks like, again, they're investing, I look at it as extracting. And so, uh, I think we should be concerned, but this is a global problem. It's not just in my region. It's not just in the end of, uh, Pacific. Uh, this is a global, uh, issue. This is the same playbook that they've used in Africa, Asia, Europe.

Gen. Richardson (10:47):

It's not new. We're about five to 10 years in this region behind Africa. But I think that, uh, again, I, I talk about, we know what's going on east west a lot, uh, but not right in our own neighborhood. I can fly to 80% of this region from Miami in two to three hours. That's pretty close. That's really close. If you really think about that same time zone, give or take maybe an hour. It, it is, uh, you know, if we just think about, uh, all the things that we've talked about, uh, it's very concerning. And then you just ask yourself why, when you talk about the rules based international order, I think they, uh, the PRC China would like to replace the United States. That is their goal. And they're well on their way to try to do that. But I'll tell you the power of partnerships in this region.

Gen. Richardson (11:43):

When I travel and I meet with these leaders, I look at 'em in their eyes. I try to understand their challenges through their lens. How do they see it? Because I know how I see it, and we know how we

see things, but if you're really gonna get after their challenges and help them, you have to look, you have to look at it and understand their perspective. I went in, uh, um, one of the ministers of defense, uh, that I was meeting with. And, um, he had a map on the wall, a big map. A lot of us in the military have maps all the time that we, that we showcase and put in nice, pretty frames and everything. And he had this map, uh, of the Southern cone and Antarctica, and he flipped it around. It was upside down the way, how we normally look at the globe and articles at the bottom, right?

Gen. Richardson ([12:34](#)):

It was at the top and the Southern cone came up in a, in a point. And that's how he looks at the region. So if we really wanna understand our partners, we gotta understand their challenges, but they wanna partner with us, make no mistake. They are hungry to partner with us. And when you talk about integrated deterrence and you talk about everybody here, it is not just a department of defense. It is the interagency, it is academia. It is industry. It is non-governmental organizations. And I meet with all of them. And I try to put all of the, I use 'em and, uh, look at them as levers. You know, what levers do we have to succeed and put this all together. One minister told me, um, you know, saying alone, we are, we are strong, but together we are invincible. And he's exactly right, but just like what we have, and we've seen the strength of what, uh, of NATO as a result of what's going on in Ukraine, and we see that power, but I'll tell you that our neighborhood and what I've described so far is we really have to be careful about our adversaries and our competitors creating that same type of situation right in our neighborhood, and very close to our Homeland.

Ignatius ([13:57](#)):

So let, let's talk about the feelings of our neighbors about the United States, because they're complicated to put it mildly. And that was evident. Um, most recently in June when president Biden hosted the summit of the Americas and at Mexico, a, a, a dominant power in the region, significant player was absent along with some other, uh, key countries, because they were upset that Cuba, Venezuela, and others hadn't been invited, but it, it surfaced this longstanding decades, old century old, um, tension between the United States, this big power to the north, uh, and, and our, and our neighbors. And I'm curious about how you deal with that, um, uh, underlying tension, sometimes resentment, uh, and how you think we can begin to, to, to make that better.

Gen. Richardson ([14:59](#)):

So I'll, I'll, I'll, I'll give you Richardsons for perspective. And, uh, as I travel around and I meet with, uh, meet with leaders and one I'm very, um, respectful when I go in their country, sovereignty is extremely important, uh, for our Latin America friends and our, our friends in the Caribbean, uh, I respect their positions. I approach my visit and my meetings with them from that perspective. Um, I've had a couple, uh, countries that I've visited and as we've had meetings through the day, and then we, we might have, uh, a reception that evening or some sort of, uh, social gathering, uh I've I've had a chief of defense say, wow, you're really nice. And I was like, Hmm, okay.

Ignatius ([15:53](#)):

You should tell if you're an all America swimmer too. <laugh>

Gen. Richardson ([15:57](#)):

So it makes me think, what did he expect? What did he expect I was gonna do? And, and how I was gonna be like, I wanna be there, you know, I wanna be their partner. I wanna partner with them. They wanna partner with us. I don't know what he, uh, you know, expected that I was gonna be, um, you know, like I was a big brother coming from the United States that, you know, uh, again, it's a partnership, it's our neighborhood. You don't expect that from a neighbor, right. You expect an understanding, uh, you expect to work with them, understand their challenges. And so I think when you talk about the tension, uh, and how you have to approach things, it's not that, that we are a big brother, we're a partner, and, uh, we have respect for them, and we need to show that. And I think that, uh, just as a premise, um, and then that's how you build the relationship. I think that our visits and our, uh, key leader engagements as I call them, uh, are really important. And when we have visitors that come to Washington, they come all the time, then we need to meet with them and we need to have the right leaders meet with them. Our competitors are picking up the phone. Gigi J ping is picking up the phone and calling these leaders and meeting with them and corresponding with them all the time.

Gen. Richardson ([17:20](#)):

And we need to do the same. And I think we can do better in that respect.

Ignatius ([17:24](#)):

So to, to ask a, her question of the SOUTHCOM commander, um, should we try to learn a little bit from China, you're commanding a substantial military presence, uh, in effect this great fleet backed by aircraft, all these amazing military assets and the Chinese are out, uh, investing that may be opaque may have dangers, but as you say, uh, they're engaged in the process of economic development, uh, in a way that arguably we could do a lot better. I'm just curious, cuz you see this region in a way that few us officials do. What do you think? Is there anything we can learn from what we're seeing the Chinese doing?

Gen. Richardson ([18:10](#)):

I think the, um, um, the investment that they have made, uh, one of the levers that I use is the, uh, that I found very helpful is the business executives for national security that will bring together, um, CEOs, uh, from companies and, uh, put together, uh, a trip into the region. I have one, um, that I've worked with, uh, with Bens on going into Guyana. And why is Guyana very important? Well, they just discovered, uh, light sweet, crude, um, right off the shores of their country. And so, you know, that kind of changes the dynamics for them. And you wanna make sure that they have honest investment. The thing about the United States is we don't have strings attached to what we do. We don't have fine print. We don't require loans. We don't require if we'll do this for you. If you do this for us, we don't require that we are trusted partners and that's why, uh, folks want to partner with the United States.

Gen. Richardson ([19:17](#)):

And so that investment, uh, I think industry and getting those partnerships, we've already, we've uh, already had a, another visit, uh, in the fall, uh, last year to Panama, you know, to help these countries understand where they are, what they need to do, it's transparency and being able to advise them with no fine print and no strings attached. And I think that, um, you know, that's why I say it's a call to action for all of us in the room because we've gotta bring it together. And again, it's on the 20 yard line. We are in this neighborhood together and we gotta have good partners, trusted partners. We're already a trusted partner. We just gotta show it more,

Ignatius (20:02):

Uh, helpful answer, uh, plug for Bens, um, headed by former combatant commander, Joe hotel, uh, and an organization that that does, uh, a lot of good. So something that's on everybody's mind this week is we read the news, especially from Europe is global climate change. The, the news of, you know, record historic, uh, temperature highs in, in Britain. Um, I think God everybody's note notice, I wanna ask you about your dialogue with, uh, leaders in, in your region, uh, about the effects that climate change will have in Latin America in south and central America are, are, are people beginning to see, um, evidence of, uh, impact, uh, and, and obviously a huge issue that we, we focus on episodically I'm afraid is the rainforests, uh, in the Amazon.

Gen. Richardson (21:06):

So, uh, climate change is very much alive and well in the region. Obviously the, uh, what impacts the United States will generally come up through the Caribbean. Uh, and so those, uh, Caribbean I'm used to saying Caribbean, uh, before I got in this job, but our partners say Caribbean. So I always, uh, sometimes I have to correct myself, but, uh, in the Caribbean, they are, um, worried very, very much concerned about the storms, what capabilities that each one of the nations has to provide. Uh, we had a, uh, a Caribbean national security conference, uh, about six months ago and, uh, talked about, um, getting, uh, you know, what each country has to respond. Uh, last year in the earthquake, uh, the Haiti earthquake, there were multiple countries that had capabilities. They don't have a lot of capability, but they have some capability. And again, uh, you put all that together and then you have a, you have a strong capability, nobody has enough to be able to respond.

Gen. Richardson (22:15):

And, uh, in order to withstand, uh, you know, a strong storm, I could talk about EDTA and I lotta in 2020 crush, the, uh, south America in, uh, Honduras. Uh, for example, still, uh, have tarps on the roof, things like that. They still haven't recovered for that. Uh, you add COVID on top of that. Uh, you talk about the, uh, uh, the drought corridor that we have, uh, that's in Mexico, down through central America provides, uh, not provides, uh, causes, uh, food insecurity for about 8 million people. So this is very, very much a part of this region. When you can't get food, you can't get healthcare, you have, uh, you don't feel safe. You feel insecure. I could add transnational criminal organizations in there that, uh, provide insecurity and instability. It causes people to move. They're gonna go somewhere where they can get food, where they can get healthcare, where they can feel safe and live and thrive with their kids and their family. And this causes this irregular migration. So very much a part of what, uh, our region, uh, faces and faces every single day. And we're trying to help them be stronger and encounter that.

Ignatius (23:28):

So, as, as I listen to you talk about those, um, threats. I I'm wondering if, uh, SOUTHCOM and other combatant commands need to have as one of their, uh, mission priorities in terms of our national security, engaging these climate change issues, uh, on the ground. I mean, the thing about, about a COCOM is, uh, you have resources, you can get places in a hurry, you can connect, um, you know, our, our, our government as a whole often isn't as, as flexible should, should, should we bump climate change and its impact up on our list of national security priorities in your, in your region and around the world?

Gen. Richardson (24:08):

Absolutely. And so climate defense is already, uh, a program that department of defense has SOUTHCOM has it as a priority. And, uh, and working with our partner nations, uh, making our own forces, uh, stronger and withstand being able to withstand, uh, stronger storms. How do you respond, uh, and, and make sure you're strong and can withstand the, the harsh environment that some of these storms bring. Um, all of those things we wrap up in their, uh, illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing, for example, all of those things that go into, um, uh, and, and I find quite honestly that some of these other topics really resonate with our partners because it takes away revenue that they have, but it's absolutely at the top of the list. I was very, you know, I wasn't able to, uh, uh, department of defense wasn't part of summit of the Americas, but we were able to participate in a climate, uh, climate change forum the week prior.

Gen. Richardson ([25:08](#)):

And I got to be the keynote speaker amongst a lot of, uh, scientists and experts on climate and these kinds of things. And I was the only general speaking to this group and I told him, I said, I, I bet you're wondering why there's a four star general talking to you today. Uh, but I got to share all of the things that we're doing in SOUTHCOM and the department of defense does to help, uh, our partners withstand all of these things. And, uh, it was a great opportunity to talk about it, but just then, you know, educate and inform again, it goes back to all of us working together, uh, as part of the integrated deterrents, Ignatius ([25:44](#)):

I wanna take advantage of, uh, general Richardson's, uh, uh, being with us to ask about a, a couple of specific countries that matter, but don't often get, uh, discussed in the foreign policy gatherings that I attend. And I, I wanna start with Columbia, Columbia's a country where we've had a significant engagement for a long time. Columbia just elected its most, uh, left wing, uh, president in a long time. I'm gonna say, uh, decades, at least, um, Gustavo Petro will take office next month. He's already talking about improving Columbia's relations with Venezuela. So I'm wondering as this new political figure enters on the horizon, you're you don't do policy obviously, but I'm, I'm wondering whether from your perspective as, as SOUTHCOM commander, these changes in Columbia, um, make you look at at Columbia and the challenges in a new way.

Gen. Richardson ([26:45](#)):

Yeah, I think, uh, if we're, um, in terms of looking at Columbia, Columbia is a great news story. Oh my gosh. Off the charts, the capabilities of their military, uh, they are an exporter of security. They train other partner nation militaries to be strong. They run, I mean, I'm a helicopter pilot. We used to have the Spanish speaking part of flight school, uh, in the United States at Fort Rucker, Alabama. Um, Columbia took that on in 2019, they train all of our helicopter pilots. That's a huge, great story again, uh, you know, as we work with our partner nations, it's about being sincere. We will work with our partner nations. We have a strong relationship. We just, uh, celebrated the 200th anniversary of Columbia and the United States as this year. And so you talk about the ties that the, that we have, we fought side by side with them in war already. This is a huge country. It's an opportunity, uh, a call to action, a call to opportunity, uh, and we will be there to work with this partner nation, uh, regardless of what administration is there. And so, uh, I have, I think we have a lot to offer and again, it's with no strings attached it's with no fine print and we already have a well-established relationship with them.

Ignatius ([28:12](#)):

So the other key actor in the region, um, that we worry about from, uh, a national security standpoint is Venezuela. Uh, and I want to ask you about, um, how you'd assess, uh, in, in strict national security terms, the, the danger that Venezuela poses, uh, and, and, and if, if that's a, a less, uh, dramatic danger than sometimes portrayed, I'd be interested in hearing that as, as well. We just, uh, had, uh, several months ago, uh, decision by the Biden administration to allow, encourage Chevron to extend, uh, an oil lease, um, in Venezuela, which, which made some people wonder if maybe a slightly different shape to, to policy might be ahead. But again, from your perspective, as our, as our combatant commander, H how do you assess Venezuela right now?

Gen. Richardson ([29:07](#)):

I would say the, uh, Venezuela has caused a lot of instability in the region it's caused, uh, a lot of migration. It has caused the other countries around it that are neighbors and some that aren't even neighbors, uh, to have, uh, take on, uh, the migration issue as a result of Venezuela. When you talk about six, 6 million coming out of Venezuela, and then the countries in Brazil, in Columbia, uh, in Chile and the other countries in, uh, south America and central America taking this on that's again, I go back to the COVID impacts already, and they're struggling being able to provide. And so this is just an added, uh, an added, um, you know, but they're doing it and they're doing it. And they know that the reason that they have to do it, and they're taking, they're trying to take care of the neighborhood and they're doing the best they can, but this is an additional challenge that they have to take on.

Gen. Richardson ([30:05](#)):

And that other countries are doing a great job of this, having this resolved peacefully. And, uh, democratically is obviously where we want to go with Venezuela. And, um, I meet in Venezuela are in, uh, in Miami, uh, a lot of, uh, the different diasporas in Miami. There are a lot of, uh, folks from Venezuela in Miami, and a lot of them still have family in Venezuela. And if that, uh, situation could be resolved democratically, that's what we would all strive and hope that actually happens. But I will tell you that just on the, you know, again, I go back to when people don't feel safe, uh, they can't get healthcare, they can't get basic needs, they leave the country and they're on the move and it absolutely contributes to their regular migration.

Ignatius ([30:55](#)):

I'm gonna go to the audience in just a minute or two for your questions. So be thinking, this is a chance to ask about, about, uh, a region. We don't get to talk about off often enough, but before I do that, I wanna piggyback on a question that, uh, Courtney cuby, uh, asked a few minutes ago of general brown, uh, talking about the Dobbs decision by the Supreme court. And, um, general brown is, is air force chief of staff. You have in a sense of a more direct, immediate relationship with the thousands of people who are part of SOUTHCOM, including some, uh, women in, in service who may, who may be concerned about the impact of that decision. Um, SOUTHCOM is based in, in Florida, but it's a raid across the south. And then, uh, in your AOR, what, what, um, can you tell us about the kind of guidance that you're giving to your colleagues? Uh, if any, uh, about how to deal with this, the concerns you have going forward about, about taking care of all of your personnel, um, and, and their health needs.

Gen. Richardson ([32:10](#)):

Yeah, so the, uh, taking care of people, obviously in the, in the army anyway, the, uh, you know, we're not, we're, we're about people. Uh, the people, uh, in our service are really our weapon system. And so

taking care of people is, uh, extremely important. Uh, as, uh, CQ said, the, uh, you know, he's a service chief and those service chiefs, uh, they train and equip our forces, and then the combat commanders are the, uh, are the customers of the service chiefs and things like that. And so, uh, we have to just do the best that we can, based on the, the decisions that are made by our country to take care of our people and bottom line, uh, uh, the services have to put the policies in place and the department, uh, and then we will, uh, follow in line with that, uh, as we, uh, receive personnel in our region and take care of them.

Ignatius (33:03):

And just, just to take this, uh, a step further, um, I'm sure you've gotten questions, uh, from your, from your staff, uh, about this it's something the whole country's been asking about. What do you tell 'em?

Gen. Richardson (33:18):

Well, yeah, I, I think that the, we watch the debates on the news. We see the different arguments that happen, and, um, and I think that the, uh, as the decision is made, uh, the policies will put in place and, uh, and we've gotta trust in our leaders and the policies for our department of defense as we move forward. And then we take care of our people.

Ignatius (33:41):

So, uh, I hope people have been thinking about questions and have some, I see Jane Harmon. And let me start with Jane.

Speaker 4 (33:49):

Well, thank you very much. That was very interest. Interesting. Glad you made it, David, first, I hope you'll tell us what happened to your teenage daughter, uh, how she turned out. Uh, but, um, I'm, I'm really asking about the Southern border of the United States. Uh, secretary Myorca, wasn't asked about that much yesterday when he was questioned. I understand that's much more of a, of a, an issue for the department of Homeland security, but the pictures and the stories are everywhere. And I have to believe that people in your AOR are very aware, uh, of our border policies and some of the confusion and, uh, some of the, uh, uh, personal tragedies and the rest. And I just wonder, what do you say about that and what activities do you undertake, uh, to if, if you do, to, uh, uh, explain our policies to the, the countries that you deal with.

Gen. Richardson (34:46):

So the, in terms of that's, uh, um, in some of the things that I described about their regular migration, uh, and certainly when I was in NORTHCOM in my previous job, uh, and, um, being, uh, up upfront, close and personal with the Southwest border, uh, and seeing the challenges that we have, and then realizing that a lot of that, uh, comes from now the SOUTHCOM region, uh, up to, uh, up to the Southwest border. And so, uh, again, the, what we try to do in SOUTHCOM is we work with our partner nations, right, to, as they handle the migration problem, and they handle insert, uh, uh, internal security problems is to make them stronger and, uh, to work with them, talk about human rights, the rule of law, uh, everything that we talk about, train, train, advise, assist the security cooperation, the exercises that we do makes them stronger to deal with these problems, deal with their borders, deal with their other, uh, neighbors, uh, as, uh, as the, um, as we know, going through south America, if we have migration up through Columbia, into Panama and over, they all have a very, um, uh, good perspective in terms of how

that translates and how it happens, and then how it impacts them, uh, specifically in each one of those countries, it's different.

Gen. Richardson (36:13):

And, um, so as I meet with them, I, I talk to them about, uh, that, but then we also, it's not just about talking about it, it's about, you know, how do we make them stronger to handle their own problems, so we don't have to help them even more. And so that's really what we try to do in, uh, in south.

Speaker 5 (36:31):

Com's

Ignatius (36:31):

Take a, a couple more questions before lunch. I saw a gentleman in the first row, sorry. So, yes. Uh, we're by the window. Yeah. Got, see, two of you there first, and then the gentleman behind you,

Speaker 5 (36:47):

Uh, thank you, uh, Marcus Oliver from the government accountability office. And I just wanted to ask gentleman Richardson, just, I guess, what are some of the, uh, the challenges that sort of you face in managing the sort of Gimo mission set, um, sort of given the sort of lack of maybe clear direction from the president, um, on that mission, as well as the lack of consensus, uh, on that mission from the hill.

Gen. Richardson (37:11):

Okay. I think I heard most of that, but, um, I think in terms of the, uh, uh, JTF GMO or the GMO question, um, uh, the thing is, is that the, our mission is to provide the safe, legal, and humane treatment, uh, of the DD detainees that are there. And so that's what our mission revolves around and all the other decisions, uh, that are policy decisions, we just execute that mission and we execute it to the best of our ability and, uh, make sure that it's the safe, humane, and legal treatment of, uh, of those of those detainees and those other decisions and, and, um, discussions and, uh, arguments and things like that, uh, that is at the policy level.

Ignatius (37:58):

And yes, gentlemen right behind him.

Speaker 6 (38:06):

Thanks, David. Thanks general Kevin Barron from defense one, I wonder, uh, going back to the immigration, uh, migration border security question, walk us through some of the, the MIS versus realities of the security threats that you see, uh, from the, the entire chain of migration, as we hear them in the public discourse versus as a security professional as a COCOM commander, how you view them. And when you talk about you also, you've talked about a lot today of the, the non-military ways and investments that, that you can alleviate security concerns in south in the south. I've heard that for many years, for 20 years from all of your predecessors in this, that same role, but it doesn't seem to resonate at least in Congress, or maybe with American people. How do you think you can maybe move the ball more than in the past to really push for, you know, foreign other kinds of foreign investment or us, uh, government investment that's non-military to get to the same goals you're mentioning.

Gen. Richardson (38:59):

Yeah. So thanks for that great question. And so, um, I like to, uh, just in, in terms of the, when I talk about the integrated deterrents, it's really, I look at that as all of the levers out there, all of the, uh, uh,

elements of national power that we have in the United States to bring to bear and that when we talk about, um, you know, how we can help, uh, different countries, for example, we have, uh, agreements with academia and you're like, okay, well, what does that mean? SOUTHCOM has agreements with academia, but, uh, global fishing watch. For example, if I talk about, uh, illegal, unregulated on reported fishing, right, takes three, 3 billion in revenue, away from our partner nations. So if we have, if we're able to, uh, see something from the domain awareness that we do have as a COCOM and working with our academia and working with, uh, global fishing watch.

Gen. Richardson (39:55):

So we have the, in the academia part, uh, university of Miami and Florida international university have agreements, and we can expose this malign activity, right? Because people don't like to be exposed when they're, uh, when they're behaving, uh, in ways they're not supposed to. Right. I don't, we don't need the credit in SOUTHCOM, but we will certainly give that information either to our partner nations or to NGOs or, or through our academia, uh, to get that message out there. When you talk about, uh, insecurity in instability, right, 310 billion revenue business a year, it's off the charts. It's not just, counter-narcotics, it's human trafficking, it's illegal logging, illegal mining, uh, I, uh, IUU fishing, uh, it is a whole host of things. And so, um, this is, uh, in my mind, it creates the wedge, the insecurity and the instability that our partner NA not our partner nations, but our adversaries capitalize upon.

Gen. Richardson (40:55):

And, um, and then they flourish, right, and make that even a bigger wedge for them to be able to, uh, undermine, uh, us objectives, undermine our relationships, undermine, uh, the objectives that we have in the region. You know, I talked earlier about the PRC is playing chess. Well, Russia is playing checkers, right? And they have, uh, short term goals in terms of undermining our democracy, uh, causing destabilization, uh, through the information environment, off the charts in this region, over 30 million followers in social media, Sputnik, Mundo, uh, Russia today Espanol, uh, very, very prevalent. We are not in competition in that space. We are in conflict in the information environment. And when I bring this up, some, most of the countries are very, very aware of this, but making them stronger in order to be able to counter this when I bring up diff disinformation, they'll say, oh, fake news. And I'm like, yeah, you could say that, but the, uh, you know, how do we band together in terms of all domains, um, with our partner nations being stronger, it's not just in the information space. It's not just in the air domain or the, uh, the sea domain in terms of counter-narcotics. I mean, it is the whole gamut. It's cyber it's space. It's, uh, we have a lot of things to get after and we have to work together as a team for our neighborhood.

Ignatius (42:27):

Um, I'm to take away from me. We are not in competition. We are in conflict in the information space. Uh, I've been signaled that we've run out of time. I recognized a woman, uh, who was standing in the back next to the pillar. Can you ask a brief question and we'll ask general Richardson to give a brief answer, and then it's lunchtime.

Speaker 7 (42:46):

Thank you. Thanks for your awareness. And you're in you're so informative general, um, and good questions, David, but my question is, is there a way to get a general honorary kind of guy in Latin America, uh, central America, uh, where we can give more security and there was a time American

business got tax deductions to go to China. Well, is there a way to work something out like that? And we can be less dependent on China.

Ignatius (43:18):

Last word.

Gen. Richardson (43:20):

Can you raise your hand where you are? I, there we go. Okay. I thought that might be you. Okay. Uh, so in terms of working with the inter agency, I, I would like to just, um, let you know that we're, we are very much involved with the interagency. I think that we can do better, but we have to, uh, continue to provide forums where we can collaborate. And so on may at SOUTHCOM, I, we hosted the, all of the chiefs of mission from this region, uh, uh, at SOUTHCOM. So we had the ambassadors and thess, oh, by the way, we have 12 ambassadors that still need to get in the seat. So I would, uh, appreciate your integrated deterrence and helping to reinforce the priority of getting our, uh, ambassadors in their seats. It's kind of like me not being here for SOUTHCOM and having a acting, uh, or a deputy that's in my seat.

Gen. Richardson (44:11):

Very, very important, but go back to the interagency we host, we had over 60 inter agent, uh, interagency that were there at this, uh, at this conference that we held and we had, uh, commerce, we had treasury, we had justice, um, and we hold a law enforcement working group as well. I have, uh, I think about 15 interagency L Andos that work out of the SOUTHCOM headquarters already. And, uh, but when you're talking about the I, uh, illeg illegitimate, uh, or the, uh, money laundering, uh, that takes place in our region as well. If I go back to the 310 billion business and money laundering, and those kinds of really complex challenges, we have to continue to work collaboratively with the inner agency to move the ball down the field. So I appreciate your question. Um, and, uh, and we'll continue to work, uh, all of those angles and issues.

Ignatius (45:08):

So it is lunchtime, uh, thanks to general Laura Richeson for a wonderful chance to talk about, well, we don't talk about enough.

Speaker 8 (45:16):

Thank you.