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Pentagon presses Latin America to ship arms to Ukraine

In an increasingly frenetic search for arms to pour into the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the United States has turned to Latin America, the senior US commander for the region has revealed.



Southcom commander Gen. Laura Richardson reviewing Panamanian troops in the Darién Gap, October 2022. [Photo: US Embassy Panama]

US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) chief Gen. Laura Richardson told an online forum held last week by the Washington geopolitical strategy think tank Atlantic Council that the Pentagon is trying to convince several unnamed Latin American governments to “donate” Russian-made military hardware to the US-backed regime in Ukraine.

“We are working with the countries that have the Russian equipment to either donate it or switch it out for United States equipment,” General Richardson told a virtual audience last Thursday.

Diplomatic relations are either nil or sharply curtailed between the US and the three countries in the region that have the closest military-to-military ties with Moscow -- Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. All of them, like Russia, are subject to US sanctions.

While Richardson declined to name them in the forum, titled “On Security in the Americas,” she said that six other countries in the region have significant stockpiles of Soviet or Russian-made weaponry, and that talks were “in the works” on getting them “to donate it to Ukraine or the ongoing cause.” Such deals to send Russian-made equipment into the Ukraine war would include pushing the Latin American countries to replace the Russian gear with US-made armaments.

While the US Southern Command also declined to say which countries were in talks on such weapons transfers, the Pentagon has kept careful track of the inflow of Soviet and Russian arms to the region.

In testimony last July before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Evan Ellis, the US Army War College’s chief expert on Latin America and a vocal proponent of Washington viewing the region as a battlefield in the preparations for world war, gave a detailed list of such weapons systems.

Significantly, the Latin American country—outside of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua — with the largest number of such arms, he testified, is Peru, which began importing Soviet weapons in the 1970s under the nationalist military regime of Gen. Velasco Alvarado, and as recently as 2013 bought 24 Mi-17 military helicopters and two Mi-35 attack helicopters from Moscow. In the intervening years, including under the right-wing dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori, Lima bought Su-22 fighter bombers, Mig-29 fighter jets and other equipment, while its armed forces received Russian military training.

The December 7 parliamentary coup that ousted President Pedro Castillo and brought in a regime dominated by the Peruvian right and the security forces under Castillo’s former vice-president Dina Boluarte may well have greased the wheels for the kind of deal being promoted by General Richardson. A day before the coup, the US ambassador in Lima, Lisa Kenna, a veteran CIA agent, met and reached an understanding with the country’s defense minister to support Castillo’s ouster. Since then, the security forces have been unleashed against protesters, killing at least 60 of them.

Other countries with significant stocks of Soviet/Russian weapons include Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay and Argentina. The weapons include tanks, armored vehicles, multiple-launch rocket systems, surface-to-air missile systems, MANPADS (man-portable air defense systems) and various fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters.

In her remarks, Richardson stressed that the Pentagon was moving “aggressively” to exploit the obstacles imposed by anti-Russian sanctions on Moscow’s providing parts for its weapons systems and financing for Latin American customers.

From the standpoint of the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine, the shipping of the weapons from Latin America serves a definite purpose. While international attention has been focused on the provocative and potentially world catastrophic decisions to provide Kiev with advanced US M1 Abrams and German Leopard 2 main battle tanks, the reality is that it will take months before these weapons can be fielded with trained Ukrainian crews. The Soviet/Russian stockpiles in Latin America, on the other hand, are virtually identical to the arms already familiar to the Ukrainian military and can be deployed immediately.

In terms of Washington’s aims in Latin America itself, removing Russia as a competitor and restoring the Pentagon’s monopoly on weapons provisions would provide US imperialism with increased political leverage throughout a region in which the military has repeatedly intervened to overthrow governments seen as insufficiently subordinate to US and national profit interests.

Increased weapons sales mean greater numbers of US military advisers on the ground in these countries and more of their own officers being sent for their military training to the US. This works to forge military-to-military ties that are far deeper than those existing between diplomats or elected officials, putting in place the organizational infrastructure for the kind of US-backed military coups that swept the continent over the course of the last half century.

While Richardson presented Russia’s operations in the region as an acute threat to US interests, in reality they pale in comparison and are largely a response to the massive US-NATO encirclement of Russia itself.

As the general made clear in her remarks, Washington and the Pentagon view China, which she described as a “malign state actor,” as the more consequential challenge to US imperialist interests in the region.

Using the alarmist rhetoric of war propaganda, Richardson warned of “the invasion and the tentacles of the PRC [People’s Republic of China] in the Western Hemisphere

countries so close to the United States.” China’s presence, she said, had reached “right here on the 20 yard line to our homeland—right here in the red zone.”

The general’s language echoes the 19th-century Monroe Doctrine, which the US first employed to ward off European imperial interlopers in the hemisphere, and later invoked in defense of military coups, police state dictatorships and bloody counter-insurgency wars conducted in the name of defeating “communism.”

She, like her predecessors, has the arrogant habit of viewing the countries to the south of the US border as American imperialism’s “own backyard.” But she is compelled to admit that Washington has lost a great deal of its grip over these territories.

“In a lot of our countries in this region, [China] is the number one trade partner, with the United States number two in most cases,” Richardson said. In reality, China is already South America’s largest trading partner. In the space of barely two decades, total trade between China and the Latin American region as a whole has leapt nearly 20-fold, from \$17 billion in 2002 to \$315 billion in 2019.

Twenty-one of the region’s 31 countries have joined Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, which has already produced significant infrastructure development, including 17 port facilities, highways and railways designed to direct the flow of Latin America’s vital raw materials across the Pacific to China. Meanwhile, in defiance of US pressure, the Chinese multinational Huawei has taken the lead in telecommunications and the provision of 5G networks.

“I worry about these dual-use, state-owned enterprises that pop up from the [People’s Republic of China], and I worry about the dual-use capability—being able to flip them around and use them for military use,” Richardson said.

As she continued, however, the SOUTHCOM commander made it clear that the real concern is securing US domination over the region’s strategic resources and being in a position to deny them to China.

Explaining “why this region matters” to US national security, the general proceeded to catalogue its “rich resources,” including the vast oil reserves of Venezuela and the discovery of huge deposits off the coast of Guyana, copper, silver, gold and other minerals, as well as 31 percent of the world’s fresh water supply. She noted that today, China depends upon Latin America for 36 percent of its food.

General Richardson laid particular stress on the so-called “lithium triangle”—Argentina, Bolivia and Chile—which accounts for most of Latin America’s estimated 60 percent of global lithium reserves. The strategic metal is a key component in the transition to electric

vehicles and is utilized in virtually every modern weapons system. The struggle for control of lithium reserves in the region may soon resemble the fierce and bloody battles for control over Middle Eastern oil. Today, China accounts for over half of the world's lithium refining capacity and produces 79 percent of lithium-ion batteries, compared to just 6.2 percent for the US.

Richardson recounted that just the previous day she had convened a Zoom meeting of “the US ambassadors to Argentina and Chile, and then also the strategy officer from Livent [Tesla's US lithium supplier] and also the VP for global operations from Albermarle [the largest US lithium company] to talk about the lithium triangle in Argentina, Bolivia and Chile, and the companies and how they're doing and what they see as challenges and things like that in the lithium business. And then the aggressiveness and coercion from the PRC.”

The aim, she said, was “to figure the problems out and box out our adversaries.”

The SOUTHCOM commander offered no details as to how Washington intends to “box out” China from a region and a strategic industry where it has already emerged as the dominant economic force.

The fact that it is the Pentagon's regional commander who is convening a meeting of ambassadors and big business executives to discuss how to wrest control of Latin America's lithium reserves from China provides the answer. US imperialism is turning to expanding militarism in its attempt to offset the erosion of its global economic hegemony. It views Latin America as a target for imperialist plunder and a key battlefield in the march to World War III, even as it attempts to build up and tighten its control over the region's armed forces to confront the rising threat of social revolution throughout the region.

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