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Intelligence Interoperability to Counter Narco-Terrorists in the Hemisphere: Challenges and Opportunities for the US Army and the Armed Forces of the Southern Cone



Kevin Wulfhorst[1]

The 2026 United States National Defense Strategy (NDS) prioritizes the line of effort (LOE) *"Defend the Homeland"* as the most important of the four lines of effort in the strategy. Under this line of effort, one of the US military's mission is *"Counter Narco-Terrorists in the Hemisphere"*. As noted in the NDS, in this mission the United States military will *"help to develop partners' ability to degrade narcoterrorist organizations across the Americas and support them as they do"*.

A key part of this mission to degrade narco-terrorist organizations is integrating the shared intelligence architectures of the Armed Forces of the South Cone of the hemisphere with US Army intelligence systems to create a common operating



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1 MG (RET) Kevin Wulfhorst retired from the US Army as a Major General in 2021 with 34 years of military intelligence experience both in the active Army and in the Army Reserve, with service in the Federal Republic of Germany, Kuwait and the Pentagon. In his last assignment, MG (RET) Wulfhorst served on active-duty as the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, G-2, US Army, from 2016 to 2020, responsible for leading the Army Intelligence Corps of 59,000 Soldiers and a 360-person staff in the Pentagon. He represented the Army G-2 in executive forums with HQDA, Army Secretariat, Joint Staff, the Intelligence Community, Army Commands and served as Senior Army Representative to the Foreign Military Attaché Corps. MG (RET) Wulfhorst has a B.A. in History and Russian from the Pennsylvania State University, a Masters of Education in Human Services and Human Resource Administration from Boston University, a Masters in Strategic Studies from the US Army War College, and a Master of Science in Strategic Intelligence from the National Intelligence University.

picture (COP) to identify and target narco-terrorists. This article outlines the organizational, doctrinal and technical challenges the US Army faces in integrating South American Armies into US Army intelligence processes and architectures.

An organizational challenge immediately facing this intelligence integration is the creation of the US Army Western Hemisphere Command. This new Army component command merges the US Army Forces Command, which had operational control of US Army forces in CONUS, with the US Army North and US Army South.

The steps to create a new integrated headquarters and reorganize two existing headquarters will create personnel and organizational challenges to the creation of a shared intelligence architecture. The US Army South HQ is moving from Fort Sam Houston in Texas to Fort Bragg in North Carolina and integrating into the new US Army Western Hemisphere Command. It was scheduled to reach initial operational capability in February, 2026 and full operational capability by the summer of 2026. This HQ reorganization will have personnel and operation planning impacts. In the long-term, this HQ reorganization prioritizes US Army operations in the Western Hemisphere, and according to a US Army spokesperson, it *"puts more Soldiers into operational formations where they can directly contribute to warfighting readiness",* in the short-term, the focus will be on moving HQ personnel, implementing a new chain of command, building expertise on AOR partners capabilities, and revising contingency plans to reflect the new organizational structure.

A significant doctrinal challenge is the recent US designation of drug cartels as terrorist organizations, moving the identification and targeting of cartels from law enforcement agencies to the military. US military forces must develop proficiency in identifying narco-terrorist operating on the South American continent. Doctrine must be developed for deploying military intelligence surveillance assets to identify drug laboratories, and vehicles carrying drug shipments.

This drug trafficking activity is quite different than conventional military operations or even low-intensity counter-insurgency actions. Drug traffickers do not wear uniforms, operate civilian vehicles, and often operate within civilian population centers. Analysts need to be trained to conduct GEOINT and SIGNT intelligence analysis and develop the skill to spot, assess and develop sources that can report human intelligence on drug cartel activities.

Previously, this expertise in identifying and assessing narcotics trafficking was in law enforcement agencies like the US Drug Enforcement Agency, which has a long history of training and collaborating with host nation law enforcement agencies in South America. To integrate US Army intelligence process with South American Armies, the operations and planning staff at the US Army Western Hemisphere Command and at US Army units deploying to South America must develop the process and build the expertise in targeting and assessing drug trafficking activities.

A major doctrinal and technical challenge to creating a functional process to share intelligence information on narcotics cartels in South America is that multinational military training exercises have not developed proficiency on the identifying narcotics trafficking or the small unit tactics needed to close with and engage personnel carrying narcotics The US Army has a long history of training with South American armies, including

the Chilean, Argentine and Uruguayan Armies, but training exercises have primarily focused on small-unit mountain warfare and winter combat survival training. For example, the purpose of Exercise Southern Vanguard 25 (ExSV25), held in AUG 2025, was to train *"mountain warfare capabilities, including survival, movement and combat in winter terrain as a combined unit".* In ExSV25, the US Army deployed assets from the 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade, the 3rd Light Brigade Combat Team, and the 2nd Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, along with elements of Digital Liaison Detachment, an Expeditionary Signal Battalion, and Engineer Battalion, and a Field Hospital and Medical Company from a Theater Medical Command. In addition to Chilean Army units, Chile invited regional partners Argentina and Peru to join the exercise.

In 2024, more than 600 military personnel from the Chilean, Argentinian, and the United States armies participated in Exercise Southern Fenix 24 (SF24), a multinational exercise focused on enhancing interoperability for multi-domain operations in the Atacama Desert of Chile. SV24 was the first US Army-led exercise to deploy the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System platform within the US Southern Command area of operations, and training events featured a combine forceable entry; airfield seizure; HIMARS rapid integration; reception, staging, onward movement and integration; and a combined field training exercise culminating in two live-fire exercises — one with maneuver and one with rocket artillery forces. Approximately 200 US Army personnel, to include Soldiers from U.S. Army South, 11th Airborne Division, 75th Field Artillery Brigade, 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade, and the Texas, Utah and New York National Guard participated in the event.

The major technical challenge facing the integration of US Army intelligence architectures is the lack of current intelligence sharing systems with South American armies. Unlike NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), or the US-ROK Combined Forces HQ in South Korea, there is no integrated operational structure supporting the exchange of real-world intelligence data in South America. There are no battle management systems the provide real-world blue force (friendly) common operating pictures (COPs) with red force (threat) COPs. There are also no standing intelligence dissemination release standards, like RELEASABLE//NATO which cover the sharing of intelligence on a consistent, not AD HOC basis, for all sources, including GEOINT, SIGINT and HUMINT. It will be necessary to develop a system, with approvals, to integrate intelligence collected from US law enforcement agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Agency teams and FBI Legal Attaches in South America with US military intelligence systems so that this information can be shared with South American army partners.

To overcome these challenges, and to help to develop the ability for US Army partner's in South American to degrade narco-terrorist organizations across the Americas and support them as they do, the US Army can focus on the following initiatives. First, create a operations and planning section in the US Army Western Hemisphere Command forward command post with the mission of supporting combined US military/South American military counter-narcotics operations. Second, develop counter-narcotics intelligence collection, collaboration, and combined US-partner counter-narcotics operations and train US Army units assigned to the US Army Western Hemisphere command in these operations. The US Army Wes-

tern Hemisphere Command should coordinate with South American Armies to plan and execute multi-national training exercises focused on conducting intelligence collection and sharing to identify narcotics-trafficking operations and small-unit operations targeting these operations. These exercises should include fielding of battle management systems that support the sharing of intelligence data and blue force/red force common operating pictures (COPs). As the US Army and its South American partners develop proficiency in counter-narcotics operations, the US Army Western Hemisphere Command can develop plans and conduct operations integrating intelligence and capabilities from US law enforcement agencies in South America, including the DEA and FBI with US Army missions. These initiatives will lead to the effective US Army operations with its South American army partners to degrade narco-terrorist organizations in South America.