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The Evolution of Peru's Multidimensional Challenges:

Transnational Organized Crime

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The Evolution of Peru's Multidimensional Challenges:

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R. Evan Ellis¹

Introduction

Peru's crisis of politics and governability has reinforced economic and fiscal pressures from the COVID-19 pandemic and increased in food and fuel prices due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, to greatly complicate grave challenges from transnational organized crime and terrorism in the country. Those crises have also undermined the resources available to the country to effectively respond through investing in the modernization, adaptation, and strengthening of its security institutions, and other parts of its whole-of-government response.

In terms of traditional measures of citizen security, the criminal challenge in Peru is far less than in other parts of the region, with 3.3 murders in the region per 100,000 people in 2021,² although increasing rates of other forms of crime led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Lima metropolitan area in February 2022.³

The challenge in Peru is not simply a matter of individual criminal groups. In Peru, the web of money and influence from such criminality has profoundly permeated and undermined the nation's political and economic institutions and social structures, particularly at the provincial level in the interior of the country, so that organized crime from narcotrafficking to illegal mining, to illegal logging, among others, is together an interdependent, synergistic, if decentralized criminal economy. Indeed, in 2022, Peru's own government calculated losses to the state from corruption and malfeasance of at least \$6 billion.⁴

By contrast to countries such as Mexico or Colombia, in which named groups struggle, often overtly, generating high levels of public violence to impose their criminal dominion, the culture and geography of Peru has led to a different dynamic. In Peru, the geographic separation of the mountainous and jungle interior from the coast, the isolation of individual mountain valleys from each other, and the relative lack of

land transportation within the Amazon jungle interior, has led to a highly fragmented criminal culture in which the relative isolation of each geographical subregion from the others give individual family-based clans relative security from outsiders and unity in the area that they dominate,⁵ while at the same time limiting their ability, and their development of interest in extending their domination to the national or international level.

The result of this complex structure of incentives and limitations is a Peruvian criminal heartland which is very difficult to penetrate for outsiders in geographic and sociopolitical terms, with important synergies within each subregion between illicit activities including narcotrafficking, illegal mining, illegal logging, and the cooptation of local politics to maintain the system, and leverage both the state and the broader, largely informal economy. The ability of small family groups to dominate their local economies in multidimensional ways facilitates the laundering of proceeds, through institutions from universities to casinos, restaurants, sports clubs, public works, and even media organizations. It also supports the logistics required to maintain the viability of that criminal economy, including importing precursor chemicals and items needed for mining and timber operations, to smuggling illicit products out of the area, and the country. In the process, it makes those local criminal economies remarkably resilient and synergistic.

Ironically, such local dynamics were reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of borders⁶ and restriction of internal movement⁷ created temporary problems in supply chains for precursor chemicals,⁸ the transport of drugs, and the ability of illegal miners to move between their home communities and mines. At the same time, the pandemic also obliged security forces to distance themselves to some degree from regular contact with local populations, while the pandemic simultaneously worsened the economic plight of those communities, giving criminal groups the opportunity to strengthen their positions within them. Moreover, the pandemic, by restricting internal and cross-border movements of persons, shook up relationships and obliged criminal groups to find new modalities to move illicit products and precursor chemicals. That arguably has left authorities still working to understand and catch up with the changes. With national borders closed, criminal organizations even used ambulances to smuggle cocaine and people across checkpoints.

There are important synergies between criminal activities in Peru, including but not limited to narcotrafficking, illegal mining, and illegal logging. These are different in

each part of the country. In the northeast, illegal mining, narcotrafficking, and illegal logging are all present in the same zone. There, narcotraffickers sometimes finance illegal mining activities to launder their illicit earnings. They use logging as one vehicle for smuggling their illicit products out. There are also overlaps in the routes and sometimes the personnel used to smuggle inputs into the region for each of the activities. Further to the south, in Ucayali, there are synergies between illegal timber operations and narcotrafficking, yet mining is relatively less than that which occurs in other problematic regions of the country.⁹ In the southeast, in the department of Madre de Dios, for example, illegal mining and narcotrafficking are both present with synergies between them. There, by contrast to Ucayali, however, the nature of vegetation in the region means that the land is often cleared by burning for planting coca and mining, without giving rise to a timber industry that can be exploited by the other illicit activities.

The laundering of money from the aforementioned illicit activities is another part of the dynamic that is critical to their occurrence, while exerting a corrosive effect on the economy, Peruvian institutions and society. In the interior of the country, rural cooperatives (“Cajas Rurales”), a type of community savings in loan, were believed by most persons consulted for this work to play a role in the laundering of money, although virtually all parts of Peruvian society are also permeated by illicitly earned money. Peru’s large informal sector and the many people and small businesses struggling to stay solvent in the wake of COVID-19 and the inflationary effects of Russia’s war against Ukraine, also facilitate opportunities for laundering illicit money throughout the Peruvian economy.

Adding to such challenges, relationships between international criminal actors, and those in Peru continue to deepen and diversify. These include ties to criminal actors based in neighboring countries such as Bolivia and Colombia, the incorporation of outside groups such as Mexican and Colombian cartels and Brazilian gangs. The presence of such groups, however, are largely limited to the major cities and key logistics nodes, to link that criminal economy to international markets. There are also worrisome indications that external ideological actors, including those from Cuba and Venezuela, have also penetrated and are exploiting Peru’s criminal networks in ways not unlike how they exploited networks of subversion and terrorism in previous eras.

The expanding range of criminal challenges set forth in this section have led Peru’s security forces to focus not only on zones historically linked to terrorism and drug

production such as the Apurimac-Ene-Mantaro River Valley (VRAEM), but also on the amazon, which comprises 60% of the national territory,¹⁰ and into which illicit activity such as coca production is also diversifying. Within the Amazon, due to the transnational character of illicit activities, the nine regions of Peru which have a border with a foreign country, and the “frontier districts” within them where that occurs, have become increasingly strategic.

Beyond illicit activity, Peru's Amazon also has strategic importance for environmental reasons. The area, including the Peruvian Andes, which contain the headwaters for many of the rivers flowing into the Amazon basin, is the source of 20% of the fresh water for the entire continent. Although Brazil in geographic terms, accounts for the largest portion of the Amazon, 11% of the Amazon, plus the mountains bearing its headwaters are nonetheless in Peru, making Peru's protection and use of that water, and those areas, extraordinarily impactful for the entire continent, particularly neighboring Brazil.

Cocaine

Peru has long been a key producer of coca for cocaine, initially in the upper Huallaga river valley (UHV), and more recently, in the remote VRAEM. Prior to 2020, the government had made significant progress in reducing coca production in the UHV,¹¹ and some progress in the VRAEM. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the demands on security forces for operations to combat the pandemic, and the associated imperative to limit contact with local populations, led the Peruvian government to stop eradication of coca.¹² Indeed, more than 500 Peruvian police died of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic alone.¹³

With difficulties in eradication by the Peruvian government, the US Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) estimates that coca production in the country grew 22% to reach 88,200 hectares under cultivation by the end of 2020 (versus 72,000 hectares in the prior year).¹⁴ In addition to the growing of coca in the VRAEM, it has spread to multiple other sites, particularly near the borders with Bolivia, Brazil, and Colombia. Although the terrain there is not as suitable for growing coca with high alkaloid content, the increased volume that can be produced in these non-traditional areas, combined with genetic improvements to the plants themselves, have led to an increase in total cocaine produced from Peru's coca leaves from 409 metric tons per year in 2014 to 810 metric tons per year in 2020.¹⁵

As in other countries where coca is produced, the problem in Peru goes beyond illicit production itself. In the context of weak or poorly performing state institutions and relative absence of transportation and other infrastructure that makes licit agricultural production viable, coca growing has become a way of life, perceived as necessary rather than bad, and integrating the entire community, including children. Coca plants, yield usable product within months of first being planted, and may generate an income of 140 Soles (\$36 USD) per day, with the local narco representatives picking up the product from the producer. By contrast, alternative products such as coffee or cacao yield an income of only 40 Soles (\$10 USD) per day, with new plants requiring 2–3 years to bear fruit, requiring much more constant care, and presenting challenges of how to get the product to market with often inadequate local infrastructure.

With respect to production and transportation of cocaine, the routes and modalities are different in each region. In the VRAEM, long the heartland of coca production, precursor chemicals are generally smuggled in from Lima, often concealed in vehicles. The coca that is produced is usually transformed into cocaine in the region, then moved out through a combination of planes departing from clandestine airstrips,¹⁶ river routes, concealment in vehicles, or carried by individuals (“mulas”) over often treacherous mountain passes. The most common route out of the VRAEM goes through the southeast, to Bolivia and onto southern Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and eventually Europe. Some cocaine from the region also proceeds along a northerly route along the Amazon River corridor leading into Brazil at the Peru-Colombia-Brazil triple frontier.¹⁷

Although the Peruvian government has continued the destruction of clandestine airstrips leaving the VRAEM under the special authorities that they have to operate in the zone,¹⁸ locals are able to rapidly repair them.¹⁹ Moreover, the previously noted spread of cocaine production to other areas of the country has limited the effect of such operations on the export of the product.

According to many interviewed for this work, the north of the country, particularly the area south of the Putumayo River defining Peru’s border with Colombia, along the border with Ecuador, and along the Napo River from the Ecuador border across the north of Peru, is becoming more significant as a narco hotspot. There, as noted previously, coca growing reinforces other criminal activities including illegal mining and logging in the zone. Despite the local alkaloid levels from coca plants grown in the lower, more humid jungle environment, genetic engineering of the coca plants,

in combination with more intensive farming techniques, have permitted significant production of coca in the region with acceptable yields. Precursor chemicals for coca production near the Putumayo and Napo rivers are reportedly smuggled in from Colombia or the coast through a combination of river and overland routes, with the cocaine produced there often moved via river into the Brazilian Amazon, passing through the triple frontier area at Tabatinga, as noted previously.

The production of cocaine in the region is reportedly overseen and facilitated by the Carolina Ramirez front and 48th Fronts of FARC dissidents from Colombia,²⁰ who were engaged in a struggle for control of illicit production in the territory at the time of this writing.²¹ Such facilitation reportedly included help with the logistics of precursor chemicals, purchase of product from locals in the zone, and associated “protection” of their activities, without the FARC fronts actually attempting to establish a political presence in the zone.

Peru's eastern border with Brazil, including the Department of Ucayali,²² as well as the southeast of the country bordering Bolivia,²³ have also begun to transform from being transit areas for cocaine, to production regions. As noted previously, in Ucayali, the smuggling of cocaine is sometimes supported by the movement of timber, which is rarely inspected by authorities.

In the south, as in the north, cocaine production sometimes helps to finance, and is interconnected with the illicit infrastructures of the illegal mining sector, including prostitution and other activities. One notable confluence of such illicit activity is the department of Puno, where a route through the mountains through Bolivia, and ultimately to Chile,²⁴ was used by an organization called “la culebra,” (the snake),²⁵ due to its convoys of vehicles following the precipitous winding road has long been a route for contraband. Notable along this route is La Rinconada, one of Peru's highest cities, where the relative absence of the state, combined with contraband, narcotrafficking, illegal mining and other activity has reportedly made it a “no man's land” of illicit activity.²⁶

In addition to cocaine, since 2008, the Peruvian Department of Cajamarca, home territory of President Pedro Castillo, has also become a source of the poppies used to produce heroine.²⁷ Production is reportedly centered around the town of Jaen, traditionally a coffee growing region, although processing into heroin latex is reportedly done in Ecuador, just to the north.

As noted previously, major foreign narcotrafficking organizations such as Mexico's Sinaloa and *Jalisco Nuevo Generacion* (CJNC) cartels, Colombia's Gulf Clan, and Brazil's First Capital Command (PCC) and Red Command (CV) have representatives in Peru to facilitate the production and extraction of cocaine and other products. In general, their presence is generally limited to major cities and nodes in logistics routes, without integration into the communities in Peru's interior where criminal operations take place. Different groups play distinct, often shifting roles in various parts of the country. The Sinaloa Cartel, for example, had a presence for some time in Trujillo, and may have operatives near the Bolivian border involved in the export route through the southeast of the country. As noted previously, the dissident 48th Front and Carolina Ramirez dissident fronts of Colombia's FARC operate in Peru's northern border region near the Putumayo River. Colombia and Bolivian criminal groups are reportedly operating near Pichari, central to cocaine production operations in the VRAEM. Brazil's PCC is reportedly present in the triple frontier region, with it, and Red Command reportedly also present along other parts of the long Peru-Brazil border.

Shining Path

The 69,000 Peruvians killed in the long war against Shining Path in the 1980s and 1990s,²⁸ makes the continuing presence of the remnants of the organization a significant issue for security forces. According to Peruvian security experts consulted for this work, the group is now largely restricted to 200–300 adherents,²⁹ principally in the mountainous areas around Vizcatán. There is, nonetheless, a much larger community who are integrated into their network, in part through their involvement in the coca industry, facilitated and protected by Shining Path, which is key to their livelihood. This broader network is key to providing intelligence and logistical support to the group in the area.

The principal Shining Path effort was largely defeated in the early 2000s under the government of Alberto Fujimori, leading to its split between a more ideologically-oriented faction in the Upper Huallaga Valley (UHV) led by Artemio, who remained loyal to the teachings of the group's founder Abimael Guzman, and a more militarily powerful group tied to cocaine production in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro river valley (VRAEM), under the leadership of the Quispe Palomino brothers. In 2012, the government captured Artemio and in the years that followed, largely wiped out the

presence of shining path in the UHV.³⁰ It was also making progress toward combatting the group in the VRAEM, led by the Quispe Palomino brothers. A key advance in this regard was the death of “Raul,” in January 2021,³¹ reportedly due to wounds suffered in combat with Peruvian government forces the prior October.³²

In the years preceding the pandemic, Shining Path came to be militarily isolated in the VRAEM, conducting occasional terrorist attacks against military bases and patrols there. Beyond its military wing, however, the organization also managed to sustain itself politically in marginal terms through its political front MOVAREF,³³ the organization’s connection with sympathetic NGOs, work by Shining Path in mobilizing communities against mining projects. Shining path has also continued to demonstrate that it presents a terrorist threat, although a low-level one. In May 2021, just prior to national elections,³⁴ Shining Path was accused of ambushing and killed 16 people in a bar in the VRAEM town of San Miguel del Ene by the Joint Command of the Armed Forces in a statement.³⁵ However, Peruvian officials have not officially declared a responsible party for this killing.

Illegal Mining

Illegal mining is a phenomenon that occurs throughout Peru, due to the country’s widespread, abundant mineral deposits. In the country’s national parks and other environmentally protected areas alone, by one estimate, 28% of all gold produced in the country is mined illegally.³⁶ As noted previously, illegal mining in Peru is supported in part by narcotics operations,³⁷ with the latter helping to finance illegal mining to launder its proceeds, and with both activities sometimes using the same routes and organizations to bring supplies into the region and move products out of it.

Although illegal mining occurs in virtually all parts of Peru, it has historically been concentrated in Madre de Dios,³⁸ and the surrounding provinces such as Puno, and Loreto, among others. The illicit gains from the industry have also contributed to the movement of persons to the region from other parts of Peru. The population of Madre de Dios, for example, increased 50% from 2007 to 2017,³⁹ with 28,000 people moving to the capital, Puerto Maldonado, alone.⁴⁰

In February 2019, in an attempt to crack down on illegal mining in the region, the government launched “Operation Mercury,”⁴¹ sending 1,200 police and 300 military

personnel into La Pampa,⁴² in the Tambopata National Reserve.⁴³ Although illicit production was reduced in the area, Peruvian security experts consulted for this work believe that the illegal miners were simply displaced to other areas, including Ayapata, in the department of Puno.

Although following Operation Mercury, due both to COVID-19 and the less aggressive policy of the current government, there has not been a major anti-mining sweep. Nonetheless, in June 2022, the Peruvian Army reinforced police in an operation against illegal mining in the province of Condorcanqui,⁴⁴ in the department of Amazonas.

With respect to the dynamics of the industry, the illegally mined gold and other minerals are generally purchased by consolidators, who use falsified paperwork to create the illusion that it came from a legitimate Peruvian mine. Such gold is often moved to Lima for sale in the internal market, or for export. In some cases, however, the gold is smuggled into Bolivia,⁴⁵ where the process of falsifying its origin is perceived to be easier, and to require lower bribes.

Nor is illegal mining in Peru confined to gold and diamonds. In the department of La Libertad,⁴⁶ on the northern part of Peru's Pacific coast, Peruvian authorities identified illicit coal mining operations, in which the perpetrators used the port of Salaverry to export their illicit production.

Illegal Timber

The illegal timber industry in Peru is a significant, if often overlooked illicit complement to narcotrafficking and illegal mining in the remote areas of the interior of the country. In 2020 alone, Peru lost an estimated 203,000 hectares of forest,⁴⁷ an increase of 37 % from the amount lost the prior year.

Departments such as Ucayali and Loreto, where the quality of the wood for commercial use is good, have been particular focuses of the illegal timber industry. According to Peruvian security experts consulted for this report, wood cut there is traditionally taken to Pucallpa and shipped out by road, sometimes by riverine routes through the Brazilian amazon. The verification of the legitimate origin of timber is complex, and the Peruvian state has very limited resources to check shipments, allowing virtual impunity for illicit shipment of wood through the zone. An estimated 70 % of timber shipped out of Peru is on the international red list.⁴⁸

As with other types of illicit trade, some government officials at the highest level have been corrupted by those participating in the trade. The governor of Madre de Dios, for example, was accused of accepting bribes from 5 companies of Chinese Ji Wu for 48,000 ha concession in protected area for export of wood out of province.⁴⁹

Venezuelan Migrants

With the collapse of Venezuela's economy, a substantial portion of the more than 7 million Venezuelans forced to flee their country have gone to Peru. The Peruvian government estimates that there are 1.4 million Venezuelan migrants live in the country.⁵⁰ The United Nations estimates that there will be 1.45 million by the end of the year. Lima is, by one official estimate, the city with the most Venezuelan immigrants outside Venezuela.⁵¹ The expansion of the Venezuelan population is particularly notable in the exterior suburbs of Lima, including Rimac, and Comas in the North, and Ate in the East, but also extends to other cities throughout Peru.

The vast majority of Venezuelan migrants have been law abiding, and absorbed into Peru's large informal sector, estimated to comprise as much as 70% of the Peruvian economy.⁵² Their economic integration was also facilitated insofar as their arrival coincided with the take-off of a number of service-based industries in Peru that could accommodate them, including home delivery of food and products, and beauty salons, among others. The migration of many Venezuelans as families, rather than individuals, has also facilitated empathy toward them and relatively good relations with the rest of the population of Peru.

Despite such factors facilitating the integration of Venezuelans into Peruvian society, the sheer number of arrivals, amidst challenging times in Peru associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the inflationary pressures on food and fuel prices caused by Russia's Ukraine invasion, have created challenges. A portion of Venezuelans, have expanded the illicit economy in the country, including prostitution.⁵³ The number of Venezuelans arriving has meant that Venezuelans, to some degree, have begun to reproduce local chapters of Venezuela-based criminal networks in Peru,⁵⁴ rather than integrating into local ones. Whether or not supported by crime statistics, many Peruvians perceive elevated levels of insecurity, and the expanded prevalence of crimes such as the use of motorcycles to commit robberies and assaults,⁵⁵ and associate these crimes with Venezuelans.

To date, both increased crime directly tied to the Venezuelan immigrant community, and ethnic violence by Peruvians against Venezuelan immigrants has been limited, yet the expanded immigration continues to create social and criminal pressures, particularly in the context of expanding economic difficulties, political instability, and mobilization and unrest directed toward the government.⁵⁶

The Peruvian State Policy Response

The response of the Peruvian State and its institutions to the challenges of transnational organized crime and insecurity have been complicated by ongoing political crisis in the country, and the high rate of turnover in Peruvian institutions involved in a coordinated whole-of-government response, including multiple changes in the leadership of the Interior⁵⁷ and Defense ministries.⁵⁸ In general terms, the posture of the current government⁵⁹ has emphasized greater attention to the socioeconomic needs of long neglected communities⁶⁰ in the areas such as the VRAEM in which such criminal activities are taking place.⁶¹ A number of policies and plans, however, have been continued across governments without significant overt change. Peru's 2018 law for a National Policy of Frontier Development,⁶² for example, focuses on 10 critical frontier areas in which the presence or performance of state institutions is weak, and organized crime is operating in the area.

Peruvian law also gave the military special jurisdiction and powers in select areas of the country including the VRAEM. Public law 1095 established such “emergency zones” where the military could operate with special authorities.⁶³ Public Law 30796, passed in 2018, authorized select military actions in those zones including direct interdiction of narcotraffickers.⁶⁴ In practice, however, even in the VRAEM, the military has generally conducted operations in coordination with police, prosecutors, and other interagency representatives in order to avoid legal problems that arise from those that they intervene against denouncing them, both for legitimate and cynical reasons.

The increasing prevalence of multiple types of criminal activity outside the VRAEM has reportedly led to some discussion regarding the utility of establishing new areas of emergency jurisdiction those parts of the country, including Ucayali and Leticia (particularly near the triple frontier), although at the time of this writing, no concrete action had been taken.

Beyond the questions of special jurisdictions, in early June 2022, the Peruvian Congress passed legislation (Public Law 31494),⁶⁵ extending a law from the Fujimori era authorizing the operation of citizen “defense committees.”⁶⁶ The former law had formalized legal authority for armed community watch organizations known as “rondas campesinas” to operate in designated conflict zones,⁶⁷ and to receive recognition and compensation for their sacrifices helping the state maintain local control in the fight against the terrorist group Shining Path. The new law, which extended the rights of defense committees to operate nationwide, raised concerns among some because of ambiguities regarding the types of arms authorized for them, responsibility for supervision and training, and other matters. Some interviewed for this article worried that, under a radical left government, such committees could be used in a manner similar to armed “collectivos” in Venezuela,⁶⁸ as a force loyal to the President, countering the traditional Armed Forces in the context of a leadership dispute.

Despite some public perceptions that the Peruvian military was the lead government actor in the VRAEM, most major operations were whole-of-government. One major example was Operation Harpy,⁶⁹ conducted during 2018–2019, which focused on acting in areas identified as nodes supporting multiple different types of criminal operations. The Peruvian government intervention involved everything from intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance from aerial and other military assets to interventions by multiple government agencies from DEVIDA to the Agriculture Ministry and the Ministry for Women and Vulnerable Populations to address the economic and social needs of the population.

With respect to resources, in the Defense sector, pre-COVID 19 plans called for establishing a “basic defense nucleus” which would be achieved from the revenues dedicated from particular sources,⁷⁰ including a percentage of the revenues generated by the exploitation of Lot 88 and Lot 56 of the Camisea gas project.⁷¹ Such funds, in theory, would assure the modernization and transformation needs of the Armed Forces.

Within the context of defense modernization, each of the services has a vision for the role,⁷² initiatives, and transformation of its own institution. The Peruvian Army has an Institutional Transformation Plan for the period 2019–2034,⁷³ adopted prior to the period of the present government, but reviewed by persons in the present government with some adaptations, according to people with whom I spoke to for this work. It emphasizes “capabilities-based planning,”⁷⁴ and focuses on four lines of effort:

changing the institutional culture, developing the force, modernizing institutional management, and sensitizing internal and external actors.

In the short term, the Army has committed to using its engineering capabilities to build roads and bridges to support the development of vulnerable areas,⁷⁵ including better connecting them to the rest of the country and making it more economically viable to sell legal products rather than coca. The goal of the initiative is to build 1083 bridges.⁷⁶ The Army has reportedly started building 12,⁷⁷ although the future of the project is not yet clear.

One key element of the Army concept for adapting to meet the new mission set is a concept of “Amazon protection Brigades,”⁷⁸ reflecting the previously noted emphasis on frontier regions. Such brigades, in principle, would have monitoring, mobility, and other capabilities appropriate to controlling the strategic border regions to which they were being deployed, including identifying and acting, consistent with the Peruvian Constitution, in whole-of-government operations against drug trafficking, illegal mining and logging operations.

The Amazon Protection Brigades would be outfitted to effectively interact with and support the people of the zone, to facilitate development of the region and its connection with the government. The concept would thus support a concept of a “system for monitoring of the Amazon” (SIVAM) and “System for the protection of the Amazon” (SIPAM), analogous to the system for the protection and control of frontier regions (SISFRON) employed by Peru’s neighbor Brazil,⁷⁹ sharing information with Brazil and other neighbors, as authorized by national leadership, to strengthen control of the frontier region.

A driver shaping the development of Army’s Amazon Protection Brigade concept is its lessons learned from the brigade that it deployed to Madre de Dios in 2019 under Operation Mercury.⁸⁰ Among other insights are the importance of assuring that brigades for operations in the Amazon region are adequately outfitted with the material that it needs to operate in the jungle environment to which it is being deployed.

Although pursuit of the concept was suspended during COVID-19 because of the considerable costs involved, its implementation in principle would involve a significant increase in state presence along Peru’s frontier. Indeed, currently, the Peruvian Army has only four battalions for control of the entirety of its difficult 1,626 kilometer jungle border with Colombia.

Beyond the Army, the Peruvian Air Force has its own modernization, the “Quinones” plan. Elements of the Air Force plan include support to the SIVAM/SIPAM concept through an expansion of monitoring assets from access to satellites beyond the current PeruSat1, airborne ISR assets to possibly include unmanned aerial vehicles, synthetic aperture radar (SAR) and LIDAR on airborne assets, and the possible centralization of data collected in a “National Amazon Vigilance” Center. The Air Force concept also includes completion of acquisitions postponed during the pandemic, such as its C-27J Spartan transport aircraft, among others.⁸¹

For the Peruvian Navy, its response to the aforementioned challenges includes the strengthening of its system for maintaining control of the system’s internal waterways, including riverine interdiction units employing hovercraft, and counterterrorism bases, as well as new blue water and brown water assets built by its own SIMA shipyards, including two CB-90 interceptor boats.⁸² In the short term, just as the Army is building bridges, the Peruvian Navy is working to upgrade river docks, so that river barges can access communities to load and offload cargo.

Each of the services also is developing or implementing a concept to use its assets to bring the presence of the state to local populations. The most mature concept among the three services is a Navy program, Platforms for Itinerant Social Action (PIAS),⁸³ which uses riverboats produced in the navy’s own SIMA Iquitos shipyards to bring services such as registration for the national identification card through RENIEC,⁸⁴ as well as pension payouts and other banking services, to remote communities accessible only by river. The Navy program has been relatively successful, with the side benefit that the Ministries leveraging the system pay for part of the costs of the operation of the platforms. From April–May 2022, Navy PIAS boats conducted missions serving Loreto, Ucayali, and Puno.⁸⁵ The Air Force has a complimentary concept using Twin Otter pontoon craft to bring those services to even more remote towns that the Navy’s riverboats can’t reach.⁸⁶ The Army, for its part, envisions caravans of trucks to bring such state services to remote towns.

Challenges

While the Peruvian government and military has a range of innovative programs to help address the challenges mentioned in this paper, it is not clear that in the difficult post-COVID-19 fiscal environment, in the context of government debt and

demands to compensate communities for high food and fuel costs, money for military modernization and transformation programs and initiatives to combat crime and insecurity in the country will be forthcoming.

Operational issues tied to COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have further complicated matters. For the Peruvian Air Force and other services, the extra hours flying helicopters and other fixed wing aircraft, and operating other vehicles, have created a bow wave of maintenance requirements at exactly the moment when resources available to the services is constrained. In addition, Peruvian security officials consulted for this report note that Western sanctions against the Russian arms organization Rosboronexport make it difficult for the Peruvian military to pay Russia for necessary depot-level maintenance for those platforms, reducing their operational readiness.

While there is a range of opinion on whether the effective suspension of drug eradication efforts by DEVIDA, or the state's purchase of Peru's entire illicit coca crop,⁸⁷ mentioned earlier, are good ideas, resource-backed alternatives to develop long neglected communities and strengthen their bonds to the legitimate state have not yet been put on the table in more than a symbolic fashion.

At the technical level, controlling precursor chemicals entering drug producing regions is another daunting challenge.⁸⁸ Materials as ubiquitous as cement and gasoline are on the controlled list. The items on the list are also highly substitutable. Moreover, the ever-expanding group of areas in the vast national territory where such production occurs, and the limited resources of the state to control that expanding list of substances in an expanding array of areas. By one estimate, the Peruvian tax authority SUNAT has managed to intercept less than 1% of controlled substances going into just the VRAEM. Moreover, because SUNAT also collects tax revenues from the sale of goods such as gasoline and cement, the organization has contradictory incentives not to question the entry of materials which are key generators for the tax revenue whose collection it is responsible.

Peru's people, and government professionals have a long history of resilience, and the ability to adapt to adversity. They are doing so currently, in the face of enormous current challenges. Nonetheless, it is critical to recognize that expanding criminality, in the form of narcotrafficking, illegal mining, logging, and other activities, continues to erode the effectiveness of Peruvian institutions, and the faith of the Peruvian people in democratic, market-oriented solutions to their challenges. Peru is an integral

part of a Latin America weathering its own severe economic and social difficulties. It is important to recognize that what happens in Peru will likely have profound repercussions for the trajectory of democracy and stability in the hemisphere.

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Dr. Ellis has published over 300 works, including the 2009 book *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores*, the 2013 book *The Strategic Dimension of Chinese Engagement with Latin America*, the 2014 book *China on the Ground in Latin America*, and the 2018 book *Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean*. He recently published his 5th book, *China Engages Latin America: Distorting Development and Democracy?*

Endnotes:

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