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The Evolution of Peru's Multidimensional Challenges, Part II: Transnational Organized Crime



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This article represents the second in a series on Peru. [Click here to read Part I](#) and [click here to read Part III](#).

Image: A Peruvian military helicopter flies over the valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro, also known as the VRAEM. Source: VOA.

Crises within the realms of politics and governance in Peru have reinforced the pre-existing economic and fiscal pressures that the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed, in addition to the increases in food and fuel prices that have been caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine. These issues are now complicating the grave challenges from transnational organized crime and terrorism in the country. Investing in the modernization, adaptation, and strengthening of Peruvian security institutions, along with other parts of its whole-of-government response, requires resources that these stresses have now undermined.

In terms of traditional measures of citizen security, the principal challenge is

the region per 100,000 people in 2021. However, increasing rates of other forms of crime led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Lima metropolitan area in February 2022.

The challenge in Peru is not simply a matter of individual criminal groups. The web of money and influence from such criminality has profoundly permeated and undermined the nation's politics, economic institutions, and social structures—particularly at the provincial level in the interior of the country. Organized crime, from narco-trafficking to illegal mining and logging, is altogether an interdependent, synergistic, if decentralized criminal economy. Indeed, in 2022, Peru's own government calculated state losses from corruption and malfeasance of at least USD \$6 billion.

As opposed to countries such as Mexico or Colombia, in which named groups struggle, often overtly, and generate high levels of public violence to impose their criminal dominion, the culture and geography of Peru fosters a different dynamic. In Peru, the geographic separation of the mountainous and forested 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 have all led to a highly fragmented criminal culture. The relative isolation of each geographical subregion from others gives individual family-based clans relative security from outsiders and unity in the area that they dominate, while simultaneously limiting their ability and interest in extending

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The result of this complex structure of incentives and limitations is a Peruvian criminal heartland, one that is very difficult for outsiders to penetrate in geographic and sociopolitical terms. Important synergies exist within each subregion between illicit activities—including coca growing, illegal mining and timber, and the cooptation of local politics to maintain the system—leveraging 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, which occurs through institutions including universities, 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 and smuggling illicit products out of the country. In the process, it makes those local criminal economies remarkably resilient and synergistic.

Ironically, these local dynamics were reinforced by the pandemic. Border closures and restrictions on internal movement created temporary problems for precursor chemical supply chains, the transport of drugs, and the ability of illegal miners to move between their home communities and mines. The pandemic also obliged security forces to distance themselves to some degree from regular contact with local populations, at the same time worsening the economic plight of those communities, giving criminal groups the opportunity to strengthen their positions within them. Moreover, COVID-19 lockdowns, by restricting internal and cross-border movements of persons, obliged criminal groups to find new modalities to move illicit products and precursor chemicals. With national borders closed, criminal organizations even used ambulances to smuggle cocaine and people across checkpoints. Authorities are now racing to catch up with these changes and understand the new dynamics between groups. There are important synergies between criminal activities in Peru, including but not limited to narcotrafficking, illegal mining, and illegal logging. However, these synergies vary within each part of the country. In the

the same zone. There, narcotraffickers sometimes finance illegal mining activities to launder their illicit earnings, while also utilizing logging as a vehicle to smuggle 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 south, in Ucayali, there are relationships between illegal timber operations and narcotrafficking, while mining is relatively less present than in other problematic regions of the country. In the southeast, in the Department of Madre de Dios, for example, illegal mining and narcotrafficking are both present with synergies between them. However, as opposed to Ucayali, the nature of vegetation in the southeast means that the land is often cleared by burning for planting coca and mining, prohibiting the rise of a timber industry that can be exploited by other illicit activities.

The laundering of money from the aforementioned illicit activities is another part of the dynamic that is critical to their occurrence, exerting a corrosive effect on the Peruvian economy, 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—along with the many people and small businesses struggling to stay solvent in the wake of COVID-19 and the inflationary effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war—also facilitate opportunities for laundering illicit money throughout the Peruvian economy.

In addition 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, as well as the incorporation of outside groups such as Mexican and Colombian cartels and Brazilian gangs. The presence of such groups, however, is largely limited to major cities and key logistical nodes, which are needed to link the

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 like 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. The rainforest comprises 60 percent of the national territory, 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 percent of the freshwater for the entire continent. Although Brazil, in geographic terms, accounts for the largest portion of the Amazon, Peru claims 11 percent. Most importantly, the mountains bearing the Amazonian headwaters are in Peru, making their protection and use of that water, and those areas, extraordinarily impactful for the entire continent, particularly in 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 Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River valley (VRAEM). Before 2020, the government had made significant progress in reducing coca production in the UHV, and some

demands on security forces for operations to combat the pandemic, and the associated limitations on contact with local populations, led the Peruvian government to stop coca eradication efforts. More than 500 Peruvian police died of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic alone.

Without eradication measures being taken by the Peruvian government, the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) estimates that coca production in the country grew by 22 percent, reaching 88,200 hectares under cultivation by the end of 2020 (versus 72,000 hectares in the prior year). In addition to the VRAEM, the growing of coca 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 an astounding 810 metric tons per year in 2021.

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 the relative absence of transportation and other infrastructure that makes licit agricultural production viable, coca production 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) 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) per day, with new plants requiring 2-3 years to bear fruit, needing care much more frequently, 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 methods: planes departing from clandestine airstrips, river routes, concealment in vehicles, or individuals (“mulas”) who carry the product over 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.

Although the Peruvian government has continued the destruction of clandestine airstrips, in an effort to leave the VRAEM under the special authorities that they designate to operate in the zone, locals are able to rapidly repair them. 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 ever 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, has 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. The cocaine produced there is 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, who were engaged in a struggle for control of illicit production in the territory at the time of this writing. 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, as well as the southeast of the country bordering Bolivia, has also begun to transform from being a transit area for cocaine to a production region. 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 is interconnected with the illicit infrastructures of the illegal mining sector, including prostitution and other activities, and sometimes help to finance them.

One notable confluence of such illicit activity is the Department of Puno, where a mountainous route through Bolivia, and ultimately to Chile, was used by an organization called “La Culebra,” (the snake), due to its convoys of vehicles following the precipitous winding road that 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, narco trafficking, illegal mining, and other activity has reportedly made it a “no

In addition to cocaine, since 2008, the Department of Cajamarca, home territory of President Pedro Castillo, has also become a source of the poppies used to produce heroin. 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 narco-trafficking 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 limited to major cities and nodes in logistical 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. Colombian 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, and Red Command is also said to be present along other parts of the extensive Peru-Brazil border.

Shining Path

The 69,000 Peruvians killed in the long war against Shining Path in the 1980s and 1990s makes the continuing presence of the organizations’ remnants 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, principally in the mountainous areas around Vizcatán. There is,

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) lead 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. It was also making progress toward combating 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, reportedly due to wounds suffered in combat with Peruvian government forces the prior October.

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 MOVADDEF, the organization's connection with sympathetic NGOs, and work by Shining Path in mobilizing communities against mining projects.

In May 2021, just prior to national elections, Shining Path was accused of ambushing and killing 16 people in a bar in the VRAEM town of San Miguel de Ene by the Joint Command of the Armed Forces. 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 percent of all gold produced in the country is mined illegally.

As noted previously, illegal mining in Peru is supported in part by narcotics operations, with the latter helping to finance illegal mining to launder its proceeds. Both activities sometimes use 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, 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 percent from 2007 to 2017, with 28,000 people moving to the capital, Puerto Maldonado alone.

In February 2019, in an attempt to crack down on illegal mining in the region, the government launched "Operation Mercury," sending 1,200 police and 300 military personnel into La Pampa, part of the Tambopata National Reserve. 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.

However, 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, in the Department of Amazonas.

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, 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, 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 narco trafficking 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, an increase of 37 percent 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 percent of timber shipped out of Peru is on the international red list.

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 national Ji Wu for 42,000 hectares concession in a

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 currently living in the country. 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. The expansion of the Venezuelan population is particularly notable in the exterior suburbs of Lima, including Rimac, 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, absorbed into Peru's large informal sector, and estimated to comprise as much as 70 percent of the Peruvian economy. 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 invasion of Ukraine, have created challenges. A portion of Venezuelans have expanded the illicit economy in the country, including prostitution. 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, rather than integrating into local ones. Whether or not supported by crime statistics, many Peruvians perceive

of motorcycles to commit robberies and assaults, often associating these crimes with Venezuelans.

To date, both crime directly tied to the Venezuelan immigrant community and ethnic violence by Peruvians against Venezuelan immigrants has been limited. However, 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 Castillo government.

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 crises in the country. Additionally, the high rate of turnover in Peruvian institutions involved in the coordinated whole-of-government response, including multiple changes in the leadership of the Interior and Defense Ministries, has prevented progress in the effort against criminal organizations

In general terms, the posture of the current government has emphasized greater attention to the socioeconomic needs of long neglected communities, especially in areas such as the VRAEM where such criminal activities are taking place.

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, 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.

“emergency zones” where the military could operate with special authorities. Public Law 30796, passed in 2018, authorized select military actions in those zones, including direct interdiction of narcotraffickers. 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 targeted groups 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 in those parts of the country, including Ucayali and Leticia (particularly near the triple frontier). However, 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), extending a law from the Fujimori era authorizing the operation of citizen “defense committees.” The former law had formalized legal authority for armed community watch organizations known as “rondas campesinas” to operate in designated conflict zones, as well as 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, 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-

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—including DEVIDA, the Agriculture Ministry, and the Ministry for Women and Social Development—to address the economic and social needs of the population.

With respect to resources in the Defense sector, pre-pandemic plans called for establishing a “basic defense nucleus” which would be achieved from the revenues dedicated from particular sources, including a percentage generated by the exploitation of Lot 88 and Lot 56 of the Camisea gas project. 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, initiatives, and transformation of its own institution.

The Peruvian Army has an Institutional Transformation Plan for the period 2019-2034, 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” 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, 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, and the Army has reportedly started

One key element of the Army's plan for adapting to meet the new mission set is a concept of "Amazon protection Brigades," 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. The brigades would also work consistent to the Peruvian Constitution, identifying and acting against, within whole-of-government operations, groups involved in illicit activities.

The Amazon Protection Brigades would be outfitted to effectively interact with and support the people of the zone, facilitate development of the region, and strengthen connections with the government. The concept would thus support the 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 neighboring Brazil. SIPAM would have the power to share 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 are the lessons learned from the brigade that it deployed to Madre de Dios in 2019 under Operation Mercury. Another priority is 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 the pandemic because of the considerable costs involved, its implementation in principle would involve a significant increase in State presence along Peru's frontier. Indeed, the Peruvian Army currently has only four battalions for controlling the entirety of its 1,626 kilometer jungle border with Colombia.

Beyond the Army, the Peruvian Air Force has its own ideas for 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 the completion of acquisitions postponed during the pandemic, such as [its C-27J Spartan transport aircraft](#), among others.

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. The Navy also added new blue water and brown water assets built by its own SIMA shipyards, including [two CB-90 interceptor boats](#). 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 branch of the Armed Forces is also developing or implementing a concept to use its assets to bring state presence to local populations. The most mature concept among the three services is a Navy program, [Platforms for Itinerant Social Action \(PIAS\)](#), which [uses riverboats produced in the navy’s own SIMA Iquitos shipyards to bring services—including registration for the national identification card through RENIEC, pension payouts, and other forms of banking—to remote communities accessible only by river](#). The Navy program has been relatively successful, and a side benefit is that the Ministries leveraging the system pay for part of platform operation costs.

From April-May 2022, Navy PIAS boats conducted missions serving [Loreto, Ucayali, and Puno](#).

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.

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 pandemic 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, along with operating other vehicles, have created a bow wave of maintenance requirements at exactly the moment when resources available to the services are 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 opinions vary on whether the effective suspension of drug eradication efforts by DEVIDA, or the state's purchase of Peru's entire illicit coca crop 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, yet another daunting challenge is the effort to prevent precursor chemicals from entering drug producing regions. Materials as ubiquitous as cement and gasoline are on the controlled list. The items on the list are also highly substitutable. Moreover, the group of areas in the vast national territory where such production occurs is ever-expanding, and the state only has limited resources to control that growing list of substances. By one estimate, the Peruvian tax authority SUNAT has managed to intercept less than 1 percent 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 for.

Peru's people and government professionals have a long history of resilience and adaptation to adversity. They are doing so currently, in the face of enormous 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, as well as the faith of the Peruvian people in democratic, market-oriented solutions to their challenges. Peru is an integral part of Latin America, a region 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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