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**Department of Defense Strategic Evaluation Public Summary**  
Strategic Evaluation of U.S. Defense Security Cooperation with Northern Triangle Nations  
(2016–2022)

Department of Defense  
OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

(U) The Department of Defense (DoD) sponsors strategic evaluations of security cooperation (SC) programs and activities pursuant to section 383 of title 10, U.S. Code, and DoD Instruction 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise.” Section 1336 of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) requires an independent, strategic evaluation of how effectively DoD SC activities and investments contributed to U.S. national security objectives—namely, those stated in the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) Combatant Command Campaign Plan (CCP), with particular attention to efforts to promote the rule of law and human rights in Northern Triangle Countries (NTC) (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras).

(U) The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Partnerships (ODASD(GP)) and the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs (ODASD(WHA)) commissioned the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), an independent federally funded research and development center, to conduct this strategic evaluation of DoD SC in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The evaluation, “Strategic Evaluation of US Defense Security Cooperation with Northern Triangle Nations,” included SC activities in these three NTC countries from 2016 through 2022. The findings of this product were current as of September 25, 2023.

(U) This summary, developed by ODASD(GP), provides unclassified primary findings, conclusions, and recommendations derived from CNA’s evaluation report.

(U) To address U.S. congressional requirements, this evaluation responded to the following questions:

1. (U) During the period of evaluation (2016–2022), what were DoD’s strategic objectives for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and how did DoD use SC to pursue them?
2. (U) What short-term or long-term results did SC achieve in these countries in pursuit of these objectives, particularly with regard to the promotion of the rule of law and human rights?
3. (U) What factors or conditions affected these results?

**(U) Background of Relations with Northern Triangle Nations**

(U) El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—collectively referred to as the “Northern Triangle” of Central America—are longstanding economic, diplomatic, and military partners of the United States. They have struggled for years, however, against transnational organized crime and citizen insecurity fueled, in part, by powerful domestic gangs who fund their activities partly through narcotics shipments to the United States. In recent years, Northern Triangle governments have “clashed with Washington” over the fate of anti-corruption policies and traditional democratic institutions.

(U) U.S. security relations with these countries have traditionally been strong. For years the U.S. has provided assistance, equipment, and training to these nations’ armed forces and supported their missions to counter illicit trafficking and organized crime; respond to natural disasters and

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humanitarian emergencies; and deploy units in support of UN peacekeeping missions. To facilitate cooperation, the U.S. military is granted permission to operate its Joint Task Force–Bravo out of a Honduran air base and support for regional counternarcotics efforts by conducting air surveillance flights out of Comalapa Air Base in El Salvador.

**(U) Evaluation Scope and Design**

(U) This evaluation focused on SC executed during the period 2016–2022 through DoD’s Title 10 authorities. In practice, DoD cooperates with various U.S. Government agencies to plan and execute SC with these countries, and the evaluation mentions interagency contributions to SC where relevant.

(U) CNA’s process involved the following steps:

1. (U) **Desk review** of literature on USSOUTHCOM SC efforts, the security environment and trends in the three partner nations (PNs), and effective evaluation techniques from entities, including the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office, and various U.S. think tanks;
2. (U) **Data collection within DoD:** To understand the full complement of DoD’s SC operations, activities, and investments (OAI)s in these countries and their intended results, CNA surveyed relevant USSOUTHCOM documents, including campaign plans and their country annexes. CNA created a simplified logic model to capture those efforts and link them to desired outputs and outcomes. That effort led CNA to define four general lines of effort (LOEs):
  - a. (U) Capacity building for counter–transnational organized crime (CTOC) or counternarcotics (CN),
  - b. (U) Institutional capacity building (ICB), to include efforts to strengthen the rule of law (ROL) and human rights protections,
  - c. (U) Capacity building for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR),
  - d. (U) Capacity building for peacekeeping operations (PKOs);
3. (U) **Country-level data collection**, including field visits to each country;
4. (U) **Data organization:** CNA organized their findings from the field and combined them with the information about the SC LOEs to create country briefs that describe the short- and long-term results from DoD SC that they were able to identify or observe. For the CTOC LOE, significant information was available. But for other LOEs, there was very little objective information about changes in partner capacity or capabilities, apart from the knowledge of personnel who work within the affected units;

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5. (U) **Analysis** of these data to identify country-level findings about SC outputs and outcomes, from which CNA derived regional conclusions about the results of SC efforts during the period of evaluation as well as various factors that affected those results;
6. (U) **Development of recommendations** for:
  - a. (U) Future improvements to SC outputs and outcomes in these countries,
  - b. (U) Steps that SC policymakers and personnel can take to exploit the positive factors the evaluation identified and avoid or address the negative factors,
  - c. (U) Recommendations that address more directly the growing issues and challenges related to strategic competition in these countries.

(U) The CNA evaluation produced three documents: an unclassified Evaluation of US Defense Security Cooperation with Northern Triangle Countries, a supplementary CUI annex that provides supportive data and the three country cases, and a SECRET-level annex. The evaluation's conclusions are as follows.

**(U) Conclusions Related to USSOUTHCOM Strategic Objectives**

- (U) The 2018 NDS-led shift in U.S. strategy did not result in a noticeable change to USSOUTHCOM Security Cooperation LOEs.
- (U) CTOC-related OAI's were the largest portion of SC.

**(U) Conclusions Related to Security Cooperation Results**

*(U) Conclusions about the counter-transnational organized crime LOE:*

- (U) DoD SC contributed to improved capabilities for maritime interdiction operations in El Salvador and Guatemala, but sustainment and strategic outcomes are uncertain.
- (U) There was little data available about changes in border security capabilities or outcomes.
- (U) Partners rely on the U.S. for much of their training beyond basic skills; some train-the-trainer efforts showed positive results.

*(U) Conclusions about the ICB LOE:*

- (U) Only Guatemala engaged seriously in ICB cooperation.
- (U) PN governments and military forces took important steps toward preventing and responding to human rights violations.

*(U) Conclusions about the HA/DR LOE:*

- (U) HA/DR was a top priority for Northern Triangle partners and an area of consistent SC, but outcomes are uncertain.

*(U) Conclusions about capacity building for PKOs:*

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- (U) With low partner commitment outside of El Salvador, contributions to UN PKO missions were modest and uneven.

(U) Capacity building or support related to strategic competition was not an LOE during the period of evaluation, and very few USSOUTHCOM OAIAs addressed strategic competition directly. Nevertheless, CNA offered the following conclusions from the case studies:

- (U) US permissions for access, basing, and overflight (ABO) remain reliable and routine in these countries for shared missions such as CTOC and HA/DR. This did not change during the period of evaluation, despite significant cuts and withholdings to U.S. security cooperation and assistance.
- (U) Longstanding U.S. programs for international professional military education (IPME) and training have been critical elements in ensuring strong military-to-military relationships over the decades.
- (U) USSOUTHCOM’s Humanitarian Assistance Program played an important role supporting these partnerships in ways and areas for which other DoD SC tools are unsuitable—for example, cooperating with PN civilian agencies and local governments and providing quick-response assistance during crises.

**(U) Conclusions Related to Factors that Affected Results**

(U) Taken as a whole, these conclusions convey a mixed record of limited successes from DoD SC with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between 2016–2022. Considering that during this period, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected lives, staffs, and budgets across these countries and in the U.S. and minimized the delivery of direct SC for more than a year, a mixed record of results could be considered a positive outcome. Several other less-exceptional factors also contributed to the observed results:

(U) *Factors related to strategy:*

- (U) Unclear guidance on strategic competition objectives in the Northern Triangle countries and use of SC to achieve them.
- (U) Weak, uneven partner interest in ICB or PKO.

(U) *Factors related to SC policies:*

- (U) Cuts, certification requirements, withholdings, and PN human rights violations and associated Leahy Law processes complicated planning and execution of SC.
- (U) Drawdown of U.S. forces’ presence reduced SC scope and impact.
- (U) Limits on authorities and programs for HA/DR limited results.
- (U) Longstanding inter-institutional contentions thwarted most SC efforts to develop PN military-police interagency units.
- (U) Consistent, focused U.S. interagency support for special task forces generated positive operational results.

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- (U) Restrictions against U.S. support for PN military units that support internal security operations limited SC's relevance to PN priority missions.
- (U) Regular U.S. training for PN officers strengthened bilateral military partnership.

(U) *Factors related to SC implementation:*

- (U) Provision of U.S. equipment that was unsuitable for PNs detracted from results.
- (U) Long timelines and complexity of U.S. procurement made U.S. offerings less competitive.
- (U) Deficits in knowledge management within security cooperation offices (SCOs) complicated SC delivery and suitability of equipment.
- (U) One-year funding for SC programming undermined five-year SSCI plans.

(U) **Recommendations**

(U) CNA's conclusions led to the following recommendations, summarized below:

(U) *Aligning strategy and SC activities:*

- (U) OUSD(P) should specify strategic competition objectives in the Northern Triangle and prioritize SC OAI that contribute to those objectives.

(U) *Adjusting SC laws and policy:*

- (U) Congress, DoD, and the Department of State (DoS) should consider if current authorities and programs adequately support partner militaries' efforts to improve capabilities for HA/DR and environmental security operations.
- (U) DoD and DoS should explore whether Leahy law policies and processes could be made clearer and more efficient.
- (U) OUSD(P) should advocate to Congress for longer funding timelines and/or design the SSCI process to create more certainty in out-year funding.
- (U) DoD should continue efforts to expand professional military education programs, and Congress should reconsider whether certification requirements should apply to IPME.

(U) *Enhancing SC implementation processes:*

- (U) OUSD(P), CCMDs, DSCA, and implementing agencies should reexamine SC policies and processes to ensure the delivery of equipment that is suitable to PN capacity.
- (U) DoD should continue efforts aimed at SC learning and knowledge management, including at the implementation level.

(U) **Looking Ahead**

(U) From 2016 to 2022, SC with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras produced mixed results. USSOUTHCOM had some success in some of the countries in building capacity for maritime narcotics interdictions, PKO deployments, and strategic planning, and there was evidence for

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operational improvements in some areas. However, no clear progress was made toward long-term outcomes involving regional stability or security. U.S. national security strategies shifted to address strategic competition, but DoD SC activities in the countries of the Northern Triangle continued largely the same. Gaps developed between the priorities of DoD and PN governments, some of which had little interest in cooperation in ICB and PKOs. Nevertheless, some critical U.S. security objectives remain achievable. The U.S. and the NTC agree that narcotics trafficking should be reduced as much as possible within reasonable costs (with the U.S. bearing a good portion of those costs), and close partnerships with these countries' armed forces yielded the U.S. exceptional access to operational locations and decision-making venues.

(U) Looking ahead, however, political and global trends suggest that U.S. relations with Northern Triangle countries will remain complicated and could deteriorate further, especially if the recent trend of democratic backsliding continues. In that context, DoD and its USG partners should consider carefully the extent to which these strong military ties are vital to U.S. interests in the region, under what conditions, and in what ways.

(U) Globally, DoD allocates most of its resources to its high-priority missions, which currently center on deterring or defeating strategic competitor states in regions far from Central America. Yet it is also important that longstanding security cooperation with the countries of Central America's Northern Triangle be sustained in some form, if for no other reason than to keep these competitors from establishing themselves as equal or superior security partners for Northern Triangle governments or their armed forces. At some point, recent reductions in the scale, scope, and quality of U.S. SC with these countries and their armed forces, and differences between U.S. and PN security priorities, put that longstanding security cooperation and affinity at risk. CNA suggested that DoD policymakers seriously consider how they can best and most efficiently—given global competition for DoD resources—sustain U.S. security partnerships with these countries' militaries and defense leadership, along with the access and operational privileges such partnerships afford.