

Multinational Joint Capabilities in the Americas: How the US Marine Corps Force Design 2030 Can Pave the Way for Collective Defense

WILLIAM “BILL” GODNICK, PhD

ROBERT BURRELL, PhD

MANUEL CARRANZA

As the geopolitical landscape of the Americas continues to evolve, nations across the Western Hemisphere are increasingly confronted with complex security challenges in which traditional defense strategies do not adequately address emerging strategic competition and irregular warfare threats (such as transnational crime). Among these challenges, the US Marine Corps (USMC) Force Design 2030 concept emerges as a pivotal framework to enhance multinational joint capabilities and foster a more cohesive and robust defense mechanism among US armed services.

At the heart of this concept is the recognition that polyvalent platforms and weapon systems are unable to address modern threats. Thus, this concept advocates for a unified approach, leveraging the unique strengths and resources of each military service component to build a flexible forward defense posture, and emphasizes interoperability with a focus on standardized training, joint exercises, and shared platforms. These efforts aim to facilitate seamless communication and coordination, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of combined operations and fostering mutual trust among the forces.

The concept underscores the importance of adaptability in an era of rapid technological advancement and the growing relevance of air, naval, and maritime environments. By integrating innovative technologies and innovative tactics, this concept enables the USMC to respond swiftly and effectively to many potential threats. This proactive stance ensures that the Corps remains agile and versatile, capable of navigating both conventional and irregular warfare landscapes.

This article examines the operational, tactical, and strategic dimensions of the USMC Force Design 2030 concept, while exploring its potential to revolutionize defense collaboration in the Americas. By analyzing the historical context and lessons learned from past initiatives, it highlights the challenges and opportunities in implementing this ambitious framework and represents a significant stride

towards a more secure and stable future for the region, promising a new era of defense collaboration and collective security.

Marine Infantry Components and Naval Power

Today, marine infantry components focus on weapons control, counterterrorism operations, humanitarian assistance, and support for states affected in their territories by insurgency or crisis during peace, crisis, emergency, or war.¹ In his article “Marine Corps in Latin America: past, present and future projections,” Marcos Pablo Moloeznik relates how marine infantry components were first formed in the sixteenth century when troops were trained to provide ship security/defense and to board enemy vessels.² In Latin America, the *Corpo de Fuzileiros Navais* (Naval Infantry Corps) of Brazil is considered the oldest of the marine infantry military services, tracing its origins to the Royal Portuguese Brigade. During the wars of independence in Latin America, the emerging national navies inherited their own marine corps from their previous colonial masters, which provided them with a historical connection to their wealthy Portuguese and Spanish roots—integral part of the development of the Ibero-American republics. Moloeznik further relates that the British Marine Corps originated on 28 October 1664, under the name Albany Maritime Regiment of Foot (or Admiral’s Regiment), with their first documented deployment in 1672; King George III officially designated them the Royal Marines in 1802. Meanwhile, the USMC, one of the oldest globally deployed naval infantry combat units, can be traced back to 10 November 1775 in Philadelphia, when naval Captain Samuel Nicholas, by congressional order, formed two continental marine battalions. Meanwhile, although Canada currently does not have marine infantry components, its Navy continually works with the USMC and has become a leading actor in the Western Hemisphere.³

In her book *The Marines, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Culture: Lessons Learned and Lost in America’s Wars*, Jeannie L. Johnson broke down the strategic planning process of the Marine Corps into four primary competing groups.⁴ The first group, Small Wars, addresses issues related to failing states, transnational threats, and jihadism. The second group, the Traditionalists, focuses on preparing for and winning large-scale interstate wars and emphasizes the Corps’ amphibious capability. The third group, Full Spectrum Operations, preferred by many American ground force commanders, stresses the importance of training and logistics for a full range of conflict contingencies, as its medium weight force concept is heavy enough for expeditionary warfare and sufficiently light for rapid deployment. The fourth group, Division of Labor, supports using specialized forces for irregular warfare while focusing on conventional training and armament. This approach prioritizes preventive stability operations and calls for

highly specialized training to address irregular scenarios—in line with the current American political landscape.

As per Moloeznic, the measurement of naval and maritime power can be calculated as follows: naval power (i.e., naval forces plus supporting infrastructure) + maritime interests = maritime power.⁵ Of note, the US Navy considers both surface units and total number of deployed weapons as part of its naval power, which is significant for the argument later presented in this writing. Currently, based on the Henry Jackson Society's Geopolitical Capability Audit, the US surpasses all other Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) partners in naval power. However, the report warns that if China continues to grow at its present rate, it may eventually challenge the US for regional dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, although the report only catalogs two countries in the Western Hemisphere as hemispheric powers, Canada (4th overall) and Chile (9th overall), the audit suggests that less-developed nations have the potential to narrow the capability gap.⁶

According to Moloeznic, as of 2015, most surface units used in the Western Hemisphere include frigates, corvettes, and SAAR 4.5 (Aliya) patrol ships; with the navies of Chile, Peru, and Brazil primarily focusing on maritime territorial defense while the navies of Ecuador, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia primarily focusing on police surveillance (with the Cuban Navy mainly serving a symbolic role). Most missile inventories in the region include the surface-to-surface Exocet and Harpoon missiles and the surface-to-air Aspide or Sea Wolf missiles.⁷ However, in his study, Commander Matthew S. von Ruden, USCG, explains that as of 2006, military resources in the region remained extremely limited, with the total military spending of all the countries in the hemisphere, excluding the US and Canada, being less than four percent of the world's annual defense expenditure. Many countries in the region do not even have the necessary military capabilities to monitor maritime activities in their territorial waters effectively.⁸ Unfortunately, despite their geographic layout, Latin American nations have traditionally prioritized their armies more than their navies, despite their proximity to the sea. What's more, although Canada has a significant naval power, it has had difficulty even meeting NATO's defense investment guidelines.⁹ Meanwhile, current US focus on the Indo-Pacific also presents a challenge when trying to maintain superiority in the Western Hemisphere.

Yet, as democratic governance has emerged in the region, naval strength has gained greater prominence, with Brazil and Chile leading the way.¹⁰ However, as Guevara Moyano points out in his study, while allied countries are increasingly supporting hemispheric security by projecting their naval capabilities in the region, they are also opening the door to centuries-old naval and territorial dis-

putes.¹¹ Nonetheless, this article argues that investment in a multi-national capability, as proposed by the USMC Force Doctrine 2030 concept, is imperative, as its blended approach provides a framework for collaboration while concurrently addressing naval and territorial concerns.

Western Hemisphere Politics

The Monroe Doctrine, the primary tool of US foreign policy in the Americas since the 1800s, experienced a surge in calls for its enforcement during the 20th century, particularly during the period between the two world wars when debates regarding the viability of the League of Nations were at their highest point. However, it gradually lost significance during the Cold War, with only a brief increase in calls for its enforcement during the Cuban missile crisis. Although increased calls for its enforcement have recently renewed, the doctrine has now become more a set of ideas than actionable concrete policies.¹²

Instead, in November 2021, US President Biden envisioned that the best way ahead would be achieved by improving the region's competitiveness and by generating investment. Thus, he organized the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP) summit, attended by leaders from 11 Latin American countries. In the words of US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, APEP "is an example of 'friendshoring'." However, more is needed to define a comprehensive strategic plan for all the Americas, as Brazil and other prominent Latin American economic powerhouses did not attend the summit, citing the absence of Argentina and other Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) members.¹³ Of note, China is the primary trading partner of Brazil, Chile, and Peru, three of the most prominent Latin American economies and all CELAC members.

In *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe*, the authors provide additional insight. Their study analyzed 16 variables that measure how great powers seek influence through diplomatic, informational, military, and economic means, and used them to evaluate the likelihood of competition in secondary theatres. Their findings show that Latin America presents optimistic opportunities for the US, as opposed to Russia or China, and that the US currently holds hegemonic power in the region, with Canada and Mexico fully geopolitically aligned with the United States.¹⁴

Furthermore, in October 2003 the Organization of American States (OAS) issued their *Declaration on Security in the Americas*, bringing a fresh perspective on hemispheric security. This expansive viewpoint went beyond the traditional scope of national defense and included a broad range of potential threats, including political, economic, social, health, and environmental issues. As regional marine infantry components prepared themselves for these new responsibilities, in addi-

tion to their traditional border and territorial responsibilities, in his article “The State of Marine Corps Forces in the Southern Cone of America in the Context of Current International Security,” Jaime Sepúlveda Cox also identified drug trafficking, terrorism, organized crime, arms trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking as the foremost threats within the post-World War II environment.¹⁵

Finding mutually beneficial agreements between brotherly nations is the most critical task for inter-American institutions. At the XV Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, the US proposed creating a joint force to address shared risks and threats, focusing on integrated and decentralized deterrence to counter China’s “grey area” activities, which led to enhanced joint exercises such as Southern Vanguard 2021, Panamax, and Southern Star 2022.¹⁶ However, in their article “Strategic Deterrence in the Western Hemisphere: Current Proposals for the Multi-Domain Environment” Carlos Alberto Barrera Franco and Manuel Abdullah Carranza Vázquez caution that these exercises can run the risk of raising tensions within the inter-American system as Latin America and the Caribbean have formed diverse international partnerships with Canada, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and African partners, in addition to the US and China.¹⁷ These nations have been expanding their relationships with Latin American countries by investing in renewable energy, funding development projects, supporting climate initiatives, bolstering trade, and investing in mining projects.¹⁸ Thus, clear mission definitions and proposals are necessary to create cooperative security frameworks to address shared risks and threats.

South America’s positioning between the African continent and Eurasia makes it a privileged region in terms of geostrategic location, although this does not necessarily translate into geopolitical relevance. It is worth noting that APEC countries hold critical economic and military partnerships with both the US and Australia, crucial as US defense infrastructure in the US Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility is limited compared to that in the European, Central, and African commands.¹⁹ This limited infrastructure is such that with regards to strategic deterrence or even preparations to fight in the South and East China Seas, both US Northern Command and US Southern Command will also need to prepare to provide support, to include defense of the South Pacific Ocean, particularly in the Micronesian and Polynesian regions.

Complicating matters further, from a maritime security standpoint, it is essential to maintain responsible utilization of ocean resources. To accomplish this, international collaboration becomes crucial in the setting of standards for preventing and managing threats to ocean safety. However, this also presents an opportunity to form and enhance strategic partnerships between governments

and private organizations to implement robust regional and comprehensive maritime security measures.²⁰

Security threats in the Western Hemisphere

The Pacific Rim is a vital area for the Americas, and any disruptions to trade in the Indo-Pacific region could significantly impact the economies of multiple countries. Thus, Western-leaning countries should take appropriate measures to protect their strategic interests and establish solid military partnerships.²¹ This is of particular concern with the threats associated with the defense of Taiwan, as China may, in case of conflict, be tempted to disrupt strategic and tactical capabilities in the Western Hemisphere, such as the space domain, Information Technology infrastructures, naval ports, and airfields.²² This is just one of many potentially significant security instability issues that the Western Hemisphere faces in multiple sub-regions.

Other potentially significant security instability issues include decades-long territorial disputes, such as that between Guyana and Venezuela, which recently experienced Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro's threat to take military action to annex the Essequibo province.²³ The Essequibo province is an oil-rich region which has been part of Guyanese territory since its colonial independence. Due to its adjacency to the impenetrable Amazonian rain forest, any military conflict would rely heavily on naval and marine infantry forces. Although in this case diplomacy prevailed, the future of the dispute is uncertain, with even opposition Venezuelan leader Maria Corina Machado remaining, at best, neutral on the conflict.²⁴

Furthermore, Ecuador, which is strategically positioned within critical drug-sea routes, has descended into chaos after local gangs received substantial support from the Sinaloa and the Jalisco *Nueva Generación* Cartels, and became better armed, better trained, and even more violent. In 2023, after ex-president Rafael Correa was accused of corruption, one presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, pleading to bring transparency, was murdered by a local gang, which prompted national outrage.²⁵ The new president, Daniel Noboa, attempted to fulfill Villavicencio's ambitions by implementing strict policies closely resembling Nayib Bukele's strongman policies in El Salvador. One such policy, involving stringent control of the penitentiary system, led instead to the jailbreak of one of Ecuador's top drug kingpins, José Adolfo Macías, also known as "Fito" and the placement of improvised explosive devices throughout the city, the targeting of police forces, and even the takeover of a TV station during a live broadcast. Noboa's response was to declare an emergency under Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction provisions for non-international armed conflict, which made most criminal gangs to be cat-

egorized as terrorist organizations/enemy combatants and thus, legitimate military targets.²⁶ As fighting continues and other countries offer military support, the size and scope of this ongoing conflict is unlike others experienced before in the recent history of Latin America.

Unfortunately, Ecuador is not the only country facing heightened international drug cartel rivalries posing significant destabilizing effects in the region. After the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse on 7 July 2021, which caused the collapse of the country's fragile governance structure, the largest gang in Haiti, 400 Mawozo, expanded from its local base to conquer multiple nearby regions that were under the control of its rival, the Chen Mechan gang (member of the G9 and Family—Haiti's biggest gang federation). At least 148 people were killed and 132 homes torched, resulting in several gang rapes, a dozen beheadings, and civilians burned alive.²⁷ This prompted, Luis Abinader, President of neighboring Dominican Republic, to call for the international community to "provide the money that has been promised so many times and it must do so now . . . otherwise the collapse will be irreversible and a threat to the Dominican Republic and the entire region," prompting both the US and Canada to provide limited support.²⁸ However, a stronger joint US–Canada response ensued when Russia sent naval assets to Cuba as a display of force to show its displeasure with US support for Ukraine.²⁹

Complicating Western Hemispheric security further are not only Russia's and China's aspirations in the arctic, but in the South Pole as well.³⁰ Although the Antarctic has usually been the concern of countries with territorial Antarctic claims (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom), Russia has invested significant resources in the search for oil and mineral reserves, contrary to the 1998 Antarctic mining ban.³¹ At the same time, Argentina has made a significant decision to seek NATO Global Partner status.³² What's more, plans for a US–Argentina naval base are also underway.³³ All of these concurrent activities indicate that the southern part of the Western Hemisphere is becoming strategically important. By becoming a global NATO partner, Argentina strengthens its ties with the US, reaffirms its position on its Antarctic claims, and gains access to Canadian technology, which is ideally developed to endure extreme cold temperatures.³⁴ The region becomes even more relevant as the US Navy, USMC, and USCG turn from their 2015 *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* to their newly revised *Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*.³⁵

US Marine Corps Force Design 2030

On 28 March 2023, before the US Senate Appropriations Committee, Gen. David H. Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, stated that in light of ongoing

conflicts in Africa, the India–China border, the Turkish–Syrian border, and Ukraine, American leadership could not afford to create a force designed for a single threat, region, or type of warfare. Instead, he advocated for the increase of ongoing efforts to ensure the USMC can effectively deploy to prevent or respond to crises anywhere, at any time.³⁶ During the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the USMC expanded in size and became overly dependent on logistical support, and drifted away from its maritime mission.³⁷ In March 2020, the USMC announced Force Design 2030, to reorganize and instead focus on its naval expeditionary warfare mission. To achieve this, Force Design 2030 relies on two major concepts: Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment and Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, which builds on General James Amos’s Expeditionary Force 21 which “called for the service to explore using expeditionary advanced bases, or military sites spread out across the potential battlefield, as a part of a broader naval campaign.”³⁸ This distributed approach addressed China’s development of anti-access/area-denial capabilities, and was intended to complicate an enemy force’s targeting abilities by distributing American resources, weapons, and service members, as well as serve as a launchpad for Marine Corps aviation assets and anti-ship and anti-air systems.³⁹

Force Design 2030 envisions reorganizing unit formations and reducing 12,000 personnel by 2030. General Berger argues that traditional equipment is unsuitable for the Pacific theatre and instead advocates that modern threats require long-range precision rockets, armed drones, and mobile ship-killing missiles.⁴⁰ This advocacy comes from years of classified Indo-Pacific war games at the US Naval War College and the Cold Response military exercises in Norway, which takes place every two years.⁴¹ Over 30,000 soldiers from 27 countries participated (14,000 ground troops, 8,000 sailors/navy troops, 8,000 air force troops, and other staff) during the last exercise in March 2022.⁴² An even larger exercise, Nordic Response, took place in March 2024 with over 20,000 troops and over 50 submarines, frigates, corvettes, aircraft carriers, and various amphibious vessels from 13 allied nations.⁴³

Nevertheless, in their “Marine Corps Force Design 2030 and Implications for Allies and Partners: Case Norway” article, Terje Bruøygaard and Jørn Qyiller argue that there’s still a lack of an overarching joint concept, making it challenging to communicate the USMC transformation to allies. They also highlight the need for the US Department of Defense to develop a comprehensive implementation plan that includes practical and efficient joint force interoperability and training opportunities to test new concepts and capabilities.⁴⁴ Further, multiple articles have emerged regarding the specific language of Marine Corps Force Design 2030, to extract insights into the prioritization of threats and capabilities, as there is in-

creased nervousness among US and partner nation analysts since it doesn't address all adversarial countries, non-state actor groups, nor regions (for example, the document doesn't address the Western Hemisphere). Although the document mainly addresses the defense of Taiwan from Chinese aggression as a top priority, there is tremendous room for Western Hemisphere countries to support US efforts and, at the same time, revive the decades-old naval infrastructures in the region.

Going Beyond: Full-on Multidomain Collective Defense

Multiple agreement proposals have emerged to address the lack of defensive capabilities in the Western Hemisphere, while at the same time anticipating the need to address any future naval arms race concerns. To this end, drawing from the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty, in his article "Exploring a Conventional Armed Forces Treaty for South America," Hector Guevara Moyano advocates for limits on 1) the armament to be carried by all naval vessels in the Western Hemisphere, including the range of surface-to-surface missiles mounted on ships or coastal defenses, 2) the acquisition of modern ships such as destroyers and guided missile frigates, and 3) number of submarines, to ensure these assets serve purely for defense and have little capability of becoming offensive weapons. He also advocates for effective economic zone enforcement and sea-lane protection capabilities with smaller vessels fitted with anti-air, anti-submarine, and anti-surface armaments.⁴⁵ Further, others, like VADM Ignacio Mardones, Chilean Navy, in his article "Una Fuerza Naval Para Los Desafíos Del País (A Naval Force for the Country's Challenges)," speak about the need to integrate the role of maritime police into partner nations' fleet capabilities, which would allow for more effective resource utilization, particularly for countries with limited resources.⁴⁶ To this end, the US Excess Defense Articles program enhances the maritime security capabilities of Latin American partners by transferring surplus legacy platforms from the USCG, although it may not be enough to meet current challenges and does not address long term budget concerns.⁴⁷

From a USMC outlook, proposed solutions for addressing the needs of Western Hemisphere partners include continuing to construct multipurpose ocean patrol vessels, with the option of integrating weapon systems and missile launchers (both surface-to-surface and surface-to-air), along with a significant number of missiles in each surface unit, to include exercising joint capabilities by combining resources to address domestic threats within each country.⁴⁸ Interestingly, these solutions are similar to those proposed by a study from the *Infantería de Marina Colombiana* (Colombian Marine Infantry) service, a significant player in Colombia's armed conflicts for the past 80 years. The Colombian Marine Infantry study focused on amphibious recovery capabilities, acquisition of coastal defense capabilities,

strengthening river operational capabilities, and classification of the Colombian Marine Infantry service as a unique body capable of carrying out power projection and sovereign maritime and river defense.⁴⁹ However, a collective hemispheric defense approach would only serve to strengthen these defensive capabilities.

In his 2022 study on Naval “Integration in the South American Pacific: a regional response to threats in our maritime domains,” Peruvian author Valega Mires discusses a confederation-type model for establishing integration within existing supranational mechanisms. However, this approach aims to promote convergence rather than integration and would entail developing joint capabilities to deter threats from outside the region or destabilizing countries within the area.⁵⁰ The study calls for national and international coordination, and the alignment of doctrine and policy across countries for the collective defense against specific threats, one example being the utilization of what historically has given the US an advantage over its foes: joint power.⁵¹ In the article “Naval Integration: An Old Approach for a New Era” authors address new concepts and doctrines from a joint force perspective across all warfighting domains is essential and argue that ship-killing missiles from the Air Force or the Army are equally vital as Navy and Marine infantry components in naval warfare.⁵² This shoehorns perfectly with the USMC Force Design 2030 concept, which already provides a blueprint for collective security via joint integration and allocation of kinetic weapon systems from other armed services as part of multidomain integration; such integration would also ease financial constraints for partner nation navies in the region.

A doctrine that promotes openness and teamwork can lower expenses and effectively harness each component of the region’s national defense mechanisms to yield a more significant impact without consuming substantial resources urgently needed in other areas. Strategic allocation of assets across the hemisphere and their coordination through multinational command and control centers could serve as a cornerstone for western hemispheric endeavors and foster trust among partners. These multi-sovereign assets could prevent conflict from escalating and ensure the cooperative efforts of all countries when responding to an attack. Although not ideal, this approach is better than other alternatives, such as relinquishing maritime security to private actors. Today, many countries in the region do not have an army and depend on the US for protection, without any politically viable nor financially feasible mechanisms for reimbursement. Thus, exploring alternative ways to fund common defense, such as the use of private sector capital as done by NATO and Europe, might be beneficial as well.⁵³

Final Considerations

The USMC Force Design 2030 concept offers significant advancements in technology and capabilities, signaling a transition from the traditional focus on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency towards a more maritime-centric strategy. While it represents, as currently written, a comprehensive blueprint for conceptual and doctrinal shifts within the USMC aimed at adapting to the evolving dynamics of competition in the Indo-Pacific region, this article contends that Latin American naval forces stand to gain from adopting elements of this concept as well, particularly in addressing non-state threats and challenges. By aligning with specific doctrinal approaches of the USMC, Latin American naval forces can cultivate agile and efficient units that complement the capabilities of their respective countries, while at the same time providing for comprehensive Western Hemisphere defense.

This approach presents a more viable strategy than solely relying on bilateral partnerships with the US Navy, as has been the conventional practice. However, this approach will require restructuring across US and allied partners' armed forces to establish all-encompassing multilateral agreements that enable joint defense acquisitions between partnering countries. Despite the challenges that US armed forces and nations in the region will face establishing such mechanisms, such as budgetary constraints and doctrinal and policy differences, successful implementation will enhance overall hemispheric defense in general, and amphibious and naval components specifically. Bottom line, while the USMC is recalibrating its focus toward naval operations, its foundational ethos still embodies its historical responsibilities. □

Notes

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William “Bill” Godnick, PhD

Dr. Godnick serves as the Dean of Academic Affairs at the William J. Perry Center. He joined the Perry Center in 2016 as a Professor of Practice. He has led academic programs on strategic defense and human rights and taught at several prestigious universities, including American University and the Middlebury Institute. His prior roles include Public Security Program Coordinator for the UN and Senior Policy Advisor at International Alert. Fluent in Spanish, he has lived and worked in over 20 countries across the Western Hemisphere.

Robert Burrell, PhD

Dr. Burrell is a Senior Research Fellow at the Global and National Security Institute, University of South Florida. He served as an Assistant Professor at the Joint Special Operations University from 2020 to 2024 and was editor-in-chief of doctrine for Special Operations Command from 2011 to 2014. Previously, he taught military history at the US Naval Academy from 2001 to 2004. A retired Marine with two combat tours in Iraq, Burrell is an Asia-Pacific expert with 12 years of experience living and working in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. He also completed a diplomatic tour at the U.S. Embassy in Australia from 2016 to 2019.

Manuel Carranza

Manuel Carranza has worked as a research assistant at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies and as a Non-resident Fellow at the US Joint Special Operations University. Currently, he is a fellow at the North American and Arctic Defense and Security Network. Carranza holds a bachelor's degree in Intelligence and Security Studies from the Military College of South Carolina. He is also an alumnus of the Colombian Naval Academy, the Argentine Defense University, and the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies. His affiliations include the Mexican Council on International Affairs, RUSI's Strategic Hub for Organized Crime Research, and the Center for Strategic and Aerospace Studies (CEEAA) at the Chilean Air Force.