

**Admiral Craig S. Faller  
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**Defense Writers Group**

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**DWG:** Thank you very much for coming, Admiral Faller. We're happy to be hosting you today for a discussion about Southern Command and its work and your leadership.

I'll start by asking you, Admiral, could you just run down for us for a minute what's your strategic approach to the job, to the region, and what are the three or four things that you worry about the most or have to think about the most in this role?

**Admiral Faller:** Thanks, David, for hosting this. Thank you all for coming. I know we rescheduled so thanks for flexing from Thursday to Friday. This dialogue's important. Having a conversation with the media is important for us in the military to tell our story.

The way I'd like to start that framing the story of a trip I took in August of last year with the Secretary of Defense, and then a follow-on trip in November that framed a lot of the thinking and inspiration for our strategy and approaches to the security challenges and the opportunities that the hemisphere has. So in August last year I traveled with Secretary Mattis to the region. It was a four-day, four-country stop. So Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia. And it reaffirmed what I knew or thought I knew in the sense that we share so much in this neighborhood. Shared values, democracies, culture, and all the domains that we think about in warfighting -- sea, air, land space and cyber, but really those values and with that tremendous opportunity, so the hemisphere remains the number one trading partner with the United States overall, although there are dynamics that are shifting. And we have so much culturally with the alliance. So there's a huge opportunity there.

At the same time, the sense of urgency with respect to the

threats that we have to our national security here in the United States from that region. The illegal migration, transnational criminal organizations. The weak institutions that transnational organizations thrive on weak institutions, corruption thrives on weak institutions. And then these aspiring great powers, maligned actors is what they're called out for in the National Defense Strategy -- Russia, China and Iran. They're there. They're present and they're working their, for their national interest in ways that are 100 percent counter to long-term stability in the region, and it's our own. Each of those is different. Russia I'm convinced is out to make the United States look bad at every turn of the corner and hang onto some of their traditional alliances, whereas Venezuela is another one, that's a separate conversation I think in its own.

China's the number one trading partner with the United States, number one trading partner with Brazil, number one trading partner with South America. So when our National Defense Strategy called out competition with China, that was the right thing to do. We have to. The future of this globe depends on how we can reconcile that competition. But right now in this hemisphere that competition is strong and in the area of values and access and influence it borders on conflict. So that strategic setting framed the sense of urgency we have in the command. It framed my thinking about the importance of this region and reinforced the urgency we need to get after the security challenges to seize those opportunities.

So how do we do that? Strengthening partnerships. So we're working with key partners -- Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Panama, I could go on with that list. And working with that partner on a basis that recognizes that I am the United States Southern Command. So my responsibility is the defense of this homeland first and foremost, so there has to be a mutual benefit in that partnership. Strong intelligence sharing, strong liaisons through education, partner exchanges, exercises which are our North Star as we learn interoperability and learn about each other. So those approaches in that strong partnership.

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Strong partnerships counter threats and being able to action that in a way that we can measure a reduction in the impact of transnational criminal organizations is where we're headed in our strategy and the application of our strategy.

**DWG:** I'm not going to follow up because I want to give lots of chances to people around the table.

Laura, Foreign Policy?

**DWG:** It's good to see you again, General.

I wanted to ask you, there was an incident this summer in which some Venezuelan jets harassed a Navy plane in the region. I'm wondering if you have seen any other incursions like this, what you're doing about this particular threat, and if it perhaps suggests that they are more and more following in the footsteps of Russia?

**Admiral Faller:** Every security challenge that framed the transnational criminal organizations, the migration challenge. We didn't talk about the terrorist challenge I that initial response to David's framing question, but there are terrorist-designated FARC dissidents. And every one of those challenges is exasperated by that Maduro's done to his country. How he's driven it into the ground with his cronies, along with the interventionist assistance of Russia, China, Iran, and now we see liaison with North Korea in the latest move from Venezuela.

So you have Russian technicians in there assisting the Venezuelans to maintain Russian jets at the expense of feeding their people.

Our role in the Venezuelan, in support of the Venezuela crisis, in support of the U.S. whole of government efforts has been back to that strength in partnership. So working with Colombia, Brazil, other very strong regional partners. Sharing

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intelligence, understanding the context of what's happening inside Venezuela.

And we do that by other means too. A variety of intelligence sources. And this particular incident that you mentioned, Laura, was an EP-3, it was flying in international airspace as part of our intelligence and monitoring mission so we can better understand the context, so we can understand what to plan for and what to anticipate and how to work inside the U.S. whole of government efforts. Those Venezuelan pilots were very unsafe, very unprofessional, flew at a very close distance and we were quite vocal about releasing a video that showed that happen.

We keep an eye on this closely. If there were other instances of unsafe, unprofessional activity by the Venezuelans, we'd report that before they had a chance to spend it in a way that was not accurate, not facts-based. So we keep our eyes on the situation, continuing to monitor intelligence and continue to monitor Venezuela. So I think it's representative of their lack of professionalism in some of their forces, unfortunately. And as we move forward we will monitor that closely.

**DWG:** But you haven't seen anything else like that.

**Admiral Faller:** If we had, we're report it.

**DWG:** And then just to follow up on a different subject. [Some people] in the past weighed in what's going on in Peru right now and whether that impacts your command.

**Admiral Faller:** We're monitoring the political situation and I defer to our State Department, the Ambassador there, for any specifics on how they think that will play out, what the role is. We just came from a recent trip to Peru where we met with the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Defense. We have a very strong relationship with the Peruvian military and they're a very professional force. I think they work hard doing the right thing day in and day out. Those right things include

respect for the rule of law and human rights kind of things that any legitimate security force embraces. It struck me while I was there that they have embraced that path and they're in a fight of their own against the remnants of the shining path and their own fight against narco-traffickers. They continue to have a significant coca production in Peru, so we work to support those partnerships. So we've been focused on that and our dialogue has remained strong with the Peruvian military as this plays out. We'll continue being a monitoring and assess role, but we look forward to continuing a strong partnership with their mil-to-mil.

**DWG:** Ashleigh, Jane's?

**DWG:** I wanted to ask you, right now there's a special purpose MAGTF down in Central America and parts of South America for the hurricane season. Working with partners from Central American nations, it's sort of like a step towards getting to a multinational maritime task force and getting off land [to the] sea. What do you envision this task force looking like? What [inaudible] would you need in a time frame and partnership? Could you talk a little bit about that?

**Admiral Faller:** So strength in the partnerships. When we look at the details of that we focus on what each partner nation needs and where those partner nations have naval forces and navy, blue or brown water navy, ones that go to sea; and then where they have marine forces working to appropriately partner with our U.S. Marines and our U.S. Navy. So we don't need a lot to do that. A little goes a long way in this hemisphere, so a very modest investment gives you a high rate of return.

For a number of years we've had for about six months of the year a special purpose MAGTF element. Generally just a small number of Marines, a few hundred with some helicopter lift. And we've moved them around in an expeditionary manner. We've used them for a response to disasters as we saw last year, in the Fuego volcano response in Guatemala. They were a very integral role

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there.

Our vision is to have this naval force be naval and be mobile and expeditionary at sea. So as we get available platforms we'll move them on and off those platforms so that they can maneuver by the sea, working with our partners.

So we've done that this summer, working with the UNITAS exercise series which is the 60<sup>th</sup> year of the UNITAS was this summer. But they had, we had a UNTAS LANT hosted by Brazil, UNITAS Pacific hosted by Chile. So we moved them on the Carter Hall and then on a Brazilian amphibious ship. We're looking for other opportunities.

The vision long term would be a more maneuverable presence on the water for whatever focused period of the year or whatever focused force we thought was most appropriate to both exercise and then habitually work. That would be part of a multi-task force structure where the command and control was something that was recognizable to U.S. force elements and our partners.

**DWG:** Do you have a time frame on this? And then I have a separate follow-up.

**Admiral Faller:** We don't have a time frame. We're working through the concept. I'd love to have it happen soon. There's a lot of demands on our forces worldwide, so we're recognizing those demands. So the current force element down there's doing an excellent job. They're exercising with the Colombian Marines right now. The principle focus of that is maneuver from the sea and support humanitarian assistance disaster relief. It's an excellent exercise. And we actually have Colombian Marines embedded in our special purpose MAGTF formation for the duration of their employment. So it's a great example of partnership and interoperability.

**DWG:** With this special purpose MAGTF and other forces in the region, what sort of challenges have you faced as the U.S. has

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pulled aid from the golden triangle?

**Admiral Faller:** We didn't have any challenges with the special purpose MAGTF or other formations. So just specifically on that.

More broadly on the Northern Triangle -- Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador -- the security threats to the United States and to the region are significant. Illicit immigration or migration, transnational criminal organizations, and we're working hard with our partners there, the military forces of those three countries, and there are some successes. We have been permitted on some of our mil-to-mil security cooperation to continue as a recognition of those successes.

For example, in Guatemala the special naval forces, they're incredible. They have gone 300 miles out to sea. Their interdiction rates for the past year, an all-time record. And that's saving lives here in the United States. We recognize that, they recognize that, and we're continuing to partner with them along with our interagency partners here in the U.S. government.

So the pressure that we have placed on the Northern Triangle countries I think is working. The Northern Command Commander and I were both in Mexico City, in Guatemala, the last week to get a first-hand view on how we can better partner and how we can help those nations get after those threats.

**DWG:** John Harper.

**DWG:** You mentioned that great power competition with Russia and China in your AOR. What kind of military activity are you seeing from Russia and China down there?

**Admiral Faller:** The range of activity from Russia and China is across all elements of national power. So you know we use the acronym DIME -- Diplomacy, Information, Military and Economic --

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so it's hard to break out one aspect of that. We see it across all elements of the DIME.

For Russia, they have a traditional arms sale relationship with countries in the region and that continues, particularly Venezuela, Nicaragua. Russia's deployed nuclear capable bombers. Russia's deployed their most advanced warship that's capable of firing nuclear cruise missiles through the region, all within the last year. Russia has provided significant assistance to Venezuela and there are hundreds of Russian contractors and forces in Venezuela as we speak helping Maduro continue his rei of terror on the nation. And we see Russia presence around the region. In Nicaragua Russia runs a counternarcotics, counterterrorism training center that has dubious dual purposes. They also have an extremely large Spanish-language information operation throughout the region. So that's a concern. We watch that.

In one particular case as I was coming out of an office call in Senator Rubio's office, the Russian official state news agency reported that I was on the border of Venezuela in Colombia planning an invasion. And they had B-roll footage of some, I don't know what it was, some U.S. Marine amphibious vehicles and this was put out in the Spanish language to try to incite the region and create a false narrative.

China, that's different. They have legitimate economic interests and they're working those, but they have deepening threads in the information space, IT, cyber, space. And their arms sales have grown. They have deployed some assets, not as many, but they have deployed some assets and that's ticked up consistently in the last couple of years.

They're also increasing their military engagement, Spanish language schools training, training centers and gift of, where they're just gifting get to various countries.

So across the board what I see is a significant uptick in those



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powers' involvement in all aspects.

**DWG:** Just a quick follow-up. You noted that you're setting up the special purpose MAGTF down there. Are there any capability gaps that you're facing right now in terms of assets? And what other platforms or other capabilities would you like to have down there?

**Admiral Faller:** Again, that goes back to the initial framing with David's initial point.

The best approach in this hemisphere, because we share so much, and these are democracies that want to partner with the United States. And despite what I see as alarming trends, we remain the partner of choice. The best approach is to work with those partner nations and what are their needs and how do those needs support the defense of the hemisphere and the United States of America. So it's a by, with and through approach that can come in at a very low cost and a high return on investment. So that's where we focus, and it's different country to country.

For the missions that I'm given in the U.S. law and by our overall command plan that the Secretary of Defense gives me, we are in need of more intelligence assets. Everything's intelligence driven. So across the range of assets that you would think intelligence.

But again, that starts with sharing with partners, so that's where we work on our intelligence and information sharing first and foremost. But other assets for monitoring the drug flow would be intelligence, surveillance, long-range aircraft, unmanned, those types of assets. And then for interdiction of the drug flow it would be naval assets. We would be, we have some capability gaps there.

**DWG:** Chris Woody, Business Insider.

**DWG:** I wanted to ask a question about Venezuela specifically.

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So they [inaudible] the last month doing exercises along the border with Colombia. I wanted to ask if you had the observations back on what they were doing in those exercises?

And secondly, a lot of discussion of anti-aircraft systems. Do those [inaudible] the U.S. partners in the region?

**Admiral Faller:** Again, just to go back to Venezuela, just think about the overall situation where we have a dictator, an illegitimate leader who's being propped up by Cuba, Russia and to some extent, lesser extent, China. And they're spending money on moving the forces around to make a statement to the neighbors and continuing to drive people out. There are four million people who have left Venezuela in search of something to eat, medical care and a better life.

So as part of this, Maduro and his cronies, they've always had this annual exercise regime. So part of this is just the annual regime just continuing. Some of it is his attempt to show that he's still capable and has the military forces.

We always are concerned about a nation's military. I would never discount or discredit somebody's forces as being incapable. That's not the right approach for planning with what they have and what they could have, and we work through that continuously and share that assessment with our partners.

It is alarming when the country has so many internal problems that they would message what they feel is a threat from the outside, but moving their forces to the border, so we're monitoring that and sharing information. It also gives us an indication of the readiness of those forces.

**DWG:** Regarding China, I know on Monday your remarks at AUSA, you touched on the number of important deals and presence they have in ports throughout the region. Do you have any long-term concerns about a Chinese presence, or potential dual-use for those facilities?

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**Admiral Faller:** There are some 56 port deals of various levels that China's working. One on either side of the Panama Canal. Some of these deals are locked up with very long-term leasing agreement. We've seen what China's done with port leasing agreements in other parts of the country where they've essentially created a situation where there's limited host nation access and little host nation involvement. So we've been watching that very closely and it has our attention and has contributed to the sense of urgency I feel about the overall security of the hemisphere.

One of our partner nations, the Chinese built a road end to end through the nation. They've got a 99-year lease on that road. They've got an agreement for land rights on either side of the road, thousands of acres, and they have the ability to control the tolls on that road for the 99 years. That's the price you get for having the Chinese come in and build a road across your country.

**DWG:** Do you mind if I ask which country that is?

**Admiral Faller:** I'd rather not report on that.

**DWG:** Mary Walsh, CBS.

**DWG:** I'd like to talk to you about climate change. We saw what happened with Hurricane Dorian and the destruction in the Bahamas. Have you done an assessment for your area of that type of what's the vulnerability? And also specifically to American bases. As the Navy would call it, precipitous [inaudible]. I'm not asking you to buy into climate change but we saw what happened at Tindall last year, so you do have these storms that become laden with moisture and [inaudible].

Can you talk to us about it?

**Admiral Faller:** One of our principle, underlying basis to all

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the missions that we have and supplied in all of our ability to respond to missions is to be able to respond rapidly, which is why our limited presence that we have is important. So the special purpose MAGTF that we deployed to the region principally for about half the year with some mobility capabilities is there during hurricane season. We also have joint task force in Soto Cano, Honduras, that also has mobility. And we've used those during weather events.

Our mission is to be able to respond rapidly, so we watch very carefully the weather, any environmental conditions, and we look for trends and put ourselves in a footing that we can respond.

We have an annual series of exercises where we work with partners, and agreements where we work with partners. That's not just national partners, that's our own interagency partners. So particularly USAID and [OFTA] and the State Department and our liaison.

Trade Winds is an exercise series that we use to work through the Caribbean in particular, and we work with NORTHCOM and all our partner nations on that.

So being able to rapidly respond to these things is how we approach it and we look at the frequency and the number to see if we're postured.

That's why I would argue our footprint, while small, is appropriate because we know that these events aren't going away.

With respect to the resiliency of our facilities, Joint Interagency Task Force South, JIATF South in Key West, is our key command and control center for the counternarcotics fight. We have 22 partner nations there. We've got all the interagency there. A two-star Coast Guard admiral leads that effort. Key West is very low-lying and we were hit hard by a hurricane a couple of years ago, so we're looking very hard at the infrastructure that required to be resilient and to stay there

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for as long as we would need to. I think it's important that for the most southern part of the United States have a U.S. base. So recently we did a study to determine what it would cost 25 years, 30 years in the future, the changes in climate and changes in the sea level to harden that base. We're investing in submissions into military construction in the budget so we can make that base resilient with the support of the Florida delegation.

And, as you might imagine, we also have facilities on the Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay. So that's our only base in my whole AOR is Guantanamo Bay, so we're also looking at what would be required to have that base resilient for any future changes. So we watch very closely.

Being able to rapidly respond, one of the threats is the weather-related threats.

**DWG:** What was the effect on the drug runners during Dorian? Did you see any interesting scenarios play out? And do they factor in our [inaudible] thesis as well?

**Admiral Faller:** Certainly bad weather affects their ability to be at sea, and having been at sea in some really nasty weather, it actually has its benefits. But they're clever and they wait, and they wait for the price points in the market. They're so well funded, these transnational criminal organizations that deal in narcotics, that they can afford to wait. Or they can afford to send their product on alternate paths and they do.

For example, in the past year there's been a two-fold increase in the amount of drugs that go into Venezuela and now go out by air from Venezuela. Commercial air. That we can't really, we have laws in place for commercial air, so it makes it much more difficult to track and to determine the final destination.

So I think they're unfortunately resilient enough to find another way that doesn't impact the flow during weather events.

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And the weather events are so transitory for them, because the destruction happens on land and the weather passes and seas calm down fairly quickly.

**DWG:** So if the Venezuelan government partnering with organized crime?

**Admiral Faller:** Absolutely. What we've seen is, the pressure, the whole government pressure campaign's working. And Maduro's increasingly isolated in international unity as seen recently by the Rio Treaty vote is solid. So what the sanctions have done, and they're international sanctions, not just U.S., is they've targeted Maduro and elements of his regime, has caused them to have to go for other forms of finance. So he's substituted illicit gold and illicit drug money for some of the money that they were, I guess illicit money for illicit money because they were really robbing the people with the way they were running the state businesses, so that's happening. So those drug organizations that are increasingly flowing through Venezuela are working with Maduro and his cronies, and the same is true with the FARC distance and ELN. There's a significant increase in those terrorists' presence inside Venezuela and they're also profiting from all sorts of illegal activity to fund their business. So that is happening and it adds to the challenge of isolating Maduro, but we're committed to work with other elements of the U.S. government to figure that out.

**DWG:** Jeff Sullivan, Voice of America.

**DWG:** Thank you very much.

I was curious, how do you assess the international terror threat coming from the SOUTCOM AOR? [Inaudible] the U.S. force concerns about terrorists infiltrating through Mexico. How much of that activity are you seeing in Central and South America? And to what extent, is that mostly in through Iran? And to what extent does that [inaudible] other groups like ISIS or al-Qaida?

**Admiral Faller:** I'd first like to say I think it's a credit to the various elements of the U.S. government and the teamwork that we've been able to find and deter and understand that flow such that we've been able to keep the United States of America safe. But you can never assume that for the future, so no one's being complacent as to the degree that we have of security. If it's that easy to flow people across borders it's certainly that easy to flow any number of illicit types of goods, and drugs is one of them as evidenced by 70,000 deaths the year before last year in the U.S., so there's undoubtedly a concern. We'll be watching closely, working with our interagency partners.

We have uncovered terrorist plots, two years ago in Carnival, in Trinidad and Tobago. We have known there's a significant Lebanese Hezbollah presence through the region with connections back to Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran. Some of that is long term familia ties, but some if it is, there's some financing that goes on. We're not complacent about that and we're continuing to monitor it.

The terrorist attacks in Argentina. Our memories need to be attuned to that. That was Iranian sponsored. We've had Iranian sponsored murders right here in the capital of the U.S. So there's a connection.

Then you go back, and Iran's hand is in this. They're the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world and the long arm of Iranian malfeasance is alive and present around the world, not just in the Middle East.

So we are continuously keeping our eye on that ball working with interagency partners.

**DWG:** Have you seen any increase in activity by any of the Lebanese Hezbollah linked groups or operatives? Especially as tensions have ramped up between Washington and Iran. Are you seeing any evidence of that?

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**Admiral Faller:** I don't want to comment on specifics about the current intel that we're seeing. We do note that Iran's connections, in addition to Lebanese Hezbollah, include Venezuela, so we're concerned and we have our eye on it.

**DWG:** Richard Sisk, Military.com.

**DWG:** Sir, what can you say about the presence of Russian mercenaries in Venezuela? They crop up with Maduro. Do you have any [inaudible] on how many are there and what they're doing?

**Admiral Faller:** There's hundreds of Russians in Venezuela. Venezuela has a significant Russian arms and Russian arms support, Russian support to maintaining and upgrading of those arms continues. That's a primary line of effort for Russia and Venezuela.

**DWG:** What type of arms?

**Admiral Faller:** Exactly what you can find in Jane's. You've got fighter aircraft; anti-air defense systems, a large number of them; and that list goes on.

**DWG:** The Russian mercenaries, do they form sort of a palace guard around Maduro? That's one of the reports.

**Admiral Faller:** The palace guard around Maduro is Cuban. Nearly 100 percent of the presidential guard are now Cubans.

**DWG:** A hundred percent?

**Admiral Faller:** Yeah. So the Cubans are the, there's thousands of Cubans and hundreds of Russians. And we know the strict relationship between the Soviet Union and Cuba and now Russia and Cuba continues to be strong as evidenced by a recent Russian port visit of one of their warships in Cuba.



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**DWG:** I may have misheard in the opening remarks, North Korean influence?

**Admiral Faller:** A high level Venezuelan official recently went to North Korea to establish a relationship. And we've seen today in the media where Maduro's announced that he's intending to make a trip there. We'll keep our eye on that relationship closely. Certainly strange friends, but it would not surprise me, and we are concerned about that relationship.

**DWG:** Mike Glenn, Washington Times.

**DWG:** As you're leading the combatant command that may not get as much public attention as some of your colleagues -- U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command/NATO. Is it a challenge for you to make sure that you get your equitable sort of share of the pie as well as attention from Capital Hill and the White House?

**Admiral Faller:** It's a fair question, and all threats are global. The domains that we fight are global domains. Cyberspace, transnational criminal organizations, they have connections and we see where the great power competition plays out. It's all global.

Under Chairman Dunford we instituted some really good processes for global integration that bring the voices of the combatant commands together on a near real time basis to analyze where we best apply the various levels of military power.

I think it's important that I have, tell the story, and tell the story in a way that's balanced, recognizing the challenges are global and the different set of challenges associated with being near broad to Russia and China and in the Middle East than there are in the hemisphere. So we focus on the opportunities and the challenges here.

So I think we have, with the exception of the gaps that I

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mentioned earlier and some intelligence and naval assets, we have the appropriate level of resources to carry out our mission. A little goes a long way, so the right presence of National Guard or Reserve or active duty doing an exercise, doing a subject matter expert exchange training, and that's ongoing.

I would concern myself with any resource reductions. I think our footprint is very light and it's very cost-effective. If it was a stock, it would be a very good return on investment.

**DWG:** Would you say, the Russian port visits into Cuba and Venezuela as well? Or have there been any other port visits?

**Admiral Faller:** They did not make a port call in Venezuela, and they've made a port call in Ecuador just for fuel and then they went to Cuba.

**DWG:** Rafael Salido, EFE.

**DWG:** A few months ago [the theme seems to be about changing ] Venezuela [inaudible]. Do you think momentum has [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** I think momentum continues. I see Maduro being increasingly isolated and increasingly manipulated by Russia particularly. He just went on a trip to Moscow and he tweeted out pictures of himself staying in an opulent hotel while millions of people are trying to survive. I just think that's how totally out of touch with reality he is and how isolated that he is in both what he understands about the situation.

We have the United Nations General Assembly I think affirmed the unity. It's been almost a generation in the making with Chavez and Maduro in terms of how the country's been mismanaged, so it's taken time. We're all impatient about getting the Venezuela people what they deserve, but the isolation's working, and the U.S. government's objective of seeing a democratic transition to a legitimate interim government, led by President

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Juan Guaido is working.

**DWG:** You were mentioning the picture from Maduro, but also [inaudible] some really controversial shopping trips. He was posting with some [inaudible]. Are you concerned that maybe [inaudible] Guaido or [inaudible] may have been [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** I'm not concerned.

**DWG:** Why do you think he's the right person?

**Admiral Faller:** We're supporting a democratic process and a legitimate interim president. I think it's indicative of what Maduro and his cronies try to do. They try to change the facts by seizing on a photo or some other small, so that's one photo of the vast array of objective evidence that shows how Maduro's ruling in the country and what an illegitimate leader he is. I think President Guaido spoke for himself quite well about that photo.

**DWG:** Dimitry, TASS.

**DWG:** You addressed General Rogers' Strategic Issues Forum as far as an extent a couple of days ago and you spoke about, among other topics, about Brazil and NATO. I saw a quote attributed to you, I don't know if you, I wasn't there myself. I don't know if you said it or not. "Brazil would say they should be part of NATO, and I don't disagree with them. There is a lot of opportunity there."

I wanted to ask you if this is in fact what you said. If it is, that it is being actively pursued here in the interagency with the Brazilians and within NATO.

**Admiral Faller:** The Brazilians and the U.S. have recently concluded an agreement where they've been designated as a non-NATO major partner which is one of the highest partnerships we have. So Colombia is a NATO partner and I think of Brazilians,

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and I won't speak for the Brazilians overall, their government policy at all, but they see themselves as an Atlantic power and they have history going back to World War II. They declared war on Germany before the U.S. did. The narrowest point of the Atlantic Ocean is off of the Brazilian and African coast. And they are an extremely credible military power with significant capability and they partner very well with us.

So that designation that I mentioned is why I made that statement the other night about the designation. So they would see themselves on that equivalent. We've signed an agreement that they are a non-NATO major partner.

Now as to whether they would ever pursue anything bigger than that, that's a policy decision that sits outside of my lane.

**DWG:** So you mean it's completely up to them? It's not something that you're discussing with them and they discuss here within the U.S. administration?

**Admiral Faller:** One of the aspects of our partnerships, when we work on our partnerships, is to do it with a principle of mutual respect. That is that we move at the speed of partners. So partners have to want aspects of the relationship. So whatever partner status the Brazilians would choose with us or with NATO would be completely up to the Brazilians. I work on the basic building blocks of that intelligence sharing, information sharing, training, education exercises, and as we conclude partner agreements at the government level, at the Secretary of Defense level or higher, that allows us to expand.

**DWG:** And can I also ask something completely different that may be outside or, well, probably outside, but still you're talking at length about Russia and China. I wanted to give it a stab.

President Putin said yesterday that Russia is helping China to build their first early warning missile attack system. Any thoughts on that?

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**Admiral Faller:** I saw that statement and I have no thoughts on that.

I would note that the Russian Prime Minister was present in Cuba yesterday to reaffirm that relationship, and I'd also note the strong support that Russia and China have provided to an illegitimate government in Venezuela

**Admiral Faller:** Russia and Cuba I meant have provided to that strong illegitimate government. Thank you.

**DWG:** Chris Woods?

**DWG:** Countries in Central America, [inaudible] in particular, have moved to increase their border [inaudible] enforcement. [Inaudible] the U.S. Have they reached out to SOUTHCOM at all for advice or training in doing so? And would you [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** I traveled to Guatemala City last week with the Northern Command Commander to meet with our military counterparts and in Mexico City as well, to get their assessment of what they're doing. Their military forces are in support of their government efforts as well. Generally military forces do not have the lead on immigration or border security in any of these nations.

But as military forces look at better understanding the security situation in any country, part of that is intelligence and information gathering. So as we're looking to work with our partners in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, how do they better organize their intelligence efforts, how do they better train, how do they better collect, how do they better share. That's a primary area of emphasis, one we're working with them on, and I think they're very committed partners to that effort.

I would also say that they're committed to professionalism. So you're not going to be effective at your job unless you're a

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professional force. That professionalism includes respect for human rights, rule of law, respect for gender integration. And these are things we work with those partner nations on.

The Guatemalans recently revamped their military human rights training program. Why? My command has a human rights office, 20 years running now, where we train and work with, both within the U.S. interagency and with our partners on human rights aspects of the forces because it's an important part of being legitimate.

So I think we're never satisfied that we're on the right glide slope. We've got to work harder at this. There's a lot of work to do. But there is progress being made mil-to-mil, and I think there's progress being made overall by those governments on getting after the illegal immigration, although I'd defer an accurate assessment to our own Department of Homeland Security.

**DWG:** Rafael?

**DWG:** [[Inaudible], he reported that the administration has considered the use of Guantanamo to [inaudible] illegal immigrants. Is that correct?

**Admiral Faller:** We didn't talk about a Guantanamo detention facility yet, so, and Guantanamo is part of my mission set. Joint Task Force Guantanamo. And we've got a joint team there. A lot of Reserve, National Guard professionals working hard on the mission which is legal, humane detention operations. And we have 40 law of war detainees there.

We've transitioned from an expeditionary mindset to an enduring mindset. So we are on a gliding slope to try to figure out a way to transfer and close the facilities, and now we're on a glide slope to how do we make this, have this most efficiently, effectively, professionally run for the long term.

Any decision about putting additional detainees there or

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immigrants at the Naval Station -- which I would separate that from the detention facility -- is a policy decision. We would respond to a policy -- I've not received any policy directive to prepare for an expanded operation of facilities.

**DWG:** It's a function that is [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** I've not received any direction to. We have facilities there. It would be a policy decision.

**DWG:** Ashleigh, Jane's?

**Admiral Faller:** I wanted to follow up on --

**DWG:** Did you say 40 detainees there?

**Admiral Faller:** Yes.

**DWG:** Sorry, thank you.

**DWG:** I wanted to follow up on his question about extending the flow of immigration through third party nations. Many of these nations such as Guatemala are already suffering from violence, insecurity, and a host of other factors. What concern do you have on possibly putting refugees or immigrants inside these countries? And fueling further instability in the region?

**Admiral Faller:** As they've worked through these agreements, and the Department of Homeland Security has been working through the agreements, part of working through the agreements is to address concerns to do it in a way that doesn't increase instability. So I've trusted that Homeland Security is working hard to get that right, and I'm not part of those discussions or planning.

All the interactions I have with Homeland Security are professional and they're working hard, so I have no doubt we're going to implement it in a manner that does not include instability. The manner with which it's instituted is supposed

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to be to provide for the mutual security of the United States and those host nations, and to deter further immigration as people see that it's not an easy path for a different life.

I had an experience early on in my job where it just brought home how important it is that we get after this. We were in Honduras and we went out to a community, sat down in a community center, and we were with the Charge and there was a young man who had been all the way to the border and come all the way back. I asked him why did you go? He said well, we didn't have any food. He's probably in his early 20s. We didn't have any food. I didn't feel safe at home. I needed to get money back. The U.S. is a beacon of prosperity. I said why did you go all the way to the border and walk all the way back? He said it was an extremely dangerous trip and I felt unsafe and so I wanted to come back, and I missed my family.

So how do you make sure that word is amplified and then give those men and women that do that, that stay home, a better life? I think that's what this is all about ultimately. The military plays a small supporting role in that. The security forces in those countries are in support. These are young democracies. They were in civil wars in our lifetime, and they're democracies which is a good thing. So we're working hard. I think the pressure has been, the pressure the U.S. government has put on them has made a difference in terms of their focus, and I'm confident, and I know we're working hard, and I'm confident we're going to get a solution as we move forward on this.

We were in El Salvador, I went to El Salvador with the Secretary of State. We sat down with the President and their new security team, and these are professionals that have been trained in U.S. schools and they are working hard and I think making a very positive impact. But this impact is tenuous and we've got to have a long view as they get after some real sustainable security challenges.

**DWG:** Can I ask you also about Nicaragua? Before you came, it's



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been about a year and a half since the U.S. cut off aid and mil-to-mil relations with the nation. Have you seen any steps towards reinstating that? What is your assessment of that country?

**Admiral Faller:** I mentioned earlier the presence of the Russian training center there. That's concerning. There's a definite connection between Venezuela and Nicaragua and the inter-relation of that support.

Our principal role right now is to monitor the situation, understand it, work with other U.S. government interagency partners to better assess it, but we have no mil-to-mil and we're not planning on that at this point.

**DWG:** Laura?

**DWG:** You talked about Russia and China earlier, is there any evidence that Russia and China are working together in your AOR?

**Admiral Faller:** That's a concern as we look globally, Russia and China working more closely together. We're concerned about the presence of Russia and Chinese in Venezuela. And as folks have seen in the media, we've seen the uniformed Chinese military personnel in Venezuela. So yes, we're concerned about it.

**DWG:** Have you seen any specific instances of that?

**Admiral Faller:** I don't want to discuss any more details about what's happening inside there, but it's a concern.

**DWG:** And also if I could just ask, what are your thoughts on why President Maduro would go to North Korea? What kind of incentives might he have to work with the North Koreans?

**Admiral Faller:** Maduro is a brutal dictator. Look what he's doing to his country. And he has plenty of opportunity to do

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the right thing and he hasn't taken that opportunity. The nation's starving. Four million people fled. He continues to invest money in Russian arms and Russian support. So it's not logical, but it fits the pattern of illegitimacy, isolation, and I think frankly he's being manipulated.

The Russians want his money to pay back the debt that he owes them and he's willing to give it to them to curry favor. But beyond that, I don't understand what he's thinking. Maybe he's not.

**DWG:** Is he perhaps looking to buy arms from North Korea?

**Admiral Faller:** I'm sure whatever he could get from Russia he would take.

**DWG:** She was asking about North Korea.

**Admiral Faller:** Oh, North Korea. I'm not sure where that objective went.

**DWG:** Jeff Sullivan.

**DWG:** You mentioned the Russian mercenaries in Venezuela, [inaudible] Nicaragua. Can you give a sense at all of what the Russian military or paramilitary presence is across the AOR? Do they have mercenaries working in other countries? If so, how closely are they working with some of the government? We've seen some of this in Africa.

**Admiral Faller:** The Russian objective it appears is mostly in the information space, and their information operations are considerable in their relationships with their long-term partners of Venezuela and Nicaragua. Beyond that, I don't want to speculate or provide additional details about some of the intelligence that we have.

**DWG:** Can you describe the information operations at all? Is it

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similar to what the intelligence community has [inaudible] U.S. in terms of the election interference, which other U.S. allies have seen in Europe? Or are they doing something different?

**Admiral Faller:** It runs the gamut, so there's a large media presence in RT and Sputnik in Spanish. It's Russia's largest language operation outside their native language, outside of Russia, and it's pumping a lot of information out in those spaces, and misinformation. And the classic story that I cited at the beginning where Russia was reporting that I personally was on the border of Colombia and Venezuela preparing for an invasion when in fact I was in Senator Rubio's office.

**DWG:** Does any of the information that they're pumping out contribute to the crisis of the migrant flow north? Are they putting out stories that are scaring people more into leaving their homes and making them willing, or convincing them that it's worth taking the trip because despite the hardships, they're convincing them that the cost benefit is worth it?

**Admiral Faller:** I think some of the very, the shrill nature of the information is not helpful. As to whether it has a direct impact on migrant flow, I wouldn't, I don't know. I don't have an assessment of that.

**DWG:** Are you seeing any evidence of U.S. [partners] in your AOR investing in Russian or Chinese weapon systems that could threaten the operational security of American [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** There's significant evidence of investment in Chinese and Russian weapon systems in the AOR. Russian weapon systems, sales in the billions; and China's approaching and increasing. China is also gifting a lot of military hardware to the partners.

The extent to which it undermines partnerships with the U.S. contributes to instability. Look at Venezuela. It is a concern for the security of the U.S. Weapon systems that are in Cuba

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already have always been a concern for us and we monitor that closely.

**DWG:** Mike Lynn?

**DWG:** You may have already gone over this. I'm wondering if you can talk about Chinese actual military activity in there beyond their economic concerns and their infrastructure work they're doing. Are we talking about, you said there are Chinese troops in your AOR? Chinese Navy ships.

**Admiral Faller:** With the Chinese it's principally economic. But IT investments, space, cyber. The Chinese military presence and activity in space and with space station with one of our partners in the region. Chinese troop presence has been periodic as they've done deployments and some training. And their investment in schools to bring Latin American partners to China is how we see it.

**DWG:** Richard Sisk.

**DWG:** Sir, the Wasp is making its way around the Horn and [inaudible] East Coast port. Are you looking at any [inaudible] your region and maybe hanging onto it for as long as you possibly can?

**Admiral Faller:** The Wasp is transiting around South America as it changes home ports and we have planned a robust schedule of exercises, partner engagements, port visits, utilizing our special purpose MAGTF forces and other forces. So we will use that for as long as we can in the best way we can to work with our partners to enhance the readiness of the sailors and marines and our partners. So I'll hang on as long as I can, sure. But they've got places they've got to be and a path they've got to take. So we'll use that.

That's been an example of some of the innovation we've tried to work with the services as forces move in a global way around the

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world, and we've had some real good success with that as we've moved forces through. We transit over 100 warships of various types through the Panama Canal every year, and we utilize every one of those transits as an opportunity to strengthen both our own readiness and those of our partners.

I had the opportunity two weeks ago to go through the Panama Canal on a night transit aboard the Coast Guard cutter James, one of our new national security cutters that was heading from the Caribbean mission to an East Pac mission, counternarcotics. What a wonderful ship, great crew. But just to see the strategic importance of that waterway at night. The Security Minister of Panama went with me for the whole transit. And so it's another example.

So we're making a statement by our presence, but we're also getting after reducing the threats.

**DWG:** Rafael, one more?

**DWG:** Another quote from Ambassador Bolton [inaudible] the international pressure is working. Is [inaudible]?

**Admiral Faller:** The pressure's across the spectrum, but it's principally been economic and diplomatic and it continues to be so. And we're ready, we're on the balls of our feet, we're doing planning. We are focused very intently on intelligence information sharing with our partners, Brazil and Colombia. They are solid, strong, professional military forces, and that's been our principal level of effort. The Colombians are just outstanding military forces as are the Brazilian.

The planning that we're doing is focused on the day after. So when a legitimate government is in place, and I'm optimistic it will happen, the people will get what they deserve. Then what happens? And what does that look like? How does the military support a whole of world, whole of government effort to supply food and things?

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So there will be some role for the military. It will be a small role, but we want to be ready so we're planning a lot in that area.

**DWG:** [Inaudible], Ambassador Bolton was pretty lengthy. He was [inaudible] that the military intervention before was on the table, which it seems it must not be the whole White House [inaudible].

**Admiral Faller:** The President has said on a number of occasions that we need a diplomatic solution, but he's also said that all options are out there . So we're ready.

**DWG:** Admiral, I'd better wind this up, we're almost a 9 o'clock, but I just want to say, and maybe get your reaction, listening for an hour, I mean South and Central America used to be thought of, quite frankly, by the Pentagon as a bit of a backwater. It doesn't sound that way anymore to me. Listening to you talk about the increased involvement of particularly Russia but also China and others in the region, and some of the international, transnational threats that are global in nature.

It sounds like you've got your hands full, first of all, and that this region that you command in has become let's say more worrisome and more in need of resources perhaps, needing more attention at least at a high level. Would that be right? And what's your comment on that?

**Admiral Faller:** It's our shared neighborhood, so this is our neighborhood. So all those things we talked about at the outset -- values, culture, family, shared domains, that's our neighborhood. So we've got to ensure that we invest time in our neighborhood. That's the number one thing we can do. Time and attention. And then the right amount of resources.

I think we are. We mentioned a few gaps. We are investing the right amount of resources. We've got to make sure that that

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continues to be the case as we move into the future. It's a global world. So recognizing how this all fits into that global world and the global security that we need is important and I think we've done that as a government. My job is to continue to make sure we stay focused on that and then work with our partners. Because there are some incredibly strong partners that are working very hard for their security.

We mentioned the Guatemalan special forces, the El Salvador special forces. Brazil, Chile, Colombia. These are strong partners that export security both in United Nations missions and help one another. So continuing to develop that so that we stay strong together. That's what the future's going to be. Working together as partners to deter threats, counter threats when they come, and ensure we have the same hope for the future that we have now. But it's tenuous, as we mentioned.

The transnational criminal organizations, the illegal immigration, the corruption, the connection to the great powers, to great power competition is all something that's got to be -- it's a vicious circle, those threats, right? So weak governance, weak institutions, young governments, corruption, transnational criminal organizations, all connected in a way that make them vulnerable to the great powers that don't respect the rule of law, democracy and human rights.

And I don't ask my partners to choose. I'm there, it's on the basis of a mutual respect relationship. But they value democracy, human rights, rule of law, sovereignty.

**DWG:** Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Admiral Faller:** Is the hour gone already?

**DWG:** Yes.

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