

Terrorism and the Triple Frontier

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Since the September 11th attacks on the United States, the “Triple Frontier” border area, shared by Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, has been the subject of intense scrutiny. The area is suspected of supporting criminal activities ranging from drug and arms trafficking to counterfeiting and money-laundering. It has been described as “one of the world’s great centers of lawlessness” and “the contraband capital of South America.” In addition, it is assumed to have been the headquarters for the terrorists who bombed the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires in July 1994 and the Israeli Embassy two years earlier. To discuss the significance of these allegations, and their consequences for the hemispheric community, the Latin American Program invited officials from Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, along with policy analysts from Latin America and the United States, to participate in the January 28, 2002 conference on “Terrorism and the Triple Frontier.”

VIEWS FROM THE NATIONS’ CAPITALS

The first panel included officials from the countries directly involved. Argentine General *Julio Hang*, Commanding General, Army III Corp, discussed the role of the armed forces in the fight against terrorism, and described the challenges faced by a military trained to fight soldiers, now faced with an elusive enemy, disguised as religious zealots or “freedom fighters.” Referring to terrorist organizations as “NGOs of violence,” General Hang said there is debate over whether law enforcement officials should be at the forefront of the fight, or whether it falls under the mission of the armed forces. On this question, he stated his belief that the police



General Julio Hang, Argentine Army III Corp

alone are incapable of fighting terrorism, a battle that requires the pooling of all state resources. The immediate requirement, according to Hang, is to distinguish the roles of different governmental institutions. General Hang pointed out that even United States officials have had difficulty coordinating and integrating the wide-range of government institutions involved in the fight against terrorism. It cannot be less difficult for Argentina, which also faces severe resource constraints.

With reference to the Triple Frontier, General Hang acknowledged that many illegal activities flourish in the area, but he knew of no hard evidence of terrorist activity. Hang emphasized that Argentina is committed to fighting terrorism, particularly in light of the terrible attack against the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires in July 1994. In conclusion, Hang outlined four steps to stopping terrorism: prevention/cooperation; criminal pursuit; managing consequences or fall out; and finally, retaliation.

Rubens Barbosa, Ambassador of Brazil to the United States, explained that Brazil has com-

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plied with the United States request that nations keep track of possible terrorist groups within their borders, share intelligence information, and work to prevent money laundering. Contrary to the claims of some critics, Ambassador Barbosa expressed that the Triple Frontier is by no means the “front line” of the war against terrorism, and he reinforced General Hang’s claim that there is no proof of terrorist activity in the area. He emphasized that Brazil is dedicated to stopping money laundering, and has a sophisticated system to track the movement of funds that was originally implemented to combat money-laundering by Colombian drug traffickers. However, the volume of remittances sent by members of the large Arab community in the area makes it extremely difficult to judge legitimate from illegitimate funds.

Paraguayan officials took a very different position. *Marcial Bobadilla*, Deputy Chief of Mission of the Embassy of Paraguay, said the Paraguayan Government has solid evidence of ties between residents of the Triple Frontier and terrorist organizations in the Arab world. *Esteban Aquino*, a Paraguayan Intelligence expert, produced documents that he said provided evidence of such activity, including letters from terrorist organizations thanking contributors for their financial generosity. Aquino said the Paraguayan Government has in custody several people who are suspected of financing terrorist groups and is actively investigating other suspects. He acknowledged, however, that limited resources and insufficient technological capabilities make the process more difficult.

The **Latin American Program** serves as a bridge between the United States and Latin America, encouraging a free flow of information and dialogue between the two regions. The Program also provides a nonpartisan forum for discussing Latin American and Caribbean issues in Washington, D.C., and for bringing these issues to the attention of opinion leaders and policy makers throughout the Western hemisphere. The Program sponsors major initiatives on Decentralization, Citizen Security, Comparative Peace Processes, Creating Community in the Americas, U.S.-Brazilian relations and U.S.-Mexican relations.

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VIEWS FROM A DISTANCE

The second panel highlighted the views of policy analysts. *Rut Diamint*, Professor of International Relations at the Universidad Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, reflected on the strategic implications of the situation in the Triple Frontier by saying that if the current Argentine economic crisis occurred fifteen years ago, military tanks and helicopters would be omnipresent. However, Diamint warned that while progress has been made, the military is not yet completely subordinate to civilian authorities, and the division between the roles of the military and police is still not clear enough. A government’s efforts to combat terrorism, she insisted, should include a clear statement of divergent roles of the police and the military, and that funds should be allocated to each in a transparent fashion.

Edward Luttwak, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, cited as a central problem the failure of the Brazilian government to assign a Customs official to monitor the movement of goods from Paraguay to Brazil over the “Bridge of Friendship,” which spans the Paraná River. Luttwak argued that while simply placing a Customs officer on the Brazilian side of the bridge would not stop the flow of illegal goods, it would at least make it more difficult. According to Luttwak, this contributes to the “lawless” nature of the area, and is a key factor in the rapid growth of the Paraguayan city “Ciudad del Este,” a city of between 150,000 and 300,000 residents located at the confluence of Paraguay’s borders with Argentina and Brazil, widely known as a center for drug trafficking and arms smuggling.

The Triple Frontier has long been home to a large Arab population, many of whom are thought to be linked to the Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad militias. This population stands out, argued Luttwak, because the majority have made no real effort to integrate with Argentine, Brazilian, or Paraguayan society. Many Arab children attend schools run by Hezbollah, and the community identifies socially and politically with Hezbollah, not Latin society. In conclusion, Luttwak emphasized that U.S. officials have long known about the illegal activities and connections to radical Islamic groups in the area, but have failed to support adequately the law enforcement and intelligence-gathering efforts of the countries involved. In Luttwak’s opinion, this is another



H.E. Rubens Barbosa, Ambassador of Brazil and Marcial Bobadilla, DCM, Embassy of Paraguay

example of the United States inability to focus on Latin America in a coherent manner.

Johanna Mendelson Forman, from the Association of the U.S. Army, said that the Triple Frontier has long been the site of “arms for cocaine” transfers, where Colombian drug traffickers trade cocaine for weapons. According to Mendelson Forman, a clear indication of the weakness of state institutions in the Triple Frontier is that many citizens have hired private security because they have little confidence in the state’s ability to protect them or their businesses. Turning to a discussion of post-September 11 United States-Latin American relations, Mendelson Forman said that citizens of many Latin American countries were victims of the September 11 attacks, and that the region is committed to fighting terrorism. She suggested that there are three specific steps the United States could take in Latin America: freeze the assets of suspected terrorists; increase intelligence-sharing and confidence-building measures; and, work with authorities to directly target terrorist cells. According to Mendelson Forman, while it is clear what steps should be taken, most nations in the region lack the physical and technical capacity to carry out the operations, and rely upon the support and partnership of the United States.

Finally, *Luis Bitencourt*, director of Brazil @ the Wilson Center, speculated that some governments in the region are concerned with the attention attracted by terrorism, so to a point that they do not even want to talk about the likelihood of terrorist activity within their borders, for fear that this issue will come to dominate all bilateral relations with the United States. Bitencourt emphasized that a comprehensive, multilateral effort, including cooperation

on intelligence exchanges, is the only hope for combating terrorism in the Triple Frontier and around the world.

COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

After the formal presentations concluded, an animated debate ensued among the panelists and members of the audience, which included policy analysts and officials from the U.S. Department of State, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, U.S. House of Representatives, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, as well as representatives from various embassies and multinational corporations. The general sentiment was that the United States has known for years about the troubling activity in the Triple Frontier, but did little to address the situation.

Virtually every speaker agreed on two points: first, illegal activities flourish in the Triple Frontier; second, there is a large Arab population, some of whom undeniably have ties to Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad militias. The task at hand, according to one well-respected official, is to determine the severity of activities taking place in the Triple Frontier. Are groups in the area only involved in fundraising to support terrorist groups or are they more intricately involved in plotting terrorist activities than many suspect? Once the answer is determined, officials can more effectively create strategies to address the problems.

According to Luttwak, it would behoove the United States to crack down on illegal activities in the Triple Frontier regardless of terrorist activities there, especially since the flagrant violations of copyright laws negatively impact the profits of U.S.



companies. Mendelson Forman argued that companies such as Disney, Xerox, and Nike should have filed suits long ago.

In his closing remarks, *Joseph S. Tulchin*, Director of the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson Center, reminded the speakers and audience members that it is important to consider the historical realities in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. In Paraguay, for example, under General Alfredo Stroessner's thirty-four year dictatorship, money laundering, boot-legging, and counterfeiting were not discouraged. The current regime is committed to stopping these practices, but this will not happen over night. It is in the national interest of the countries involved to fight terrorism aggressively, but as

Ambassador Barbosa explained, the countries have done all that was asked of them by the United States — they have taken measures to stop money laundering, tightened security in high-risk areas, and to the best of their capabilities used intelligence to determine which, if any, subversive groups are operating within their borders. At this point, the strategic collaboration of many sovereign states, including the United States, and access to sophisticated technology are necessary to curb illegal industries in the Triple Frontier, thus creating a more controlled environment where terrorist-related activities can be detected and stopped. Collaboration and cooperation must replace cautious unilateralism if terrorism is to be overcome.

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