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# Weathering the Storms Together: Improving US Humanitarian Efforts

**Admiral Craig Faller (retired) and Patrick Paterson, PhD**





# Atlantic Council

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Cover: Soto Cano, Honduras (Nov. 27, 2020) — Members of Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron (HSC) 22 Detachment 6 assigned to the Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS Sioux City (LCS 11) join U.S. Southern Command's Hurricane Iota relief efforts in Central America, Nov. 27, 2020. Sioux City is deployed to the U.S. 4th Fleet area of operations to support Joint Interagency Task Force South's mission, which includes counter illicit drug trafficking in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Juel Foster/Released)

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## Executive Summary

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**T**he US humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) system—well practiced and extensively developed—could further serve US and partners’ needs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and beyond through targeted improvements. Based on our experience as HADR practitioners with operational and academic expertise, we share insights from many years of working with partners in the Americas. The task is urgent: fragile governments and organizations further impacted by COVID-19 and climate change have exposed HADR deficiencies that need to be rapidly strengthened. Redoubling the US’s HADR commitment to allies and partners can also have strategic benefits during a period of renewed competition with the People’s Republic of China.

We believe that the United States can strengthen its HADR work globally, and particularly with LAC countries, through partnership and relationship building as well as education and exercises. By deepening its strengths and addressing room for improvement, the United States can remain the partner of choice for LAC countries and conserve its positional advantage over China and other strategic competitors.

How can LAC and partner nations (such as the United States), nongovernmental organizations, and regional and other global organizations strengthen their abilities to respond to natural disasters? What can the United States do to improve its disaster preparedness and response in LAC? And what can Washington learn from Beijing’s approach to disaster assistance in LAC?

In crafting this report to address these questions, we drew from a roundtable discussion, verbal and written consultations with subject matter experts, and written material. A full description of the methodology is provided in the appendix.

The findings of the report include eight recommendations grouped under two mutually complementary areas: (1) partnership and relationship building, and (2) education and exercises. Not only are these recommendations timely and relevant for HADR practitioners, but taking these steps would strengthen Western hemispheric security by investing in the region’s infrastructure and human capital. As the United States and its LAC partners consider future room for cooperation and collaboration, HADR work will form an indispensable centerpiece of their strategies.

# Abbreviations

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- **CARICOM:** Caribbean community
- **CARICOM RSS:** CARICOM's Regional Security System
- **CDEMA:** Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency
- **CEPREDENAC:** Spanish acronym for the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Disasters in Central America and the Dominican Republic
- **CSL:** Cooperative security location
- **DOD:** US Department of Defense
- **DOD COCOM:** DOD Combatant Command
- **DOD OHDACA funds:** DOD Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid funds
- **DOS:** US Department of State
- **FOB:** Forward operating base
- **HADR:** Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
- **INSARAG:** International Search and Rescue Advisory Group
- **JTF:** Joint task force
- **LAC:** Latin America and the Caribbean
- **MOU:** Memorandum of understanding
- **NG:** National Guard
- **NORTHCOM:** US Northern Command
- **PAHO:** Pan-American Health Organization
- **PPP:** Public-private partnership
- **PRC:** People's Republic of China
- **SOUTHCOM:** DOD COCOM responsible for LAC
- **UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- **UN OCHA:** United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance
- **USAID:** US Agency for International Development
- **USAID BHA:** USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance
- **USAID BHA DART:** BHA Disaster Assistance Response Team, a small team of experts who arrive in the affected area to make a rapid assessment of needs.
- **V-OSOCC:** Virtual on-site operations coordination center
- **WebEOC software:** Communications software for emergency operations centers
- **WFP:** World Food Programme
- **WHO:** World Health Organization

# Introduction

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**W**ith its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) services, the US provides an essential but often underreported contribution to the international community. No other country brings the amount of relief to emergency zones as the United States does as the largest donor of foreign aid in the world; moreover, HADR is the largest category of the billions of dollars in US assistance shared yearly with partner nations.<sup>1</sup> US HADR assistance is particularly visible and impactful in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), a region prone to natural disasters.<sup>2</sup>

US HADR assistance in LAC has broader strategic implications as well. US and partner investments in HADR capability and capacity have a high rate of return for ensuring Western hemispheric security and stability. To understand the connection between natural disasters and governance challenges, consider that any postdisaster fallout may exacerbate societal inequalities, delay education, damage infrastructure, and provide opportunities for organized crime or other illicit activity.<sup>3</sup> US HADR assistance, particularly preventative assistance, doubles as an investment to mitigate some of these spillover effects. As such, US HADR assistance is one of many avenues to ensuring regional prosperity.

Finally, US HADR efforts should be understood in the context of the global geopolitical competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC), articulated in the *2022 US National Security Strategy*.<sup>4</sup> The first priority of US humanitarian assistance is, of course, saving lives and alleviating suffering, not gaining an advantage over its geopolitical rivals. However, as the United States and the PRC vie for global influence through soft power,

HADR is a field in which the United States can burnish its reputation while offering concrete services to populations in need.

Despite its extensive scope and depth, the US HADR system has room for improvement. This report addresses two areas in which the US government, LAC allied nations, and LAC regional organizations can improve HADR efforts: (1) partnership and relationship building, and (2) education and exercises. Based on our decades of work and studies in LAC and the United States, we offer recommendations that—if adequately resourced and developed—will improve the readiness and resilience of US HADR efforts both in and of themselves, and as a competitive alternative to other global rivals' offers of assistance.

At the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, strengthening LAC prosperity and US regional leadership in the face of geopolitical competition are two of our strategic priorities. This publication is the first in a series that the center will produce regarding perceived unconventional or understudied areas of US-PRC rivalry. Future reports will focus on energy, soft power, and other dimensions of US-PRC overlap in the region beyond political and economic activity.

The William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies supports the community of security and defense professionals in the Americas to pursue collaborative approaches to mutual opportunities and challenges. This publication exemplifies the Perry Center mission by highlighting tangible HADR recommendations for field practitioners while contributing to a broader understanding of security and defense among the general public.

## US HADR Overview: Structure and Policies

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**U**S HADR operations are a whole-of-government operation, led by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and supported extensively by the Departments of State and Defense, and other government entities. USAID, DOS, and DOD have all made HADR an integral part of their mission. USAID and DOD both publish field manuals for HADR operations,<sup>5</sup> while a DOS strategic objective is to provide “humanitarian leadership and lifesaving protection and assistance in response to international disasters and humanitarian crises overseas.”<sup>6</sup> DOD’s *2022 National Defense Strategy* emphasizes the need for a robust HADR response to advance strategic goals and to serve as allies’ trusted defense partner.<sup>7</sup>

On average over the past five years, the United States has devoted \$50 billion per year to foreign assistance. USAID receives the lion’s share of those funds, between \$20 billion and \$25 billion. Of that, roughly \$10 billion per year is earmarked for direct humanitarian assistance,<sup>8</sup> and within USAID, the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is the lead bureau putting these funds to use.<sup>9</sup> In 2022 alone, BHA responded to seventy-four crises in

sixty-four countries, distributing almost \$12 billion to disaster zones.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, every Combatant Command (COCOM) under DOD, including the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in LAC, practices HADR responses through exercises, simulations, and conferences each year. SOUTHCOM’s campaign plan emphasizes HADR throughout as a necessary military mission, and SOUTHCOM includes HADR discussions in its annual Caribbean Security Conference.

Ultimately, the US HADR system is most effective when all three principal branches are moving in sync and mutually collaborating. For example, when DOS requests DOD HADR support,<sup>11</sup> COCOMs provide the airlift, sealift, logistics, manpower, indirect distribution of relief supplies, field hospitals, search and rescue teams, communications, evacuation of injured victims, tent encampments for displaced persons, debris removal, and provision of basic human needs for large groups. Thousands of US service members, dozens of US naval vessels, hundreds of aircraft, and millions of dollars can be devoted to HADR responses.



# United States vs. China in HADR: Stakes and Geopolitical Context

**F**oreign disaster relief may seem like an unconventional field to illustrate US-PRC competitive dynamics in LAC. Yet because HADR efforts rely on infrastructure and communications, it is important to note the PRC has an established presence in these sectors in LAC through its Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, because HADR efforts also rely on logistics and geographic proximity, continued US presence in LAC HADR efforts is highly likely. This confluence of factors means that US and PRC officials may each seek to provide LAC with HADR assistance while subtly trying to curry favor with regional countries by outcompeting the other. Current data suggest this is less likely than anticipated, since the United States stands head and shoulders above the PRC in the metrics of US HADR assistance to LAC. Nonetheless, the United States can conserve its reputational advantage in LAC by more effectively publicizing its contributions.

The PRC's HADR assistance is a small fraction of what the United States provides to its LAC partners. According to

AidData, the PRC contributed \$19 million in humanitarian aid to countries in LAC from 2010 to 2022. In contrast, the United States spent more than \$743 million on humanitarian assistance in the region in one year (2021), almost 40 times what the PRC spent in the previous decade.<sup>12</sup>

Elevated US spending allows the United States to remain comfortably associated with HADR efforts in LAC. The USNS *COMFORT*, a hospital ship, treated 20,000 patients and conducted 600 surgeries in 2018 during its visit to Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Honduras.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, dozens of US DOD-sponsored humanitarian and civic assistance (HCA) events occur in almost every region of the world. These events consist of medical visits by US military doctors who provide basic medical care or surgeries to remote communities in need of assistance. In 2023, the United States is scheduled to conduct more than seventy HCA visits to Barbados, Belize, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, and Suriname. Efforts of this scale ensure that the United



US Naval Hospital Ship Comfort is seen mid-mission en route to Colombia, circa 2009. REUTERS/John Vizcaino

### Case Study: The Stakes of HADR (Mis)communication

To see the geopolitical importance of effective communication about US HADR efforts in LAC, look no further than the aftermath of Haiti's 2010 earthquake. A photo of US military personnel disembarking a US helicopter in front of the collapsed National Palace spread through social media channels. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez reposted the photo, claiming

it was evidence of the "US imperialists" invading Haiti. In reality, the photo was of US personnel landing to distribute emergency medical supplies to the Haiti General Hospital. Regardless, the misrepresentation of the photo generated enough animosity that angry Haitian mobs later threatened US HADR personnel with violence.

States remains the HADR partner of choice by LAC citizens and governments.

Nonetheless, the United States should boost its public communications strategy to ensure that the PRC does not seek to spin any perceived gap in LAC's HADR service provision as a US shortcoming. Both USAID's BHA and DOD's SOUTHCOM have established communication programs that could be further strengthened.<sup>14</sup> First and foremost, messaging about US HADR efforts should be distributed through US government communication channels beyond

DOD and USAID, which is currently done on a limited basis. US officials should also be attuned to LAC local media to understand how US HADR efforts are perceived outside the US information bubble. If local media generates allegations that could undermine US HADR efforts and goodwill, US officials should proactively counter the allegations and share updated, fact-checked information through US and LAC partner channels. In addition, US officials should invest in cultivating long-term relationships with local LAC media to build trust and alternative sources for LAC citizens to receive information on US HADR efforts.

# Improvements for the US HADR Program

**A**s mentioned above, the United States manages HADR assistance through interagency efforts to ensure a whole-of-government response. However, US HADR activities in LAC also require extensive international coordination with foreign partners who are assisting the afflicted country, including international entities such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UN OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and other international bodies. Lastly, US HADR efforts frequently require joint operations from the US military assets deployed for the crisis. These three elements—interagency, international, and joint military operations—require periodic review of their practices, procedures, and rehearsals in the form of exercises, simulations, and conferences.

There are two focus areas of foreign disaster relief missions that must be strengthened: (1) partnerships and relationship building, and (2) education and exercises. Under the first cluster of recommendations, we emphasize that the United States should improve its partnership with other HADR organizations internationally, regionally, and with private companies. Under the second cluster of recommendations, we emphasize that US HADR policy should improve the different dimensions of its internal coordination, which will produce benefits for US international coordination.

## Part 1: Partnership and Relationship Building

**Recommendation 1: Strengthen HADR coordination with the international community, primarily through UN OCHA and through the “cluster system” of international nongovernmental organizations, plus NATO countries and regional allies.**

BHA already coordinates with the international HADR community, nominally led by UN OCHA. The international community works through a cluster system involving UN and other organizations and partners to ensure that a broad range of urgent humanitarian tasks—involving water, food, security, children, nutrition, logistics, sanitation, hygiene—are adequately addressed. Each HADR task is managed by an international organization, typically by a UN agency such as the WFP, WHO, or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

US policymakers should seek opportunities to strengthen and deepen interoperability with the UN-led HADR program. Liaison officers, international conferences, interoperable equipment, compatible communication

systems, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) are all possible tools to strengthen and streamline international collaboration. Liaison officers could be nominated from the US or UN side and jointly funded by both; and international conferences could be organized and bankrolled using the same equitable distribution of labor and financing. Interoperable equipment could be provided by the United States or another UN country with the most technologically advanced HADR teams, and bought at a discount or received for free by partner countries in need. UN OCHA could also create a template MOU for use by any of its partner nations in an HADR emergency.

Beyond these immediate fixes, a long-term solution would need to either pare down or effectively work around these organizations’ complex branches. Within the United States, for example, migration issues are addressed by the DOS’s Population, Refugees, and Migration branch, not by USAID’s BHA. Meanwhile, in the international cluster system, internally displaced persons and disaster refugees are managed by UN OCHA through UNHCR. To simplify this triangular web, USAID and DOS should increase routine coordination and streamline requests made externally to UN OCHA, while UN OCHA should loop in both USAID and DOS to all US government-related HADR requests.<sup>15</sup>

### *Coordination with NATO Partners*

On the international level, the United States should deepen its collaborative HADR activities with European partners. Britain and France have multiple overseas territories and thousands of citizens in the Caribbean, and getting prompt assistance to their citizens when a disaster strikes is a national obligation. To address this, European governments frequently assign a Caribbean station ship to the region to provide immediate help during hurricane season. For example, HMS *Medway* served as the British Royal Navy’s vessel station ship in the Caribbean in 2020 and 2021. It was joined by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker, RFA *Wave Knight*, in responding to the 2021 Haitian earthquake on August 14. France deployed its own Caribbean naval vessel, FS *Germinal*, for the same HADR operation.<sup>16</sup>

Much like British and French station ships deployed to the Caribbean each year, US military assets and units that could provide essential HADR equipment and services should be more frequently deployed or placed on standby, prepared to act in anticipation of seasonal crises. A ship

or a marine expeditionary unit (MEU) that is within one or two days of travel time to a disaster zone can respond to a disaster much faster than other US vessels that must sortie from their home port.

Beyond placing additional resources on standby, the US should deconflict its relief efforts with European partners in the Caribbean to minimize overlap and maximize impact. For example, after Category 5 Hurricane Maria landed on Dominica in September 2017, five different countries flew aircraft around the island attempting to determine the extent of damage—without coordinating flights or sharing the results of their surveillance to build a common operating picture of the conditions on the ground. One possible solution would be using amphibious assault ships or other large deck amphibious platforms as at-sea airfields for staging HADR materials and refueling helicopters. With proper coordination, international and regional organizations could use the naval vessels to ferry HADR supplies and victims to and from the disaster zone.

**Recommendation 2: Streamline standing HADR diplomatic agreements and MOUs in anticipation of crises.**

A key part of HADR response is proactive planning, particularly in limiting institutional obstacles well before a disaster occurs. Countries can utilize MOUs or agreements that permit relief forces to arrive in the disaster zone without diplomatic delays, especially if foreign forces are expected to bring arms for force protection. Status of forces agreements, acquisition and cross-servicing agreements, and acquisition-only agreements are most often negotiated for these situations. It is vitally important that these agreements are applied with consistency, efficiency, and a suitable degree of customization before disasters strike. To address this, LAC countries could coordinate versions of each type of agreement with US and other foreign partners, so the agreements are completed in advance and HADR efforts can begin as soon as disaster strikes.

Delays or mismatched expectations when crafting memoranda and treaties underscore the larger challenge of interoperability when US government and international partners collaborate. Beyond legal permissions to enter a location, data and information sharing processes should be established in advance. The United States normally uses communications software for emergency operations centers, known as WebEOC software. However, most other nations and international HADR organizations such as UN OCHA and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) use V-OSOCC software, an OCHA-managed tool of the Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System. Incompatibility between these systems delays the development of a common operating picture and hinders

the ability of rescue teams to understand where their skills are required most urgently.

**Recommendation 3: Support institutional capacity improvements of regional partners.**

The United States should help fortify the institutional capacity of HADR organizations in the region. We define institutional capacity as the ability of a governmental or nongovernmental organization to collaborate with US, foreign, and multilateral partners as well as to address HADR challenges independently. Capacity building is relevant to both HADR organizations native to LAC as well as foreign HADR agencies working prominently in LAC. In the short term, fortified institutional capacity will ensure rapid disaster response, while in the long term, it will boost broader hemispheric security and resilience.

Within LAC, the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) is the most developed HADR agency.<sup>17</sup> Created in 1991 by CARICOM nations, CDEMA is headquartered in Barbados and coordinates disaster responses and humanitarian assistance to eighteen Caribbean nations. CDEMA has developed an extensive series of agreements, plans, and procedures that constitute its regional response mechanism. It also includes MOUs and agreements with organizations such as CARICOM's regional security system (RSS), Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), and WFP. The United States has often collaborated with CDEMA to increase adaptation efforts, such as colaunching a much-touted 2020 Caribbean Climate Resilience Initiative that provided US funding for CARICOM HADR operational systems and communications technology.<sup>18</sup>

Much as the United States has supported CDEMA's institutional capacity in the Caribbean, it could also offer increased financial support for HADR institutions in Central and South America. The Coordination Center for the Prevention of Disasters in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPRENAC by its Spanish abbreviation) is the CDEMA-equivalent in Central America. In South America, no collective HADR response organization exists, but US government funding and training of local experts could begin to address this need.

The United States also can support the institutional capacity and impact of HADR agencies from Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, which feature prominently in LAC's postdisaster relief and reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> Taiwan's International Cooperation and Development Fund (ICDF) has been strongly active in LAC, providing over \$152 million in development funds to its diplomatic allies over the past decade and a half.<sup>20</sup> With an emphasis on preventative investments to increase resiliency before natural disasters, particularly in Haiti and Honduras, ICDF assistance has proven invaluable for regional partners.<sup>21</sup>





Taiwanese and US officials at the signing ceremony for the Memorandum of Understanding on Taiwan-US Development and Humanitarian Assistance Cooperation. REUTERS/Ann Wang

USAID and ICDF's 2022 MOU to deepen global collaboration should be frequently applied to channel further US assistance to LAC countries in the wake of natural disasters.<sup>22</sup>

Japan and South Korea have each provided HADR help to LAC, though to a lesser degree than Taiwan. Tokyo, building on its advanced earthquake detection expertise, sent Japan International Cooperation Agency experts to Peru in 2018 to install an emergency broadcast system in the countryside.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, South Korea has been a large global donor of climate resilience and development funding, giving \$5.4 billion worldwide since the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup> The United States could structure its regional HADR aid amounts to match Japanese and Korean aid organizations' amounts, thus doubling the impact of formerly small investments and encouraging continued multilateral cooperation in LAC.

Beyond institution-to-institution funding, the United States can support regional partners' institutional capacity by providing technical tools for partners to operate independently and effectively. Every EOC needs a communications and information distribution ability, a reliable logistics program, and lift capacity, among many other tools. For example, the

U.S. can provide technology for early warning systems for storms and tsunamis, equipment that many LAC nations do not currently have. Even if LAC governments have human resources to send to the emergency zone, they may still be hampered by lack of lift and interoperability constraints due to lack of equipment. A small US policy adjustment that emphasizes a need to send these tools could reduce this LAC obstacle.

US policymakers should also explicitly assure that US foreign aid and security cooperation funds, also known as the 333 Program, can be directed toward regional organizations like CDEMA and RSS. The 333 Program was designed for broad security cooperation, but has historically been considered an exclusive funding source for combat or combat-adjacent activities. The US Congress should consider expanding or specifying 333 Program parameters so that HADR work, which has clear security implications, can tap into much-needed funding.<sup>25</sup>

Most COCOMs also have cooperative security locations (CSL) or forward operating bases (FOB) in their area of responsibility to ensure rapid responses after a disaster.



Both types of sites should be made further accessible to regional partners. JTF Bravo, for example, is a CSL positioned at the Soto Cano airfield, part of Honduras's Palmerola International Airport. Since large cargo planes can safely land at the international airport (including the C-5 Galaxy, the largest US military cargo aircraft), JTF-Bravo helicopters are able to rapidly distribute incoming HADR aid to Honduras or neighboring Central American nations that would otherwise wait for days or weeks for urgent supplies to arrive. In the wake of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020, JTF-Bravo helicopters rescued 731 civilians, delivered 2,100 tons of aid materials, operated in three countries, and transported more than eighty first responders throughout a region that had been cut off from outside assistance by the two storms.

Though they are US bases, FOBs and CSLs already permit limited foreign use. Bilateral agreements between the US government and other countries, and interinstitutional agreements (such as between SOUTHCOM and CDEMA or CEPREDENAC) are important and can eliminate coordination delays. If LAC partners were given unfettered access to CSLs and FOBs like JTF-Bravo during a disaster, they could multiply the impact of US HADR.

#### **Recommendation 4: Leverage the HADR efforts of the US National Guard State Partnership Program.**

On an international level, the National Guard (NG) State Partnership Program (SPP) has linked state NG forces with ninety-five partner nations around the globe. Started as an institutional capacity-building effort for Eastern European nations after the end of the Cold War, NG state units now work closely with partner nations to accomplish US embassy and COCOM goals in partner nations.<sup>26</sup> Guardsmen exchange technical expertise and doctrinal training that could be tailored toward HADR efforts, an area with which the NG is intimately familiar.

If invited to do so by LAC leaders, US policymakers should consider boosting the SPP's presence in LAC countries and removing bureaucratic constraints for limited periods during emergencies. There are currently policy and legal hurdles to using NG forces in an effective and rapid manner for foreign HADR. When Haiti was devastated by a 2021 earthquake, NG Puerto Rican forces were available and ready to respond within hours—but it took days to work around bureaucratic procedures within the Pentagon to get them assigned and on their way.

#### **Recommendation 5: Increase the use of public-private partnerships.**

Beyond connecting with private companies in the wake of a disaster, US HADR agencies should systematically form

long-term public-private partnerships (PPPs) to preemptively coordinate and deconflict their assistance during HADR crises. Current PPPs consist of US personnel receiving supplies from large companies such as UPS or DHL for HADR efforts.

For example, the BHA Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) on the ground in disaster zones publishes a list of requirements for supplies and materials so private companies can fill those requests with their own stockpiles. The program permits badly needed supplies (e.g., baby formula, diapers, hygiene products, or bottled water) to reach the emergency zone. According to SOUTHCOM officials, twenty private companies and NGOs provided urgent relief supplies after Hurricanes Eta and Iota struck the Central American coastline in November 2020. During the earthquake response efforts in Haiti in 2010, forty to fifty private companies and nongovernmental organizations contributed supplies totaling more than \$35 million dollars in just four months.<sup>27</sup> When the devastating earthquake struck Haiti in 2021, PPPs between private companies and the US government and international and nongovernmental organizations generated an effective and swift response.

Despite the strong promise of PPPs, they often fall short of their full potential in two ways. First, companies do not always coordinate “horizontally” with each other, meaning that certain supplies requested by DARTs may be provided by multiple companies while other supplies may be overlooked entirely. To rectify this, US HADR professionals should consider implementing a tracker or database showing up-to-date inventory status for key goods at the disaster site and that allows private partners to “sign up” online to provide missing items. Alternatively, US HADR professionals could implement long-term contracts with each private-sector company supplying goods, specifying the specific products that company is always responsible for providing to HADR sites for the duration of the contract.

Secondly, not all the COCOMs maintain robust relationships with US private companies operating in the region.<sup>28</sup> Whether due to staffing bandwidth, communication challenges, potential doubts over reliability, or other factors, some COCOMs prefer not to rely on the private sector. COCOMs without PPPs should conduct an internal analysis to understand the reasons for not doing so. If those reasons can be satisfactorily addressed through the strategies above, the COCOMs should implement PPPs to better provide urgent materials that may not be available through US supply lines or through the international cluster system.

## Part 2: Education and Exercises

### Recommendation 6: Expand HADR education for the US workforce and partner nations.

One of the top priorities within any HADR strategy is to educate the first responders and broader disaster-related workforce. These key stakeholders require in-depth training on the HADR practices to improve their country's institutional capacity including:

- Defense support of civilian authorities.
- Preservation of critical infrastructure.
- Interagency coordination.
- Regional cooperation.
- Emergency operation centers.
- Civil-military coordination cells.
- Information management.
- Evacuation procedures.
- Joint personnel recovery centers.
- Strategic communications.
- Search and rescue.
- Logistics and distribution of relief supplies.
- International principles of humanitarian interventions.

BHA periodically offers three-day interagency HADR training sessions in Washington for US personnel who work on HADR programs. In addition, BHA also offers the Joint Humanitarian Operations Course, a mobile training opportunity provided to military units outside of Washington.<sup>29</sup>

However, for foreign partners, there are few DOD-sponsored courses that cover these critical HADR issues.<sup>30</sup> Of the thousands of courses available yearly to foreign students—part of the US effort to improve the institutional capacity of other countries—there are seldom training courses on essential HADR skills, which is a significant deficiency in the security cooperation enterprise. Only one of the six DOD regional academic centers, the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense

Studies at National Defense University in Washington, offers an HADR course for foreign students.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM) in Hawaii offers short three-day courses on HADR.<sup>32</sup>

It is imperative that US policymakers broaden the training options for essential HADR skills for non-US stakeholders. Education forms an integral link between the training and resources that reside in a more robust exercise program. Educational initiatives should have the flexibility to use security cooperation funds and international military and education funds to train partner security forces, military, and applicable civilians.

Geopolitically, the United States also benefits from training non-US stakeholders in HADR skills. An investment in human capital in Latin America and the Caribbean lays the foundation for long-term diplomatic goodwill between the United States and the region. Additionally, if LAC stakeholders and US HADR professionals are trained in the same methodology and the same tools, the United States will likely remain the partner of choice for the region in humanitarian aid, infrastructure creation, and other related logistical tasks. This places the United States at a competitive advantage globally vis-à-vis strategic rivals such as the PRC, which also vies for influence.

### Recommendation 7: Develop and expand exercises to include more international and interagency tabletop exercises and simulations.

#### *Reasons for Expanded Exercises and Simulations*

Linkages between US HADR agencies and their international counterparts are complex and often dependent on personal relationships. These personal relationships can be strengthened through shared exercises and simulations. Teamwork, which is essential to an effective response, can atrophy over time with experienced hands

## Case Study: Exercises to Predict Real-life Emergencies

In the best-case scenarios, COCOM HADR exercise planners can rehearse the exact nature of a disaster and provide precise insights that later alleviate significant damage. For example, at the 2018 Humanitarian Allied Forces exercise in Guatemala, planners from the United States and Guatemala simulated a volcano eruption that required the rehearsed evacuation of several towns near Volcán de Fuego in the center of the country.

Three weeks later, Volcán de Fuego erupted, sending ash and lethal pyroclastic flows toward Guatemalan communities that had participated in that recent evacuation simulation. Despite a death toll of nearly two hundred, thousands of lives were saved because the US-Guatemala team had exercised its HADR practices in advance. More frequent exercises conducted in more countries would save more lives.



Guatemalan and US soldiers work in tandem to transport aid after Tropical Storm Eta. REUTERS/Luis Echeverria

“assuming” everyone knows how to implement protocol. However, reduced tabletop exercises and simulations will only accelerate the degeneration of muscle memory and weaken skills for disaster response.

Internally, more US federal interagency preparation is needed before disaster strikes. Relevant organizations should consider a more robust and regularly occurring set of HADR conferences, tabletop exercises, and simulations, such as those suggested below. The speed of US government HADR response can be enhanced through exercises and simulations for both domestic and foreign HADR incidents, since many participants and organizations have key roles in both.

#### *Mechanics of Expanded Exercises and Simulations*

To ensure a country’s national response plan is tried and tested, exercises are an essential part of the HADR rehearsal phase. What stands out in that regard, in contrast to the dearth of academic courses on HADR issues, is how BHA joins forces with some of the COCOMs to offer exercises evaluating national emergency action plans, particularly in disaster-prone areas such as LAC. During these

exercises, participants test communications, inventory and replenish emergency provisions in warehouses, review and practice standard operating procedures, set up field hospitals and command posts, rehearse the chain of command and activate logistics lines.

These exercises bring multiple countries together to test interoperability and coordination as they would in the event of a major natural disaster. In 2022, representatives from twenty-three Latin American and Caribbean nations, US personnel from each of the branches of the armed forces, and national guardsmen from eight US states all attended a hemispheric two-week simulation called Tradewinds, exercises conducted almost continuously since the 1980s.<sup>33</sup> Tradewinds participants rehearsed responses to natural disasters, practiced interoperability, and strengthened partnerships among the personnel.

US policymakers should continue to allocate funding and personnel to ensure these exercises continue, offer additional interagency and international tabletop activities and simulations, and are on the cutting edge and relevant for LAC countries’ needs.



### Case Study: Innovative Ways to Support LAC Military HADR Unit

Since OHDACA funds are designated directly for foreign civilian populations and not for the armed forces, COCOM commanders have developed innovative ways to support LAC military HADR units. For example, the Jamaica Defense Force (JDF), which assigns an engineering battalion to serve as the quick reaction force to disasters, recently requested US assistance to develop a DART. Because OHDACA funds cannot

be used by a foreign armed force, US DOD representatives had no means of directly supporting Jamaican military forces. A bit of innovation saved the day. After negotiating an internal agreement among Jamaican government representatives, SOUTHCOM arranged an MOU for the Jamaican national disaster office to receive \$2.5 million of OHDACA funds to train the JDF on how to operate a DART.

#### *Protect HADR Budgets, Principally in DOD*

For COCOM exercises to be successful, there must be adequate funds to manage HADR efforts. The DOD budgets that fund education, exercises, and conferences should be at a minimum preserved, and ideally expanded, to permit a more robust rehearsal program for HADR responders. During the 2019 COCOM review, Pentagon budget offices considered cutting funding for the joint exercise program because it was not seen as directly relevant to “high end fights.” The budgets for current DOD HADR programs can often be tenuous. Within SOUTHCOM’s purview, the Allied Humanitarian Forces exercise, New Horizons, and Beyond the Horizon exercises have all been discontinued for lack of funding.

Lack of funding removes a vital HADR rehearsal opportunity for the United States and partner nations just as climate change is fueling more severe environmental conditions and consequently HADR crises. As we have stressed throughout this report, the preventive efforts during exercises and simulations can alleviate suffering in partner nations and can also benefit the United States by maintaining a level of hemispheric security. The principal source of funds for HADR efforts within DOD’s COCOMs is the Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) funds. These funds are earmarked for humanitarian relief that benefits civilians of a country that has suffered a disaster. The funds are not intended for partner nations’ military forces unless those units are providing direct HADR assistance to the civilian population.<sup>34</sup> Since OHDACA funds are approved and distributed for a two-year period, they provide the COCOM commander with immense agility to support HADR efforts when sudden crises occur.

For example, across 2020-21, SOUTHCOM received \$110 million in OHDACA funds to assist partner nations with their response to COVID-19. With those funds, SOUTHCOM helped build seventy-seven field hospitals in LAC countries, each equipped with forty beds, heating

and air conditioning, potable water, ventilators, and freezers to store COVID-19 vaccines. The importance of following up on this investment through enhanced training and education will be key to the long-term effectiveness of SOUTHCOM and US government efforts.

As previously mentioned, OHDACA funds are not intended for other countries’ armed forces, even though most countries’ militaries play an important role in HADR responses. In many cases, they are the largest group of first responders.<sup>35</sup> This means that for the United States to offer financial assistance to the largest group of on-the-ground responders, DOD officials need to painstakingly liaise with inter-agency counterparts and request permission to reprogram funds from USAID, DOS, or other channels. Without the means for DOD to promptly distribute substantial HADR funds to LAC military forces, the United States misses an important capacity-building opportunity with some of the most essential HADR responders in LAC countries.

#### **Recommendation 8: Host additional conferences to review HADR practices, improve interoperability, and streamline and reduce logistical overlap in assistance provided.**

After new HADR policies are implemented, experts and practitioners should convene to compare notes on their impact and share best practices. Conferences are a key means to do so. Conference participants can conduct reviews of HADR operations and discuss ways to streamline emergency procedures during the next disaster response. Working groups may also examine important HADR topics such as communications, logistics, information sharing, command centers, emergency responses, security, and critical infrastructure. These efforts result in updates to manuals and doctrines, and help each country have a more effective response before the next catastrophe occurs.

Conference participants should have a chance to hear from their domestic and international counterparts, as well

## Summary of Recommendations

### Partnership and Relationship Building

- Strengthen HADR coordination with the international community, primarily through UN OCHA and the cluster system of international nongovernmental organizations, plus NATO countries and regional allies.
- Streamline standing HADR diplomatic agreements and MOUs in anticipation of crises.
- Support institutional capacity improvement of regional partners.
- Leverage the HADR efforts of the US National Guard State Partnership Program.
- Increase the use of public-private partnerships.

### Education and Exercises

- Expand HADR education for the US workforce and partner nations.
- Develop and expand exercises to include more interagency and international tabletop exercise and simulations.
- Host additional conferences to review HADR practices, improve interoperability, and streamline and reduce logistical overlap in assistance provided.

as private- or public-sector organizations. The valuable exchange of ideas can help participants learn about the organizational and operational challenges they will face in their own duties. The relations built through the course also strengthen the network of contacts they can consult

in the future. COCOM HADR planners, with support from BHA, should provide at least one to two regional HADR conferences each year, and a broader interagency, international conference and tabletop exercise on HADR should be run periodically with USAID's BHA in the lead.



## Conclusion

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**H**umanitarian assistance and disaster relief are a combined national priority for the US government, and despite the US HADR program's many strengths, addressing its deficiencies is an urgent requirement. A further streamlined and updated HADR program will help the United States better provide immediate and tangible assistance to allies in need—while fortifying US credentials as a reliable long-term partner in all aspects of Western hemispheric security. Against a backdrop of US-China geostrategic competition, the United States should simultaneously strengthen its global comparative advantage and provide a public good.

Aside from the US HADR structure and procedures that already exist, this paper identifies two broad categories of humanitarian assistance that can be strengthened. It provides eight specific examples that US policymakers should examine to bolster HADR capacity, both within the US as well as with partner nations.

The United States and its partners have learned plenty from the two-year COVID-19 pandemic. The structural weaknesses and institutional deficiencies exposed during this period must be strengthened if US and LAC communities are going to be resilient in the face of future disasters. However, the pandemic may have been a harbinger of tougher conditions that the United States and its partners will face in the future. The HADR capacities of partner nations may well be stressed to their maximum capacity by the challenges that lie ahead.

Lastly, given the subtle but omnipresent global competition for hearts and minds between the United States and the PRC, Washington should clearly signal its intent to support LAC citizens in the critical periods that follow a natural or man-made disaster. If the United States does not communicate the beneficial HADR role it frequently plays around the globe, it is missing an important opportunity to showcase its strengths and serve its regional partners in addressing the shared goal of hemispheric security and prosperity.

## About the Authors

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**Retired Admiral Craig Faller** is a Distinguished Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center and Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. From 2018 to 2021, he commanded the US Southern Command in Miami, Florida, where he led a diverse team of seven thousand people with an annual operating budget of over \$1 billion. In this role, he enhanced Western Hemisphere security by building strong, trusted partnerships between the US military and Latin American and Caribbean security forces. His team rapidly responded to a myriad of complex security challenges including transnational criminal organizations, the Venezuela crisis, the global pandemic, and the August 2020 Haiti earthquake.



**Patrick Paterson, PhD**, is a professor of practice at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. A 1989 graduate of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, he retired from the US Navy as a commander in 2009. He completed his PhD in conflict resolution at Nova Southeastern University, where his research focused on negotiations with military institutions during postconflict transitions to democracy. He has a master's degree in national security studies from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, a master's equivalent from the Argentina Naval War College in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a master's degree in political science from the American University in Washington, DC.

## Appendix: Methodology

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**W**e drew from diverse sources in crafting this report: a roundtable discussion in August 2022, consultations with subject matter experts and representatives of US and international HADR organizations, and examination of archival material.

First, the coauthors' extensive personal experience in humanitarian operations and foreign disaster relief served as the impetus for the study. Retired Admiral Craig Faller was the commander of SOUTHCOM from November 2018 to October 2021. During his time at the helm, he and his team coordinated interagency and international responses to multiple disasters, including Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020, and the August 2021 Haiti earthquake. Patrick Paterson, PhD, is a retired Navy foreign area officer with extensive experience in the Americas and leads the HADR program at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at National Defense University. The Atlantic Council conducted a roundtable discussion on August 3, 2022, with fifteen external experts. Participants included Kevin Bostick, US Southern Command; William Campbell Falconí, Ayuda en Acción; Jeffrey Cimmino, Atlantic Council; Evan Ellis, PhD, US Army War College; Tommaso Fabbri, Doctors Without Borders; Cristina Huidobro, Metropolitan Region of Santiago de Chile; Lt. Col. Michael Jones, CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security; Jason Kaufmann, Hive International; Col. Omar Khan, Republic of Guyana; Rayan Koteiche, Doctors Without Borders; Leland Lazarus, US Southern Command; John Lyon, World Hope International; Jason Marczak, Atlantic Council; Elizabeth Riley, Caribbean

Disaster Emergency Management Agency; Mauricio Santoro, State University of Rio de Janeiro; Commodore Errington Shurland, Barbados Defence Force; and Ambassador Kevin Whitaker, Atlantic Council.

The combined research teams from the Atlantic Council and the Perry Center (including Isabel Bernhard, Sydney Knapp, and Pepe Zhang) also consulted six representatives from the US Southern Command and officials at USAID's BHA and UN OCHA's Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.. All individuals consulted beyond the August 3 roundtable have been granted anonymity.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank our external readers, who provided helpful suggestions on content and tone: Lt. Col. Michael Jones, executive director of CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS); Leland Lazarus, former special assistant and speechwriter to the commander of SOUTHCOM; and Commodore Errington Shurland, chief of staff of the Barbados Defence Force.

The archival material examined included after-action reports from HADR events, diplomatic cables, presidential executive orders and decisions, USAID manuals, military HADR doctrine, international accords, and journal articles addressing a wide range of humanitarian issues.

The Atlantic Council team thanks Jason Marczak, senior director of the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, for his editorial guidance and input.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Since 1946, the United States has provided an estimated \$1.1 trillion dollars of foreign aid to its partners. See US Agency for International Development (USAID), Foreign Assistance (website), <https://foreignassistance.gov/aid-trends>. For information on foreign aid provided by other countries, see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Development Finance Data (website), <http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/>.
- 2 Latin America and the Caribbean are widely accepted to be the region of the world most vulnerable to natural disasters, second only to the Asia-Pacific region. For example, the top ten earthquake, volcano, and hurricane events in the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took more than 638,000 lives.
- 3 This is metaphorically referred to as the “conflict trap.” See Angelika Rettberg, “The Legacies of Armed Conflict on Lasting Peace and Development in Latin America,” in *Implementing the 2030 Agenda: The Challenge of Conflict*, UN Chronicle 52, no. 4 (April 2015), 26-28; Paul Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, World Bank Policy Research Report No. 56793 (Washington: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/13938/567930PUBObrea10Box353739B01PUBLIC1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
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- 5 US doctrine distinguishes between HADR and foreign disaster relief (FDR). For purposes of simplicity, this report uses the term HADR to refer to humanitarian responses to natural or man-made disasters in foreign countries. See the *US Government Compendium of Interagency and Associated Terms* for the subtle distinctions between the two terms. The principal manual for HADR operations is the USAID Field Operations Guide for Disaster Assessment and Response, September 2005, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/fog\\_v4\\_0.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/fog_v4_0.pdf). See also, for example, “Foreign Humanitarian Assistance,” Joint Publication 3-29, US Department of Defense (DOD), May 14, 2019, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_29.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_29.pdf); DOD Directive 5100.46, Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR), July 6, 2012; and US Department of Defense, “DOD Support to Foreign Disaster Relief (FDR): Handbook for the JTF Commander and Below,” July 13, 2011, <https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/disaster.pdf>.
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- 7 US Secretary of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States*, 6, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.
- 8 The United States maintains public records on the humanitarian assistance it provides to other countries; see, for example, the helpful Foreign Assistance Dashboard on the USAID and State Department homepage, <https://foreignassistance.gov/>.
- 9 Formerly known as the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the name was changed to the Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) in 2020.
- 10 BHA Fact Sheet, 2022, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/BHA\\_Fact\\_Sheet-FY2022.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-01/BHA_Fact_Sheet-FY2022.pdf); also see the BHA Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/BHA-AR-FY2021.pdf>.
- 11 See a flowchart of the US response sequence to HADR requests from foreign countries in “Foreign Humanitarian Assistance,” Joint Publication 3-29, II-21.
- 12 Data on Chinese humanitarian aid comes from the AidData research lab at William and Mary University’s Global Research Institute in Williamsburg, Virginia, <https://www.aiddata.org/>; US data are from “Humanitarian Snapshot: USAID/BHA in Latin America and the Caribbean, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021,” <https://www.usaid.gov/document/usaiddha-latin-america-and-caribbean-fy2021>.
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- 24 Lazarus, “The ‘Pivot to Asia’ Should Include Climate Action.”
- 25 The US government can offer bilateral security assistance, such as the 333 Program, to countries but not to RSS, CDEMA, or CARICOM. Being able to do so would help strengthen those regional organizations for both security missions and HADR.
- 26 National Guard State Partnership Program (website), <https://www.nationalguard.mil/leadership/joint-staff/j-5/international-affairs-division/state-partnership-program/>.
- 27 Telephone conversation of the author with US Southern Command J7/9 personnel, Oct 24, 2022.
- 28 The Indo-Pacific Command uses the Pacific Angel program.
- 29 According to BHA officials, the course is offered about one hundred times per year to educate the US HADR workforce on the country’s FDR program and structure. On average, about twenty-five to thirty participants are involved in each session.
- 30 The Foreign Military Training Report is a congressionally mandated annual summary of all security cooperation programs offered to US partner nations. The reports list every country in the world where the United States has conducted training, the specific training that was conducted, how many foreign personnel were trained, the type of training, and the cost of the training. The reports can be read on the State Department website, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-military-training-and-dod-engagement-activities-of-interest/>. Reports from before 2016 are in the State Department archives, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/fmtrpt/index.htm>.



- 31 The William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies is the regional academic center for SOUTHCOM and for the US Northern Command. Located on the campus of the National Defense University at Fort McNair in Washington, the center offers academic courses and seminars in both Spanish and English on a range of security- and defense-related matters including HADR.
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- 34 The president may authorize the secretary of defense to make exceptions to the rule of providing OHDACA funds directly to partner nation military forces. Chapter 12 of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency’s Security Assistance Management Manual (aka the Green Book) is the primary reference for OHDACA funds; see <https://samm.dsca.mil/chapter/chapter-12#C12.1>.
- 35 The authors have contended that more flexibility in the application of ODHACA and security cooperation should be delegated to the COCOM level. Most partner nations are not organized in the same manner as the US military and having flexibility and speed to respond to their needs helps build capacity, capability, and trust. SOUTHCOM forwarded a legislative proposal to create a small-dollar, flexible military assistance program (MAP) to enhance partner nation military capacity building with a focus on HADR.



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