

Security Challenges Facing the Dominican Republic and the Government Response

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Introduction

From September 24-28, 2023, a trip was made to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to present a paper on crime and violence in the Caribbean at a forum organized by Funglode,² one of the country's leading think tanks. As part of this visit, he held a dialogue with a wide range of former and current security personnel and other experts on the security challenges facing the nation.

The Dominican Republic's economy, closely linked to that of the United States (U.S.) through geography, family ties and the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR),³ is one of the fastest growing in the region.⁴ Despite the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic,⁵ tourism has recovered remarkably. The country has a vibrant democratic political culture and, unlike many of its Caribbean and Central American neighbors with whom it shares close linguistic and cultural ties, has managed to maintain significantly lower levels of violence and gang activity.

However, these positive indicators are complemented by a set of significant and multidimensional challenges that are mutually reinforcing, threatening its security and political and economic viability. In the context of severe economic, fiscal and political distortions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic,⁶ these challenges include economic stresses stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine (reaching 8% in 2022, before falling to 4% this year),⁷ climate change, among other factors, as well as a growing flow of illicit goods and funds fueling violence and criminality, primarily undermining the nation's institutions. These challenges are compounded by the growing crisis of governance and violence in neighboring Haiti, with multiple spillover effects in the Dominican Republic.

Strategic Context

In its security situation, the Dominican Republic is beset by the same mutually reinforcing challenges affecting the Caribbean and the region at large.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic not only had an unprecedented effect in terms of mortality, but also altered the economic structure of the country and its neighbors, destroying small businesses and pushing the population into the informal sector. These tensions were compounded by the inflationary effects already noted of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which increased the prices of basic foodstuffs and fuel, affecting the most vulnerable segments of the population. Arguably, this combination of pressures expanded the number of people willing to engage in criminal enterprises, including

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money laundering. In addition, the pandemic affected the government's subsequent fiscal balances,⁹ thereby limiting the nation's ability to spend on development, social programs for the needy, law enforcement and the judicial system in response to changing security threats.

Like the rest of the region, the Dominican Republic also experienced the effects of climate change, evidenced by an increase in the number of hurricanes and tropical storms. The year 2020 set a record for the region,¹⁰ and subsequent years brought major storms affecting the country, such as Hurricane Fiona, which caused significant damage in the eastern part of the island in September 2022.¹¹

It has also been affected by the correspondent banking crisis, following the financial collapse of 2007,¹² although high confidence in the Dominican Republic's banking system meant that the correspondent banking de-risking dynamics have not been as severe as in other parts of the region.

Similarly, it is suffering the consequences of the outflow of immigrants from Venezuela, especially given its affinity as the most important Spanish-speaking economy in the Caribbean. An estimated 121,000 Venezuelans currently reside in the country.¹³ However, the tide of Venezuelan migrants heading to the Dominican Republic has diminished in the last two years and, according to people consulted for this paper, the perceived impact on Dominican society has dissipated, due to the Abinader administration's policies facilitating the regularization of the migratory situation of Venezuelans.¹⁴

Due to its geographic location, which places it between South America's largest drug producers and major consumer markets in the US and Europe, it has long been a transit nation for narcotics,¹⁵ which has contributed to corruption and criminal activity. Prior to 2010, when the government acquired Super Tucano interceptor planes, drug flights sometimes landed on Dominican highways to drop off their merchandise or dumped drug packages into the sea to be retrieved by accomplices operating from the ground.¹⁶

Colombia's growing cocaine production, especially following the 2016¹⁷ peace accords and with the expansive policies of Gustavo Petro's government, increased from 24% of potential production in the last year alone,¹⁸ according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).¹⁹

The extensive collaboration of members of Venezuela's authoritarian government with organized crime added another challenge.²⁰ Venezuela went from being a transit country to becoming a cocaine-producing region with numerous laboratories.²¹

The combination of increased cocaine shipments from the Dominican Republic's southern neighbors Venezuela and Colombia, along with other illicit funds entering

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the country from activities such as illegal mining in the Orinoco region,²² has put a strain on the Dominican institutional fabric, particularly its law enforcement agencies. Reflecting the current increase in drug transit, more than twice as many drugs were intercepted in 2022 alone as in 2020 (31 metric tons).²³ In the first five months of the year, the National Drug Control Directorate (DNCD) had already seized 17 metric tons,²⁴ which places 2023 as another record year. In April 2023 alone, seizures surpassed the total for 2018 and 2019 combined.²⁵

Due to its geographic location in the center of the Caribbean, the increase in drug flows through the Dominican Republic was also exacerbated by increased demand for cocaine from Europe²⁶ and the concomitant involvement of European criminal organizations in the movement of drugs from source countries such as Colombia and Venezuela to the Old Continent.

Crime and Insecurity in the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic is caught in the destructive interplay between youth gangs, illicit flows and weapons, which affects the Caribbean in general,²⁷ albeit in a different way compared to its Caribbean neighbors. The homicide rate of 11.9% per 100,000 inhabitants,²⁸ is modest compared to other areas of the Caribbean,²⁹ including neighboring countries such as Jamaica, with a rate of 52.9% per 100,000 inhabitants,³⁰ Trinidad and Tobago, with 39.4% murders per 100,000 inhabitants,³¹ and Haiti, which is mired in violence and chaos.

In addition, the perception of insecurity is due, in part, to the fact that its homicide rate increased in recent years, from 9.2 murders per 100,000 people in 2020,³² to 11.9 per 100,000 in 2022.³³ According to security experts interviewed for this paper, this is expected to reach 13.6 per 100,000 in 2023. High-profile crimes and media coverage contributed to a sense of heightened insecurity among the Dominican population.

In contrast to other parts of the Caribbean, where the role of firearms in murders and other crimes has become a major political issue,³⁴ the prevalence of firearms in crimes committed in the Dominican Republic has not received as much attention. This is particularly troubling compared to its high-violence³⁵ neighbors such as Jamaica³⁶ and Trinidad and Tobago.³⁷ Nevertheless, statistics on the use of firearms in homicides are in line with the rest of the region, where half of all murders involve the use of a firearm.³⁸ In the case of the Dominican Republic, of the 1,632 homicides registered in 2022, 968, distributed in conflictive areas such as Villa Mella, Los Guaricanos and Herrera, were committed with firearms.³⁹

It should be noted that firearms were strictly controlled during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo Molinas (1930-1961), although the legal regime was relaxed with his fall and firearms ownership gradually expanded in the following years. In the late 2010s, the military and police made efforts to reduce the number of illicit firearms, including a special organization within the Dominican Republic's Attorney General's Office dedicated to combating arms trafficking.⁴⁰

Evolution of the Narcotrafficking Challenge

Despite, or perhaps because of, their location as a transit hub for drugs flowing from South American source countries to the US and Europe,⁴¹ Dominican groups have traditionally been intermediaries rather than major players in the drug trade. Major mid-level criminal bosses based in the country, such as Jose Figueroa Agosta⁴² in the 1990s and early 2000s (actually Puerto Rican), and Cesar Peralta⁴³ in the 2010s, were the exception.

As noted above, growing drug production in Colombia and Venezuela increased the trafficking of cocaine and other illicit products. These flows had a corrupting impact on the country and its law enforcement system, which has long struggled with corruption and other institutional problems.⁴⁴

Due to its geographic position, the country has been the scene of struggles between powerful Colombian and Mexican groups. In recent years, as in other parts of the region, representatives of the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación cartels have established a strong position. The Sinaloa cartel, in particular, has begun to introduce fentanyl into the Dominican market,⁴⁵ in combination with other products, although authorities claim that there is no indication of a significant fentanyl problem in the territory as yet.⁴⁶ Given the highly lethal nature of fentanyl and its health effects, combined with the limited capabilities of Dominican authorities to deal with it,⁴⁷ the potential impact on Dominican criminal dynamics and society are serious.

As demand for cocaine and other drugs from Europe increased,⁴⁸ the Dominican Republic, including the high-volume port of Caucedo, has become a strategic hub for drug shipments destined for Europe,⁴⁹ inviting representatives of European criminal organizations to operate in the process.

Over time, the payment-in-kind approach by drug traffickers fueled a growing drug consumption problem and local illicit economies linked to such micro-trafficking.⁵⁰ The multiple people and money involved in each local sales point, within the specific areas where drugs are bought, sold and consumed, contribute to a wider community of gangs and illicit actors.⁵¹ Taken together, these drug outlets have contributed to the deterioration of Dominican communities facing economic and other problems, as discussed above.

Gangs in the Dominican Republic

In previous decades, U.S.-based Dominican gangs such as the Latin Kings, the Trinitarios, the Bloods and the Crips, among others,⁵² played a key role in the distribution of drugs moving through the region to the East Coast of the U.S. territory. In parallel to the situation of Jamaican gangs like the Shower Posse,⁵³ the power and wealth of Dominican gangs, leveraging similar connections to ethnic diasporas in the

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US,⁵⁴ began to create a problem within the Dominican Republic itself.⁵⁵ By the mid-2010s, however, the government got the problem under control.⁵⁶

Today, however, security sector officials consulted for this paper indicate that gangs are beginning to re-emerge,⁵⁷ fueled by the micro-trafficking phenomenon noted above.

Haiti

Despite the serious problems that drug trafficking poses for the Dominican Republic, the descent into violence and chaos in neighboring Haiti, with which it shares the island of Hispaniola, has become, without a doubt, the country's main political and security concern.

In Haiti, more than 200 gangs,⁵⁸ operating in coalition, especially the G9 and G-PEP,⁵⁹ have come to control 80% or more of the capital, Port-au-Prince,⁶⁰ and a considerable part of the rest of the national territory. Their capabilities exceed those of the demoralized and under-resourced Haitian National Police.⁶¹ Kidnapping, extortion and their internal struggle for territorial control have made it almost impossible to move food and fuel for generators from the ports to the areas where they are needed.⁶² Rampant and crippling kidnappings and other acts of violence,⁶³ forced the withdrawal of many non-governmental organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF),⁶⁴ that were meeting the basic needs of Haitians as the economy collapsed. It is estimated that more than half of the Haitian population suffers from some level of severe malnutrition.⁶⁵ Compounding the violence and lawlessness, vigilante organizations such as Bwa Kale have tried to take matters into their own hands,⁶⁶ launching a campaign of assassinations and other punitive actions against actual and suspected gang members.⁶⁷

For Haiti, the thriving economy of the neighboring Dominican Republic was, for a long time, a source of employment, food and other necessary goods. As Haiti has descended into chaos, increasing desperation has affected the Dominican side in multiple ways. Although the increasingly powerful Haitian gangs do not typically engage in violence on the Dominican side of the border, according to those interviewed for this paper, many use the Dominican Republic as a repository for their money, a base for planning operations, and a safe zone for the families of the gang leaders. As the situation worsened in Haiti, there have also been some incidents of kidnappings and crimes related to these groups in the Dominican Republic.⁶⁸

The border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti has traditionally been considered "porous".⁶⁹ Currently, there are six official checkpoints, from north to south: Monte Cristi, Manzanillo, Dajabón, Elías Pina, Jimaní (the closest to Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital) and Pedernales. As with similar border crossings between the U.S. and Mexico, the high volume of people and goods passing through the official border crossing between the Dominican Republic and Haiti makes control difficult.⁷⁰ In addition, there are numerous "informal" border crossings between the two

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countries ("blind crossings").⁷¹ At both formal and informal border crossings, the people interviewed for this study report that bribery facilitates the movement of people and goods even when controls are in place.

In the Dominican Republic, those consulted see the situation in Haiti as a serious threat to the country through the effects of violence,⁷² refugees, and other dynamics. The lens through which many Dominicans view Haiti is tinged by a difficult history on the shared island of Hispaniola, which included a brutal 22-year invasion from 1822 to 1844,⁷³ in which Haitian occupiers effectively tried to eliminate Dominican language, cultural, religious, and other traditions. The historical legacy includes repeated invasion attempts by Haiti in the years after the Dominicans gained independence from them. In addition, a modern history in which instability in Haiti and associated crime and the spread of diseases such as cholera have been an ongoing problem, despite the fact that the Dominican Republic has benefited from Haitian labor and trade during the same period. Many in the Dominican Republic feel that the international community is insensitive to the many problems that instability in Haiti has caused the Dominican Republic over the years, slow to act meaningfully to address the Haitian crisis and its detrimental effects on the region,⁷⁴ but quick to judge Dominican attitudes and policies towards Haiti.⁷⁵

The impact of the Haitian crisis on the Dominican Republic intensified in September 2023, when Haitian groups seeking water for irrigation began building a large canal to divert water from the Masacre River,⁷⁶ which begins and ends in the Dominican Republic and defines part of the country's border, but briefly enters Haitian territory off Dajabón. Although the canal had initially been the subject of some consultation by the Haitians with their Dominican counterparts, the size of the canal that Haiti intended to build threatened to divert virtually all of the water from the Masacre River, which would affect agriculture and sustainability downstream on the Dominican side, in addition to having serious environmental consequences.⁷⁷ Ariel Henry's government in Haiti was initially unable to manage the canal activities on its side, and eventually aligned its position with gang leaders such as G9 leader "Barbecue"⁷⁸ who advocated for the canal, even as Barbecue promised an armed revolt against Henry.⁷⁹ The Abinader government completely closed the border on September 15, 2023.⁸⁰

The effects of the border closure on both sides were severe, due to the economic interdependence in the border region, subject to an estimated annual economic exchange of US\$1 billion.⁸¹ The impact on the Haitian side was especially severe given the crisis in its economy and the need to rely on the Dominican Republic for basic goods and income from labor services. The actions precipitated riots and protests on the Haitian side.⁸² International attention to the closure was compounded because, deliberately or not, it occurred while Dominican President Abinader, Haitian President Ariel Henry⁸³ and other international leaders were gathered in New York for the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, where the activity became the focus of worldwide attention.

The Dominican Government Response

Compared to its neighboring Caribbean partners, the Dominican Republic has a relatively large and capable security apparatus, including the national police, the army, the anti-narcotics directorate (DNCD) and other bodies. The government's response to security challenges has been hampered by corruption and institutional weaknesses, although successive governments have worked in partnership with neighbors such as the United States to remedy such deficiencies.⁸⁴

With respect to corruption, those interviewed for this paper generally agreed that the Abinader administration has made great strides in cleaning up government organizations in the security sector and other sectors, although much work remains to be done. Currently, the Abinader government is pursuing multiple cases of public corruption involving \$740 million in embezzlement and/or bribes.⁸⁵ Operation Calamar,⁸⁶ which arrested individuals close to former President Danilo Medina, and Operation Anti-Pulpo,⁸⁷ which included former President Medina's son Jose as a key target,⁸⁸ illustrate both the scope of the challenge and the current government's work to clean up institutional corruption.

Dominican National Police

The Dominican National Police⁸⁹ is a force of approximately 36,000 people, including administrative personnel, currently under the command of Police Major General Eduardo Alberto Thien.⁹⁰ Although it possesses substantial capabilities, over the years, the organization has struggled to manage corruption within its ranks.⁹¹ In one survey, 47% of people who had contact with the Dominican police reported being pressured to pay a bribe.⁹² Police reform was one of the main priorities announced by the current president,⁹³ Luis Abinader, upon taking office. During his administration, some 5,000 agents have been forced to leave their posts due to corruption-related measures. In this regard, the military has come to direct, support or supervise a wide variety of police functions in the country.

Dominican Republic Military

The armed forces of the Dominican Republic,⁹⁴ currently under the command of the Minister of Defense, Carlos Díaz Morfa,⁹⁵ are a capable force with significant weight in Dominican politics dating back to the era of the Trujillo dictatorship (1930-1961). As noted in the previous section, the Dominican military is involved in a wide range of security functions, from the traditional responsibilities of defending the nation's sovereignty against external threats, to border control, counter-narcotics and internal security functions, among others.

Article 252 of the 2010 Constitution of the Dominican Republic establishes⁹⁶ that the military is the guarantor of national security and may be used for internal security and other matters when the capacity of other institutions has been exceeded. It also creates a vehicle for the military's role in public security by authorizing the creation

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of "specialized agencies" by the president. Within this constitutional and legal framework, the military has assumed a role in numerous internal security functions, roughly doubling its strength in the process.

Specialized military organizations in the Dominican Republic include the Border control organization (CESFronT), the specialized organization for Airport Security (CESAC), the military port security organization (CESEP), a military organization for metro security (CESMET), a military organization for protection of Dominican forest and other environment (SENEPA); and a specialized body for the protection of public spaces (CIUTRAN).

The Dominican government is also creating a new "public security corps" for the protection of public infrastructure such as financial buildings and schools, replacing the former "mixed" police-military corps that performed this function. In addition, other important public agencies, such as the Tourism Police (POLITUR) are also run by the military. From the point of view of the Dominican military, assignment to one of the "specialized corps" is attractive because those assigned receive a "second salary" corresponding to their participation.

To specify more clearly the missions of the armed forces, including their overall strategy and responsibility to other parts of the government, the Dominican military has recently completed a Defense White Paper,⁹⁷ long in the making, through a team led by Brigadier General Justo del Orbe. The work includes traditional areas of interest as well as important new areas such as cyber defense.

In response to the challenges posed to the nation by narcotics flows, insecurity and the Haiti crisis, among others, the Abinader government has acquired a significant number of additional military capabilities. These include a range of vehicles, such as the purchase of 24 Spanish VAMTAC ST5 armored vehicles for additional mobility along the border, delivered in September 2023.⁹⁸ It also includes the acquisition of four British twin-engine Leonardo AW169 helicopters,⁹⁹ and plans to procure 10 additional fixed-wing aircraft for surveillance and other missions.¹⁰⁰ These newly acquired vehicles¹⁰¹ and aircraft complement the 305 vehicles obtained by the Abinader government in 2022, including 7 buses, 70 minibuses, 49 trucks, 64 vans and SUVs, 104 motorcycles and one off-road vehicle.¹⁰²

The new assets also complement a significant existing vehicle base, including 8 CJ-8 jeeps provided by the U.S. in 2021,¹⁰³ as well as other vehicles, eight Super Tucano fixed-wing interceptor aircraft acquired in 2009,¹⁰⁴ two Cessna 208 fixed-wing aircraft for detection and surveillance,¹⁰⁵ among other uses, 11 UH-1 Huey single-engine helicopters,¹⁰⁶ a substantial fleet of patrol boats, many of them U.S.-supplied.

The military has expanded its capabilities in the south of the country, the destination of much of the drug flows coming from the Caribbean, mainly from Colombia and Venezuela. The Dominican Air Force established a new base in the southern city of Barahona,¹⁰⁷ next to the Maria Montes International Airport. This military air base is

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expected to solve radar coverage problems in the region, due to the "shadows" created by the mountainous terrain. Additionally, other Dominican agencies, such as the National Intelligence Directorate (DNI) and the National Drug Control Directorate (DNCD), have established a joint operations center at the airport.

In reaction to growing insecurity, the Dominican government also turned to electronic measures, such as installing network cameras in public spaces and modernizing its 911 emergency response system,¹⁰⁸ in part with donations of equipment from the People's Republic of China (RPC).¹⁰⁹

DNCD

The National Anti-Drug Organization (DNCD),¹¹⁰ currently under the command of Vice Admiral José Cabrera Ulloa,¹¹¹ is the Dominican Republic's main agency to combat transregional narcotics moving through the country and its surrounding airspace and waters. The DNCD works closely with its US counterpart, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and other US federal entities. In particular, the US works with units that have been vetted from a rights perspective. human rights and corruption, including through polygraph tests.

Furthermore, the DNCD has a considerable number of assets and capabilities, including aircraft and ships confiscated from criminals under laws that allow the State to confiscate such assets after due process.

Also, in coordination with other Dominican authorities, it operates customs scanners in the country's main airports and in the ports of greatest commercial importance, such as Caucedo and Haina.¹¹² While the DNCD focuses especially on narcotics shipments throughout the country, the police have the primary responsibility of combating micro-trafficking within the nation. Unfortunately, after a scandal in 2014 in which the head of the narcotics directorate of the DICAN police, Carlos Fernández Valerio, was arrested for complicity with drug traffickers,¹¹³ including the release of a shipment of 950 kg of cocaine previously seized by the police,¹¹⁴ the DICAN organization was dissolved, leaving the country without an effective capacity against microtrafficking.

Financial Analysis Unit

Despite, or in response to, the corrupting influence of the substantial drug trafficking resources flowing through the country, the Dominican Republic has a highly respected Financial Analysis Unit (UAF),¹¹⁵ headed by Aileen Guzmán Coste.¹¹⁶ After successfully satisfying the requirements of the Edgemont group, she was admitted to the organization in February 2019.¹¹⁷

The UAF works together with multiple other Dominican entities in the fight against money laundering and other financial crimes, including the Superintendency of Banks, the Superintendency of the Securities Market, the Public Ministry and others.

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The UAF and the country's vehicles for monitoring the financial system against illicit activities are considered to comply with the recommendations of its international counterpart organization, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The Dominican UAF conducts investigations, identifying financial crimes and is technically independent from the Attorney General's Office that makes decisions and pursues law enforcement actions, a separation that, while consistent with practices in the region, has created challenges and issues of coordination and moving cases forward.

Border Security: CESFRONT, the Military and the Border Wall

CESFRONT, currently under the command of Colonel Freddy Soto,¹¹⁸ is responsible for controlling the six formal border checkpoints along the Dominican-Haitian border. Their role has become increasingly important as the Haitian crisis and associated migration issues have increased in importance in recent years. As with the DNCD, in the field of the fight against drug trafficking, the amount of illicit trafficking and people who cross the border daily generates constant corrupting pressures that CESFRONT must strive to control.

In border supervision, CESFRONT's work consists of controlling the six official checkpoints at the border crossing.¹¹⁹ CESFRONT's work in managing these border crossings is complemented by the deployment of the army to defend the area between them, including the aforementioned informal crossings ("blind crossings"). Personnel for these operations come primarily from battalions of the three army brigades closest to the border: the Third Brigade in San Juan, west of the Dominican Republic; the Fourth Brigade in Mao, in the Northwest of the country; and the Fifth Brigade in Barahona, to the South.

The Dominican military also uses a contingent of Army special forces, located near the First Brigade headquarters in Santo Domingo, as a quick reaction force to support the work of the other battalions assigned to the border. The people consulted for this study indicate, however, that the special forces unit of the Dominican Republic Army, assigned to border responsibilities, has only needed to intervene occasionally. As the situation in Haiti has deteriorated, Abinader's government has used the newly acquired vehicles mentioned above, including its VAMTAC ST5 trucks, to reinforce the border with greater mobility for soldiers there.

To complement these military forces in border control, since February 2022,¹²⁰ Abinader's government has been rapidly building a wall along the country's 173-mile border, scheduled for completion in November 2023. The wall is much lower than corresponding structures on the US-Mexico border, and consists of a concrete block bottom topped by barbed wire, complemented by cameras and other sensors,¹²¹ as well as manned surveillance towers.

According to the Dominican experts consulted, to date the initial works on the wall have focused on the areas close to the checkpoints and in the north and south of

the country, leaving for later the construction of more difficult structures in the mountainous center of the border region.

The speed of construction appears to have been facilitated by the relatively limited incidence of private ownership of land along the border, which has made the government's acquisition and use of the necessary territory relatively more faster than with corresponding public works projects that cross public lands. Dominican authorities emphasize that the wall is a first attempt and a barrier that is both symbolic and physical. According to security officials, the Haitians began cutting the wire along some sections of the wall to cross. Analysts are concerned that the concrete block construction could make the wall vulnerable to erosion in heavy rains, in certain areas, during the Dominican rainy season.

CIUTRAN

CIUTRAN was created under the Administration of President Leonel Fernández to complement the police forces and increase the feeling of citizen security in the main urban areas, including Santo Domingo and, later, Santiago.¹²² In June 2022, Abinader's government launched the "Mi País Seguro" program,¹²³ within the framework of CIUTRAN, as a joint military police operation against citizen insecurity. It is worth mentioning that CIUTRAN deployment is usually expanded during holidays to increase perceived security in public spaces.

Although it has made important contributions to public security in the Dominican Republic, CIUTRAN still has a number of challenges. The force's military personnel do not have the same detention authorities as civilian police. Additionally, several governments have made efforts to ensure that the equipment and training available to deployed soldiers is consistent with the level of interaction they have with the Dominican public. The rotation of the organization's command between the branches of the Armed Forces every three months creates, in turn, some difficulties with respect to the continuity of command.

The Dominican Prison System

The management of crime and public insecurity in the Dominican Republic is complicated by a prison system that is 64% overcrowded and managed by multiple organizations,¹²⁴ due to the incomplete comprehensive reform of the prison system that began during the administration of President Lionel Fernández.

The country has a small number of prisons, under the regime established by Fernández, designed to promote rehabilitation. This system is based in Moca. Likewise, the prisons associated with it are managed by the Public Ministry, without police or military personnel inside.

The Dominican Republic also has 12 large prisons, under the old punitive-oriented system. Six are controlled by the national police: Victoria, Barahona, Santiago, Mao, Puerto Plata and El Quince. The other six, by the Army: Seibo, Iguey, Moca, La Vega,

San Juan and Aqua. On the other hand, police-controlled prisons tend to be larger and newer, while Army-controlled facilities, built from the fortifications of walled cities during the Trujillo dictatorship, tend to be smaller and with harsher traditions.

U.S Support

The United States is a long-standing partner of the Dominican Republic in development, security and other areas. The program in the Dominican Republic was one of the first established by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), currently ongoing for more than 60 years.¹²⁵

US support for the security sector is part of, but is not limited to, the 2010 Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI). Through the CBSI, the U.S. has provided \$953 million in assistance to the region,¹²⁶ across multiple program channels, from the program's inception through the end of fiscal year 2022. \$64.5 million has been requested additional dollars for fiscal year 2024.¹²⁷ The commitment is also determined by Public Law 114-291,¹²⁸ passed by Congress in December 2016, which directs, among other provisions, the U.S. Department of State to maintain a strategy towards the region.¹²⁹ In addition to training and institutional support, the State Department and the North American armed forces assisted the Dominican authorities in the acquisition of interceptor boats, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft for surveillance, interception or other missions, to complement those acquired by the Dominican government by other means. Recent US gifts include twelve Zodiac Milpro FC470 inflatable boats,¹³⁰ received in March 2023, two TH-67 Creek helicopters¹³¹ and two Bell UH1-H Super Huey IIs,¹³² provided in February 2023 from US military surplus. The US has also been coordinating with the Dominican military to provide another six twin-engine Huey II helicopters¹³³ to replace some of the fleet's older vehicles, although the previously mentioned Dominican purchase of the four British Leonardo helicopters may have made those discussions moot.

Additionally, the US helped the Dominican Navy acquire 15 Boston Whaler patrol boats,¹³⁴ Metal Shark patrol boats, and was in talks to provide it with up to three 87-foot Coast Guard cruisers from military surplus. Although problems with boat maintenance ultimately prevented the deal from being consummated, the U.S. is currently seeking to provide the Dominicans with a 110-foot patrol boat and possibly a 210-foot vessel from military surplus.

The US is currently working to provide the Dominican military with improved communications and navigation/location capabilities, across its assets, starting on the southeastern coast and eventually extending to the eastern part of the island and the border. land agreement with Haiti, to be completed in 2027. The U.S. is also helping to provide the Dominican military with advanced communications equipment for its Super Tucano interceptor aircraft and interceptor vessels. On the horizon of 2027, the US is working to provide the country with maritime radar to support the detection and interception of drug trafficking flights, as well as other security and rescue functions.

Beyond equipment, a significant number of Dominican military personnel are sent to training courses in the US, including those at the Western Hemisphere National Security Institute (WHINSEC), in addition to providing training in the country, through institutions such as the William J. Perry Center (WJPC), training and exercise equipment.

The US also provides daily support to the Dominican military, including a high-level maritime advisor, who supports the operation of the fleet and the planning and integration of new capabilities. The U.S. is currently working to help the Dominican Armed Forces strengthen its long-term budgeting process, to avoid the need to regularly draw on special allocations of funds from the Presidency, as well as to meet procurement and modernization of forces.

The Dominican military has also played a regular role in exercises to reinforce regional security and humanitarian coordination. In June 2023, they hosted the Fuerzas Commandos regional special forces competition,¹³⁵ which included a visit from the Commanding General of the US Southern Command, General Laura Richardson, who met with the Dominican Minister of Defense, General Carlos Diaz Morfa. The Dominican military also participated in the regional exercise Tradewinds from July 15 to 27,¹³⁶ organized by Guyana, as well as in the UNITAS naval exercise in Colombia in July 2023.¹³⁷ In November 2022, the Dominican military hosted the multinational exercise in their country Continuing Promise, which included a visit to the US military hospital ship USNS Comfort,¹³⁸ as well as the USS Milwaukee, among others.¹³⁹

Beyond military-to-military engagement, the U.S. provides additional support to the security sector, both to the military and other agencies such as the DNCD, through State Department-funded programs in areas ranging from enforcement from the law to pilot training.

The Path Forward

The Dominican Republic's central location in the Caribbean makes it a logical target for the activities of drug traffickers, as well as geopolitical rivals to the US, including the PRC. The same centrality makes the Dominican Republic strategic with respect to its prosperity and good governance, and its willingness to maintain its close partnership with the US and like-minded democratic partners with respect to security cooperation. It is imperative that the United States, in its work with current and future governments, demonstrate that democratic governance can succeed in addressing major security and development challenges, and that the United States is a faithful partner. in that sense.

The Biden Administration has committed to working with the US Congress to provide \$100 million in support of a new multinational peacekeeping force in Haiti.¹⁴⁰ This force was accepted by the UN Security Council on October 2.¹⁴¹ It is in the strategic

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interest of the US to play a leadership role, alongside the Dominican Republic, and participate in the Kenyan-led multinational force as it trains and deploys.

With respect to the fight against organized crime, it is equally vital that the U.S. continue its close collaboration with Dominican authorities, providing them not only with physical capabilities such as aircraft, vessels, radars, and communications and sensor packages, but with advice and support to ensure that Dominicans can maintain and make the best use of the physical assets they acquire, and the personnel that the US helps train. It could also be said that the US can do more with respect to helping the Dominican Republic in strengthening its institutions, and in its fight against corruption, by continuing to provide both resources and technical means, leveraging the will of the government of Abinader to take the difficult measures that such a path requires.

For the Dominican government, making the most of the partnership with the US will also require continued engagement with North America on difficult issues such as streamlining its system of planning, acquiring and maintaining security capabilities. The continuity of programs between governments, to the extent possible, will greatly contribute to the progress of the Dominican government.

Beyond security issues, the Dominican Republic, with its proximity to the US and its privileged access to the US market through the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), is a logical hub, along with Mexico, to benefit from “nearshoring”¹⁴² reinvestments by companies seeking to locate closer to the US market and reduce the vulnerabilities of PRC-based companies in their supply chains.

The Caribbean and Latin America, in general, are going through a time of unprecedented pressures in the areas of security and the economy, which endanger the continuity of their good governance. In the Dominican Republic, the US has a strategically critical and collaborative partner. It is important that the US helps its neighbor succeed and, in the process, sends the message that the commitment to its country as a partner and to democratic processes, despite its challenges, is well done.

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