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# Peru's Complex Security Challenges and the Government Response

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## Summary

Peru is facing a profound, mutually reinforcing crisis of insecurity, criminality, and corruption, driven primarily by expanding illicit economies—namely illegal mining and cocaine production—that leverage and deepen institutional weakness. Illegal mining, fueled by high gold prices and used for money laundering, has become the top illicit revenue source, corrupting the political landscape. This cycle of crime, facilitated by small, fragmented family clans and external groups (Mexican, European, Chinese), fuels dramatic spikes in urban violence, extortion, and kidnapping, notably in Lima, partially exacerbated by the tactics of splintered Venezuelan gangs.

The Peruvian government is struggling to mount a unified institutional response due to poor intelligence sharing and systematic capability challenges. Despite this, security forces are undertaking major anti-crime and counter-narcotics operations, restructuring commands, and investing heavily in defense modernization, primarily through a strategic partnership with South Korea. Key acquisitions include armored vehicles and an F-16 Block 70-led competition for interceptor fighters. The persistence of these corrosive forces threatens Peru's democratic stability and requires greater strategic engagement from partners like the U.S.

**Keywords:** Illegal Mining, Organized Crime, Corruption, Cocaine Production, Urban Violence, Institutional Weakness, Security Response, Defense Modernization.

## Introduction

From September 13 through 21, 2025, the author traveled to Lima, Peru for an event bring them together faculty from the US Army War College and it's alumni from Peru and across the region. There, he spoke to a wide range of Peruvian security experts about the country's challenges and the response of its government and security forces. This work relays the insights from those conversations.

Peru is currently beset by a troubling array of mutually reinforcing and deepening problems involving insecurity, criminality, and corruption,<sup>2</sup> threatening the long-term prosperity, stability and democratic governance of the country. Peru is plagued by destructive interactions between expanding illicit economies involving drugs, mining,

illegal logging, other contraband,<sup>3</sup> as well as extortion and kidnapping. These dynamics involve a fragmented array of criminal family clans,<sup>4</sup> responding to external demands, and sometimes facilitated by external criminal groups from Mexico, Brazil, Europe, China, and elsewhere. These activities leverage the weakness of Peruvian institutions, high rates of corruption and informality, and in the process contribute to that dysfunctionality. That informality and institutional weakness also make combating the money flows of criminal groups almost impossible.

### **The Dimensions of Organized Crime and Criminal Violence in Peru**

At the heart of the destructive cycle in Peru is the synergy between the production in export of cocaine, illegal mining,<sup>5</sup> including its use for laundering the proceeds of other criminal activities, illegal logging, the extortion of both legally and illegally obtained wealth and microeconomic activity, and violent activities such as kidnapping.

With the price of gold surpassing \$3,000 an ounce in 2025,<sup>6</sup> illegal mining has become the most significant source of illicit revenues in Peru. Although not all informal mining is illegal under current Peruvian law, the country's vast mineral wealth has created opportunities for illegal mining activities throughout the country. The vast proceeds from informal mining (including illegal activities) fuel a range of legitimate and illegitimate commercial activities, including the use of legitimate mining operations to launder the gold and other minerals produced in illegal ones. Proceeds from informal mining are believed to fund congressional campaigns,<sup>7</sup> arguably contributing to initiatives<sup>8</sup> in the Peruvian Congress to delay the imposition of sanctions<sup>9</sup> on informal miners who have not signed themselves up to participate in the formal mining economy under the country's REINFO mining regularization law.<sup>10</sup>

Illegal mining is also used as a vehicle for laundering proceeds of cocaine production<sup>11</sup> and smuggling, as well as other illegal activities. This occurs through local purchases of gold and other transactions in illicitly earned cash.

While illegal mining occurs throughout the country, during the past year, violence associated with such activities in the Andean Highlands in the northwest of the country, in Pataz, such as the murder of 13 miners<sup>12</sup> in August 2025, has grabbed national headlines. The incident was only one of many during recent months, in which mafia groups tied to illegal mining have ambushed, kidnapped, and killed numerous workers and others associated with the mines, despite the contracting of former military and other security personnel by mine operators. A key illicit operator in the area is the Sanchez Paredes clan,<sup>13</sup> linked by some to prominent Peruvian Congressperson Caesar Acuna.

Recent media attention to illegal mining in Pataz has, according to experts interviewed for this work, drawn attention away from the much greater levels of illegal mining occurring in other areas throughout the country.

The area along the Santiago River on the border with Ecuador, near where the “Cenepa War”<sup>14</sup> was fought between Ecuador and Peru in 1995 has also become problematic, with illegal gold operations in the vicinity of San Ignacio involving both the local populations and criminal groups such as the Choneros from the Ecuadoran side.

In the jungle region in the east of Peru, a different type of illegal mining occurs.<sup>15</sup> There, informal miners use mercury and small-scale construction equipment to extract gold and other minerals found in the lowlands rivers.

Illegal mining in the southeast of the country from Madre de Dios and Junin to Puno, near Bolivia also continues to be a problem. Key focuses of such activity include La Pampa, Sandia, Alto Molina and Rinconcido. Although the government has conducted large-scale security operations against illegal mining in the south, including Operation Mercurio in 2019,<sup>16</sup> focused on illicit activities around protected national parkland in Madre de Dios, such operations only served to displace a portion of illegal mining and other illicit activities further to the south.

Gold mined in the southeast is commonly smuggled across the border into Bolivia, where it is laundered through mines<sup>17</sup> there. This is because in Bolivia there is arguably even less effective auditing and control of mine operations than in Peru.

Overlaying illegal mining, cocoa growing and cocaine production and smuggling continues to expand into new geographic areas across the country. Some progress has been made in recent years in eliminating most cocoa production from the Upper Huallaga Valley (UHV),<sup>18</sup> and reducing to some extent<sup>19</sup> production in the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro River Valleys (VRAEM).<sup>20</sup> This progress has also included operations by the Peruvian government against the remnants of the terrorist group Shining Path in the region. The group protected coca fields and sometimes involved itself in coca production in the region. After its reach was gradually reduced by Peruvian security force operations over the years, in August 2022, the government mounted a major attack against its stronghold in the mountains of Vizcatán, Operation Patriota.<sup>21</sup> Although its principal remaining leader, Comrade Jose, escaped, the government has shifted to more targeted smaller scale actions<sup>22</sup> against the remaining Shining Path operatives in the area, including several operations in 2024.<sup>23</sup>

Peruvian government action in the VRAEM and elsewhere also includes persistent actions<sup>24</sup> against narco air strips, although local persons tied to the narcotrafficking groups reportedly quickly repair the damage.

Despite such operations, in recent years, the growing of coca in other parts of the country has expanded,<sup>25</sup> particularly in the previously mentioned jungle lowlands to the north of the VRAEM, and to the southeast. While the climate in these lower elevation areas makes the alkaloid content of the coca grown there less, it can be

produced in greater quantities since the area has until recently received less focus from Peruvian anti-drug efforts.

In the north, emerging areas of concern in the north include those along the western portion of the Putumayo River border with Colombia, where the 48<sup>th</sup> ("Carolina Ramirez") front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) front operates on the other side.<sup>26</sup>

In the northeast, the area where the border of Peru, Brazil and Colombia converge has become a center for contraband and support to the multiple criminal economies of the region. This includes smuggling of weapons into Peru from Colombia and to a lesser extent from Brazil, as well as moving precursor chemicals for drug production, and drugs and gold. Because of a recent drought which changed the course of the river, in August 2025,<sup>27</sup> the area also became the site of a territorial dispute, including Peruvian and Colombian military watercraft confronting each other, albeit without shots fired. Although Colombia's President Gustavo Petro made bellicose accusations<sup>28</sup> against Peru about the situation, the longstanding relationships between Peruvian and Colombian military commanders managing the zone prevented an unintended escalation.

Returning to the challenges of Peru's illicit drug economy, in the northwest of the country, the area near Jaen, in the Department of Cajamarca, has become an increasingly important source zone for the poppies used to produce heroin. Peruvian experts consulted for this work believe that much of the heroin produced is smuggled out through the port of Paita, near Piura, principally destined for the United States.

In Ucayali, as previously mentioned, coca production has also become a problem that compliments illegal mining and illegal logging there.<sup>29</sup>

Coca production also occurs further to the southeast, although in more limited quantities. Much of the output is shipped into Bolivia in the form of coca base<sup>30</sup> rather than finished cocaine. The vast majority of aircraft suspected to be carrying drugs making incursions into Peruvian airspace actually come from Bolivia, with Bolivian registries. A common pattern is for such aircraft to bring gold, weapons and other contraband from Bolivia to Peru, and return with drugs. Peruvian experts interviewed for this work argued that the failure of Bolivian authorities to act on radar tracks of suspicious aircraft passing from Peruvian into Bolivian airspace compounds the problem of controlling drug flights and dissuading future ones.

Port Maldonado, as a crossroads between Peru, Brazil and Bolivia, has become an important hub for the illicit economy generated by cocaine, mining, logging and other activities in the region. Because illegal mining and other activities generates a flow of U.S. dollars into Peru, and because dollars are scarce on the Bolivian side of the border, the length of the Interamerican Highway near Port Maldonado has

numerous mostly informal money changing shops, as well as other businesses that thrive on the illicit economy in the area.

Reflecting the high price of cocaine in Europe and its increasing importance as a market for that produced in Peru, as elsewhere in the Andean region, intermediaries from the Albanian mafia and other European groups have appeared in Peru. The representational and facilitation of these groups are complimented by similar presence of Mexico's Sinaloa cartel, as well as from the Brazil based groups First Capital command (PCC), and Red Command (CV), and even the Choneros from Ecuador.

The decentralized structure of Peru's criminal economy means that the businesses of illegal mining, drug production, and other illicit activities in mountainous and jungle interior of the country is not dominated by international cartels, but rather, is in the hands of a large number of small, interacting family clans who live there. These clans are believed to launder their wealth through constructing properties and buying cars and other luxury goods in the areas, as well as investing in similar things in nearby urban centers such as Trujillo (close to Pataz). Similarly in the south of the country, populations from rural parts of Puno and elsewhere, reportedly launder the proceeds of their illegal mining, narcotics and drug activities through real estate and small businesses in nearby urban centers such as Arequipa, Tacna, and Moquegua. Illicit money and the migration of populations from the Andean highlands and jungle regions have also fed the rapid expansion of urban developments in northeastern part of Lima ("Cono Norte") such as San Juan de Lurigancho and Comas, among others. The inflow of new money and people in these areas has driven both a real estate boom and an associated significant increase in real estate prices<sup>31</sup> across the greater Lima metropolitan region.

Perversely, the inflow of money into urban areas from the countryside into urban areas has also interacted with violent gangs arriving in those areas on the back of a wave of Venezuelan immigration, to fuel dramatic increases in extortion, kidnapping, and other urban crimes. Extortions in the Lima metropolitan area increased by 200% in 2024,<sup>32</sup> and by 50% in the first half of 2025<sup>33</sup> alone. Extortion has particularly targeted middle class and less affluent neighborhoods, including small shops, street vendors and even motorcycle taxis.<sup>34</sup> Criminals have openly murdered bus drivers and burned busses,<sup>35</sup> prompting strikes by transportation workers demanding more protection from the state. The use of motorcycles to rob cellphones<sup>36</sup> and conduct targeted assassinations has also become a problem.

An initial driver of this extortion and violence was the Venezuela-based criminal gang Tren de Aragua (TDA) which followed and exploited the more than 1.5 million<sup>37</sup> desperate Venezuelans immigrating to Peru among other places in the region. With time, TDA has splintered into multiple factions in Peru, each employing their own high levels of violence. Meanwhile, non-Venezuelan gangs have also copied the violent techniques of their Venezuelan criminal rivals, which have proved effective in

gaining territory from less violent groups, and now employ their own violence to displace Venezuelan gangs<sup>38</sup> from territories that they claim.

Due to high levels of urban violence, as of the time of this writing, parts of the north of Lima were still under the declaration of a state of emergency.<sup>39</sup> In the South and East of the country by contrast, the penetration of Venezuelan gangs and the corresponding violent evolution of other groups has been more limited. In Arequipa for example, there are reportedly significant problems with extortion, but less with kidnappings and violent murders.

### **The Response of the Peruvian Government**

Experts consulted for this work identified a number of institutional problems that impede an effective institutional response. These include difficulties in intelligence production and fusion. Those interviewed almost uniformly lamented a lack of effective intelligence sharing between the Peruvian military, the Peruvian National Police (PNP), and the civilian directorate for national intelligence, DINI.

Despite such difficulties, professionals within the Peruvian security forces have labored to combat the country's enormous challenges to the best of their abilities.

The Peruvian campaign against organized crime and insecurity is led by civil organizations, including the Peruvian National Police (PNP). Peru's National Commission for the Development of Life Without Drugs (DEVIDA) spearheads the eradication of coca crops and programs incentivizing substitution of alternate crops, albeit with mixed success. DEVIDA reported that the amount of land used for coca growing in the country, 90,000 hectares<sup>40</sup> in 2024, was approximately the same as the prior year. The National Commission Against Drugs (DIANDRO) leads police operations against drug laboratories,<sup>41</sup> shipments and narco-trafficking groups. The National Commission Against Terrorism (DIRCOTE)<sup>42</sup> leads efforts against terrorist groups such as Shining Path, although in recent years the country's Joint Intelligence and Special Operations Command, CIOEC, has spearheaded operations against<sup>43</sup> particular high-profile leaders of Shining Path such as Comrade "Artemio"<sup>44</sup> as well as heads of other criminal organizations.

In principle, the approach of the Peruvian government and the capabilities that it is seeking to improve or acquire to respond to its myriads of challenges are defined by the National Development Plan 2030. Correspondingly, the capability of acquisitions and work of each branch of the Armed Forces is defined by a plan. These are "Plan Quiniones" for the Army, "Plan Grau" for the Navy, and "Plan Bolognesi" for the Air Force. Many interviewed for this work however, suggest that the process of acquiring capabilities within the government is less systematic than official plans would suggest.



In addition to the long-established military police special command in the VRAEM<sup>45</sup> combatting terrorism, narcotrafficking and other illicit activities in that region, the Peruvian government has set up a established a joint military police command<sup>46</sup> to combat illegal mining in Pataz, CUPAZ.<sup>47</sup> The government is also contemplating a new special command which would combat narcotrafficking and illegal mining near the border with Ecuador and Colombia, although it has not yet been established.

The government is further strengthening capabilities in at least four prisons and building a new one in Abancay, in the Department of Apurímac.<sup>48</sup> Its completion, despite some delays, is anticipated by the end of 2026. The government has also discussed construction of four additional prisons, although they have not proceeded beyond the conceptual and planning phase.

In military affairs, the Peruvian Defense Ministry is working to strengthen its capabilities in the air, land and maritime domains.

In the land domain, the Peruvian Army has established "Amazon Protection Brigades"<sup>49</sup> which are intended to combat illegal mining among other challenges. In addition, the Peruvian Army seeks to expand its territorial presence and mobility, focusing on a number of initiatives including acquiring 30 8x8<sup>50</sup> and an additional quantity of 4x4 all-terrain armored vehicles from the South Korea company Hyundai.<sup>51</sup> The initiative includes a graduated plans to eventually produce the vehicles locally, with defense offsets and plans for production of increasingly complex parts and maintenance through the Peruvian defense company FAME. The objective is to transfer capabilities and build up local defense production. As part of this plan, the Peruvian Army hopes to eventually produce Hyundai military trucks and ambulances for the Army in Peru.

In the naval domain, Peru is working with Hyundai<sup>52</sup> to bolster the capabilities of its naval shipyards (SIMA) in Callao, Chimbote and Iquitos. South Korea has donated two large, albeit aging patrol craft to the Peruvian Navy in the past. Hyundai reportedly plans to donate a diesel-electric submarine to the Peruvian Navy during the October 2025 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit in Seoul, a gift which is reportedly linked to Peru's decision to acquire the previously mentioned armored vehicles from Hyundai. Peru's naval cooperation with South Korea also includes plans for co production of future frigates, coastal patrol boats, and other vessels.

Beyond cooperation with South Korea the Peruvian Navy has also built special river boats for bringing government services such as National Bank services, civil registry, and health services to remote areas in both the Amazon and in the South. These boats, known as Platforms of Action for Social Inclusion (PIAS) have been deployed on Amazon rivers, including on the Napo River in the north of the country as far as

the town of Gueppi. Naval PIAS also have been deployed in the Southeast of the country, in Lake Titicaca.

The Peruvian Army has implemented its own PIAS concept, including the army's use of vehicles bringing services to road-accessible parts of the northwest of the country, and in some occasions, in the southeast.

In the air domain, the Peruvian Air Force has faced significant challenges in maintaining the operational readiness of its fleet of Russian Mi-8, Mi-17, and Mi-171 helicopters particularly important for operations in high-altitude areas such as Vizcatán. The problem is principally due to Russian refusal to certify Peru's performance of maintenance on its helicopter engines and transmissions in its maintenance base in Arequipa. The issue has been compounded by contracting difficulties that the country has had with subcontractors as it works within a lack of Russian parts due to the latter's ongoing war against Ukraine and associated international sanctions against working directly with Russian military companies.

The Peruvian Air Force has prioritized the acquisition of supersonic interceptor fighters, to be purchased through the Ministry of Defense. The project, which has been given a high priority by the Boluarte government, has a budget of \$3.5 billion. The three contenders are the US F-16 Block 70, the Swedish JAS-39 Gripen E/F, and the French Rafale AF-4. The F-16 is by far the most expensive per unit but is reportedly highly desired by the Peruvian Air Force, both for its characteristics as an aircraft, and the long-term relationship with the United States for training, maintenance and other support it implies. The Gripen is attractive for some, in part because it is being acquired by its neighbors Brazil and Colombia, reportedly has a strong lobby within certain Peruvian Air Force circles. Although the Rafale has reportedly performed well in tests, and benefits from the Peruvian Air Force experience with French equipment in the form of its much older Mirage fighters, there is reportedly concern among some due to losses they incurred in combat during a major clash between India and Pakistan in May 2025.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond its acquisition of supersonic interceptors, the Peruvian Air Force also seeks to acquire as many as 12 subsonic aircraft in support of its anti-illegal mining and other activities. It is reportedly interested in subsonic interceptors such as the A-6 Texan or the Super Tucano in this role. It also seeks to bolster its capabilities with respect to intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft such as the Beechcraft King Air.

Despite such acquisition plans, the country's significant lack of radar coverage and the lack of integration between the Civil Aviation radar and radar is operated by the Air Force, and smaller radars operated by the Navy in select sites, may undercut the effectiveness of the new fighters in intercepting flights involving narcotics and other contraband. The Peruvian Air Force currently operates several aging TPS-70 radars which have issues with periodic outages and a lack of coverage in some areas due to their limited numbers and the country's mountainous terrain. Peru's military air



picture receives some information from the Thales radars operated by its civilian aviation system, although the civilian and military systems are not digitally integrated.

In the transport domain, Peru operates C-27 Spartan aircraft, and plans to spend \$54 million to acquire longer-range Boeing 737 NG aircraft<sup>54</sup> for transport.

Beyond the Air Force contribution to interception, surveillance and military transport missions, the Peruvian Air Force also has an aircraft-based PIAS initiative, based on a fleet of 14 of DeHavilland Twin Otter transport aircraft, one of the largest fleets of such aircraft in the world. Some of these Twin Otters are configured with special wheels for soft field takeoffs and landings on unimproved landing strips, while others are configured with pontoons in order to get into remote river areas too distant or shallow for the Navy's PIAS watercraft to reach.

Unmanned air systems are another emerging area for the Peruvian military. The military industry firm Casanave reportedly has some capability to produce drones,<sup>55</sup> in addition to SEMANAC, which is primarily focused on repairing aircraft. The Peruvian military is reportedly evaluating the acquisition of several drone such as the vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) UBat system, as well as anti-drone systems. Despite some initiatives, however, progress and the scope of projects are still relatively limited. Analysts consulted for this work expressed skepticism regarding whether the Peruvian military had a well-integrated concept for the acquisition and employment of drones and drone defense systems.

### Conclusion

The sense of frustration and disillusionment among many Peruvians with a performance of their government will likely impact outcomes in the upcoming May 2026 national elections.<sup>56</sup> Pro's political landscape is highly fractionalized with 43 political parties registering intent to participate, with the candidates to be formalized by mid-October. Insofar as the parties have forged only three alliances to date for presenting a common slate of candidates, there will be a vast number of candidates, about which voters know little. As with the prior election, the risk is that voters choosing between two candidates about which they know little, based on superficial impressions or simply voting against someone they dislike, could permit the selection of another inexperienced or radical President. Candidates with some trajectory include radical leftist Guillermo Bermejo,<sup>57</sup> reportedly with ties to the Shining Path terrorist organization.

To date, despite its problems come up Peru is demonstrated close cooperation with the United States on security and other political issues, although it also has significant commercial ties with the PRC, including the port of Chancay, mining operations, and its Chinese presence in telecommunication, electricity, and retail. Peru also maintains a variety of commercial and military relationships with Russia.

Given Peru's strategic centrality as one of South America's principal gateways to Asia, it is in the United States' strategic interest to continue to engage actively with the country to help it control the criminality and corrosive forces undermining democracy and institutions and making the country vulnerable to populist leaders and predatory foreign partners. A common refrain heard by the author, in discussing the courtship of Peru by malign interests was "why doesn't the United States do more?" Although the U.S. government may not be disposed to compete to "outbid" actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>58</sup> for Peru's loyalty, there is far more the U.S. can do to help inoculate the country against those within and outside its borders who would take Peru in a destructive direction with implications for both the country and the region.

### About the author

Robert Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. He has published over 500 works, including five books. Dr. Ellis has worked in both the government and private sector in more than 30 years of work on Latin America and other security issues, including service on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff (S/P) from 2019-2020, with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean (WHA), as well as International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) issues.

### Endnotes:

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