

8th Annual Security Challenges in Latin America Forum

Proposed Forum Title:

Politics and Violence in a Shifting Hemisphere

Date and Location

Thursday, April 9, 2026
Johns Hopkins University SAIS – Theater
Washington, DC
8:30 AM – 5:00 PM

Description

The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), in collaboration with the Inter-American Defense College (IADC) and Stimson Center hosts the premier annual forum in Washington, DC with a focus on defense and security in the Americas. Examining the most pressing defense and security challenges across the Western Hemisphere.

In 2026, Latin America stands at a strategic inflection point. Renewed U.S. security prioritization in the region, evolving criminal networks, domestic political polarization, and escalating great-power competition are reshaping how governments define sovereignty, order, and cooperation. From Venezuela's geopolitical fallout to Mexico's security realignment and electoral securitization across the region, hemispheric stability is increasingly intertwined with domestic political transformation, internal security, and global rivalry.

This year's forum brings together senior policymakers, diplomats, analysts, and practitioners to assess how power, politics, and security dynamics are converging in a contested hemisphere.

Morning coffee, lunch, and an evening reception included.

9:00–9:15 AM | Welcome Remarks

Major General Rogelio Amador

Chief of Studies- Mexican Air Force Major General Rogelio Amador

9:15-10:30 AM | Panel 1: Venezuela Post-Maduro: Politics, Security, and Strategic Stakes

This panel explores how shifting power dynamics between the United States and Venezuela's government are reshaping the country's political trajectory and regional security. The panel will assess how Venezuela's evolving governance and economic reforms, including changes to the oil sector and amnesty releases, affect migration flows, organized crime networks, and broader stability in the hemisphere.

Moderator

Cynthia Arnson

Adjunct Lecturer, Johns Hopkins SAIS; former Director, Latin American Program, Wilson Center

Speakers

Carrie Filipetti

Executive Director, Vandenberg Coalition; former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Cuba and Venezuela

David Smolansky

Senior Advisor to María Corina Machado; former OAS Special Envoy for the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis

Miriam Kornblith

Senior Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, National Endowment for Democracy; former Vice President, Venezuelan National Electoral Council

Brian Naranjo

Independent Senior Foreign Service Officer (ret); Independent Strategic Consultant

Panelist Bios:

1. Dr. Cynthia J. Arnson is former Director and former Distinguished Fellow of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and an Adjunct Lecturer at Johns Hopkins SAIS. She was a Fall 2025 visiting professor at Universidad de los Andes in Colombia as part of its Pensadores del Mundo program. Her work focuses on Latin American politics, conflict resolution, and U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere
2. Ms. Carrie Filipetti is Executive Director of the Vandenberg Coalition and a Distinguished Fellow at the Wilson Center. She previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Cuba and Venezuela and Deputy Special Representative for Venezuela. Her work focuses on U.S. foreign policy, democratic transitions, and strategic engagement in Latin America.
3. Mr. Smolansky is the Deputy Director of the ConVzla Presidential Campaign, representing democratic opposition leader María Corina Machado and President-Elect Edmundo González in Washington, D.C. He also serves as a Senior Security Advisor and spokesperson for the campaign, supporting strategic communications, policy development, and international engagement.
4. Ms. Miriam Kornblith is Senior Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the National Endowment for Democracy. She previously served as Vice President of Venezuela's National Electoral Council and has held academic positions at the Central University of Venezuela. Her work focuses on democratic institutions, electoral systems, and political development in Venezuela and across the region.
5. Mr. Brian Naranjo is an independent strategic advisor and Senior Advisor at Transnational Strategy Group, specializing in political risk, government relations, and crisis management. He served for 32 years in the U.S. Foreign Service, including as Deputy Chief of Mission in Venezuela and senior leadership roles in Mexico and Canada. His expertise focuses on Venezuela, U.S. hemispheric policy, and regional security and migration dynamics.

10:30–10:45 AM | Coffee Break

10:45-12:00 PM | Panel 2: Washington's Renewed Hemispheric Doctrine

Latin America has reemerged as a central arena in U.S. national security strategy, from defense cooperation and counternarcotics to migration management and congressional oversight. At the same time, broader geopolitical competition has become embedded in how the United States approaches infrastructure security, technology governance, and regional partnerships. This panel examines how Washington's hemispheric strategy is being recalibrated, and what this renewed focus means for security alignment, sovereignty debates, and strategic positioning across the Americas.

Moderator:

Tahina Montoya

Adjunct Faculty, Inter-American Defense College

Panelists:

Sarah-Ann Lynch

Former Civilian Deputy to the Commander and Foreign Policy Advisor, U.S. Southern Command; former U.S. Ambassador to Guyana

Monica Palencia

Ambassador of Ecuador to the Organization of American States; former Minister of the Interior of Ecuador

Carlos Ruiz-Hernández

Head of Practice, RPK Global; Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Panama

Panelist Bios:

1. Dr. Tahina Montoya is Adjunct Faculty at the Inter-American Defense College, a Policy Researcher at RAND, and an officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserve. She has over 17 years of experience in intelligence and defense policy, including deployments supporting major U.S. operations. Her work focuses on multidimensional security, defense strategy, and Western Hemisphere affairs.
2. Ambassador Sarah-Ann Lynch is a career U.S. diplomat who most recently served as Civilian Deputy to the Commander and Foreign Policy Advisor at U.S. Southern Command. She previously served as U.S. Ambassador to Guyana, where she played a key role in supporting democratic processes and expanding U.S. engagement. Her expertise focuses on diplomacy, regional security, and political-military affairs.
3. Ambassador Mónica Palencia is Ambassador of Ecuador to the Organization of American States and former Minister of the Interior of Ecuador. She has led national efforts on public security, governance, and institutional reform. Her work focuses on security policy, rule of law, and regional cooperation.
4. Ambassador Carlos Ruiz-Hernández is Head of Practice at RPK Global and former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Panama. He previously served as Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Panama to the United Nations. His expertise focuses on diplomacy, geopolitics, and multilateral engagement in the Americas.

12:00–1:00 PM | Lunch

1:00-1:45 PM Keynote Fireside Chat - Power and Prudence in a Shifting Hemisphere

How U.S. diplomacy adapts when partners themselves are polarized, securitized, and institutionally strained.

Moderator:

Dr. Jim Marckwardt

Founder, SAIS Latin America Studies Initiative; Professor, SAIS & IADC

Speaker:

Amb. Tom Shannon

Former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

Panelist Bios:

1. Dr. Jim Marckwardt is Founder of the SAIS Latin America Studies Initiative and Faculty Co-Lead for the Americas at Johns Hopkins SAIS. He previously served for over 29 years in the U.S. Army, including as Colombia Country Director in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy. His work focuses on defense policy, regional security, and U.S. engagement in Latin America.
2. Ambassador Thomas Shannon is a senior U.S. diplomat with over three decades of service in the Foreign Service. He most recently served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the third-highest position at the State Department, and held the rank of Career Ambassador. His experience includes serving as U.S. Ambassador to Brazil and Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, with expertise in diplomacy, global strategy, and hemispheric relations.

1:45-2:00 PM | Coffee Break

2:00 - 3:15 PM | Panel 3: Politics to Securitization: Elections and Public Order

Rising insecurity is reshaping electoral competition and governance across Latin America. As countries such as Peru, Colombia, and Brazil enter critical election cycles in 2026, public demands for order, institutional stability, and effective state capacity are increasingly central to campaign platforms. This panel examines how crime, migration pressures, and public security concerns are influencing voter behavior, strengthening executive authority, and altering democratic norms.

Moderator:

Yael Sternberg

Johns Hopkins SAIS; Latin America analyst

Panelists:

Jana Nelson

Senior Director for Latin America, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change; former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs

Adam Isacson

Director for Defense Oversight, Washington Office on Latin America

Ivan C. Marquez (OAS)

Secretary for Multidimensional Security, Organization of American States

Panelist Bios:

1. Ms. Yael Sternberg is a second-year MAIR candidate who has previously worked as a Latin America analyst at Eurasia Group. Her experience includes political risk analysis and regional policy research. Her work focuses on Latin American political dynamics, elections, and governance trends.
2. Ms. Jana Nelson is Senior Director for Latin America at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, where she works with political leaders and institutions to drive reform and strengthen governance. She previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs, advising on regional security and defense policy. Her expertise focuses on governance reform, public policy delivery, and strategic engagement across Latin America.
3. Mr. Adam Isacson is Director for Defense Oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), where he monitors U.S. security cooperation and regional defense trends. He has conducted extensive field research across Latin America, particularly in Colombia, and has produced numerous publications on security and human rights. His work focuses on civil-military relations, security policy, and accountability in the Americas.
4. Mr. Iván C. Marques serves as Secretary for Multidimensional Security at the Organization of American States (OAS). He has worked across government, international organizations, and civil society on public security, human rights, and violence prevention. His expertise focuses on citizen security, institutional reform, and regional cooperation in addressing security challenges.

3:15-3:30 | PM Coffee Break

3:30-4:45 | Panel 4: Power and Violence in Mexico

Mexico continues to grapple with entrenched criminal networks that shape public security, political authority, and relations with the United States. Recent high-profile operations against cartel leadership have sparked waves of unrest in multiple states and highlighted the complex feedback between enforcement actions, fragmented criminal networks, and state capacity. This panel will examine how criminal violence intersects with political governance, public order, and U.S.–Mexico cooperation on security, development, and rule of law in 2026.

Moderator:

Francisco Gonzalez

Associate Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS; Faculty Co-Lead, The Americas Focus Area

Panelists:

Sergio De La Peña

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs

Steven Dudley

Co-founder and Co-director, InSight Crime; senior fellow, American University

Clare Seelke

Specialist in Latin American Affairs, Congressional Research Service

Panelist Bios:

1. Dr. Francisco González is Associate Professor of International Political Economy and Latin American Politics at Johns Hopkins SAIS and Faculty Co-Lead of the Americas Focus Area. His research focuses on political economy, energy policy, and regional dynamics in Latin America. His work examines governance, economic reform, and international engagement in the region.
2. Mr. Sergio de la Peña is a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs. He previously served for over 30 years in the U.S. Army, including roles in defense policy and regional security strategy. His expertise focuses on defense cooperation, security policy, and U.S. military engagement in the Americas.
3. Mr. Steven Dudley is Co-Founder and Co-Director of InSight Crime and a Senior Research Fellow at American University. He is an award-winning journalist and author specializing in organized crime, criminal networks, and security dynamics in Latin America. His work focuses on illicit economies, violence, and governance in the region.
4. Ms. Clare Seelke is a Specialist in Latin American Affairs at the Congressional Research Service. She has covered security, migration, and U.S.–Mexico relations for Congress since the mid-2000s. Her expertise focuses on regional security challenges, migration policy, and U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

4:45-5:00 | Transition to Reception

5:00-7:00 PM | Reception



Run of Show

TIME	SESSION
8:30 – 9:00 AM	Registration & Check-In
9:00 – 9:15 AM	Welcome Remarks
9:15 – 10:30 AM	Panel 1: Venezuela Post-Maduro: Politics, Power, and Strategic Stakes
10:30 – 10:45 AM	Coffee Break
10:45 – 12:00 PM	Panel 2: Washington's Hemispheric Doctrine: Security, Strategy and Strategic Competition
12:00 – 1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 – 1:45 PM	Keynote Fireside Chat
1:45 – 2:00 PM	Coffee Break
2:00 – 3:15 PM	Panel 3: Campaigns Under Pressure: Security, Populism, and Democratic Stability
3:15 – 3:30 PM	Coffee Break
3:30 – 4:45 PM	Panel 4: Politics and Violence in Mexico
4:45 – 5:00 PM	Transition to Reception
5:00 – 7:00 PM	Reception