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The Americas: Hemispheric Cooperation Versus Strategic Autonomy

Strategic Autonomy

Abstract:

The Americas face a strategic paradox. While interstate war has become less central, transnational criminal networks have acquired a greater capacity to operate across jurisdictions and affect regional security. This transformation makes international cooperation necessary but also requires an assessment of when such cooperation strengthens the state and when it may create new dependencies. Using qualitative document analysis, this article examines the relationship between cooperation, capacity development and strategic autonomy, and proposes six criteria for evaluating security and defence agreements: sustainable national capabilities, freedom of decision and action, sovereign control, reciprocity, regional coherence and institutional strengthening.

Keywords:

International cooperation; strategic autonomy; hemispheric security; transnational organised crime; national power.

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1. Introduction

Security in Latin America and the Caribbean exhibits a structural tension. The region has a low incidence of interstate wars compared with other parts of the international system, yet it experiences exceptionally high levels of violence and a high proportion of homicides linked to organised crime (Kacowicz, 1998; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). This combination does not indicate an absence of insecurity, but rather a change in its principal sources and manifestations.

Contemporary criminal networks link diverse illicit markets through logistical corridors, digital platforms, financial structures and territories subject to different jurisdictions. Their transnational expansion has made organised crime a central factor in conflict and insecurity across the Americas and, in certain areas, has weakened the effective exercise of state authority (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2025; Europol, 2025). Because these networks operate beyond national borders, exclusively domestic responses encounter operational and legal constraints. Their containment consequently requires sustained coordination among states.

Recognising the need for cooperation does not, however, resolve the research problem. The central question is under what conditions a cooperation agreement strengthens national capabilities and under what conditions it may create dependencies that reduce the state's effective scope for decision-making and action. This article argues that the strategic value of cooperation depends not primarily on the volume of resources transferred or the number of activities undertaken, but on its ability to produce sustainable effects on institutions, national capabilities and the state's freedom of action.

The general objective is to propose an analytical framework for evaluating international cooperation agreements in security and defence. To this end, the study brings together three concepts: capacity development, strategic autonomy and national power. Its scope is hemispheric; agreements are therefore examined in terms of both their effects on participating states and their repercussions for third countries, border territories, illicit routes and regional institutions.

The article does not seek to measure the causal impact of a specific programme or establish a universally applicable index. Its contribution is more limited: it systematises

principles dispersed throughout the literature and converts them into six criteria that may subsequently be operationalised. Its conclusions should therefore be understood as an analytical proposal grounded in documentary evidence, rather than as a statistical validation of the results of cooperation.

2. The Strategic Paradox of the Americas

The concept of a "zone of peace" does not describe a continent free from tensions, but a space in which states have consistently reduced their recourse to war as a means of resolving disputes. From this perspective, Kacowicz (1998)¹ characterised South America as a zone of peace owing to the convergence of three factors: the relative stabilisation of territorial disputes, the consolidation of regional norms against the use of force, and the development of institutional mechanisms for the peaceful management of disagreements. This does not mean that diplomatic disputes, strategic rivalries or the risk of crises between states have disappeared. More precisely, the concept indicates that, in the contemporary period, such tensions have rarely led to interstate wars. Regional peace should therefore be understood as a sustained reduction in military violence between states, not as the general absence of insecurity or violence across the continent.

The relative stability of relations between states nevertheless coexists with high levels of violence within societies and with the expansion of criminal organisations operating across national borders. According to UNODC (2023), Latin America and the Caribbean has consistently recorded the highest homicide rate of any subregion in the world and, in 2021, also had the highest proportion of homicides linked to organised crime. In the same year, eight of the ten countries with the highest available homicide rates were located in this subregion, although UNODC itself notes that not all states reported data. These findings show that the low incidence of interstate wars does not necessarily amount to effective security for societies.

The IISS (2025) broadens this diagnosis by showing that regional violence is not only extensive, but increasingly shaped by criminal actors capable of contesting state control

¹ Kacowicz, A. M. (1998). Zones of peace in the Third World: South America and West Africa in comparative perspective. State University of New York

over territories, populations and economic activities. According to the institute, the conflict landscape in the Americas is largely shaped by competition among non-state armed groups for control of illicit economies and strategic routes, as well as by their confrontations with the authorities. These organisations have diversified their activities, internationalised their networks and strengthened their economic and political capacity. In some territories, they even operate as de facto authorities: they impose charges, constrain economic activity, intimidate or corrupt institutions, and provide certain services to the communities under their control. Organised crime therefore represents not merely a threat to public security, but also a direct challenge to the state's territorial presence, legitimacy and governing capacity.

The central paradox of hemispheric security can be stated clearly. The continent is relatively more peaceful in relations among its states, but not necessarily safer for its societies. The decline in interstate wars has not eliminated organised violence; it persists in other forms, involving non-state actors that operate both within and across national borders. The coexistence of interstate peace and high levels of criminal violence changes the requirements of strategic response. Although conventional military deterrence remains important in the face of potential state threats, it is insufficient for confronting organisations that combine territorial control, illicit economies, financial networks, technologies and cross-border mobility. Hemispheric security consequently requires state capabilities and instruments of cooperation adapted to threats whose structure and operation extend beyond a single jurisdiction (IISS, 2025; UNODC, 2023).

This finding gives rise to the first premise of the analysis: when a threat is generated by non-state networks operating across different jurisdictions, the effectiveness of the response depends partly on the quality of cooperation among states and the synergy that such cooperation can produce. Cooperation does not replace each state's primary responsibility to protect its territory, population and institutions; it strengthens that responsibility by enabling the timely exchange of information, access to specialist knowledge, the coordination of action and the development of interoperable procedures. This need applies even to the United States: despite possessing military, technological, financial and intelligence capabilities with global reach, it cannot act effectively in isolation against networks that use territories, legal systems, markets and routes under the

sovereignty of other countries. Cooperation therefore makes it possible to integrate complementary capabilities and generate a combined effect greater than the sum of separate national efforts (United Nations, 2004; North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], 2022).

3. The Transformation of Threats and the Requirements of Cooperation

For much of the twentieth century, defence planning was dominated by the possibility of conflict between states, territorial protection and preparation for conventional war. Strategic thought maintains that political objectives must be aligned with the means available, particularly in conditions characterised by competition and uncertainty. Changes in the environment consequently require states to adapt their institutions and capabilities without abandoning the systematic analysis of the relationship between ends, means and risks (Freedman, 2013; Gray, 2015)².

The end of the Cold War did not produce a threat-free environment. The security agenda expanded to include terrorism, transnational organised crime, cyber threats, proliferation, risks to critical infrastructure and hybrid forms of coercion. Contemporary strategic documents describe interconnected threats and state and non-state actors capable of combining military and non-military instruments (Hoffman, 2007; United Nations, 2004; NATO, 2022; Williams, 2008)³.

A distinctive feature of criminal networks is their adaptability. Contemporary criminal networks can rapidly adjust their structures, methods and activities in response to new opportunities and control measures. In its assessment of organised crime in the European Union, Europol (2025) documents how these organisations use digital platforms and emerging technologies, infiltrate legitimate businesses, resort to corruption and continually modify their financial mechanisms. These practices enable them to conceal their operations, obstruct the authorities and protect and increase their illicit profits.

² Freedman, L. (2013). *Strategy: A history*. Oxford University Press / Gray, C. S. (2015). *The future of strategy*. Polity.

³ Hoffman, F. G. (2007). *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies. <https://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/0712hoffman.pdf> / Williams, P. (2008). *Violent non-state actors and national and international security*. International Relations and Security Network. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/93880/VNSAs.pdf>

Although the evidence examined by Europol primarily concerns Europe, the mechanisms identified help explain the adaptability and resilience of transnational criminal networks. In the Americas, the IISS (2025) identifies a similar expansion into illegal mining, human trafficking, extortion, environmental crime, synthetic drugs and money laundering. These activities cut across traditional divisions between internal security, defence, justice, finance and foreign policy.

The political and legal environment has also become more demanding. States must maintain operational effectiveness without weakening the rule of law, civilian oversight or public legitimacy. This tension does not justify treating legal controls as external obstacles to security. On the contrary, a response that erodes institutions may diminish the very state capacity it is intended to strengthen. The strategic challenge is to combine effectiveness, legality and legitimacy, particularly when criminal organisations exploit regulatory gaps or capture legitimate structures (Europol, 2024, 2025).

In this setting, cooperation performs an instrumental function. It can integrate information, harmonise procedures, facilitate coordinated operations and reduce the gaps between jurisdictions that illicit networks exploit. Yet it may also create new vulnerabilities if a national institution depends on external assistance for critical functions without developing its own expertise. The need to cooperate and the risk of dependency are therefore simultaneous dimensions of the same problem.

4. International Cooperation and Capacity Development

The general concept of capacity development offers a first evaluative criterion. The United Nations Development Programme defines capacity development as the process through which individuals, organisations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities required to set and achieve their objectives over time. Its emphasis is on local ownership, sustainability and transformation generated from within institutions themselves, rather than on the indefinite substitution of national functions (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2009).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) applies a related logic to state-building in fragile contexts. Its guidance emphasises the need to

support legitimate and capable institutions, avoid parallel structures and design cooperation around sustainable national processes. Although its focus is not military, this literature makes it possible to evaluate cooperation in terms of its effects on state capacity, rather than solely by the inputs mobilised.

In the field of defence, United States doctrine defines security cooperation as the set of interactions, programmes and activities undertaken with foreign security establishments to build relationships and develop capabilities associated with shared security objectives. *Joint Publication 3-20* also links cooperation to partners' capabilities and interoperability, and treats planning, execution and assessment as continuing functions (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2024).

These approaches make it possible to distinguish assistance from capability. The provision of equipment, funding or training may be necessary, but does not in itself constitute a strategic outcome. Such an outcome emerges when the recipient state can integrate, sustain, adapt and employ what it has received in accordance with its own priorities. Capability is therefore a property of the national system, combining people, doctrine, organisation, information, infrastructure, technology, logistics and institutional authority (UNDP, 2009; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2024).

Cooperation is more robust when its continuity is less dependent on exceptional arrangements. This requires training the trainers, budgetary mechanisms, maintenance, knowledge retention, doctrinal integration and the assessment of results. Otherwise, an activity may produce visible short-term effects without changing the state's capacity to act once external support ends. Analytically, sustainability must be considered when the agreement is designed, not only after it has concluded.

5. Strategic Autonomy as Cooperation for Decision and Action

Strategic autonomy acquired particular prominence in contemporary European debate as a response to a fundamental question: whether the European Union possessed the capacity required to protect its interests and act when circumstances demanded. The 2016 Global Strategy established that an appropriate level of autonomy was necessary to promote peace and safeguard security within and beyond Europe's borders. It also

maintained that European states should be better equipped, trained and organised both to contribute to collective efforts and to act autonomously when necessary (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2016). The 2022 Strategic Compass translated that general aspiration into more specific lines of action: accelerating decision-making, developing civilian and military capabilities, investing in strategic technologies, reducing technological and industrial dependencies, and strengthening cooperation with allies and partners (Council of the European Union, 2022). This experience and documentary evolution show that strategic autonomy does not mean isolation or absolute self-sufficiency. It means possessing sufficient capabilities, resources and freedom of decision to choose when, how and with whom to act. Although formulated within a specific European institutional context, this distinction offers a useful tool for assessing in other regions whether cooperation expands a state's options or creates dependencies that ultimately constrain them.

The specialist literature rejects any equivalence between autonomy and isolation. Howorth (2019)⁴ argues that greater European autonomy can be built through more effective cooperation with NATO, while Biscop (2019)⁵ relates strategic agency to the availability of political, economic and military means. Autonomy does not require a state always to act alone; it requires retaining a genuine ability to decide and act when its own interests so demand.

This definition makes it possible to distinguish sovereignty from strategic autonomy. Sovereignty establishes who possesses the legal authority to decide. Strategic autonomy examines whether that authority has sufficient means to implement its decisions. A state may formally retain its powers while lacking the intelligence, sustainment, surveillance, technology or personnel required to exercise them effectively. The relevant dependency is not every relationship of support, but one that conditions essential functions and restricts options for action.

In this article, national power is understood in functional terms as the set of institutional, human, material and informational means that the state can mobilise in pursuit of its

⁴ Howorth, J. (2019). Strategic autonomy: Why it's not about Europe going it alone. *European View*, 18(2), 254

⁵ Biscop, S. (2019). *European strategy in the 21st century: New future for old power*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429427442>

political objectives. This formulation draws on the strategic relationship between ends and means (Freedman, 2013; Gray, 2015⁶), but its use in evaluating cooperation represents the author's own synthesis. Cooperation strengthens national power when it converts external contributions into usable and sustainable capabilities governed by the state itself.

Cooperation and autonomy are complementary when the former expands the range of available options. Information-sharing can improve situational awareness; combined training can enhance interoperability; and technological cooperation can reduce capability gaps. These effects strengthen autonomy when they are embedded in national institutions and can be sustained in accordance with national decisions (Biscop, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2022).

The relationship is reversed when the design prevents national ownership, concentrates critical knowledge in the provider, or permanently subjects an essential function to external decisions. Evaluation should therefore consider not only the immediate benefit, but also the conditions governing sustainment, access to information, control of data, maintenance, replacement and exit. Strategic autonomy thus serves as a criterion for assessing the quality of cooperation, not as an argument for rejecting it.

6. Hemispheric Interdependence and Regional Repercussions

The Americas do not constitute an integrated security system. The continent has agreements, institutions and coordination mechanisms of uneven scope, but no single structure that integrates the responses of all states. Nevertheless, the transnational nature of criminal networks creates concrete interdependencies among them. These organisations connect illicit markets, logistical support corridors, financial flows and border territories subject to different jurisdictions and levels of state capacity. Under these conditions, a localised vulnerability may produce effects beyond the territory in which it originates, while stronger controls in one country may alter the routes, costs and opportunities available to groups operating elsewhere. Although the results of each agreement should therefore be assessed initially in the participating states, their repercussions cannot be analysed as exclusively national phenomena (IISS, 2025;

⁶ Gray, C. S. (2015). The future of strategy. Polity.

UNODC, 2023).

Security policies may generate externalities, meaning effects that arise outside the territory in which they were applied. In illicit drug markets, for example, increased state pressure in one area does not always eliminate criminal activity; it may instead displace cultivation, routes or operations towards territories where institutional control is weaker. UNODC (2008) describes this displacement as the "balloon effect": when pressure reduces activity in one place, it may reappear or intensify elsewhere. The concept does not imply that every intervention necessarily produces this outcome, nor can it be applied automatically to every form of criminality. It nevertheless raises a strategic warning: an effective policy within one country may transfer part of the risk to neighbouring states in the absence of regional coordination. National success should therefore not be evaluated in isolation, but considering its potential consequences for routes, territories and criminal networks across the wider region (IISS, 2025; UNODC, 2008).

Interdependence may also generate shared benefits. Information-sharing, compatible procedures, border coordination and joint training can reduce gaps exploited by transnational organisations. The distribution of capabilities, information and influence is not necessarily symmetrical, however. Cooperative arrangements should therefore increase the capacity of all participants without concentrating essential decisions, creating permanent dependencies or weakening the responsibility of national institutions (Keohane & Nye, 2012⁷; United Nations, 2004; OECD, 2011).

This perspective requires cooperation to be assessed at three related levels. At the national level, the question is whether it leaves sustainable capabilities and preserves decision-making authority. At the bilateral or multilateral level, reciprocity, governance and the distribution of benefits must be examined. At the hemispheric level, attention should be paid to the displacement of threats, gaps between partners and effects on states that do not participate directly in an initiative. The strategic quality of an agreement therefore depends on its ability to strengthen each state without transferring avoidable costs to the rest of the Americas.

⁷ Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S., Jr. (2012). *Power and interdependence* (4th ed.). Longman.

7. The Doral Joint Security Declaration as a Document-Based Case Study

The Americas Counter Cartel Conference, held on 4 and 5 March 2026 in Doral, Florida, United States, provides a recent case through which to examine the relationship between cooperation and sovereignty. The official Spanish-language⁸ and English-language versions⁹ expressly state that the declaration was signed in Doral (U.S. Department of War, 2026).

The declaration reaffirms security and defence relationships based on peace, sovereignty and hemispheric security. It also affirms respect for the sovereignty of each state, in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and national laws. On this basis, the participants expressed their intention to expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation, coordinate government efforts on border security, combat narcoterrorism and trafficking, protect critical infrastructure, and build a coalition against shared threats (U.S. Department of War, 2026).

The document is brief and programmatic. It does not create a supranational organisation, transfer powers, or define implementation mechanisms, indicators or safeguards for sustainability. Its value as a case therefore lies not in proving results, but in showing that cooperation and sovereignty are formulated as compatible principles. Strategic evaluation must move beyond declared intent to examine the design and effects of the agreements through which it is implemented.

The political rhetoric employed during the conference was more aggressive than the joint text. Associated Press reported calls by United States officials for an offensive posture and greater use of military power against the cartels (Goodman, 2026). Analytically, this rhetoric is relevant to understanding the context, but it should not be confused with the obligations accepted by the participants. The signed document remains the primary source for determining the declaration's shared scope.

⁸ <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Mar/05/2003885538/-1/-1/1/AMERICAS-COUNTER-CARTEL-CONFERENCE-JOINT-SECURITY-DECLARATION-IN-SPANISH.PDF>

⁹ <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Mar/05/2003885537/-1/-1/1/AMERICAS-COUNTER-CARTEL-CONFERENCE-JOINT-SECURITY-DECLARATION.PDF>

7.1. From Doral to Panama: Continuity and Implementation

The Doral Declaration did not conclude the political process. On 7 March 2026, a White House proclamation presented the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition, also linked to the Shield of the Americas initiative, as a mechanism for coordinating the military and security capabilities of participating countries. The proclamation stated that the coalition brought together representatives of seventeen countries and proposed training and mobilising partner-nation forces to dismantle cartels, always in accordance with available legal authorities (The White House, 2026). This proclamation expresses United States policy; it is not a multilateral treaty automatically accepted by all participants.

On 12 August 2026, the coalition held a further meeting in Panama City with civilian defence authorities and military leaders from nearly twenty countries. Associated Press reported that the meeting addressed the continuation of the initiative and that Colombia would join as its nineteenth member (Associated Press, 2026). This meeting should be distinguished from the Seventeenth Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, held in Cusco from 6 to 10 July 2026, which was a separate hemispheric forum and concluded with the Cusco Declaration (William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, 2026).

The Colombian dimension adds strategic significance. During the Panama meeting, the United States Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, stated that Colombia's new government had requested cooperation to conduct joint military operations against networks designated as narcoterrorist. Initial Associated Press coverage noted that Bogotá did not respond immediately to that announcement. An official statement issued by the Colombian Ministry of National Defence later 12 August 2026, however, confirmed Colombia's formal accession to the Americas Counter Cartel Coalition and the conclusion of a bilateral cooperation agreement with the United States. The document also recorded President Abelardo De la Espriella's invitation to deepen the planning, coordination and execution of operations against common threats, in accordance with Colombian law and existing agreements. This confirmation establishes the existence of institutional cooperation and a bilateral agreement, but the publicly available information does not yet make it possible to determine the legal, operational, temporal or territorial scope of the

proposed actions, or whether they include the autonomous conduct of United States operations on Colombian territory (Associated Press, 2026; Colombian Ministry of National Defence, 2026).

Doral thus represents the initial documented commitment; the United States proclamation defines a policy direction; Panama demonstrates organisational continuity; and the United States announcement concerning Colombia was followed by official confirmation of its accession to the coalition and of a bilateral agreement, although the implementing instruments and operational scope are not yet publicly known. Each level requires different sources and criteria. The existence of a coalition or political accession does not in itself demonstrate that capabilities have been established, common rules of engagement adopted, accountability mechanisms created or verifiable results achieved.

From a hemispheric perspective, the assessment of any decisions adopted by Colombia should not be confined to their results within national territory. It should also consider whether greater pressure on organisations changes the regional distribution of threats. The balloon effect identified by UNODC (2008) and the adaptive capacity documented by the IISS (2025) provide grounds for considering this possibility, but do not justify the assertion that displacement will necessarily occur. Verification requires monitoring changes in routes, alliances, markets and criminal presence in neighbouring states, maritime corridors and other vulnerable spaces. The hemispheric effect will depend, among other factors, on the extent of regional coordination and the institutional capacity of potentially affected countries. This is therefore a strategic hypothesis to be tested through empirical monitoring, not an automatic consequence of intervention.

The Doral-Panama-Colombia sequence confirms the need to distinguish three levels of analysis: political discourse, documented commitment and implementation. Political discourse expresses priorities, preferences and expectations, but does not in itself create shared obligations. A documented commitment, expressed through declarations, accessions or agreements, identifies what participants have formally accepted and delineates its political or legal scope. Implementation, by contrast, reveals whether these commitments are translated into decisions, resources, capabilities and results. This distinction prevents rhetoric from being interpreted as a legal obligation or an announced agreement from being presented as an established result. A rigorous assessment cannot

therefore infer autonomy, reciprocity or institutional strengthening from declaratory language alone. It must examine the instruments that give effect to the commitments, their legal basis, allocated resources, distribution of responsibilities, coordination and governance rules, oversight mechanisms and verifiable results.

8. An Analytical Framework for Evaluating Strategic Cooperation

Building on the preceding analysis, the article proposes six criteria for determining the extent to which a security and defence cooperation agreement contributes to strengthening the state and its strategic autonomy. These criteria do not constitute universal legal standards, a quantitative index or a statistically validated scale. They are analytical dimensions derived from the literature and documents examined. Their purpose is to guide three stages of the process: *ex ante* evaluation, focused on the agreement's design and initial conditions; monitoring of its implementation; and *ex post* evaluation, aimed at identifying its capabilities, effects and results.

Table 1. Criteria for evaluating the contribution of cooperation to strategic autonomy

Criterion	Evaluation question	Principal indicators
Sustainable national capabilities	What capabilities will the state be able to maintain and employ when external assistance is reduced or ends?	National ownership; trained personnel and staff retention; transfer and preservation of knowledge; maintenance and upgrading capacity; incorporation into doctrine and procedures; budgetary sustainability.
Autonomy of decision and action	Can the state set its own priorities and employ the capabilities acquired without critically depending on another actor's authorisation, information or continuing assistance?	National planning capacity; access to and control over generated data; domestic technical expertise; operational continuity; availability of support and spare parts; alternative suppliers or options; absence of critical dependencies.
Sovereign control and governance	Do national authorities retain legal and political control over priorities, operations, information and, where applicable, the use of force?	Defined legal basis; competent national authority; decision-making chain and allocation of responsibilities; rules governing the use of capabilities; information protection; civilian oversight; accountability; dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Reciprocity and distribution of benefits	How are benefits, costs, responsibilities and risks distributed among participants?	Access to information and results; participation in decision-making; transfer of knowledge and technology; proportionate distribution of costs and risks; transparency of terms; verifiable benefits for all parties.
Hemispheric coherence and prevention of displacement	Does the initiative reduce the threat or contribute to its displacement towards other countries, routes or jurisdictional spaces?	Changes in the threat before, during and after the intervention; shifts in illicit routes and markets; territorial displacement; adaptation by criminal organisations; effects on third states; coordination with potentially affected countries.
Institutional strengthening and legitimacy	Is cooperation embedded in national institutions, and does it strengthen their capacity to act legitimately, coherently and sustainably?	Inter-agency coordination; professionalisation; compliance with national law and human rights; civilian oversight; institutional learning; trust and accountability; incorporation into permanent structures; absence of parallel mechanisms dependent on external actors.

Note: The criteria guide a structured evaluation but do not establish universal weights or thresholds. Author's own elaboration based on Biscop (2019), Council of the European Union (2022), Joint Chiefs of Staff (2024), Keohane and Nye (2012), OECD (2011), UNDP (2009), UNODC (2008) and U.S. Department of War (2026).

9. Discussion

The six criteria shift the focus of evaluation from the volume of cooperation to its quality and effects. The number of meetings, exercises, courses or items of equipment delivered indicates the activities and outputs of an agreement but does not in itself demonstrate strategic outcomes. Establishing such outcomes requires evidence of verifiable changes in preparedness, sustainment, response times, institutional coordination, decision-making capacity and the reduction of vulnerabilities. Evaluation must therefore be underpinned by a theory of change explaining how the proposed resources and activities will produce the expected capabilities and effects, as well as the conditions required for that relationship to endure.

The framework also helps to overcome a false dichotomy between cooperation and autonomy. Rejecting cooperation in order to preserve independence may limit access to information, technologies or capabilities and, paradoxically, reduce freedom of action. Yet accepting assistance without knowledge transfer, national ownership or control over decisions may produce the same outcome through prolonged dependency. Autonomy

does not require isolation, but the ability to cooperate from a position that preserves independent options. The strategic purpose is to convert external support into sustainable national capabilities and to establish relationships that distribute benefits, costs and risks reciprocally (Howorth, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012).

In the Americas, evaluation must be situated within a setting of security interdependencies, not an integrated hemispheric system. The effects of an agreement may extend beyond participating states: an operational improvement may reduce vulnerabilities in one jurisdiction while simultaneously altering the routes or activities of criminal organisations in other territories. Strengthening national autonomy should therefore take account of potential repercussions for third countries and be complemented by border coordination, information-sharing, compatible procedures and mechanisms for regional monitoring. The aim is not to prevent each state from making its own decisions, but to avoid the success of one inadvertently increasing the vulnerability of another (IISS, 2025; UNODC, 2008).

The Doral-Panama-Colombia sequence provides an initial documentary illustration of the framework's usefulness but does not constitute an empirical validation of its results. Respect for sovereignty, expanded cooperation and accession to a coalition are relevant features of political design, but are insufficient to determine their effective contribution to strategic autonomy. Implementing instruments will need to specify their legal basis, the capabilities to be developed, the distribution of responsibilities, the rules applicable to operations and, where relevant, to the use of force, as well as governance, information protection, sustainment and mechanisms for measuring national and regional effects. These elements make it possible to assess the quality of the design in advance; the initiative's actual contribution can only be established through its implementation and verifiable results (Colombian Ministry of National Defence, 2026; U.S. Department of War, 2026).

The principal limitation of the proposal is empirical. The criteria are derived from a documentary synthesis and have yet to be applied to specific agreements in order to test their clarity, usefulness and ability to distinguish among different forms of cooperation. This task may be complicated by restricted access to operational, financial or legal information and by the simultaneous influence of other factors on security outcomes.

Future research could undertake comparative case studies and longitudinal monitoring of training programmes, technology transfers, criminal intelligence-sharing, border security, maritime control, financial interdiction and critical-infrastructure protection. This would make it possible to refine the indicators, examine causal relationships, and compare conditions before, during and after implementation.

10. Conclusions

The transformation of hemispheric security does not mean that interstate violence has been replaced by criminal violence. Rather, it reflects the coexistence of two trends: the relatively low incidence of wars between states and the growing significance of criminal organisations and non-state actors with cross-border capabilities. This is the central paradox of the Americas: the continent may be relatively peaceful in relations among its states while remaining profoundly insecure for its societies. In the face of threats that cross borders, connect markets and exploit jurisdictional differences, international cooperation is a necessary, though insufficient, instrument and should not be regarded as a strategic end in itself.

The analysis distinguishes between two closely related but different concepts. Sovereignty determines who possesses the legal and political authority to decide; strategic autonomy indicates whether the state has the capabilities required to implement its decisions. Cooperation can strengthen both dimensions when it preserves national authority, transfers knowledge, develops sustainable capabilities and expands the available options. It can weaken them when it creates critical dependencies in essential functions, constrains freedom of action or moves decisions outside the competent institutions.

In an environment characterised by mobile and transnational threats, no state in the Americas, however extensive its capabilities, can address its security in complete isolation. Decisions adopted in one country may alter routes, alliances, illicit markets, institutional demands and levels of risk in others. This does not mean that every intervention necessarily displaces threats, but it requires that possibility to be assessed. National autonomy must therefore be combined with a hemispheric perspective that strengthens domestic capabilities without widening regional gaps, encouraging criminal

displacement or transferring disproportionate costs to neighbouring states.

The sequence initiated by the Doral *Joint Security Declaration*, continued through the coalition meeting in Panama and expanded by Colombia's formal accession, shows that cooperation and respect for sovereignty can coexist as principles within the same political framework. A declaration of intent, accession or the public formalisation of a bilateral agreement does not, however, in itself permit operational outcomes or institutional strengthening to be inferred. A rigorous assessment must distinguish political discourse, documented commitment and implementation; verify the legal basis of action; and examine resources, responsibilities, coordination rules and national and regional repercussions.

The article's principal contribution is the formulation of six criteria: sustainable national capabilities; autonomy of decision and action; sovereign control and governance; reciprocity and distribution of benefits; hemispheric coherence and prevention of displacement; and institutional strengthening and legitimacy. These criteria replace the binary question of whether a state should cooperate with the more analytically productive question of the legal, institutional and operational conditions under which cooperation strengthens national power and leaves the state better able to decide, act and protect its interests once external support is reduced or ends. Their empirical usefulness should subsequently be tested through systematic application to specific agreements and programmes.

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