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Perspective

The Peru-Colombia Airbridge: Moving the Program Forward

Although success has been limited, operations to staunch the flow of cocaine base from growing areas in Peru to processing laboratories in Colombia show the viability of targeting the airbridge and have established an essential foundation for longer-term success.

The objectives of airbridge operations focused on denying key organizations air access to Peru's coca-growing regions are to increase the traffickers' cost of doing business by forcing them to shift operations, deepen host-government commitment to counternarcotics efforts, especially in Peru, and reduce the flow of coca products to Colombia.

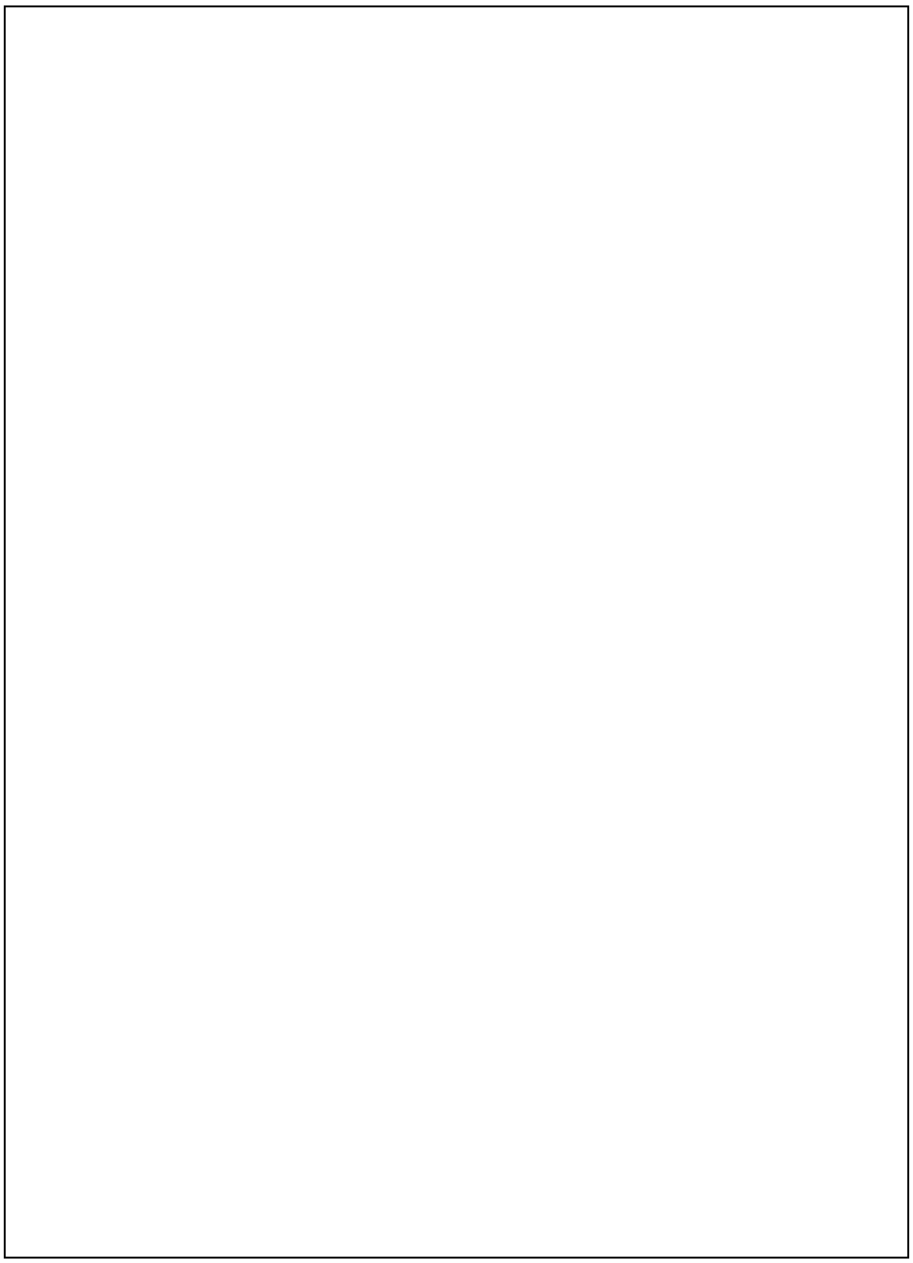
The efforts in Peru have successfully increased traffickers' costs by forcing them from the most conveniently located airstrips and from the most direct air routes. Over the past year some 15 airstrips in the Huallaga Valley have been closed to traffickers. As a result, traffickers have increasingly moved their operations to the south and east and have created a major base of operations at Palma Pampa, some 500 kilometers south of traditional trafficking areas in the Huallaga Valley. Traffickers are also more frequently using air routes along the Peru-Brazil border to make detection and interception by the Peruvian Air Force more difficult.

The flow of cocaine base to Colombia has not yet been significantly reduced, however, and traffickers have demonstrated considerable resourcefulness in seeking ways to evade interdiction forces:

- Traffickers are using new types of aircraft and improved techniques to evade interdiction efforts. Twin-engine aircraft, which can outrun Peru's Tucano interceptors, are replacing single-engine aircraft, and the increasing use of air taxi and air cargo company aircraft, which fly under registered flight plans, makes detection and monitoring of trafficking flights more difficult.

In the future, traffickers may be able to fly with even greater flexibility as air cargo companies linked to trafficking organizations acquire short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft and helicopters. Russian STOL aircraft that are designed to operate on unprepared airstrips are probably already available to traffickers, while South American air cargo companies are leasing Russian Hip helicopters capable of moving multiton loads.

Given the limited successes to date and the traffickers' seeming overreactions to them, we believe that the effectiveness of the airbridge targeting program can be enhanced by making it more responsive to trafficker countermoves, expanding its scope to include seizing aircraft, and intensifying pressure at the Colombia end of the airbridge:

- As traffickers move to new airstrips in attempts to keep ahead of the closures, efforts to quickly close them will be paramount.

- Vacuuming aircraft belonging to air cargo and air taxi companies and seizing any with cocaine traces would deny their use to traffickers, significantly constraining their ability to move coca products.
- Expanding the airbridge program in Colombia would force traffickers to relocate to more inhospitable regions, making processing operations more difficult, costly, and problematic.