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Jeane H. Stetson  
*U.S. Naval Reserve*

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# Defense of Shipping in the Western Hemisphere A Second Look

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Commander Jeane H. Stetson, U.S. Naval Reserve

**I**T WAS WITH GREAT interest that I read the article by Rear Admiral Sergio G. Jarpa, Chilean Navy, "The Defense of Shipping off South America," in the Summer 1990 issue of the *Naval War College Review*. It is not only one of only a few articles that discusses the role of naval control of shipping (NCS) in strategy, but the first that I have seen on a hemispheric approach for protection of merchant shipping. For years the U.S. Navy has been committed to naval control of shipping under Nato, and as such has devoted a significant reserve force to the manning of ports throughout the world—not only in its Nato area of responsibility, but in the Pacific and in certain ports in Latin America as well.

Because of the Latin American navies' increasing capabilities in the control of shipping, the U.S. Navy has recently been able to reduce its manpower commitments in the Southern Hemisphere. The establishment of the CAMAS organization [South Atlantic Maritime Area Command]—made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—has not only lined up some of the Latin American navies with the Nato doctrine of NCS but also has helped standardize shipping control procedures in the Western Hemisphere. Although other nations in Latin America have no formal NCS program, among them there is a growing interest and concern over the defense of merchant shipping.

As the world changes, so does the threat—but it is reasonable to expect that any threat to North America and Europe will be a threat to Latin America as well. This threat could be perceived differently by each country, as noted by Admiral Jarpa. Regardless of the perception, North America, South America and Europe share an economic concern, for we are all trading partners. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, approximately fifteen to

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Commander Stetson has a B.A. in Latin American studies from the University of New Mexico and a master's degree in international management from the American Graduate School of International Management. She attended the Argentine Naval Control of Shipping school and in 1990 was the assistant for NCS at the Inter-American War Games in Newport, R.I. Commander Stetson is presently the commanding officer of NCSO CANAL ZONE 501.

twenty-five percent of goods originating in Latin America are exported to the United States and enter the country via Atlantic ports. Somewhere in the vicinity of thirty-five percent of Latin American goods are destined for Europe and travel by ship up the Atlantic or from the Pacific through the Panama Canal before heading toward European ports of entry. The U.S. Maritime Administration estimates that U.S. imports and exports alone measure over 800 million tons per year. Whatever its origin, a substantial amount of this trade travels through the Panama Canal or along the coasts of South America. According to the Panama Canal Commission statistics, over 13,000 ships transited the Canal in 1990; roughly one-quarter of them flew flags of the Western Hemisphere countries, and another quarter flew Nato flags.

There are three areas of concern that emerge when discussing a threat to shipping in the Western Hemisphere:

- The Panama Canal.
- The straits at the southern tip of South America.
- The Atlantic Narrows between Brazil and western Africa.

All three areas are natural chokepoints and receive great attention during exercises because of their vulnerability. Because of these common interests, American navies need to communicate more amongst themselves on the subject of maritime defense. When one takes into consideration that about half of Latin American exports and a significant portion of U.S. shipping travel through inter-American waters, specifically through the three chokepoints mentioned above, the idea of a maritime defense strategy becomes more focused.

Admiral Jarpa suggests creating mutual defense zones encompassing North and South America along the lines of those detailed in *PLANDEFTRAMI* [Defense of Inter-American Maritime Traffic], which is a product of the Inter-American Defense Board. *PLANDEFTRAMI*'s value lies in the fact that a concept of maritime strategy and security zones already exists for consideration by member nations. It addresses shared areas of responsibility and "chop" (change of operational control) points. While there may be changes, as Admiral Jarpa suggests, here is a tool that we in the naval control of shipping business are not using. In exercises, we designate our operational control authority boundaries independently of the guidance offered in *PLANDEFTRAMI*. Thus, we fail to take advantage of an international organization whose function is to advise member countries on inter-American defense matters for the purpose of making it easier for us to work together.

There are a number of training opportunities for the defense and protection of merchant shipping that are available but untapped.

- The best known of these is UNITAS. This is an annual joint exercise centered on a small U.S. force which sails around the South American continent. This force conducts operational training with many of the Latin American navies

and in doing so offers an excellent opportunity to exercise control of shipping at ports of the participating countries. The ideal approach would be to conduct a port-level NCS exercise involving as many UNITAS players as possible. By exercising the U.S. NCS Organization, *CAMAS*, and independent countries' NCS organizations during an operational exercise, we would engage in realistic training which would reveal real-world constraints on communications, security, and also shared assets such as office space, administrative support, and telephones.

- Though costly because of the use of combat forces and chartered merchant ships, a live convoy exercise during UNITAS, with a multinational escort transiting from one ocean to another, chopping through national boundaries, and crossing areas of shared responsibilities, would provide an excellent opportunity to practice the idea of defense of merchant shipping.

- This idea of escorting convoys through national and shared defense zones was practiced on the game floor during the annual Inter-American War Games which were held in 1990 at Newport. Defending and escorting these merchant convoys served as a vehicle for participating countries to work with each other and address regional problems. In further such games, the U.S. NCS Organization could increase its participation in planning, screen reservists for language capability, and schedule qualified people to attend. This would allow an excellent opportunity for senior naval control-of-shipping officer and enlisted personnel to employ their expertise in new channels. It would also give the NCS program some visibility in the inter-American naval community, thereby enhancing interest for further mutual training.

- An even more impressive improvement would be to increase the number of exchange officers during NCS exercises. Though funding has been difficult, in the past there have been a fair number of exchange officers from most of the participating countries. As in all training, the payoff comes from the firsthand experience that—in this instance—includes people from a variety of nations and backgrounds. The profit grows, however, for an exchange officer increases the value of his experience by becoming a source of NCS training otherwise unavailable to many junior personnel.

The U.S. NCS Organization stands to gain from working more closely with the Latin American navies. By taking advantage of training opportunities with fleet exercises and existing multinational war games, the U.S. NCS Organization, which is made up mostly of reservists, gains in both visibility and experience. Working to create a reciprocal understanding with Latin America for naval control of shipping not only aids the U.S. Navy by extending the number of knowledgeable NCS personnel available for duty, but standardizes operating procedures and terminology throughout the Western Hemisphere.