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Three big problems in Biden’s backyard

By **MATT BERG** and **ERIC BAZAIL-EIMIL** | 04/12/2024 04:22 PM EDT

With help from Erin Banco, Phelim Kine and Alex Ward

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While the White House remains laser-focused on Israel, Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific, a trio of conflicts have broken out much closer to home in recent months that could become a growing problem for the administration.

Armed gangs are running amok in Haiti. Ecuador’s government raided the Mexican embassy. And Venezuela is threatening to invade and annex Guyana’s oil-rich territory.

“Chaos in Latin America finds its way to the U.S.,” **BENJAMIN GEDAN**, former South America director on the National Security Council, told NatSec Daily.

And as areas close to the U.S. border become less stable, it also may force the Biden administration to pull back from further afield crises.

“Today, we see that most of the attention is on the Gaza war or Ukraine-Russia war. But if we start to see more instability and tensions in Latin America, attention will have to be diverted to the neighboring region,” **ARIEL DULITZKY**, director of the Human Rights Clinic and the Latin America Initiative at UT Austin, told NatSec Daily.

National Security Council spokesperson **ADRIENNE WATSON** said the administration has had “unprecedented engagement” in the region and “we will not stop now.”

“We recognize that there are many national security priorities, but the president has maintained his unwavering commitment to our partners in the Americas,” Watson told NatSec Daily.

A few hundred miles off the Florida coast, gangs are overtaking much of Haiti — a conflict the U.S. has already dedicated some \$300 million toward, but lacks a detailed plan to remedy. Republicans are blocking funds that could allow a Kenyan-led multinational security mission to deploy to Haiti (in theory), though there are doubts that foreign intervention would help.

The Biden administration is planning to use its presidential drawdown authority to fast-track \$60 million in weapons, ammunition and other equipment to countries that would deploy to Haiti as part of the planned security force, according to a document provided to NatSec Daily. The move, an apparent attempt to go around Republican oversight efforts, reflects the growing pressure on the administration to take action.

Mexico and Ecuador are also steeped in turmoil right now. Last weekend, Mexico cut diplomatic ties with Ecuador — both among Washington’s closest partners in the region — after Quito raided the Mexican embassy, a direct violation of international sovereignty.

By raiding one embassy, a drastic move that has rarely ever happened in history, Ecuador seemingly also put all embassies in the country at risk, experts say. The dispute could exacerbate chaos throughout the region, they warn, escalation that the Biden administration can’t afford right now.

“Feuds between leaders in the region make everything worse, complicating U.S. efforts to promote regional cooperation on migration, organized crime, and other urgent challenges,” said Gedan, now director of the Wilson Center’s Latin America Program.

On the other side of the continent, Venezuela has made threats to annex a resource-rich region of Guyana which it has claimed for over a century. The specter of a Venezuelan invasion of Guyana, where U.S. oil companies like ExxonMobil and Chevron have invested billions of dollars over the past decade, prompted the U.S. to send more military assistance to Guyana earlier this year.

“There are good faith efforts, but [the administration is] seriously constrained by its attention span being consumed with other issues” such as Ukraine and Israel, **RENATA SEGURA**, deputy program director of Latin America and Caribbean at the International Crisis Group think tank, told NatSec Daily.

One common risk of all these crises: increased migration to the U.S. Lawmakers and experts alike have warned about the possible exodus of Haitian migrants to the U.S. In Ecuador, the recent uptick in violent crime led to the explosion in Ecuadorian migration to the north, Gedan said, and the same thing could happen if Venezuela invades Guyana.

