

Women, Peace, and Security

An Underutilized Tool in Countering the People's Republic of China in the US Southern Command Area of Responsibility

MAJ CHRISTINE MARTINEZ, USAF

Abstract

In the face of increasing People's Republic of China (PRC) influence within the US Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), the United States must adopt innovative approaches to maintain its strategic advantage and strengthen international partnerships. One potent tool is the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program, which promotes the inclusion of women in peace and security efforts globally. AFSOUTH, the Air Component of SOUTHCOM, exemplifies the successful implementation of WPS principles, fostering lasting relationships with partner nation air forces. By identifying barriers and sharing best practices related to gender perspectives, AFSOUTH enhances opportunities for half of partner nation populations in a non-escalatory and transparent manner. Such commitment to democratic values and human rights strengthens existing relationships and positions the United States as a leader in WPS initiatives, contrasting the PRC's limited efforts in this realm. Through continued progress in implementing WPS, the United States can further solidify its strategic position and promote cooperation in the Western Hemisphere.

The United States military must devise innovative approaches to preserve its strategic advantage and counter People's Republic of China (PRC) influence in the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). As SOUTHCOM Commander General Laura Richardson acknowledges, the PRC employs various methods to enhance its power in the region, encompassing increased trade with regional countries and investments in potential dual-use military infrastructure and technology.¹ Partners in the SOUTHCOM AOR, facing budgetary constraints and not viewing the PRC as an immediate threat as the United States does, find the PRC's seemingly indiscriminate investments appealing in the short-term. However, countering the PRC with the current set of tools presents challenges due to the nature of the United States as a true democracy. The US government lacks the ability to directly control or compel private investment and trade with countries in the

¹ "Statement of General Laura J. Richardson Commander, United States Southern Command before the 118th Congress," 8 March 2023, 2–3, <https://www.southcom.mil/>.

SOUTHCOM AOR, and numerous limitations and regulations hinder engagement in security cooperation with human rights abusers.² Additionally, the United States' foreign military sales processes can be sluggish and frustrating for international partners confronting urgent security threats.

While the United States should indeed seek to streamline the use of existing security cooperation tools to counter PRC influence in the region, it should also explore underutilized tools that offer long-term benefits to partner nations in the SOUTHCOM AOR, aligning with the strengths of democracies. One such soft power tool currently employed by SOUTHCOM and its Air Component, Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH), is the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program.

WPS is not unique to SOUTHCOM or even to the US Department of Defense. It originates from United Nations Resolution 1325, adopted by the UN Security Council in 2000, and aims to increase the inclusion of women in global peace and security efforts. This resolution acknowledges the historical exclusion of women from such initiatives and cites data indicating that women's participation in peace and conflict resolution can lead to longer-lasting outcomes.³ In 2011, the United States created a National Action Plan for WPS, which was subsequently superseded by the US Strategy on WPS in 2019.⁴ Moreover, the WPS Act of 2017 assigned four US agencies the responsibility for implementing WPS: the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense.⁵ In 2020, the Department of Defense released its *Women, Peace, and Security Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan*, while geographic combatant commands were directed to establish their own WPS programs.⁶

SOUTHCOM places WPS as a priority under its first line of effort, "Strengthening Partnerships," with a dedicated team reporting directly to the SOUTHCOM civilian deputy to the commander.⁷ The WPS team receives dedicated resources to conduct engagements throughout the AOR annually. One of the WPS team's responsibilities involves "Encouraging our partners to implement policies, plans,

² R. Evan Ellis, "Race to the Bottom: China and the Self-Defeating Logic of Transactional Diplomacy in the Americas," *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

³ Luisa Blanchfield, "Women, Peace, and Security: Global Context and U.S. Policy," *In Focus*, 15 March 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

⁴ Blanchfield, "Women, Peace, and Security."

⁵ Blanchfield, "Women, Peace, and Security."

⁶ *Women, Peace, and Security Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan* (Washington, DC: DOD, June 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

⁷ "SOUTHCOM Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program," accessed June 3, 2023, <https://www.southcom.mil/WPS/>.

and structural changes that enhance the meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes related to peace and security.”⁸ Additionally, General Richardson emphasizes the importance of WPS in senior leader-level dialogues. In her recent 2023 posture statement to Congress, she articulated, “Our main objective is to maximize the talents of the force through recruitment, retention, training, and advancement.”⁹

Apart from advocating for WPS, SOUTHCOM actively leads and participates in various conferences, including symposiums, subject matter expert exchanges, key leader engagements, and staff talks with partner nations. These events serve as platforms for discussing advancements, obstacles, and the significance of WPS in the region. Furthermore, SOUTHCOM hosts the “Breaking Barriers” podcast series, featuring senior leaders from partner nations sharing their experiences to inspire future generations.¹⁰

As the air component to SOUTHCOM, Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH) designates an O-6 officer as the lead for WPS within the component. The current AFSOUTH WPS lead envisions integrating WPS principles into as many partner nation engagements as possible. Notably, this involves incorporating WPS components into major military exercises and including educational materials on the WPS program and US gender integration efforts in subject matter expert exchanges, mobile training team events, and conferences.

The publication of strategic-level guidance documents, such as the US Strategy on WPS, the DoD WPS Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan, and the development of objectives and staffs within the Department of Defense, all the way down to the component level, clearly signals the United States’ commitment to the principles of WPS. In contrast, the same cannot be said of the PRC. In 2020, when Russia introduced a new Women, Peace, and Security resolution to the UN Security Council, which featured diminished language on the commitment to protect the human rights of women, the PRC was one of the five countries that voted to pass the resolution.¹¹ Additionally, as of February 2023, while 104 member countries of the United Nations, including the United States in 2011, have adopted national action plans on WPS, the PRC has not done so.¹²

⁸ “SOUTHCOM Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program.”

⁹ “Statement of General Laura J. Richardson Commander, United States Southern Command,” 29.

¹⁰ “SOUTHCOM Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Program.”

¹¹ Security Council Report, “Women, Peace, and Security: Vote on a Draft Resolution,” *What’s in Blue*, 30 October 2020), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/>.

¹² “1325 National Action Plans (NAPs),” Women Peace and Security Programme of the *Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom* (blog), February 2023, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/>.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) exhibits a lack of women in senior leadership positions, according to a 2022 report by the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, with only two females ever having been promoted to the rank of lieutenant general.¹³ Moreover, according to the Women, Peace, and Security Index, developed by the Georgetown Institute for WPS and the Peace Research Institute Oslo, which assesses countries based on the status and empowerment of women, taking into account dimensions of inclusion, justice, and security, the PRC was ranked 89 out of 170 countries in its last iteration in 2021–2022. By comparison, the United States was ranked 21.¹⁴

While the PRC may publicly declare its support for WPS, these statistics indicate that the PRC is still weak in this area, lagging behind many countries in the SOUTHCOM AOR. For the PRC to begin exporting its doctrine to countries in the SOUTHCOM AOR, many of which outrank the PRC in the aforementioned WPS index, it would need to make significant advances in this domain.

In contrast to the PRC's transactional approach towards the region, the advantage of having a dedicated team running a WPS program at the Air Force component level is that it fosters the establishment of meaningful and enduring relationships between the United States and partner nation air forces. By collaboratively identifying barriers, devising solutions, and sharing best practices related to the inclusion of gender perspectives into air force policy, AFSOUTH generates significant opportunities for half of the partner nation populations in a non-escalatory and transparent manner. The next generation of partner nation senior leaders in the SOUTHCOM AOR is likely to include more women who recognize the US role in spearheading discussions that have directly influenced their own empowerment.

Moreover, signaling commitment to shared democratic values, ideas, and narratives with partner nations strengthens the existing relationships. Embracing the WPS initiative entails dedicating oneself to safeguarding human rights and promoting equal opportunities. This commitment is not solely an agenda of the United States; rather, it enjoys well-established multilateral support through the United Nations.

¹³ Sierra Janik, Daniel Blaghter, and Jonathan Ray, "Women in China's Leadership," Issue Brief, U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, 30 March 2022, <https://www.uscc.gov/>.

¹⁴ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, *Women, Peace, and Security Index, 2021/22: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and the Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021), 107, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/>.

Another advantage of using WPS to counter PRC influence is the relatively low cost of WPS events compared to defense equipment purchases and large-scale exercises and training events. Regional WPS conferences or seminars can encompass multiple partners in a single event, and existing security cooperation events can be easily adapted to include dedicated time for WPS-focused discussions. In 2022, the Office of the Secretary of Defense allocated designated resourcing for SOUTHCOM's WPS program, supplemented by funding from SOUTHCOM's Traditional Commander's Activities budget for additional WPS events. AFSOUTH successfully executed multiple WPS events within its existing budgets for Traditional Commander's Activities and partner nation exercises, without a specific funding source dedicated solely to WPS. Although the Department of Defense budget for WPS is limited compared to other programs, SOUTHCOM has already witnessed positive results. In General Richardson's 2023 posture statement to Congress, she highlights several "firsts" for partner nations, including the achievement of several women attaining senior leadership positions in the past year.¹⁵

In 2023, AFSOUTH has already observed the benefits of WPS in partner nation engagements. Early in the year, AFSOUTH led SOUTHCOM's Lesser Antilles Medical Assistance Team (LAMAT) operation to Guyana, Suriname, and Saint Lucia, providing medical care to over one thousand patients across the three countries over a two-month period. AFSOUTH strategically emphasized the role of its female military medical professionals in the team to encourage women in partner nation countries to feel secure in receiving care during the operation and to inspire partner nation females to consider careers in the military.

AFSOUTH is also making a concerted effort to include WPS in its partner nation exercises. In exercise Resolute Sentinel 2023, SOUTHCOM's joint, combined, multinational, air-centric field training exercise, WPS was a strategic messaging theme throughout the planning and execution of the exercise. Consequently, engagements within the exercise included a WPS component. Female space specialists from the Colombian Air Force participated in the space component of the exercise and subsequently spoke at the Colombian Air Force Academy to inspire the future generation of leaders to consider careers in space. Additionally, as part of Resolute Sentinel 2023, AFSOUTH led a seminar focused on international law, featuring the Air Force's Victim Council, which prompted interest from partner nations, including the Colombian and Peruvian Air Forces, in incorporating victim advocacy for victims of sexual assault into their own forces. Finally, as part of Resolute Sentinel 2023, partner nations were encouraged to consider female

¹⁵ "Statement of General Laura J. Richardson Commander, United States Southern Command," 27–28.

personnel for selection to participate in the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Headquarters planning cell. Several of the CJTF planners were female officers from operational backgrounds who took on leadership roles during the exercise. These are just a few examples of how AFSOUTH incorporates WPS into existing and ongoing efforts.

Recommendations

To maintain its current strategic advantage with partner nations in the SOUTHCOM AOR, the United States must continue progressing the implementation of WPS in SOUTHCOM and AFSOUTH programs. AFSOUTH should actively seek opportunities to collaborate with other components, fostering a truly joint approach to partner nations. By sharing different service perspectives on the challenges of women's inclusion, increased collaboration and innovative solutions can be achieved. Furthermore, SOUTHCOM and AFSOUTH should continue to cross-collaborate with other geographic combatant commands, promoting a cohesive and unified effort.

To ensure effective WPS implementation, both SOUTHCOM and AFSOUTH must prioritize personnel understanding of the program. Given that the WPS program at SOUTHCOM is relatively new, efforts should be made to educate personnel about its background and objectives. This can be accomplished by providing and encouraging free online training for military and civil service employees, while also offering in-person resources for those interested in delving deeper into WPS. AFSOUTH has been proactive in this aspect by establishing a robust WPS volunteer program that requires members to undergo WPS training. Additionally, AFSOUTH hosts periodic WPS-themed luncheons and professional development seminars open to all personnel.

Data gathering mechanisms for WPS initiatives should be a priority for SOUTHCOM and AFSOUTH. In 2020, SOUTHCOM commissioned the nongovernmental organization Women in International Security to conduct a quantitative and qualitative assessment of gender integration progress in partner nation militaries and national police forces of 14 countries in the AOR.¹⁶ Additionally, SOUTHCOM tracks gender-disaggregated data for partner nation students who have attended International Military Education and Training courses. AFSOUTH is working to collect gender-disaggregated data for exercise participants during Resolute Sentinel in 2023. These efforts are crucial for tracking progress and advocating for future WPS initiatives.

¹⁶ "Our Impact," Women in International Security (website), n.d., <https://wiisglobal.org/>.

WPS offers SOUTHCOM, AFSOUTH, and partner nations in the AOR a relationship-based partnership founded on the shared democratic value of equal opportunity. While the PRC may publicly proclaim commitment to WPS at the United Nations, its actions in implementing WPS in the PLA and its partnership with Latin America remain limited. In contrast, the United States, having demonstrated sustained commitment to gender inclusion within its own military and engagements with partner nations, is better suited to lead WPS initiatives and dialogues in the region. As more women assume leadership positions in both the US and partner nation militaries, the shared understanding and commitment to WPS principles provide a common ground to foster strong military relationships, ultimately leading to increased cooperation in the Western Hemisphere. 🌐

Maj Christine Martinez, USAF

Major Martinez currently serves as a SOUTHCOM Foreign Area Officer and a country Desk Officer at Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH), located at Davis Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona. Prior to this assignment, she completed her Master's in Regional Security Studies, Western Hemisphere, from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

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