

WESTERN HEMISPHERE READINESS SERIES · POLICY BRIEF 03

Operationalizing the Security Pillar of the Shield of the Americas

Lessons from Ecuador, Chile and Panama

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Purpose — This brief examines how the Security Pillar of the 22 September 2026 Joint Statement on Defending Hemispheric Sovereignty — border security, countering narco-terrorism and trafficking, and securing critical infrastructure against transnational criminal networks — can be translated from a diplomatic commitment into an operational program. It draws on three country-level applied cases already documented in the HRS Resilience Foundation's Country Readiness Assessment series: Ecuador (CRA 07), Chile (CRA 09) and Panama (CRA 11), all three signatories of the Joint Statement and the earlier 5 March 2026 Americas Counter Cartel Conference Joint Security Declaration. Core proposition: the Security Pillar becomes operational when sustained, structure-focused institutional capacity — not individual prosecutions or single security operations — is built to outlast any one leadership tenure, criminal-network disruption, or change of government.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The Security Pillar already has three applied test cases at different stages.** Ecuador's internal armed conflict against transnational criminal organizations, Chile's prosecution of Tren de Aragua's local leadership, and Panama's operational U.S. security-cooperation model in Colón are not separate stories — they are the same institutional-capacity question appearing at three different points in its development.
- **Individual successes do not substitute for institutional continuity.** Chile's conviction of a single network's leadership, Ecuador's capture of a single cartel figure, and any one country's security-ministry leadership are each vulnerable to the same risk: capacity concentrated in individuals or single operations rather than durable institutions.
- **Transnational networks require regional, not only national, response.** Ecuador, Chile and Panama each document the same criminal networks — including Tren de Aragua and allied groups — operating across their borders, confirming that no single country's enforcement success addresses the underlying transnational structure.
- **Security cooperation already has a working operational template.** Panama's PANAMAX exercise, which paired more than 1,700 personnel with a concrete joint medical-readiness program delivered directly in a high-risk province, shows that the Security Pillar's cooperation commitments can move from declaration to delivery.
- **Security and economic readiness are not separable.** Panama's Colón Free Trade Zone, Ecuador's export-dependent coastal provinces, and Chile's port and mineral infrastructure each show organized-crime pressure concentrated precisely where legitimate commerce is most concentrated.

Executive Summary

On 22 September 2026, on the sidelines of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the United States and fourteen other Western Hemisphere governments — including Ecuador, Chile and Panama — signed the Joint Statement on Defending Hemispheric Sovereignty, establishing a Security Pillar built on border security, countering narco-

terrorism and trafficking, and securing critical infrastructure against transnational criminal networks.[1] This built on the 5 March 2026 Americas Counter Cartel Conference Joint Security Declaration, signed in Doral by defense and security officials from 17 countries, which committed signatories to expand multilateral and bilateral security cooperation, counter narco-terrorism, and advance "peace through strength." [2] A joint declaration, by itself, is a diplomatic commitment. It becomes policy only when translated into security institutions capable of functioning consistently — across leadership changes, individual prosecutions, and shifting criminal-network structures — rather than depending on any single success.

The HRS Resilience Foundation's Country Readiness Assessment series has, over the same period, independently produced exactly this kind of applied groundwork for three of the fourteen signatories. Ecuador's CRA 07 documents a formally declared internal armed conflict against criminal organizations with confirmed transnational cartel partnerships. Chile's CRA 09 documents a successful prosecution of a transnational network's local leadership, followed within months by a change in the security ministry's own leadership. Panama's CRA 11 documents an already-operating, concrete U.S. security-cooperation model extending into the same province carrying the country's most acute financial-integrity and organized-crime exposure. Read together, these are not three unrelated country stories. They are three instances of the same structural question the Security Pillar exists to answer: how does a government build security institutions that outlast any single operation, prosecution, or administration.

THE POLICY PROBLEM

Signatory governments have committed to counter narco-terrorism and secure critical infrastructure against transnational criminal networks, but individual prosecutorial and operational successes remain concentrated in specific leadership tenures rather than durable institutions.

THE OPERATIONAL GAP

Transnational criminal networks operate across the same borders the Security Pillar's signatories share, meaning no single country's enforcement success — however well documented — addresses the underlying regional structure on its own.

The objective of this brief is not to propose a single regional security command. It is to show, using three already-documented applied cases, that institutional continuity — not any one operation's success — is what the Security Pillar requires to become durable.

SECTION 01

The Security Pillar and Why These Three Countries

The Joint Statement on Defending Hemispheric Sovereignty was adopted on 22 September 2026 on the sidelines of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, establishing three pillars — Economic, Security, and Multilateral Coordination. Its first joint action under the Security Pillar designated 24 cartels, prison gangs and trafficking organizations as foreign terrorist threats, invoking the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the Rio Treaty) alongside coordinated asset freezes, immigration and visa restrictions, and criminal liability for supporters under signatories' national laws.[1] Fourteen governments signed alongside the United States — Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago — building on the broader, 17-country Americas Counter Cartel Conference Joint Security Declaration signed five months earlier; several Shield of the Americas participants, including Guatemala, did not sign the September declaration.[2] This brief examines Ecuador, Chile and Panama in depth; the remaining eleven signatories each warrant their own applied analysis in future HRS work, and are not addressed here because, independently of this brief and prior to it, Ecuador, Chile and Panama already have documented, applied readiness cases addressing exactly the institutional-continuity question the Security Pillar names.

Country	Applied Case	Security Pillar Dimension
Ecuador (CRA 07)	Formally declared internal armed conflict against criminal organizations with confirmed Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG partnerships	Countering narco-terrorism; securing critical infrastructure in an active-conflict environment
Chile (CRA 09)	July 2026 conviction of Tren de Aragua's Chile-based leadership, followed by a May 2026 security-ministry cabinet reshuffle	Institutional continuity beyond any single prosecution or ministerial tenure
Panama (CRA 11)	2026 PANAMAX exercise's joint medical-readiness program, delivered directly in Colón alongside the country's most acute financial-integrity exposure	Concrete, already-operating regional security cooperation

SECTION 02

Three Applied Cases, One Structural Question

Ecuador. Ecuador's internal armed conflict declaration against criminal organizations — formally sustained since January 2024 — identified confirmed transnational partnerships between Ecuador-based networks and Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel, placing Ecuador squarely inside the narco-terrorism and critical-infrastructure-security language the Security Pillar names.[3] Secretary of State Rubio's September 2026 visit to Quito, and the extradition of a major cartel figure to the United States in July 2025, mark concrete bilateral cooperation milestones; the underlying readiness question is whether Ecuador's security institutions can sustain the current conflict-level response once any single high-profile capture or prosecution concludes.[3]

Chile. Chile's conviction of Tren de Aragua's Chile-based leadership in July 2026 — for crimes including the 2024 kidnapping and killing of a Venezuelan dissident on Chilean soil — represents exactly the kind of prosecutorial success the Security Pillar's narco-terrorism language anticipates.[4] Yet the prosecutor who led that case was appointed security minister and then replaced in a cabinet reshuffle within months, illustrating CRA 09's central institutional-continuity finding: prosecutorial expertise built against a specific criminal network risks being lost when it is not institutionalized within standing security-ministry capacity, independent of any one official's tenure.[4]

Panama. Panama's August 2026 PANAMAX exercise — the coalition's largest multinational exercise to date, bringing together roughly 1,700 personnel from 19 countries, held the same month Colombia joined as the Shield's nineteenth member — included a concrete joint medical-readiness program delivered by Panama's Ministry of Health, Joint Task Force Bravo, and the Missouri National Guard directly in Colón, the same province CRA 11 identifies as Panama's most acute financial-integrity and organized-crime exposure.[5] This is the Security Pillar's cooperation commitments already operating, not merely declared; the readiness question is whether this model extends into sustained, year-round security and financial-integrity cooperation rather than remaining exercise-cycle-dependent.[5]

SECTION 03

The Common Pattern

Across all three cases, the HRS Strategic Dependency Test — concentration, substitutability, control, recovery time, and cascading impact — identifies the same underlying structure: security capacity concentrated in a specific operation, prosecution, or individual tenure, absent the standing institutional continuity to sustain it once that specific success concludes. The test applies with equal rigor regardless of which criminal network, country, or administration is involved, which is precisely what allows it to operationalize a durable security standard rather than a one-time operational win.

Test Dimension	Ecuador	Chile	Panama
Concentration	Security response concentrated in sustained conflict-level operations against specific organizations	Prosecutorial success concentrated in one case and one official's subsequent tenure	Cooperation concentrated in a recurring exercise cycle rather than year-round presence
Control	Transnational cartel partnerships extend beyond any single country's enforcement reach	Security-ministry leadership changed within months of the case's conclusion	Colón's elevated organized-crime exposure persists between exercise cycles
Readiness gap	Sustaining conflict-level response beyond individual high-profile captures	Institutionalizing prosecutorial expertise independent of individual officials	Extending an operational cooperation model into sustained, standing capacity

HRS PROPOSITION

The Security Pillar is not primarily measured by any single prosecution, capture, or exercise. It is a readiness standard: any signatory government that can sustain security-institution capacity across leadership changes, individual case outcomes, and exercise cycles has operationalized the pillar, whether or not any one high-profile success is ever repeated.

SECTION 04

Five Policy Priorities

- 01 — Institutionalize prosecutorial and operational expertise before it is lost.** Chile's case shows that expertise built against a specific criminal network can be lost within months if it is not deliberately institutionalized within standing security-ministry capacity, independent of the official who built it.
- 02 — Plan for sustained response beyond any single high-profile success.** Ecuador's case shows that a declared conflict-level response requires institutional capacity to continue functioning once any one major capture or extradition concludes, not a response calibrated to a single milestone.
- 03 — Extend exercise-based cooperation into standing, year-round capacity.** Panama's case shows that a concrete, well-resourced cooperation model can already exist at the exercise level; the policy priority is converting that into sustained presence rather than a recurring, calendar-bound event.
- 04 — Treat transnational networks as regional, not national, problems.** Ecuador, Chile and Panama each document the same or allied criminal networks operating across their borders, reinforcing that intelligence-sharing and coordinated response across signatory countries is necessary, not optional.
- 05 — Pair security investment with the Economic Pillar's financial-integrity work.** Panama's Colón case shows organized-crime pressure concentrated precisely where legitimate commerce is most concentrated, meaning security and financial-integrity readiness — addressed separately in HRS Policy Brief 02 — are most effective pursued together, not in isolation.

SECTION 05

An Implementation Framework

The five priorities translate into a practical sequence applicable to any Security Pillar signatory, not only the three examined here.

Phase	Primary Activity	Expected Output
1. Baseline	Map security-capacity concentration against specific operations, prosecutions, and individual leadership tenures.	Country-level institutional-continuity baseline.
2. Institutionalize	Convert case-specific or operation-specific expertise into standing security-ministry and prosecutorial capacity.	Durable institutional knowledge independent of individual officials.
3. Sustain	Fund and staff security response to continue beyond any single high-profile success or milestone.	Continuity across leadership and administration changes.
4. Regionalize	Share intelligence and coordinate response with neighboring signatories facing the same transnational networks.	Reduced dependence on any single country's enforcement success.
5. Integrate	Pair security investment with financial-integrity and economic-readiness work in the same high-exposure geographies.	Addressed root commercial vulnerabilities, not only symptoms.

A PRACTICAL TEST QUESTION

If the official or team responsible for a signatory country's most significant recent security success left their post tomorrow, would the institutional capacity they built continue functioning, or would it need to be rebuilt by their successor?

SECTION 06

Measures That Matter

Dimension	Illustrative Measure
Institutional continuity	Security-ministry and prosecutorial-capacity continuity across leadership and administration changes
Sustained response	Security-response capacity maintained beyond any single high-profile capture or prosecution
Regional coordination	Intelligence-sharing and joint-response agreements with neighboring signatories facing shared criminal networks
Cooperation durability	Share of security cooperation delivered as standing, year-round presence versus exercise-cycle-dependent activity
Integration	Joint security and financial-integrity investment in the same high-exposure geographies

For strategic partners — including the United States and multilateral institutions supporting the Security Pillar — the most useful contribution is likely to be sustained institutional capacity-building and standing presence, not single-operation support alone. All three applied cases in this brief show that the binding constraint has been institutional continuity, not the availability of operational will or initial cooperation.

Scope note: This brief examines civilian and institutional security-readiness dimensions of the Security Pillar — prosecutorial capacity, institutional continuity, and cooperation-model durability. It does not address weapons systems, security-force training curricula, or defense-article transfers, which remain subject to each signatory's own procurement processes and applicable U.S. export-control law.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The Security Pillar of the Shield of the Americas will be judged not by the text of the 22 September 2026 Joint Statement or the 5 March 2026 Doral declaration that preceded it, but by whether its signatories can sustain security-institution capacity once any single prosecution concludes, any one official's tenure ends, or any one exercise cycle passes. Ecuador, Chile and

Panama already provide three independently documented, applied cases showing what that sustainability requires in practice: institutionalized prosecutorial expertise, response capacity sustained beyond individual milestones, regional coordination against shared transnational networks, and security investment integrated with financial-integrity readiness. A standing institutional capability — sustained, not merely declared — is what converts the joint statement signed by the United States and fourteen other governments into a durable hemispheric security architecture.

POLICY TAKEAWAY

The strategic objective for the Security Pillar's next phase should be institutional durability: the same prosecutorial-continuity standard, sustained-response capacity, and regional-coordination discipline applied across every signatory country and every criminal network encountered, so that the pillar's credibility does not depend on any single operation's outcome in any given year.

BACK MATTER

Selected References and Evidence Base

The analytical framing in this brief draws on the HRS Resilience Foundation's Country Readiness Assessment series and current official hemispheric security documentation. The recommendations are HRS analytical recommendations; they are not presented as official policy of any government or external organization.

[1] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman. Joint Statement on Defending Hemispheric Sovereignty. Adopted on the sidelines of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 22 September 2026.

[2] Americas Counter Cartel Conference. Joint Security Declaration. Signed in Doral, Florida, 4–5 March 2026.

[3] HRS Resilience Foundation. Country Readiness Assessment 07 — Ecuador: Institutional Readiness, Internal Armed Conflict and Hemispheric Security Cooperation. September 2026.

[4] HRS Resilience Foundation. Country Readiness Assessment 09 — Chile: Institutional Readiness, Strategic Minerals and Hemispheric Realignment. September 2026.

[5] HRS Resilience Foundation. Country Readiness Assessment 11 — Panama: Institutional Readiness, Canal Security and Hemispheric Logistics. September 2026.

[6] HRS Resilience Foundation. Policy Brief 02 — Operationalizing the Economic Pillar of the Shield of the Americas: Lessons from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. September 2026.

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