

>> Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the podium, the president and chair of the Export Import Bank of the United States, Reta Jo Lewis.

>> Two.

>> Welcome to day two of EXIMs 2024 conference. We are in for some great, great speakers today, great advocates for American Business. It's wonderful to see you all again. We've had some amazing conversations yesterday and some great networking, and we are so excited to build on those relationships today. We are very excited to be discussing boosting American manufacturing, empowering exporters and supporting American jobs. It's also a privilege to serve and the Biden Harris administration. And we at EXIM will continue our whole of government approach to ensure American workers remain as competitive as possible on the global landscape. You know, your determination, innovation, and unwavering dedication are the driving forces behind our collective achievements. Remember that EXIM is back and we're open for business and we will use every tool we have to support American businesses every step of the way. So thank you again for joining us now this morning. We are so excited to welcome here, General Laura. Laura Richardson, General Richardson has a 30 year history in the army. She is also a Black Hawk pilot. We could not be more excited to have the head of the US Southern command, the commander be with us today to talk about the command, to talk about the region, and to talk about how and why the work that all of you do or are interested in can help to boost Americans competitiveness in the region. I know you have her bio in your, in your bulletin. And so we're gonna just kind of jump right in with General Richardson.

>> Thank you Madam Chair.

>> Thank you. Thank you. General. Why don't we just start first tell us what the Southern command is and why it's so important and we welcome you to the stage.

>> Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you very much and thank you for having me here. Thank you everybody. It's my honor to be here and my privilege to be here to speak to you. And also happy, happy 90th anniversary for EXIM Bank. That's huge. United States Southern Command. We are one of six geographic combatant commands in the Department of Defense. And so Department of Defense splits up the globe into six geographic areas and appoints a four star general to work with those countries, militaries and public security forces in the region on security cooperation. I'm also responsible for contingency plans in the region and those sorts of things. And so, you know, a lot of times people think of the military as hard power, military hardware, you know, guns, bullets, all of these kinds of things. We also have a very big component or lever that I like to call. It's not just about hard power, it's about soft power too. And US Southern Command has a lot of capability and ability to bring soft power to the region and very proud of that fact as well. So,

>> Well, you know, I'm just, not only are we excited to have you here today, it's a pleasure to let our audience know that we recently as EXIM and so many other government agencies travel to the US Southern Command for your chief admission conference that was held in Florida and having the opportunity to, to talk with you, talk with your team about the role that EXIM financing plays, supporting economic collaboration with nations in Southcom could not have been more important and could not have come at a critical time. So Commander, I would also like to ask, you know, tell our audience, you've been there now for two years as the chief commander. What is your opinion is the strategic importance of Latin America to the hemispheric and global civil and economic security?

>> So the, I would say the region in Latin America. So I'm responsible for the Caribbean, central America and South America, and working with those militaries and public security forces. And when you just think of the, the richness of this, of the region, our ties, this is our hemisphere that we all live in and work in. And, and it is part of, I I like to say that it's, it's our neighborhood and what we think of in our own neighborhoods where we live is what we expect of our neighbors and what our neighbors expect of us being good

neighbors and, and the trust and confidence that you will be there for each other if something bad happens or to keep bad things from happening. And, and with 31 countries, 11 territories in dependencies, I work with 42 different countries and it's my honor to be able to do that. And, and I have eight subordinate commands in United States Southern Command. One from every service, including the special operations. And then I have three joint task forces. And so as we work with, with these countries, if you just think of this particular region and the vastness of it, quite honestly, I believe that this region feeds and fuels the world. And I'll say that again, this region is already feeding and fueling the world. There was a lot of talk about this region doing that, about 2014 timeframe. We don't hear a lot about that anymore. But when you think about the resources and the richness, our cultural ties, our family ties to this region, you think about 60% of the world's lithium is in this region, the gold, the copper, it has the Amazon, 31% of the world's fresh water, heavy, crude light, sweet crude that was discovered off the shores of Guyana and Surinam a couple of years ago. The ability of this region and what it does already for the globe, I don't, I really think that we underestimate this region, but in terms of the impact, more than 50% of the world's soybean, more than 30% of the, of the world's sugar corn all comes from this region. So how do we help this region receive the benefits of feeding the, and fueling the world, which I think is what part of the challenge is, is they're not benefiting from that.

>> So, you know, general, you know, you look at someone's background like yourself and then all of the preparation you've done and being in the, in the military and having served in Congress, having been an aide at the White House and the, all the distinguished service medals that you have received and then the commands that you have led. The thing that is I think could also be interesting into our audience with all of that type of experience in terms of the preparation also of you not being to get this role, but to do this role, to be, to be asked to, to do this role. And you have been placing a lot of attention on economic security. So, you know, with Secretary of Commerce Raimondo, who gave us a message earlier, she often says that economic security is national security. And so I just want to have you share with us, do you think those same tenants apply to Latin America nations? And if so, why?

>> Absolutely. And, and Secretary Raimondo and I have traveled twice to the region together to show the partnership of economic security is national security. And we traveled to Panama and Costa Rica as part of the CHIPS Act and semiconductor supply chain partnership. And as the, as I've been in the seat, as you mentioned, a little over two years, the what I've come to realize is the, the instruments of national power from team USA and when I talk about instruments of national power are so important to bring all of these together. So I use the acronym, the acronym DIME: D for diplomacy, I for information m for military, which is what I represent, and e for the economics. And I would say bringing those together, all of them, all of those instruments are there, we just need to better coordinate them and synchronize those. And that's why when Secretary Austin had invited Secretary Raimondo to the Pentagon to speak to all of US commanders over a year ago, I went to see her in terms of, I thought, okay, I think there's a partnership that we can combine here because we have a tendency to look east and west a lot as opposed to south. And I call that South blindness and, and we don't pay attention to our neighbors and our neighborhood as much as we should. And we're looking elsewhere. And our neighbors have been struggling. I would say the impacts from COVID, the economic impacts this region depends a lot on tourism. And I think that the, these, these impacts have really affected their GDPs anywhere from eight point a half percent GDP decline to 18 point a half percent for a couple of the countries. And so they're still trying to dig out of the hole. And so what is our, how are we working to help in our region them be able to recover from that?

>> So, you know, when we were in Southcom in Miami several weeks ago, your team and you always talk about team USA and team democracy. Can you kind of elaborate a little about how that means and what that means up in the, in the whole economic security fit of it all?

>> So I I, I use these sports analogies because I think they're the easiest to use. We have a term in our national defense strategy that Secretary Austin uses, it's called Integrated deterrents. And the way I look at that is a mesh network of teammates that are working together, like-minded democracies that deter malign activity that doesn't translate well. And you wanna be able to have a, a motto that, that folks know immediately. And that's why I use team democracy, because you know what, if you wanna be on team democracy, it's either team democracy or team autocracy. So which one are you on? We again, have 28 like-minded democracies in this region. I think there's a, an attack globally on democracy right now happening. This is a call to action. And that's why it's very, very important that we bring from team USA, all of our instruments of national power in the hemisphere that we live in with our allies and partners that are in this region. Again, 28, like-minded democracies to work together as a team because we have a lot to lose on the democracy front.

>> You know, your motto at SOUTHCOM is Partnership for the Americas. You know, in what ways do you think that the command partners with Latin America countries and, and how might Southern Southcom partners partner with EXIM?

>> Well, I'm, I'm really excited about, that's why I'm very honored to be here today. And I think that the, the partnership is there on the dime on our instruments of national power. I'd just like to talk briefly. I mentioned 31 countries, 11 territories dependencies. Out of the 31 countries, 22 of the countries have signed on to the People's Republic of China Belt and Road Initiative, 22 of 31. And I'll tell you that as countries put out tenders contracts for their infrastructure, we aren't competing from team USA on these tenders. And the way I like to put it is, if you don't have your jersey on, you're not on the field competing. You're not ever gonna win a tender and you're, you're not competing. And we're not gonna, we're not gonna out compete strategically. We have a lot of US companies in the region and some of the countries, I could take Columbia, there's over 800 US companies in Panama. Over 250 US companies in Costa Rica, over 200 US companies. Why aren't we branding a little bit more and better about what US quality investment brings? Labor standards, anti-corruption, environmental standards. We hire host nation workers. We don't bring in our own laborers to do the work. We invest in the communities, diversification of the workforce. We have a lot of good things on US, quality investment. But if I go back to the tenders and competing on critical infrastructure, because the Belt and Road initiative, not just building stadiums and hospitals and things like that, they have a very big soft power component to that. But it's in the critical infrastructure, which is where my main concern is deep water ports, energy, 5G space, enabling infrastructure and where are we competing if we're, again, if we're not competing there. And so a partnership with EXIM Bank, a partnership with Department of Commerce, department of Treasury, Inter-American Development Bank, developmental Finance Corporation, how can we team together, certainly with the Department of State and everybody worked very, very closely with all of the secretaries at Department of State, just trying to bring all of these instruments of national power to bear into the hemisphere that, that we need to invest more in. I really believe that, that the A Marshall Plan, a Marshall plan for the Americas, again, I believe that they are feeding and fueling the world already. They're not receiving the benefit. The Economic Recovery Act of 1948 AKA, the Marshall Plan was huge for war torn countries to be able to rebuild from that. And so we have a couple initiatives that are already on tap from the, the administration, the American Prosperity, the American Partnership for Economic Prosperity, a aep, that's a start. There's also legislation, the Americas Act that's, that's working right now that would also help out. But EXIM Bank provides a huge lever that I don't think has fully been tapped into. And then the partnership with the Madam Chair here and looking at the criteria and having shovel ready projects within the region. 'cause these countries and the leaders in these countries, they want to work with us from Team USA, but if we're not there delivering at the speed of relevance, they're working on a stopwatch, not a calendar. They need to show progress. They're in the seat normally for one term of four years. They're working on, you know, a couple of weeks, months, not years. And some of our processes from Team USA are slow. And so how do we outcompete with the Belt

and Road Initiative when you're talking billions of dollars on projects. And so that's why this partnership with EXIM is so very important.

>> So in the time we have remaining general, you know, what is, you recently spoke at the US Chamber of Commerce directly to business. This is an audience of companies, large, medium, small organizations that represent exporters. What is your message I think that you want to leave with this audience today about advancing commercial, the commercial agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean?

>> Be proud of what we do. Be proud of Team USA, let's get our branding up to a level where leaders see it. Leaders aren't seeing it from the countries. We gotta brag about what US quality investment does and is, we've gotta be proud of that and, and we need to showcase that because again, the leaders aren't seeing it. And the reason I know that is 'cause they tell me, and we don't have a lot of visitors to the region as well at the higher levels. And so I've been working and asking our congressional delegations, which have picked up and we've had more high level visits. Secretary Raimondo has come, but we have got to continue with that. And we have to show that this region matters. The security of this region is in our national security strategy from the president in our national defense strategy as well. And both of these strategies rely a lot on our allies and partners. And if we are not paying attention and if we're ignoring our partners in this western hemisphere, we have a lot to lose in terms of our own strategies for the United States. I like to say what the what Russia or what the people's Republic of China as well as Russia, because Russia is very well connected in with Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, that we have a lot to lose here, but it's in the red zone. What they're doing is in the red zone to our homeland. And we have to pay attention to that. And we have to work with our partners who want to work with us first and foremost and we gotta be there for them.

>> You know, general, first of all, you have really, I think, gave us a call to arms here and a call to action understanding that there is this big sense of urgency. And so thank you so much. I think we all heard loud and clear. You need us to be in the Be in the region. You are welcome in the region. Absolutely. And we could not be more excited to have someone from a leader's perspective like yourself as the commander for Southcom to be representing the United States throughout the region. And just want to thank you for being here today. Thank you Madam Chair. Thanks for having me. Thank you. Thanks everybody. Thank you so.