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New law may hurt U.S. influence in Latin America
Official concerned China could fill assistance vacuum

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A new law that shields U.S. troops from the International Criminal Court could have the unexpected side effect of undermining American military relations with nations in critical parts of the world, a senior U.S. military official said.

And in many cases, China is moving to fill the void by offering its own military assistance and training, said Army Gen. Bantz Craddock, chief of U.S. Southern Command.

"There is a danger that where we are unable to engage, others will walk in and fill that vacuum," Craddock, who oversees U.S. military interests in Latin America and the Caribbean, told the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 15.

"We would like to be the partner of choice, if you will, in Southern Command," he said. "If we can't do that, we'll lose partners or lose those opportunities, and we may regret it in the long term."

The American Servicemembers' Protection Act of 2001 prohibits U.S. military assistance to nations that have ratified the International Criminal Court treaty. U.S. officials say they're concerned that American troops could end up before the court, based in the Netherlands, simply for carrying out lawful military orders. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his staff have said that if an American service member is accused of war crimes, the case should be tried only under the U.S. legal system.

The law grants an exception to NATO members and other major allies, a list that includes Australia, Egypt, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

But other nations that sign the ICC treaty are barred from military cooperation such as visits from U.S. special operations and training teams under the International Military Education and Training program.

"Of the 22 nations worldwide affected by these sanctions, 11 ... are in Latin America, hampering the engagement and professional contact that is an essential element of our regional security cooperation strategy," Craddock said.

The IMET program allows foreign military students to attend U.S. training centers and make long-lasting contacts with American counterparts, Craddock said.

"We now risk losing contact and interoperability with a generation of military classmates in many nations of the region," he said.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., said the fact that China is taking advantage of the reduction in U.S. military contacts is a concern.

"China is now being very aggressive in its diplomacy in Latin America . and is increasing its own military-to-military contacts and aid programs," Lieberman said.

"Indeed, it is real," Craddock said, referring to China's growing influence in the area.

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