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Out to Maximize the Internet's Vast Space

Interview with Austin Branch, Senior Director for Information Operations, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy), Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict

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Austin Branch, Senior Director for Information Operations, Office of the U.S. Under Secretary of Defense, during his visit to Diálogo, on April, 2013. (Photo: Raúl Sánchez-Azuara/Diálogo)

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In mid-April, the Information Operations (IO) divisions from U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Northern Command co-hosted an IO Subject Matter Expert Exchange, bringing together military representatives from ten countries from within the Americas to discuss lessons learned, best practices, and the ways ahead on

this domain. Austin Branch, Senior Information Operations Director at the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) came to Miami to take part of the exchange and urge participants to really work together and convert plans into actions. Mr. Branch also took some time to talk to *Diálogo* one-to-one on this topic.

DIÁLOGO: How do you see Information Operations (IO) moving forward in the future?

Mr. Austin Branch, Senior Director, Information Operations: Operating in the information environment no matter what is a critical component of how our Defense Department has to consider operating in the future, the digital age, the ubiquity of information...we have no choice but to be able to compete in this space. Because our adversaries and others are challenging us all the time, so we can't ignore it. So we have to have the capability to be able to operate in this space and have the capabilities to be effective. The hard part, the challenge is how do you show real value in an enterprise that doesn't immediately provide opportunities to show direct impact? It takes a lot of time of persistent, sustained engagement to show any kind of measure in change of anything it is we're trying to shake our strategic objectives on, and particularly for any theater command.

DIÁLOGO: What is the importance of collaborating with partner nations for IO?

Mr. Branch: For operating in the information environment, it's not just IO. IO is a military term, more importantly all of our colleagues, and all of our friends, and our international partners, they may not have the same idea of what IO is, so I want to set that aside.

I want to make sure people are talking about our ability to effectively operate in a complex information environment. So why is that important for our friends and our partners? Because we, the United States, do not have the monopoly on the information space, –in fact, we're probably one of the most challenged countries in the information space domain—, because we're so vulnerable, but at the same time, we need to collaborate with our partners, it's an all-in proposition. (US + partners) They have as much equity and as much stake as we do in being effective, because it's a global common, and so we have to be able to do that. They have a stake in this as well. Our ability to make sure that we have some comparable capabilities and understanding is absolutely essential to ensuring security and stability in the various regions where we have common objectives. It's as simple as that.

DIÁLOGO: What is the value of this exchange for the United States' IO mission in Latin America?

Mr. Branch: Well, it's not just an IO mission; it's a whole mission of engagement. And this exchange of information, transparency, having a general understanding, a common understanding of how we think; this information environment is challenging us, and how might we address it in a common way? It's not about us empowering them; it's a mutual empowerment of capabilities. There are a lot of ideas, there's a lot of development, there's a lot of experience in our partners that they can share with us, so it's as rich of an engagement for us, as it might be for them. I am always looking to learn as I go into these types of engagements with our partners in Central and South America, because this information space levels the playing field and we do not have the strategic advantage. We're all the same.

DIÁLOGO: What can the U.S. learn from its counterparts regarding IO?

Mr. Branch: A lot. Well one of the things we really do poorly is we don't really understand the audiences we wish to engage and shape. We often mirror image, we often presume, and so our colleagues and friends can share with us and get a better understanding of the elements of influence, the elements, the challenge, the interests, attitudes, and behaviors. We often get this wrong, so we can really benefit from their perspectives, from their experiences. It's more important that we listen rather than talk. We have to go in hat in hand.

DIÁLOGO: What is the biggest lesson you'd like the partner nations attending the IO SMEE to take back with them regarding IO?

Mr. Austin Branch: Operating in the information environment is very complex and because it's so difficult to measure in the short term, they have to go back to their own headquarters and be advocates for this. Say, "Listen, no matter what we do, we have to invest in technologies, in methods, in applications; we have to partner with not just the U.S., but others, so we can learn how to operate in this space. This is the information age. We built tanks in the industrial age, we're building capabilities to operate in the information environment, via the web or other tools like social media, all of that in the electromagnetic environment, the Internet, all those things play huge roles, so how do we ensure that we do it in the most effective and appropriate way?"

They've got to go back as champions of that because there's a general sense from folks that it's too complex. People just push back and don't want to get involved because it's so difficult to understand. They think it's just dealing with the Internet or just dealing with the media, but it's more than that, it's a whole complex layer of things, and you need professionals who understand how to bring those things together to combine hard science: the electronics, the bits, bytes, trons... with the soft science: the behavior, the cognitive piece, because there are people on the other end of those computers. What is it that they think, what do they know?

That's what they have to go back as champions of, and walk away knowing that they've got a better network of partners who have similar interests. So when they leave here, they'll know they have friends not only in the United States, but in Guatemala, in Peru, in Panama. They'll know who the other people are that have shared challenges.

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