ParlAmericas

Understanding the OAS Role in Regional Security:
A Primer for Parliamentarians

Security challenges across the Americas and the Caribbean are increasingly multidimensional, interconnected, and transnational. Issues such as organized crime, drug trafficking, cyberthreats, human mobility, and climate-related risks affect countries in different ways, yet require cooperative approaches that extend beyond national borders. Within this landscape, the Organization of American States (OAS) serves as the principal political and technical forum through which member states coordinate regional security priorities, share standards and experiences, and request specialized support.

For parliamentarians, understanding how the OAS' role in regional security is structured provides a valuable entry point for strengthening legislative oversight, aligning national laws and policies with regional commitments, and participating more effectively in hemispheric dialogue on security governance. This is particularly relevant in light of the priorities adopted by the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network on Security (PNS), which emphasize collaborative legislative approaches to issues such as transnational organized crime, cybersecurity, human mobility, and the protection of vulnerable populations. This primer offers a practical overview of the OAS institutions, processes, and instruments that shape the hemispheric security agenda, and highlights areas where parliamentary engagement can reinforce—and benefit from—the collective work advanced through both the OAS and the PNS.

The OAS Security Architecture

Within the inter-American system, the Organization of American States (OAS) plays a political coordinating and technical role on security matters. It does not exercise operational or enforcement functions, nor does it conduct military or law-enforcement activities.

Security work at the OAS is framed around the understanding that threats in the region are multidimensional and interconnected, spanning borders and policy areas.

For legislators, this means that the OAS functions as a supporting actor, providing political coordination, shared standards, comparative experiences, and technical tools that can inform national legislation, oversight, and public policy debates.

Core Functions of the OAS on Security:

◉ Political coordination (Permanent Council)
◉ Cooperation and dialogue (Committees)
◉ Technical assistance (Secretariat)

Core Security Policy Areas at the OAS:

◉ Citizen security
◉ Prevention of violence and organized crime
◉ Drug policy
◉ Cybersecurity
◉ Crisis preparedness

Security Decision-Making Process at the OAS	
Agenda setting: Member states	Member states may raise security concerns, national proposals, regional developments, or follow up on existing mandates for consideration.
Technical and Political Discussion: Committees* CHS (CICAD and CICTE - see next page)	The Committee on Hemispheric Security (CHS) is the main OAS forum where member states examine security issues in depth, exchanging national experiences, dialoguing with the General Secretariat and experts, and negotiating draft resolutions and mandates, before decisions are taken by the Permanent Council.
Political Approval: Permanent Council*	The Permanent Council (PC) is the OAS body responsible for political oversight and decision-making on all matters, including security, through the adoption of resolutions and mandates. The PC provides the formal authorization to the General Secretariat to implement security-related activities.
Implementation and reporting: Secretariat for Multidimensional Security	The Secretariat for Multidimensional Security (SMS) implements security mandates adopted by OAS member states. It translates political decisions into technical cooperation and capacity-building activities, working at the request of governments and within the limits set by the PC and CHS.
Oversight: PC/Committees	The PC and Committees monitor progress through SMS reports and, through follow-up discussions, renew and adjust mandates accordingly.

How to connect parliaments: Parliamentarians can contribute to collective security efforts across the hemisphere by aligning domestic legislation with regional commitments and promoting cooperation through regional parliamentary dialogue and information exchanges.

The OAS Permanent Council and its committees are composed of the permanent representatives of all member states. Leadership rotates in alphabetical order among member states, with committees chaired on an annual basis and the PC presided over through quarterly rotations.

Specialized Security Bodies: CICAD and CICTE

Within the OAS security system, CICAD and CICTE serve as specialized, member state-driven bodies that provide technical expertise and cooperation in specific security domains. While they operate with a degree of autonomy in their respective areas, their work is politically guided by member states and implemented in coordination with the OAS General Secretariat through SMS, ensuring alignment with broader hemispheric security priorities.

Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD)	Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE)
Areas of expertise:	**Areas of expertise:**
• Drug policy design and evaluation	• Counterterrorism cooperation
• Demand reduction and treatment	• Cybersecurity and cybercrime
• Supply control and alternative development	• Border and travel security
• Institutional strengthening and legislation	• Critical infrastructure protection
• Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism (MEM)	• Crisis management and preparedness

Security Agenda Intersections at the OAS

Security work at the OAS intersects with the mandates of other secretariats, reflecting the interconnected nature of security challenges. Thus, SMS may coordinate with other OAS bodies in specific matters. For example:

• **Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy (SSD):** Initiatives on citizen security, crime prevention, and public trust, particularly related to institutional resilience and electoral integrity.

• **Secretariat for Integral Development (SEDI):** Efforts related to violence prevention, youth inclusion, social cohesion, also disaster readiness, climate-related risks, critical infrastructure, and crisis response.

• **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR):** Security policies involving use of force, detention, and emergency measures.

Security and the Inter-American Human Rights System

Security policies developed and implemented within the OAS system are closely connected to the inter-American human rights framework, which provides normative guidance and oversight on how security measures should be designed and applied. In practice, standards and recommendations issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), as well as the jurisprudence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, shape regional approaches to matters such as the use of force, deprivation of liberty, counterterrorism measures, and the application of states of emergency.

Core rapporteurships connected to security:

◉ Human Mobility

◉ Persons Deprived from Liberty

◉ Human Rights Defenders and Justice Operators

Practical Challenges

The effectiveness of the OAS security architecture depends largely on member state political will, as mandates and activities are implemented only within the scope authorized by governments.

Security cooperation is also shaped by resource constraints and uneven institutional capacities across countries, which affect the pace of implementation.

In addition, security threats in the Americas and the Caribbean are evolving rapidly, particularly in areas such as organized crime, cybersecurity, and climate-related risks, and often faster than regional decision-making processes can adjust.

Alignment between the OAS security architecture and the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network on Security (PNS)

OAS work in security showcases a significant alignment with the priorities adopted by the PNS at its first gathering, in Panama in November 2025, particularly on issues related to drugs, transnational organized crime, and cybersecurity. The objective of the table below is to highlight areas of convergence and provide parliamentarians with a practical overview of existing OAS tools and initiatives that can support legislative engagement on security across the Americas and the Caribbean.

ParlAmericas PNS Priorities	Secretariat for Multidimensional Security initiatives	Other Inter-American initiatives
1. Climate resilience, food security, human mobility, public health, social protection, economic security SMS activities address selected elements of human security, notably through alternative development approaches linked to drug policy and illicit economies. However, broader dimensions such as food security, public health, and social protection are largely addressed outside the SMS mandate.	➡ Alternative development approaches under CICAD ➡ Combating environmental crimes	➡ SEDI/DSD - Water Security in the Trifinio Region ➡ IACHR - Advisory Opinion AO-32/25 ➡ SSD/DAR - Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS)

ParlAmericas PNS Priorities	Secretariat for Multidimensional Security initiatives	Other Inter-American initiatives
2. Violence against women, children and youth; human trafficking; recruitment by criminal organizations SMS work shows strong alignment in areas related to human trafficking and migrant exploitation, as well as youth-focused violence prevention. Explicit programming on gender-based violence within SMS focuses on migrants and refugees.	➡️ [Preventing and combating human trafficking](#) ➡️ [Combating exploitation of migrants and refugees](#) ➡️ [OASIS: Music for Violence Prevention / Community Resilience](#)	➡️ CIM - [Violence Against Women in Political Life](#) ➡️ CIM - [Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (MESECVI)](#)
3. Transnational organized crime; Illicit economies This priority aligns closely with SMS's mandate. The Secretariat plays a central role in supporting regional cooperation against [firearms trafficking](#), illicit financial flows, and organized crime, including through the implementation of binding inter-American instruments.	➡️ [CIFTA (Firearms Convention)](#) ➡️ [Program of Assistance on Control of Arms and Munition (PACAM)](#) ➡️ [Preventing financial crimes](#) ➡️ [Experts on Money Laundering (GELAVEX)](#) ➡️ [Legislative Assistance and Counter Terrorism Financing Program](#)	
4. Drugs This is the area of strongest convergence between SMS activities and PNS priorities. Through CICAD, the OAS maintains a comprehensive portfolio that spans [supply](#) and [demand](#) reduction and a guide on how to develop [national drug policy](#).	➡️ [Observatory on Drugs](#) ➡️ [Alternatives to Incarceration for Drug-Related Offenses](#) ➡️ [Comprehensive and Sustainable Alternative Development (GEDAIS)](#) ➡️ [International Network for Legislation on Drugs (INLOD-LAC)](#) ➡️ [Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism](#)	

ParlAmericas PNS Priorities	Secretariat for Multidimensional Security initiatives	Other Inter-American initiatives
5. Protection of human rights and environmental defenders, and journalists		➡ IACHR - [Rapporteurship on Human Rights Defenders and Justice Operators](#)
6. Cybersecurity, technologies, critical infrastructure Cybersecurity represents a highly developed area within the SMS portfolio, with long-standing programming on cybercrime, national resilience, and critical infrastructure. Emerging issues related to artificial intelligence fall largely outside the SMS mandate.	➡ [Cybersecurity Program](#) ➡ [Cybersecurity Technical Program (critical infrastructure)](#) ➡ [Cynder Project (gender gap in cybersecurity)](#)	➡ SSD/DECO - [Innovation and Electoral Technology](#) ➡ SSD/DEPM - [Framework on Data Governance and Artificial Intelligence (MIGDIA)](#)
7. Participatory approaches to security policies	➡ [Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas (MISPA)](#)	➡ SSD/ORCS - [Open Consultations: Contributions from Civil Society](#) ➡ SSD/DEPM - [Network on Digital Government (Red GEALC)](#) ➡ SSD/DEPM - [Support for the creation of open data policies](#)

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This document was made possible by the generous support of the Government of Canada through Global Affairs Canada.

Published in March 2026.