

# Defence is a civil matter first and foremost

## PRESIDENT BUSH'S OBSESSION: THE SECURITY-FIRST DOCTRINE

The obsession with security that marked the Bush administration led to at least two counterproductive side effects in Latin America. First, it alienated several Latin American leaders from the US-led agenda, and gave them the fuel to build their own agenda distinct from Washington's single-minded focus. Second, it led to an increase in defence expenditures throughout the region.

Discontent has been simmering ever since the invasion of Iraq. Many have argued that the United States "lost" Latin America during the Bush administration. As an indicator of the state of the relationship, a group convened in 2008 by the Council on Foreign Relations to provide options for the incoming president, Barack Obama, stated in its report, "US-Latin America Relations: A New Direction for a New Reality," that "the era of the United States as the dominant influence in Latin America is over." From the Latin American standpoint, China emerged as both a formidable competitor and an attractive partner; Brazil is competing to be the main rule maker in the region; and the European Union is strengthening its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean.

The stance taken in the report reflected the feeling throughout much of the continent. Most South American leaders and important sections of civil society did not see the "war on terror" as their own cause or as a cause that needed support. Therefore, opposition to the dictation of hemispheric relations by Washington gained momentum, especially after the invasion of Iraq and the failure to find weapons of mass destruction. The widening disparity of interests gave rise to new instances of cooperation regarding security in Latin America. Under Brazil's initiative, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was

BY RUT DIAMINT

Rut Diamint is a researcher at the National Council of Scientific and Technological Research of Argentina (CONICET) and professor at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires.

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formed and the South American Defence Council was launched.

As a second consequence, the increase in defence expenditures in order to secure foreign policy served as justification for both the government and the armed forces to convince society of the urgency and benefits of rearmament. According to *Military Balance 2009*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, defence spending in Latin America and the Caribbean grew 91 percent between 2003 and 2008. However, the region abandoned the proposed Confidence and Security-Building Measures compromise to assume a realistic view based on the notion that power depends on the use of coercion. According to the *SIPRI Yearbook of 2010* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), between 2008 and 2009 Uruguay spent 23.3 percent more on defence; Ecuador increased its expenditure by 17 percent, Brazil 16.4 percent, Colombia 10.7 percent, Peru 8.29 percent, and Bolivia 7.2 percent.

However, the picture is complex. Venezuela cut its defence budget by 24.8 percent, Chile by 4.49 percent, and Argentina by 6.52 percent. Several South American countries established strategic agreements with other countries, bypassing the United States, their traditional arms supplier. Brazil pursued an alliance with France to construct a nuclear submarine for the navy. Venezuela obtained 50 Sukhoi combat helicopters and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles from Russia; it subsequently purchased 18 fighter planes from China. Chile, which spends above the rest on arms alone—comfortably exceeding Venezuela's defence expenditures—turned to Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands, as reported by SIPRI in 2010. Not only were US profits from the sale of military equipment reduced; the United States also lost extended training and logistics contracts with South American countries.

## IN THE HANDS OF CIVILIANS

The question in the region is: Do these new dynamics in the field of defence lead to greater accountability of the armed forces? With varying degrees of success over the last two decades, the armed forces have been returned to their barracks. It was Argentina, with one of the worst records in human rights abuses, that led the region toward greater institutionalization of civilian control over defence. The process, which began with the return of democracy in 1983, has suffered setbacks. While it culminated in clear civilian supremacy with the establishment of new laws and institutions, it has not achieved full reconciliation between the government and the military, in the absence of consensus about the defence model that Argentina would wish to develop for the future.

In the case of Brazil, the creation of the Ministry of Defence under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso repre-

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sented a major reform of the military's full autonomy. Unlike Argentina, however, Brazilian society has not confronted military repression and human rights violations. The democratic governments have not been impelled to take civilian control of the armed forces. The increasing danger from organized crime and public insecurity has even led other countries to involve the military in domestic affairs. That is, for example, what has taken place in Mexico, where the government has left the fight against organized crime in the hands of the army.

In this de-militarized context, the armed forces lost their veto power over the political agenda and much of their clout. With the achievement of a relative degree of civilian control over the armed forces, the focus of the debate shifted to governments' ability to oversee the military effectively through the ministries of defence. However, when security re-emerged as a priority, hand in hand with the global war on terror and organized crime, there was little analysis regarding the role and responsibilities of civilian leadership in military initiatives. Although today's government officials are knowledgeable, the technical issues remain under military control. Hence, the government is forced to continue relying on the military.

## SHORTCOMINGS OF CIVILIAN CONTROL

How do we account for the lack of civilian control over defence? There are at least three reasons. First, governments have tried to avoid the high political costs of radical changes to the structure of the armed forces by maintaining arm's-length relationships with the existing military. To illustrate, the first three democratic governments in Chile introduced very gradual reforms in order to avoid political tensions.

Second, several governments facing crises of political representation found that the support of the military was expedient. In the case of political leaders

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rising to power without the support of political parties, an alliance with the military provided some guarantee of order. Alberto Fujimori in Peru dissolved Congress and used the military as "party support" to accumulate political power. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez relied on similar tactics, using the military as a political party as well as a provider of social welfare.

Third, Latin American countries did not encourage the strategic thinking necessary to guide the development of military policy—a precondition for strengthening civilian leadership. One might argue that Brazil is an exception. However, despite the fact that Brazil developed defence priorities, the Ministry of Defence remains weak with a small civilian staff and a large contingent of army officers. In other Latin American countries, the armed forces designed and implemented defence policies. Argentina still lacks sufficient knowledge in the history of state–military relations.

## A NEW START: IN THE HANDS OF REGIONAL SECURITY

After many years of democratic rule, Latin America has not significantly expanded its knowledge base around defence, and defence remains largely beyond the scope of civilian authority.

Few governments have held an encompassing debate on defence matters. Measures leading to greater accountability are rare—for example, congressional control over defence expenditures or the definition of military roles.

This is not to suggest a return to past practices—the military does not supervise regional security. For example, civilians led the 2009 coup in Honduras, with the invaluable help of the armed forces. It was not a repeat of the military coups of the 1970s. The approach of the South American Defence Council and the various defence forums of the subregion—the Democratic Security Framework Treaty on Central America (1995), the Regional Plan Against Organized Crime and Related Offences (2007) prepared by the Central American Integration System, the National Security and Law Enforcement Agency of CARICOM (2006), or the Amazon Treaty—represent a new pattern for Latin American relations with the world.

These regional rules and agreements represent a constraint on national governments, forcing the civil administration, particularly the ministries of foreign affairs and defence, to factor in these new foreign commitments and balance them with their more traditional ones. This constraint has indirectly created external pressure to advance civilian control of armed forces. It is in this area where progress has been most notable, banishing the historic neighbourhood rivalries that served in the past to increase the military's role and defence expenditures.

However, in late September 2010 a confusing situation arose in Ecuador. A police uprising faced direct intervention by President Correa, who was detained in the police hospital. A slow rescue by the armed forces was followed by the government's accusation—disputed by the opposition—of a coup attempt. There was an active and efficient response to this "attempt" from the South American presidents of UNASUR. Meeting a few

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## EFFECTIVE PROPOSALS TO FIGHT CRIMINALITY

Proposals to fight the violence, crime, and impunity in Central America include the promotion of international cooperation, the exchange of information, and the application of models of best practices and successful experiences. In addition, the judicial, intelligence, and police sectors all require more training and modernization. Promoting civilian leadership in public defence and security and inter-agency cooperation are also necessary. Without the recognition that this is a shared problem, without the rebuilding of trust, and without joint responsibility to confront criminality, no strategy will be effective, and the result will be major frustration.

The complexity and multiple dimensions of this battle demand comprehensive policies. Social and economic policy designs that result in greater social integration are needed. Fractures in social integra-

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tion weaken democracy and create opportunities for the activities of illegal networks. A military response alone does not solve the problem. Public safety policies should be state policies. The multidimensional nature of insecurity underlines the need for long-term solutions. Policies and programs must last longer than a single-term government. Policies must be continuous, sustainable, and constantly re-evaluated in order to progress and gradually become more proficient with lasting and efficient results. 

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hours later in Buenos Aires, they released a message of unconditional and deep support for democracy in the region. Nonetheless, the events in Ecuador demonstrate the altered stability of the region because political power is not exercised in an open and accountable way. Further, the process of checks and balances, fundamental to securing a democ-

racy, is not appropriately conducted.

Although the United States has lost influence over the armed forces of the hemisphere, Latin American governments are no longer challenged by their militaries. However, this does not mean that they have fulfilled the process of democratizing defence and institutionalizing civilian control. 



**FLACSO**  
ARGENTINA

The Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLACSO) was founded in 1957 by UNESCO. FLACSO is an international, inter-governmental, regional, autonomous body that is comprised of Latin American and Caribbean countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Surinam, and Uruguay.

FLACSO's core objective is to establish post-graduate programs to train Latin Americans in different fields within the Social Sciences. This function has been widened to its current main objectives:

- To promote critical research of problems related to Latin American social reality, aimed at analyzing concrete social processes.
- To assure the training of experts in Social Sciences in Latin America through specialization courses at the post-graduate level and the most updated theoretical, methodological, and technical tools.
- To spread Social Sciences knowledge and, above all, the results of its own research, through all means possible and with the support of the governments and/or institutions.
- To provide scientific consultation to governments, research institutions, and regional educational centers.
- To collaborate with national university institutions and analogous teaching and research bodies, and to promote collaboration and exchange among the international, regional, and national bodies, governmental and non-governmental.
- In general, to carry out every academic activity related to the Social Sciences leading to the development and integration of the countries comprising Latin America. ■

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