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ATTENTION DEFICITS  
Why Politicians Ignore Defense  
Policy in Latin America

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*ABSTRACT: Interest in defense issues among Latin American politicians has faded with the advent of widespread democratization in the region and the retreat of the armed forces to their barracks. Defense policy is rarely subject to the same level of public scrutiny and debate as other major policy issues faced by the region, such as health, education, and public safety. This is puzzling because by ignoring defense policy, civilian leaders in the region risk ceding authority to their militaries, allowing them a degree of self-management and undermining the consolidation of democratic civilian control of the armed forces. This article explains civilian politicians' inattention to defense as a function of three factors: a historical path that has produced armed forces with limited capabilities that are more often a threat to their own governments than their neighbors; a relatively benign international threat environment in Latin America that makes neglect of defense policy a low-risk proposition; and the low importance that voters assign to the provision of the national defense as either a public or a private good. Under these circumstances, it is rational for most civilian politicians to ignore defense policy and focus their attention instead on coup avoidance.*

In an era of widespread democracy in Latin America, attention to defense policy has become a low priority for politicians of the region. Interest in the armed forces has faded with the retreat of militarism and the military in government. Unlike the public debate that national economic, education, or health care policies provoke in most Latin American countries, civil and political society are relatively silent on the issues of national defense—this despite the fact that the defense of territorial sovereignty and integrity remains a fundamental constitutional obligation for every state of the region. Why do civilian politicians show little interest in investing resources and expertise in defense?

Our objective is to account for the widespread disinterest in defense policy, which is to be distinguished from a concern with the military itself, its past role in politics, or a larger concern with public security. By defense policy, we mean the development of plans and processes designed to provide for the oversight, organization, training, deployment, and funding of the armed forces (Bruneau and Tollefson 2006). In democracies, it falls on civilian political leaders to plan for the defense of the state and assign roles and missions to the armed forces to support this objective. Historically, the primary role of the military has always been to secure the national territory from potential aggressors. But this has not been its only role, and the military has often been led (or has led itself) astray from purely defense-related tasks. At one time or another, the military has been a governing force, a tool of repression, a keeper of public order, an unruly interest group, a political power broker, or a self-proclaimed guardian of national interest. Each version of the military evokes distinct relations between it, the state, and society, and inquiries into these topics have been (appropriately) subsumed under the umbrella of the civil-military relations research agenda.

There is no question that politicians and scholars alike have shown considerable interest in civil-military affairs. Power has been at the heart of these discussions, and foremost in the minds of politicians during the first decade or so after the transition to democracy in Latin America was the question of how to diminish military power enough to prevent coups from reoccurring. This presents a particularly difficult problem in that the organization that turns its lethal force against its own government is the same organization devoted to defending the country's territory. Politicians face the problem of designing policies and institutions that curb the military's coercive means to seize political power that do not also degrade the state's defensive capabilities. We should also keep in mind that averting military takeovers and forming national defense policies are two very different endeavors. Military subordination is often a low-cost venture that can be pursued via various political strategies (usage of carrots and sticks, divide and rule, cooptation, or containment) with minimal resources, staff, bureaucracy, or expertise (Trinkunas 2005). On the other hand, designing defense policy is a higher-cost, institutional, and expertise-building endeavor that cannot be "bought on the cheap." Politicians' emphasis on civil-military power relations and coup prevention has masked the stark deficiencies in civilian attention to defense policy across the region. Now that the threat of military coups has subsided, it has become more obvious just how little attention politicians have devoted to defense policy.

Whereas the focus on civil-military power relations two decades ago brought the question of what to do about the military (but not defense policy) to center stage, the region's contemporary interest in security

fails to prioritize either issue. Security has increasingly become a catch-all phrase that refers to both a condition and the protection of regional, national, and individual well being. It references everything from poverty to terrorism to cybernetic attacks on computer systems to physical assaults on pedestrians. As agreed upon at the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Conference on Security in October 2003, threats to security include terrorism, narco-trafficking, transnational organized crime, corruption, asset laundering, extreme poverty, social exclusion, natural and man-made disasters, and transport of hazardous materials (OAS 2003). Responses to these threats involve a myriad of agencies and assets, defense institutions being only one of these. Quite often, defense ministries and their armed forces are peripheral to these problems, and understandably so. Human insecurity, for example, is traced to unemployment, crime, police brutality and unresponsive court systems. Such problems warrant economic, police, and judicial reforms, but the defense sector has nothing to do with these remedies.

A well-thought-out defense policy could certainly contribute to national security and, moreover, redound to the favor of civilian control. An effective defense of territorial integrity and sovereignty is part of the solution to some of the threats the OAS identified in 2003, such as terrorism or the illegal trafficking in goods, narcotics, hazardous materials, and persons. In addition, if militaries are required to exclusively train their sights on territorial defense, then they may devote less time and resources to domestic repression, policing, or political intrigue (Desch 1999). Part of the objective of defense policy is not simply effectiveness or control, but also efficiency in the use of resources, and such a policy could help rationalize state expenditures on security, potentially freeing additional resources for other security forces or even calling attention to deficiencies in the defense sector. However, the promotion of defense policy demands a sustained long-term commitment of attention, expertise, and resources on the part of politicians, one that they have not been willing to assume during the contemporary democratic period, or as we will show, at most points in Latin America's history.

A survey of Latin America's past confirms that national defense policy has not been a high priority, even though the region has had a long history of troubled civil-military relations. We argue that there are historical, structural, and rational reasons why this is so. The post-independence development paths of Latin American states deemphasized the role of the military in interstate conflict, and the results were small national armies with low offensive capabilities. Very few countries experienced the existential threats from their neighbors that would have prompted civilian state leaders to pay attention to defense policy. Instead, the major threat to the power of civilian leaders was domestic insurrection and the coup d'état. Geography also blessed Latin America with a peripheral role in

the major international conflicts of the past two centuries, which meant that conventional extra-continental threats were almost nonexistent, again downgrading the importance of national defense to civilian political leaders. Even the United States in its role as a regional hegemon showed little interest in altering state boundaries or conquering new territories after the end of the nineteenth century, even if it intervened frequently to change regimes. In fact, by the 1980s, it was rapidly becoming apparent that a zone of peace had emerged in South America that created an expectation that states would not use force to resolve their disputes. Instead, international law and diplomacy have become the standard conflict-resolution mechanisms. Latin America spends the least on defense of any region of the world and purchases the fewest major weapons systems (Klare and Anderson 1996, 1). In many countries, the military burden as a percentage of GDP shrank in the wake of democratic transitions (Scheetz 2002, 55).

Under these circumstances, the rational choice of politicians is to pay little attention to national defense policy. There are almost no external threats, nor are there major economic or social constituencies in Latin American democracies that favor national defense issues. Defense contracting is not a big business as it is in the United States, and thus is not a major employer. Legislators and other politicians see no gain to be had in becoming defense savvy since they cannot deliver defense jobs to their districts in exchange for votes. Politicians then only consider the military important as a potential threat to regime stability, a problem that has receded with democratic consolidation. This is a threat that can be contained through coup avoidance mechanisms rather than by paying serious attention to defense policy-making and institution building.

In the balance of this article, we examine historical, structural, and rational arguments for civilian inattention to defense policy. Each of these alone constitutes a valuable, yet partial explanation. By bringing all of these theoretical tools to bear on the problem and drawing on the respective strengths of each, we can achieve a more complete, indeed sufficient account for why defense policy remains such a low priority for Latin American politicians.

#### HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS FOR CIVILIAN INATTENTION TO NATIONAL DEFENSE

##### *Path Dependency and the Historical Evolution of Latin America's Civil-Military Relations*

Latin America's early postindependence history features considerable armed conflict, but the result was not the consolidation of professional military establishments or civilian interest in national defense. State boundaries were settled relatively early, particularly once independence leaders'

ambitions of building large regional states, such as the Gran Colombia or the United Provinces of Central America, were dashed by separatist movements. There were a large number of militarized disputes, but these were fought by regional caudillos struggling to achieve national supremacy and fill in the hollow administrative and legal shells left by Spanish colonial rule. Threats were internal and domestic and threatened the personal power of the caudillo, but they were rarely struggles for national survival (Centeno 2003; Lopez-Alves 2000). The state-building and army-building cycles hypothesized by Charles Tilly (1992) to explain European state formation never took hold in Latin America, or did so only incompletely.

Nineteenth-century South America did experience a small number of major interstate wars, but the outcomes of the wars did not produce security dilemmas for regional states. The War of the Pacific (1879–1883), in which Chile was victorious over Peru and Bolivia, and the War of the Triple Alliance, in which Argentina and Brazil defeated Paraguay (1864–1870), instead produced more or less stable regional settlements that were not subsequently challenged by force of arms (Scheina 2003). In particular, Chile and Brazil emerged as territorially satisfied powers, and the most significant threat to regional stability, Paraguay, was nearly destroyed in the war of the Triple Alliance and never recovered. The combination of Chile and Brazil's power was sufficient to deter any serious challenges to altering the outcome of these conflicts. It is worth noting that even though Paraguay was thoroughly defeated, it survived as an independent state.

By the end of the nineteenth century, it had become clear that the United States and European powers were not particularly interested in annexing the territory of Latin American states, or even engaging in prolonged occupation of these states. Even in Central America and the Caribbean, where the United States was relatively more interventionist in the early twentieth century, states did not strengthen their armed forces to protect themselves, nor is it clear that there is any credible way they could have deterred such an intervention through military power. As Jorge Domínguez (2005, 21–22) observes, there are only six instances in which the territorial boundaries of states in Central and South America were significantly altered by force. Strip away the myths armies have built about their indispensable roles in defense of "la Patria" and you are left with the fact that these institutions, with one or two exceptions, never succeeded at expanding the reach of states, defending them from extra-continental powers, or even consolidating the territories they had (Loveman 1999).

The result of history and geography placed Latin American states in a position where they did not face the existential threats that could have led to the forging of the type of civilian-military national defense complexes exhibited by even the smaller European powers of the times. Latin American armies were neither created nor called upon to serve in ways commensurate with European armies. With few exceptions, Latin



Americans rarely used offensive power to enlarge national territories at the expense of their neighbors. They were mainly involved in internal, internecine conflicts between caudillos, political party bosses and other power brokers—all within boundaries set by Spain and Portugal. Consequently, they did not have to grow to a size or achieve a readiness consonant with the tasks of state formation, and hence they did not inherit the critical legacies of the European armies.

The initial professionalization of Latin America's militaries, largely conducted by French and German military missions between the 1880s and 1939, also distanced civilians from any interest in defense policy. Officers were now a specialized body of educated professionals drawn from the aspiring lower- and declining upper-middle classes. The French and German military traditions shared a suspicion towards civilian authority and imbued local militaries with a sense of national protagonism (Nunn 1983, 71–98). Thus, the civilian and military worlds grew increasingly distant from one another as civilian politicians increasingly left defense affairs to the (military) specialists (Rouquié 1987). However, professionalization was not accompanied, in most cases, by the level of resources and manpower required to maintain effective and professional military forces, nor was there an external threat that would have led civilians to commit to such expenditures.

Since their neighbors' armies posed such little threat to them compared to their own, it is no wonder that Latin America's civilian politicians abandoned an interest in national defense and instead focused on regime defense. Civilian inattention to defense policy is a path-dependent phenomenon. Civilians do not believe their neighbors are a threat because history has shown that their neighbors rarely attack, so they pay little attention to defense policy and avoid funding strong militaries. The result is a relatively weak military establishment that poses little threat to their neighbors, reinforcing the civilian belief system. It would be very hard to reverse this path and reconfigure militaries with strong offensive capabilities because the whole state infrastructure to support such an establishment (conscription, taxation, arms industries, logistics, mobilization plans) was underdeveloped due to the relatively benign threat environment. Even if Latin American civilian politicians had wanted a strong military by the twentieth century, their states were, barring one or two exceptions, in no condition to support such an expensive adventure.

### *Structural Explanations for Civilian Attention Deficits*

Notwithstanding the fact that history had led political leaders to an indifferent state of mind concerning defense, that indifference could not have been sustained to the present day were Latin America located at the center of international conflict. But because the region lies at the



periphery of the international system, and states there are rarely subject to the security dilemmas, existential threats, or arms races more typical of other regions of the world, politicians may ignore defense without incurring great risks to national security. In the absence of actual or potential military threats, realists and neorealist theorists of international relations might concede that civilian inattention to defense policy is understandable. The fact that South America escaped essentially untouched by the fighting in both major world conflicts (1914–1918 and 1939–1945) of the period confirms just how peripheral the region is within the structure of the international system. This has also translated into a paucity of conventional external threats to Latin American states emanating from outside the continent. In addition to realist arguments, liberal and constructivist theorists of international relations would also point to democratization in the 1980s as reinforcing a trend towards regional peace. In fact, some theorists have suggested that South America has become a *de facto* zone of peace and may be the locus of an emerging pluralistic security community (Kacowicz 1998; Hurrell 1998). In essence, both liberal and realist theorists of international relations would probably agree that it would be logically difficult to mobilize public or political interest in national defense or justify large military establishments.

The United States policy has indirectly reinforced the trend away from interstate conflict by encouraging a focus on internal defense for Latin American militaries, rather than by directly intervening to resolve the conflicts that did occur. Contemporary international relations theory has occasionally referred to the U.S. role in Latin America as a classic example of hegemonic management, with the United States intervening to prevent war in the region. But we concur with Mares (2001) and Dominguez (2005) that U.S. hegemony has had little influence on interstate conflict *per se*. In fact, some would point to the Central American conflicts of the 1980s as an example of hegemonic “mismanagement” that provoked greater conflict. Instead, the United States has influenced the nature of the militaries in the region in a way that deemphasizes conventional offensive capabilities. As early as World War II, the explicit policy of the United States was to assume the mantle of defending the Americas against extra-continental conventional military threats, and supporting and training Latin American armed forces to counter domestic subversion. The United States contributed to this trend as a major purveyor of military assistance and training to the region, through which it emphasized an internal orientation, provided counterinsurgency equipment and training and discouraged the purchase of advanced war fighting platforms by Latin American states. Latin American states began to diversify their acquisitions to European and Asian suppliers by the 1970s, but this still means that U.S. influence favoring a domestic orientation influenced

two generations of military officers and discouraged the development of offensive military capabilities (Mott 2002, 89–96).

The internal orientation of Latin American defense establishments was reflected in decisions about defense budgets, military training, and acquisitions. It meant that many Latin American militaries never developed the capabilities to engage in sustained offensive operations. The shortcomings of a relatively well-equipped Latin American military, such as Argentina's, in the face of combat against a capable European adversary is highlighted by the outcome of the Malvinas conflict (Garcia 1995). Even conflicts between Latin American state rivals themselves reveal inadequacies in defense preparedness, a deep reluctance to engage in combat, and urgent appeals for third party mediation.

The relative paucity of inter-state conflict does not mean that there have not been serious, enduring rivalries in Latin America; Argentina and Chile, Peru and Ecuador, Venezuela and Colombia, and El Salvador and Honduras are key examples. Each rivalry is a source of continuing tension and occasionally raises the possibility of militarized border disputes, and even war. Certainly, militaries in the region have pointed to such disputes as justifications for their own existence or for acquisition of major weapons systems. However enduring, these rivalries in and of themselves have not led to the development of military forces with significant offensive capabilities or resulted in sustained civilian attention to defense policy.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in cases where such a "war scare" has occurred during periods of civilian rule, the response of anxious politicians has been improvised, more often than not, with an immediate resort to a negotiated solution as the preferred solution.

The most recent Latin American conflict, which took place between Peru and Ecuador in 1995, illustrates the almost instinctive civilian aversion to war and resort to diplomacy that has characterized inter-state relations in the region. This conflict revealed Ecuadorian armed forces that performed unexpectedly well on defense, but neither state exhibited much in the way of offensive military capabilities, and both states limited their theater of operations to a small sliver of disputed territory in the Upper Cenepa region of their Amazonian border. Neither side had the desire or ability to escalate the war, and the Peruvian armed forces, considerably larger in size and resources, were nevertheless noticeably unprepared for combat operations, lacking logistical capabilities and enough troops (Herz and Pontes Nogueira 2002). Within one day of the commencement of hostilities, the Ecuadorian president was already making urgent appeals to the OAS, Brazil, and the other guarantor states

1. Although not relevant to explaining civilian inattention to defense policy, we should also note that even states ruled by military governments, a relatively frequent circumstance in twentieth-century Latin America, have not produced particularly effective or offensive minded armed forces.

to intervene diplomatically; the Peruvians were equally anxious for a negotiated settlement, which came on February 17, 1995, just three weeks after the fighting had begun. As Herz and Pontes Nogueira point out, "Fear of a general escalation certainly contributed to limiting the scale of violence and to attempts to end the war quickly" (2002,46). In the wake of the war, it is important to note that neither state attempted to remedy the deficiencies in their military performance through the development of a credible defense policy. Instead, civilian leaders on both sides invested their attention and resources in the (successful) development of a permanent diplomatic solution to their border dispute.

Other recent inter-state militarized disputes that took place between civilian-led governments in the region, such as the Nicaraguan-Honduran border tensions during the 1980s and the confrontation between Colombia and Venezuela over maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Venezuela in 1987, also revealed a preference for diplomacy, a notable civilian inattention to defense policy, and a general lack of preparedness for conducting effective military operations. Both Nicaragua and Honduras required significant support, including combat and training troops from their Cold War sponsors, to mount credible military preparations. Even as the United States and Cuba attempted to prepare their proxies for war, the region as a whole was engaged in a long-term diplomatic effort, crafted and pressed forward by civilian politicians in Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Southern Cone, the so-called Contadora group, to peacefully resolve the Central American conflicts of the 1980s. It is notable that once the Cold War ended and the superpowers lost interest in the region, Central American states, led by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, quickly negotiated an end to their disputes and pursued an aggressive demilitarization of the region (Barletta and Trinkunas 2004). Similarly, the Colombian-Venezuelan dispute over maritime borders in 1987 showcased a general lack of preparation for war on both sides, and a civilian disinterest in military planning during the conflict. Neither side developed any significant new military capabilities or engaged in long-term planning to address the shortcomings of their defense forces in the wake of the conflict. In fact, Colombia and Venezuela instead pursued regional economic integration, dramatically increasing the flows of goods and persons along their common borders during the 1990s (Trinkunas 1999).

These rivalries reinforced civilian preferences for diplomatic over military solutions to conflict, as did the process of democratization that swept the region during the 1980s and 1990s. In essence, the relative absence of war in Latin America during the last two decades would seem to support the often debated "democratic peace" hypothesis set forth by liberal theorists of international relations (Maoz and Russett 1993). In the Southern Cone, democratizers in Argentina sought to demilitarize and eliminate conflicts with their neighbors to undermine

the rationale for the existence of a large (and politically active) military. They had greater success initially convincing Brazil than Chile, but by the end of the 1990s, Argentina had successfully resolved all of its major border disputes. They also sought greater regional integration through the MERCOSUR treaty framework, and David Pion-Berlin (2000) has documented how economic integration in the Southern Cone has reinforced an expectation of peaceful interstate dispute resolution. The Contadora process in Central America also hinged on an expectation that democratization would produce a more peaceful subregion. Whether or not this logic was correct, it certainly appeared to be so for the civilian leaders of these major regional powers (Barletta and Trinkunas 2004).

This sustained peace has been reinforced by diplomatic and legal (i.e., civilian) institutional innovations in the region. Dominguez (2005) documents contributions to international law that originate in inter-American diplomacy, the most important of which is *uti possidetis juri*, which established that a modern state's boundaries should match those of its colonial predecessor and favors the territorial integrity of states. He also points to the role of the OAS in managing interstate disputes and organizing peacekeeping mechanisms. Kacowicz (1998) goes further and argues that South America has developed a "zone of peace" in which states no longer expect to go to war with each other. Certainly, the Southern Cone has come the furthest towards developing a pluralistic security community whose members no longer have an expectation that force will be used in their interstate relations. The concept of zone of peace has even been enshrined in certain limited forms by regional treaties, such as the 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco establishing Latin America as a nuclear-weapons free zone (Barletta and Trinkunas 2004). Mares (2001) has disagreed with the concept of zones of peace as a description of the international relations of Latin America, pointing out that states still make the choice to militarize interstate disputes. However, the conflicts he identifies are small in scale and have not sparked significant civilian interest in defense policy beyond a brief "rally around the flag" effect during the period of the conflict itself.

In the absence of sustained international or regional military threats, both liberal and realist theories of international relations would predict that Latin America is an unlikely candidate for arms races, balance of power behavior, or acute security dilemmas. Without such a stimulus for the development of offensive capabilities, it makes sense that civilian elites preferred diplomacy and international law as solutions to interstate disputes, reinforcing the prolonged peace in the region. The overall effect of history and structure is to produce a path by which civilian elites have consistently turned away from developing an interest in national defense as an important field of public policy.

## RATIONAL CHOICE AS A SOURCE OF CIVILIAN DEFENSE ATTENTION DEFICITS

*Defense as a Public Good*

If history sets the path, and structure sets the context for defense attention deficits, then rational choice explains the underlying motivations. Latin American politicians are driven by the interests and priorities of their constituents and parties (Hunter 1997). If there had been a persuasive electoral logic to political leaders prioritizing defense, they may very well have done so, notwithstanding the countervailing influences of history and international relations. But in fact, politicians calculate that there is little if anything to be gained in making defense an expenditure or policy priority, let alone the subject of debate or reflection, because voters and party leaders attach marginal importance to the subject.

Of course, no one familiar with the region would suggest that the political class of Latin America earns high marks for attentiveness to citizen demands; far from it. Representation or lack thereof remains a serious problem. Nonetheless, if they are to survive, governments must demonstrate *some* ability to deliver essential goods (services) to the public and respond to its most pressing needs. Defense is an essential public good in most states, but is not perceived by the public in Latin America as a pressing national priority. Unlike other public goods, Latin American states rarely "consume" national defense. Not a week goes by when the average Latin American citizen does not rely on the power, transportation, communication, sewage, health, and school systems. But defense lies in waiting; it is almost never used, and seldom visible. If it is in a state of disrepair (as the roads, phones, electrical grids, and trains invariably are) citizens do not mind since it does not directly affect their daily lives.

Consider the following thought experiment. Let us say the Chilean military, unannounced, suspends all their territorial defense functions for a week: no border, sea, or air patrols, no training; all officers and enlisted personnel return to their homes. What would occur? In all likelihood, nothing would happen. The public would carry on as usual. None of Chile's neighbors would seize on its vulnerability and launch an invasion because relations between these states are generally stable and friendly, and even if they were not, neighboring states lack serious offensive capabilities. Now compare this to the public reaction if the electrical power and water supplies were to be cut off to all major cities for a week. We could imagine the response of an alarmed, frantic, and angry public: it would quickly identify the culpable government officials, and hold them accountable for the disaster. Defense, in this part of the world at least, is a very different kind of public good from electricity, water, or roads. Politicians can earn political capital by filling potholes or building new highways. They cannot earn capital by funding yet another year of defense for a country that has no enemies and faces no imminent threats.

Although there are various threats to security and public safety (narcotrafficking, terrorism, and gang activities, to name a few), these do not by and large compel wholesale military responses. In this not so “new” security environment, police, internal security forces, immigration authorities, and intelligence services are at the front line. Militaries occupy rearguard positions, waiting for the occasional call to assist the other forces. Even when they do engage, they do so in a limited way, whether it be logistical support, aerial surveillance, or conducting anti-crime sweeps through a favela controlled by drug traffickers. These are not the kind of missions that fully test the capabilities of the military institution or provide a rationale for expanding defense spending. For that reason, politicians cannot persuasively sell anti-crime or counternarcotic efforts as defense-related missions.

### *Defense as a Private Good*

Even in the absence of threat, defense could still be relevant were it to provide important *private* goods to its citizens. In the United States, that good is employment. Millions of U.S. voters—in many cases whole communities—depend on defense expenditures for their livelihoods. Levels of national defense spending throughout the post-WWII era have been very high by historic standards, and that spending has created an abundance of jobs on military bases and in defense-related industries. By contrast, in Latin America, military installations and defense contractors provide very few civilian jobs. Levels of defense spending are low by any international comparison (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2005–06) and what resources do flow to defense do not translate into appreciable job creation for civilians. Thus, few politicians stand to gain by diverting expenditures from other national priorities, such as health and education, or becoming more informed about defense.

To get a sense of the comparison between defense employment as a private good in the United States and Latin America, we provide some statistics in the tables below for a few countries from the region. Data is extremely hard to come by on civilian employment in the defense sector in Latin America. Fortunately, we have found some comparable figures for Argentina and the United States on governmental and private sector civilian employment in defense for 2005, as shown below. Governmental employment is defined as civilian jobs in the army, navy, and air force, on military bases, installations, and in schools, hospitals, and defense-related government agencies. The private sector pertains to employment in defense industries.<sup>2</sup> The data are shown in absolute terms and as a percent of the economically active population (EAP).

2. Since Argentina down-sized and privatized its sprawling defense conglomerate called Fabricaciones Militares during the 1980s and 1990s, arms production has been largely in the



Table 1 *Government and Private Defense Employment, Argentina and the U.S., 2005*

	<i>Defense Employment</i>	<i>Economically Active Population (EAP)</i>	<i>Defense Employment as a % of EAP</i>
Argentina	32,198	15,264,783	.21
U.S.	3,352,565	146,510,000	2.28

As shown in table 1, overall civilian defense employment in the United States, as a proportion of the economically active population, is 1,100 percent greater than in Argentina. Certainly such a comparison does not allow us to make any easy generalizations about the Latin American region as a whole. However, since Argentina has historically had one of the larger military industrial complexes, rivaled only by Brazil, the differences with the United States will presumably be even greater elsewhere.

While we lack data on public sector defense employment elsewhere, there is data on private sector defense employment in arms production for four other Latin American countries: Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru, as shown in table 2. Brazil is of particular importance, since this nation has historically had the largest defense industry in Latin America. Yet the tables reveal that once adjusted for the size differentials of the work

Table 2 *Private Defense Employment: A Five Nation Comparison, 2003.*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Arms Production Employment (2003)</i>	<i>EAP</i>	<i>Employment as % of EAP</i>	<i>How many times larger is the U.S. as arms employer?</i>
USA	2,700,000	146,510,000	<b>1.84</b>	
Brazil	15,000	83,243,239 (2001)	<b>.018</b>	<b>102</b>
Chile	5,000	6,357,620 (2004)	<b>.078</b>	<b>24</b>
Mexico	5,000	43,398,755 (2004)	<b>.011</b>	<b>167</b>
Peru	3,000	12,657,000 (2003)	<b>.023</b>	<b>80</b>

Source: SIPRI database, "Arms Forces, Weapons Holdings and Employment in Arms Production," <http://first.sipri.org/>; EAP data from the International Labor Organization, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, 2003, p. 11-12; and ILO online, LABORSTA, 2004.

hands of nonmilitary-owned enterprises. Of course in the United States, arms production is big business for the private sector which contracts with the Pentagon.



forces, arms production employment in Brazil, along with the other three countries is completely dwarfed by the United States. One final metric is worth noting. Of the one hundred largest arms-producing companies in the world—measured by annual sales—forty-four are headquartered in the United States. The rest are found mainly in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, other European states, South Korea, Japan, and Israel. Not one of the top one hundred firms is located in Latin America (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2005).

There are simply not enough civilians involved in defense-related activities in Latin America for attention to defense policy to provide an electoral payoff to politicians: not on bases, not in ministries, not in the military academies, nor in munitions factories. It is hard for political figures—be they governors, legislators, or presidents—to prioritize defense in the face of relatively low security threats when defense budgets do not translate into significant employment opportunities for the civilian population and into a potential pool of grateful voters. Those few voters who have defense jobs constitute such a small proportion of the public that they are in no position to adequately reward political leaders for attention to defense issues. As shown in table 3, civilians in the private defense sector of the four Latin American countries listed comprise a minuscule fraction of all registered voters (i.e., .02 percent in Argentina, .01 percent in Brazil, etc.). This same voting constituency in the United States is proportionally 85 times greater than it is in Argentina; 170 times greater than it is in Brazil, and 188 times greater than it is in Mexico.

### *Parties and Legislatures*

A survey of the party platforms, legislative action plans, and government plans set forth by political parties during presidential campaigns

*Table 3 Defense Employees and Registered Voters in 2003: A Five-Nation Comparison, 2003*

Country	Civilian Defense Employees (private sector)	Registered Voters	Civilian Defense Employees as % of Registered Voters
U.S.	2,700,000	156,421,000	1.7
Argentina	5,000	24,735,000	.02
Brazil	15,000	115,254,000	.01
Chile	5,000	8,075,000	.06
Mexico	5,000	52,789,000	.009
Peru	3,000	14,906,000	.02

Source: Defense employment from SIPRI database, "Arms Forces, Weapons Holdings and Employment in Arms Production," <http://first.sipri.org/>. Voting data from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <http://www.idea.int/vt/>.

confirms the lack of civilian attention to defense issues. We reviewed these documents for the major parties in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru during the most recent electoral cycles. Interestingly, only the opposition parties in Chile and Mexico produced detailed defense policy proposals that included specific measures designed to promote civilian control, military effectiveness, or efficiency in the defense sector. In most countries, parties produced pro-forma acknowledgements of the importance of the military for the defense of national sovereignty and called for the strengthening of military professionalization. An excellent example can be found in the Alianza Revolucionaria Popular Americana (APRA) *plan de gobierno* for the 2006 presidential election, where fifteen of 398 proposals are defense related, although none of them propose any concrete or detailed changes to the defense system. At the low end of the spectrum, the government programs of Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) presidential candidates in recent elections contain almost no reference to the armed forces or national defense, and in the Argentine case, the ruling Partido Justicialista (PJ) and Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) parties did not refer to defense issues at all in their 2003 campaigns, although Argentine President Kirchner did overturn the amnesties for military officers guilty of Dirty War activities that his Peronist predecessor, Carlos Menem, had put into place during the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

The defense attention deficit is particularly pronounced within the legislative branches in Latin America. This is important since, in theory, parliaments are supposed to exert democratic oversight of a nation's defense forces (Bruneau and Tollefson 2006). To understand the deficit, comparisons with the United States are again in order. U.S. congressmen have, what they coin, static ambition: they are driven to seek reelection (Mayhew 1974) and have remarkable success in doing so. About 90 percent of those in the House of Representatives fight for incumbency, and of those who do, 90 percent succeed (Morgenstern 2002, 415). One means of securing their seats time and time again is to demonstrate some proficiency at delivering benefits to their home districts or states. Committee assignments help in this regard. They demand expertise in a policy area, and provide a source of power, prestige, and visibility to a representative's efforts to secure resources for his constituents in a

3. Observations are based on a survey of the websites of PJ and UCR in Argentina during the most recent presidential campaign, an examination of the candidate programs for Alan García (APRA) and Ollanta Humala (Unión por el Perú), the campaign programs of candidates Bachelet and Piñera for the Chilean presidency in 2006, party programs, websites and electoral materials for the Partido Acción Nacional, Partido Revolucionario Institucional and Partido Democrático de la Revolución in Mexico for the 2006 electoral campaign, and the 2002, 2004 and 2006 government programs of the Partido Trabalhadores and the PSDB.

competitive environment crowded by many other politicians seeking similar results. As far as defense is concerned, Rundquist and Carsey (2002, 158) find there is a “reciprocal relationship between the distribution of military procurement expenditures and defense committee representation.” States and districts well represented on defense committees tend to receive more military contracts. Legislators will seek reassignment on military committees that can deliver defense pork to their districts. As their tenure in Congress and on those committees lengthens, their knowledge about defense deepens.

In contrast, Latin American legislators do not stay long enough to accumulate real expertise in any subject, let alone defense. Reelection rates are low either because congressmen do not succeed in retaining their seats, or more commonly because they are progressively ambitious—they seek new opportunities outside of the legislature (Morgenstern 2002, 414–419). These career ambitions dictate that in most Latin American countries, legislators patronize those who are in positions to help secure future employment—party heads, governors, presidents, and other political elites—while paying less attention to the needs of constituents or to the accumulation of policy wisdom. Committee assignments are doled out by parties more as payments for services rendered to the party bosses and less as venues for acquiring substantive expertise. It would make sense for lawmakers to pay attention to defense only if doing so would help to ingratiate themselves with political party elites whose support was vital for their career pursuits. There is no evidence that this is the case. As stated, political parties in Latin America do not prioritize defense either in the campaigns or thereafter (Diamint 2002). Polling of Latin American legislators in 2000 confirms that defense issues and military affairs are considered relatively unimportant, and the armed forces are rarely seen as significant or positive institutions (Alcántara Sáez 2000). One of the few exceptions can be found in Chile, which may be a result of the longer duration of legislators’ careers in Congress.

Legislators’ inattentiveness to defense is both a cause and a consequence of committee weakness. Certainly if legislators were to serve for longer periods of time, they might accumulate more defense knowledge which in turn might strengthen the committees’ work. However, most defense commissions have a restricted mandate that proves unattractive for legislators looking for institutionalized power. Based on data provided by Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL 2004), a review of defense committee work for thirteen countries in recent years shows that they most often deal with the following issues: granting permission for deployment of national troops abroad, and for the entrance of foreign troops into national territory; promotion and retirement rules, pensions and social security benefits for officers and families; judicial matters, including military court jurisdictions; and finally decorative/symbolic

acts, including the conferring of medals and honors. These functions correspond very closely to what the national constitutions stipulate for the legislative branch in general. In other words, defense commissions have not carved out their own more detailed and unique defense agendas (Pion-Berlin 2005, 25–26).

It is instructive to reflect on what these commissions are *not* doing on a regular basis. They are not reviewing the defense portion of the budgets, and for good reason; they have no access to them. Congresspeople are not privy to the itemized details of the defense ledger. In most Latin American societies, national security trumps the right of Congress to review or analyze, let alone change, defense allocations. Neither the defense commissions nor the budget and finance commissions are empowered to reopen, examine and rewrite the defense budget. There is no item-by-item review, no markup, and thus no real capacity to assign or reassign resources.

This then impairs the committees' abilities to carry out another vital function: oversight. Defense commissions are not exerting informed oversight on defense operations, other than, as stated before, to decide on domestic and foreign troop exits and entrances, and occasionally weigh in on defense production and procurement as well as military judicial matters. Without the necessary expenditure information, the congress cannot take the military to task for misallocations, wasteful spending, or fraud. The commissions have no auditors at their disposal to pore over military accounts. The commissions can, at best, call the defense minister to testify. If there is any effort—however limited—to exert budgetary oversight, it appears to be exercised within the finance ministry, or more usually, the armed services themselves. In short, defense committees are not sufficiently empowered, and lawmakers who serve on them are not sufficiently motivated to care about defense.

### *Defense Economics*

If politicians see no vote-attracting opportunities in defense, they could still theoretically be interested in defense spending for macroeconomic reasons. That is, they could associate greater defense spending with overall improvements in the national economy, and thus be stimulated to learn more about it as matter of policy proficiency. However, the prevailing view—one confirmed by numerous studies—is that military spending is a drag on economic growth. In a statistical study of eighteen Latin American countries, Kirk Bowman (2002) finds that increases in both military spending and military size result in significant declines in economic growth, even when controlling for democracy, school enrollments, government consumption, political instability, and investment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) considers spending on the

military to be unproductive, and has counseled LDC's to redirect funds away from defense and toward health and education in order to balance the budget while targeting spending along economically beneficial avenues (IMF 2001). Conversely, the Fund has published a number of studies arguing that cuts in military spending will result in improved economic output, and in the long run, greater investment rates and overall economic welfare (Bayoumi 1993; Knight 1995).

The IMF reports have given greater momentum to a military downsizing trend that was already well underway in Latin America. For economic and political reasons many Latin American states were, by the mid 1980's, making significant cuts in the size of military forces and budgets.<sup>4</sup> Previous budgets had been bloated not because of interest in defense or preparations for war but because the armed forces had been running the state and enriching themselves. By the end of the twentieth century, the armed forces of most countries of the region had shrunk dramatically in size. This fact could figure into the electoral calculations in certain Latin American countries that have granted active duty soldiers the right to vote. Politicians wishing to curry favor with voting soldiers would have, in theory, an interest in becoming more defense savvy. Unfortunately however, defense wisdom could produce, at best, a negligible electoral return because of the diminished size of nearly all Latin American militaries in comparison to the population of registered voters. As shown below in table four, there are ten countries in the region with voting soldiers.<sup>5</sup> On average, these active duty soldiers constitute less than seven-tenths of one percent of all registered voters (Rial 2005, 28–29). Naturally for the other half of Latin America that prohibits balloting for military personnel, the electoral advantage disappears entirely.

### *Regional Influences*

If the internal politics of Latin American states fail to provide a rationale for politicians to understand defense issues, then what of regional influences? Here too we find little in the way of rational incentives. There is no parallel to NATO in Latin America that would drive political interest in defense policy. In the wake of the Cold War, the new democracies of Central Europe had three strong incentives to overhaul their defense systems. First, the voting publics of these states were, for the most part, strongly supportive of NATO accession, something that democratic

4. It is important to note that defense expertise did not factor into politicians' decisions to downsize their militaries. Military programs, training, and installations were eliminated and personnel payrolls trimmed based on macroeconomic criteria, pressures from international lenders, and the political priorities of diverting resources to other areas.

5. The countries that permit soldiers to vote are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Data is found in Rial 2005.

Table 4 *Military Size as a Percent of Registered Voters, 10 Latin American Countries*

Country	Registered Voters	Military Size	Mil. Size as % of Registered Voters
Argentina (2001)	24,735,000	70,100	.3
Bolivia (2002)	4,155,000	31,500	.8
Brazil (2002)	115,254,000	287,600	.2
Chile (2001)	8,075,000	87,500	1.0
Mexico (2000)	52,789,000	192,770	.4
Nicaragua (1996)	2,421,000	17,000	.7
Paraguay (1998)	2,049,000	20,200	.8
Peru (2001)	14,906,000	100,000	.7
Uruguay (1999)	2,402,000	25,600	1.1
Venezuela (2000)	11,623,000	79,000	.7
Total	238,409,000	911,270	.67

Source: Voting data from International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <http://www.idea.int/vt/>; Military data from Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 2005/06

politicians responded to. Second, NATO membership provided very desirable security guarantees, but accession to the organization was conditioned on a rigorous process of defense restructuring for new members to ensure compatibility with existing member defense forces. Third, NATO gave new members from Central Europe favorable terms when it came to cost-sharing for common alliance expenses, in effect subsidizing their participation while allowing them to reap the rewards (Kwasniewski 1997; Congressional Budget Office 2001).

The United States has never shown interest in creating a hemispheric alliance similar to NATO that would integrate, give parity to, and help finance Latin American forces to meet conventional defense threats. As mentioned earlier, the United States arrogated the mission of guarding the hemisphere from external threats during the Cold War while relegating its southern partners to less tasking domestic security functions. In the post-Cold War global war on terror, the United States once again sees itself as taking the lead, imploring the Latin American states to perform supporting roles in combating narcotics trafficking and terrorism. Even if Latin American states would tolerate being the lesser partners in such an arrangement, where are the material incentives to do so? Washington has focused most of its military assistance on Colombia, providing comparatively little to states in the rest of the region. Meanwhile, the

Organization of American States has yet to agree on a formula to create its own regional security force that would bear some resemblance to NATO, let alone find the resources to support such a project.

#### CONCLUSION

Defense policy has not been and is not a priority item among Latin American politicians of the region. These states and their leaders do not face existential threats from foreign invasion, and the militarized disputes they do enter into are not serious enough to trigger genuine civilian interest in defense. Over the course of a century or more, militaries have turned inward to engage in politicized, internecine conflicts and conspiratorial plots against elected governments. These moves prompt civilian attention to coup avoidance, not war avoidance. Moreover, politicians have no incentive to become defense savvy in a region where defense establishments and their supporting industries provide few employment opportunities for constituents.

Should these conditions remain unaltered, it is unlikely civilian politicians will “discover” defense planning as a worthy policy goal any time soon. To the extent that this remains true, it may lead to a set of undesirable outcomes. If civilian leaders don’t care about defense, they will not oversee efforts to reform military practices and doctrines. Absent civilian prodding, militaries—which are inherently conservative institutions—will fail to adapt their behavior and ideas to changing circumstances. The less concern civilian leaders show for defense, the more the military will resort to self-management, which in turn could breed greater levels of autonomy and pose problems for civilian control.<sup>6</sup>

Without prioritizing defense, politicians will also fail to invest resources and personnel in the development of stronger institutions of civilian control. As Thomas Bruneau has pointed out, getting the military to do what it is supposed to do within a democracy goes beyond mere subordination. Politicians must also concern themselves with military efficacy and efficiency. They must insure that militaries fulfill their internal and external roles and missions in a cost-effective manner (Bruneau 2005, 113). This demands oversight, management, organization, and strategic planning—in short civilian expertise. It is essential that defense-related, civilian-led institutions be fortified to embed that expertise so that the tri-fold goals of civilian control, efficacy, and efficiency are achieved routinely and in perpetuity (Bruneau 2005, 126). The quandary however is that Latin American politicians are not and will not become motivated to achieve these ends because they do not make the connection between the political control of the military on the

6. The authors are grateful to Samuel Fitch for providing these insights.



one hand and the pursuit of effective and efficient defense policy on the other hand. Simply subordinating the military is important, but it is a low-cost venture that can be achieved by managing or manipulating the military politically (Trinkunas 2005; Pion-Berlin 2005). Long term defense and security planning requires the investment of resources and attention in developing the right kinds of expertise among civilian politicians and career civil servants.

What might cause this situation to change? In the region, three outlier cases where civilian interest in defense policy has been sustained during the recent democratic period suggest some possibilities. Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador all have relatively well-developed defense policy planning mechanisms by regional standards; in Argentina and Chile, these include civilian-led ministries of defense and cadres of civilian defense experts that participate in policy development. In all three cases, civilian interest in the military was motivated by the experience of extremely high levels of internal conflict in the recent past. In the cases of Argentina and El Salvador, this produced consensus across the political spectrum that civilian control of the military was needed. In Chile, the governing left-wing coalition pursued defense policy planning as one of the few avenues to establishing a workable civil-military relationship with the relatively autonomous armed forces it inherited from the Pinochet dictatorship. However, as the recent history of democratization in Guatemala and Peru suggests, extreme internal conflict is not enough to produce civilian consideration of defense policy. What makes the cases of Argentina and El Salvador, and increasingly Chile, different is that civilian politicians have come to perceive the armed forces as useful adjuncts to their foreign policy strategies. Each country's reputation was tarnished by the "dirty wars" fought within their borders. Using their armed forces to participate in peacekeeping or international military coalitions (Argentina in the Gulf War, Chile in UN missions, and El Salvador in Iraq) became a way for civilian governments to advance a foreign policy designed to realign them with the international order and leave their pariah status behind. Sending troops to serve in international coalitions and in peacekeeping missions has refocused civilian attention on the merits of foreign defense policy and military effectiveness.

While we can all hope that Latin American states have put their histories of internal unrest behind them, it is possible that politicians, as occurred in the three outlier cases, may find an incentive for attention to defense in their pursuit of foreign policy goals. This has already taken place to some extent with the unprecedented Brazilian military leadership of the UN force in Haiti (MINUSTAH), in which six other Latin American countries are also participating. Brazil makes the connection

between committing its troops to international security endeavors and justifying for itself a permanent UN Security Council seat. In addition, the United States, through the G-8 sponsored Global Peace Operations Initiative, is beginning to recognize that Latin American states can play a significant role as international security providers and peacekeepers. The combination of foreign policy success and access to resources from the international community *may* provide sufficient incentive for other Latin American politicians to turn their attention to defense policy. To date, however, Latin American contributions to international stability operations remain relatively small-scale ventures which have not demanded large troop commitments from Latin America or resource commitments from the United States.

Two other potential, but less positive, sources for politician attention to defense policy could develop if new and troubling security threats were to materialize. One scenario might revolve around the emerging ideological divide on the continent, making Latin America a new center for international conflict. This could conceivably lead neighboring states to perceive each other as threats and prepare accordingly. The rise of radical left presidents in Venezuela and Bolivia could exacerbate age-old border disputes with the more conservative governments of Colombia and Chile, prompting greater attention to defense preparedness.

There is a second and final possibility. It is one where the militaries of the region move from the rearguard to front lines in combating drug traffickers, transnational gangs, and terrorists. Although this change in mission is viewed as highly problematic by most analysts of defense issues in the region, the justification for this kind of mission creep has been mounting in regional defense forums, where broader visions of the security threats and national security are gaining currency (OAS 2003). Latin American defense ministers have begun to take up the view that if security is a multidimensional problem, it demands a multi-faceted response. That necessitates more fluid coordination between various security and non-security-related agencies of state, and in turn, a relaxing of restrictions on the use of the military to permit that coordination to take place. If it becomes easier to move the military to the front lines of these "wars" against new enemies of state, then the concept of defense may shift as well. If defense of the nation is redefined to mean a full-scale military response to unconventional threats of the sort mentioned, then politicians may yet overcome their defense attention deficits.<sup>7</sup>

7. We are not advocating either a broader definition of security, nor a wider role for the armed forces. Indeed there are good reasons to be skeptical about the wisdom of dragging the military into these unconventional "wars." We are simply attempting to explain some hypothetical conditions that might prompt a renewed interest in defense policy.

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