A New Green Uniform for Latin America's Armies?

written by Gavin O'Toole | November 17, 2017

When the decorated "Hero of the Republic of Cuba," General Ramón Espinosa Martín, rallied his forces in the province of Camagüey in September, it was against an enemy far more dangerous than those he had faced in the Escambray mountains in 1958 during the Cuban Revolution or even in Angola in 1975 resisting US and South African intervention. This enemy was nature itself.

Cuba's military, like others throughout the Caribbean, was in the front line preparing for the devastating Hurricane Irma that battered the island from September 7–10, destroyed 14,657 Cuban homes, and damaged many others.

Through a complex network of well-established civil defence and compensation strategies, Cuba's National Defense Council led the official response to the disaster – and undoubtedly saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives.

In Mexico, where two devastating earthquakes struck in September, causing significant damage and claiming at least 467 lives, the armed forces took over many rescue operations. In Guatemala, the military has been at the forefront of the government's response to recurrent flooding this year that has affected at least 144,000 people.

Latin American militaries have also been in the frontline combating another natural threat: disease. In April this year Peru's army was drafted in to help fight dengue fever in Piura. In Brazil in 2016, in the largest military mobilization in the country's history, the armed forces were tasked with eradicating the *mosquito* responsible for spreading the Zika virus.

From hurricanes to earthquakes to diseases, when natural disasters strike Latin American militaries are invariably called up. Even if there is little prospect of inter-state warfare in this region, its armed forces are often kept busy mopping up the mess caused by nature.

Yet if you were to bury yourself in scholarship on security on Latin America, you could be forgiven for thinking that war is imminent. Academic security perspectives remain overwhelmingly concerned with armed defence of the state and have singularly failed to engage with alternative theories that have proliferated since the end of the Cold War.

This is largely because a traditional understanding of security as defence – built on the aging firmament of Clausewitzian ideas about warfare and US Cold War priorities – continues to exert disproportionate influence over scholarship about this region of the world.

In the US itself, where most of the research on security in Latin America originates, policymakers are also constantly finding new potential threats in the region. Accordingly, English-language perspectives have focused disproportionately on issues of public security and violence, the war on drugs, cross-border terrorism and migration, and low-intensity conflicts within strategic US allies.

Alternative security theories

The end of the Cold War posed searching questions about the *purpose* of security, spawning alternative theories that went beyond traditional concerns about war to explore "emergent" threats deriving from globalization.

Scholars began to ask what or who should be the most appropriate *object* of security, and many argued that "national security doctrine" had not rid people of the everyday insecurities caused by poverty, hunger and poor health. A "human security" perspective was enthusiastically taken up by multilateral bodies. Debates about "securitization" widened the range of policy areas approached through a lens of security.

Similarly, growing interest in "environmental security" began to address diverse themes – from the environmental impact of warfare to the potential for "greening" defense activities. Debates touched on a range of themes, from the potential for environmental changes to fuel inter-state conflict (the "environment-conflict" thesis) to the securitization of climate change.

Yet when it comes to scholarship about Latin America, these alternative conceptions of security have had a limited impact and, even when they have been the main focus of research on the region, have tended to reflect US anxieties.

This is strange, because even a cursory examination of history reveals that there has been little inter-state warfare in this region.

Arie Kacowicz, for example, has argued that an absence of warfare means there has been a long South American peace since the late 19th century and that, with the end of the Cold War and the resolution of conflicts in Central America, the region has become one of the most peaceful in the world.

The role of the military in Latin America has, in fact, *rarely* been one of fighting wars, and the region is one of the least militarized in the world. It is on the periphery of the international system, states rarely face the security dilemmas found elsewhere, and there are *no* existential threats to national security. WMD are absent amid an emphasis on nuclear non-proliferation, growing security cooperation, and an increasing commitment to peacekeeping.

The character of scholarly debates on Latin American security reflects a lack of empirical research on policymaking, and the obvious point of departure for correcting this is to undertake a close reading of the *libros blancos* – the defence "white papers" compiled throughout the region between 1989 and 2015 as part of a confidence-building agenda agreed by defence ministers at the US-sponsored Williamsburg summit in 1995. These in fact paint a picture of security thinking that challenges US scholastic obsessions.

The most striking recurring theme in these white papers is how security policy must be reconciled with democracy, an emphasis that reflects both a determined effort to ensure civilian control over defence ministries following a lomng period of military rule and, in Ecuador and Colombia, the product of public consultation exercises that ended the military monopoly over policymaking. These documents are notable for recognising that defence is *not* solely a military responsibility but a *social*

one, reinforcing the underlying trend in civil-military relations.

A second aspect of these white papers is their lack of theoretical sophistication – and in the absence of theory, civilian governments resorted to institutional and historical arguments to explain why they needed to reassess their security policies. In most cases they took their cues from the momentum generated at Williamsburg and resulting changes in the inter-American defence system that established a network of regional security forums.

A third feature of these papers that has been addressed only in a limited way is an explicit commitment to human security objectives. Ecuador, for example, developed a sophisticated analysis of human security in 2002 and wrote this into its constitution (Article 393). An oft-stated reason for pursuing human security objectives was an underlying commitment to economic development that interpreted *inequality* as a threat to stability.

Finally, these white papers demonstrate that the creation of institutional structures for military cooperation across the region had important implications, by reducing the emphasis in security policy upon armed force and increasing the emphasis upon collective defence. Such ideas were only possible in a situation where military clashes were considered unlikely, and the white papers developed historical perspectives that alluded recurrently to the disappearance of conflicts and foresaw few prospects of future ones.

In summary, these white papers offer compelling evidence of a shift in emphasis away from the coercive aspects of security policy towards notions of collective defence, an embrace of human security perspectives, and a developmental aspiration. There is little doubt that this reinterpretation was driven by the politics of the Left, reflecting the broader process of democratization.

Nonetheless, these white papers also show that the environment has hitherto *not* been a prominent security concern, and has been incorporated as a threat within policymaking mainly in terms of broader concern about natural disasters.

Environmental security puzzle

The absence of scholarship on environmental security in Latin America and the limited attention this is given in the policy documents is puzzling, given the factors that make this region fertile territory for theoretical development.

Those factors begin with the history of the region, which yields many examples of security responses to the threats posed by the natural environment and has been the scene of incessant struggles over land and resources. More recently, the transition to democracy pushed the environment up the political agenda to the extent that Latin America has since had a disproportionate influence over global climate change debates.

A key question, therefore, is *why* traditional security perspectives have persisted. First and foremost has been the overwhelming influence of the US over the security agenda in Latin America. While the end of superpower tensions after 1989 clearly strengthened policymaking autonomy vis-à-vis Washington, there have been signs of a revived emphasis on military power reminiscent of the Cold War.

A second reason for the persistence of traditional security perspectives has been the unique, often dominant status of the military in Latin American political development. The high command's interpretation of threats and fetishistic sovereign vocation have had an overbearing influence on security policy, helping to explain why until recently this remained exclusively a military domain characterized by a focus on armed defence against enemies of the state. Notwithstanding this, and

seen in the round, the military has also had a profoundly malign influence on politics as frequent foes of democracy and serial abusers of human rights.

Together, these factors have frozen scholarly perceptions in time, preventing debates about Latin American security from moving forward.

This would be little more than an academic problem were it not for the fact that it is stifling Latin America's ability to respond the principal security threat that it confronts today.

Ample evidence suggests that extreme weather events and natural disasters are already the main threats faced by this region, and that these are set to worsen due to climate change. It has been argued that the effects of Hurricane Harvey in the Gulf of Mexico earlier this month, for example, were made significantly worse by climate change.

The UN's World Risk Index for 2016 lists eight Latin American countries within the 30 that face most risk from extreme events. The Germanwatch Global Climate Risk Index places four countries in Latin America – Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua and Guatemala – among the 10 most badly affected globally by extreme weather events between 1996 and 2015. The 2017 tropical cyclone season was spectacular in terms of the number of events hitting the Caribbean, but at any given time the organization ReliefWeb monitors a series of ongoing disasters in Latin America.

Concern about increasing natural disasters has prompted leaders of multilateral bodies to warn about a lack of preparedness for growing risk. In Chile in early 2017, for example, the severe impact of forest fires was blamed on poor preparation for climate change.

Moreover, alongside climate change, Latin America already faces serious environmental challenges: from soil degradation and deforestation to the polluting impact of mining and threats to biodiversity.

There are further reasons why Latin America should be an ideal laboratory for environmental security approaches.

The region has been an important focus of research on the "environment-conflict" thesis, especially in Amazonia and Central America, has a long history of violent conflict over land, and in recent decades has witnessed a proliferation of socio-environmental conflicts. Moreover, it continues to suffer high levels of inequality, which can increase the risk of violent conflict. In 2007, International Alert identified 46 countries globally where, as a knock-on effect of climate change, there was a high risk of armed conflict, which included Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Haiti. A number of studies conclude that climate change is a threat multiplier, increasing the risk of instability in fragile states.

Latin America also offers opportunities to address a question that has been at the heart of the human security approach: *security for whom?* Ecuador and Bolivia both provide many examples of the security dilemmas states can face when development policies contradict environmental commitments and the interests of indigenous groups.

The securitization of extractive and agricultural resources is becoming a prominent political issue in Peru, Mexico, Paraguay and Honduras. This has made indigenous groups and environmental activists targets of violence, and in 2016, Global Witness placed five Latin American countries the top 10 experiencing the highest number of killings of environmental activists.

Swords into ploughshares

Under the circumstances, it is opportune moment for Latin American security debates to shift their attention away from traditional strategic affairs to environmental themes.

First, a transition has been underway in the role of militaries for some time and new ideas are displacing the state as the sole focus of security. Second, traditional notions of sovereignty are being tested by regional cooperation in ways that make them more open to the dicussion of environmental threats, which are inherently non-national. Third, multilateral initiatives have proliferated to address sustainable development, offering an *institutional* basis for collaboration on environmental security. Finally, the traditional focus of "national security doctrine" on economic development cherished by Latin America's top brass offers a way to reconcile military and environmental priorities.

In 2012, the scholar David Pion-Berlin argued that persistent interest in military defence in Latin America was ironic because the security threats it faces today do not lend themselves well to military responses. He asked, provocatively, whether the military had outlived its usefulness.

This is not a frivolous question in a region with little warfare, not least because of military expenditure – totalling $67bn in 2016. This level of spending on armies that do not fight makes little sense when the cost of environmental threats is considered: for example, the combined price tag of the 2010 earthquakes in Chile and Haiti alone was about $38bn – 50% of the entire Latin American and Caribbean military budget in that year ($77bn).

Moreover, Latin America is lucky to have two unique role models where governments have chosen to dismantle their armies, Costa Rica and Panama. It is no coincidence that Costa Rica is recognized as a global leader in environmental protection, and in 2017 topped the Happy Planet Index ranking socio-environmental wellbeing for the third year in a row.

The response of Latin America's militaries to disasters demonstrates where the real value of these institutions lies in this region today, and their future potential in the battle against climate change. Given this, soldiers are more likely to need shovels than guns.

A region without warfare that boasts our shared planet's most awe-inspiring biodiversity – where the military has been little but a malign influence – might be better served anyway by turning its swords into ploughshares.