

New Challenges for the Regional Security Agenda in Latin America

Gonzalo Serra

The marking feature of the Americas in the last years is its discordance as a region. Reality shows that the inability of the hemispheric system to be present in a major way in a vital area as defense and security is merely a reflection of the wider divisions which plague the region at this time. On the continental level, there still remains some degree of mutual mistrust. The inter-state crises in the Andean Region and the alarming, ever-growing voices that foretell an "arms race" that comprise several countries in the continent have strained the defense sector in new ways.

It should hardly surprise us then, that this context is reflected in a security system at the hemispheric level which is irrelevant to most defense and security issues of weight in the region and thus, silent on the majority of them. Despite the real dangers of military force and the international dimension of the Colombian internal conflict, the system never discusses these issues. The situation between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, much to the former's annoyance, never gets a real hearing in hemispheric circles, especially concerning its defense and security elements. Mexican-US matters remain entirely bilateral in this sense and never pass through hemispheric bodies. Quite the same is true for Central American issues: for Venezuela-US conflicts, for Bolivia-US matters, the Bolivia-Chile dispute, and many others worthy of attention.

Nevertheless, it is easy to forget in the current context how much progress has been made in the last decades concerning Inter-American Security. With the end of generating a new international insertion, the Latin American countries have developed active diplomacy in the post-cold-war era. Three principle aspects have marked a qualitative change in regional diplomacy and in the way of achieving global insertion. On the one side, the integration processes have acquired a big importance and the relationships of interdependence are more effective and linked to strategic areas. Especially in the Southern cone, all likelihood of war have disappeared. And finally, the political regional dialogue has been expanded to institutionalize and to put into effect agreements, although minor difficulties still persist.

We have made tremendous progress in the settling of many matters of immense interest to the security of the hemisphere. The inter-American system was part of the creation of that progress. However, it would be less than honest to say that it had much of a role in the occurrence of the actual events themselves on the road to these favorable results. Instead, the system was there to support but rarely called to do so. And it is surely, in large part at least, a result of the fact

that most security and defense problems in the Americas are sub-regional or even bilateral rather than wider in their scope.

There are also positive elements of change in the hemispheric architecture for dealing with conflict. From *above*, after many years of uncertainty, it has at least become possible again to discuss defense and security topics at a hemispheric level specifically at the OAS.¹

A first step was taken when an *ad hoc* Hemispheric Security Committee was set up. Within four years, it was made permanent, something unthinkable 10 years before. At the same time, on a generally well-received initiative of the United States, a Ministerial Defense Conference was created and is still with us, with a meeting held every two years in an OAS member country. This meeting brings together defense ministers who might otherwise never meet and provides a context for cooperation. The first of these Conferences was held in 1995 in the United States and the last one in Canada in 2008. The development processes introduced by the Conferences have provided an important space for compromise, consensus and the strengthening of mutual trust on the hemispheric and the regional level.

In 2003, the OAS organized a conference on security in the Americas at a foreign ministerial level in Mexico City. This marked the start of regional discussions on non-traditional regional security challenges such as the international drug trade, illegal immigration, terrorism, international crime, epidemics, natural disasters, defense of democracy and civil-military relations and other subjects that do not automatically fall into the specialty of defense ministers in democratic states. The meeting was able to produce a guideline calling for better coordination of efforts among states in these non-traditional security issues. However, this meeting showed once again that while the hemisphere's states could decide on a common list of concerns, they could not agree on they could not fully agree on what approaches to use in addressing these concerns.

¹ The Organization of American States OAS is an international organization with its headquarters in Washington, D.C. It has 35 members, with two members suspended. The suspended members are Cuba, (which has been suspended since 1962) and more recently, Honduras (due to the political crisis the country is going through). The OAS Charter was first signed on the 30th of April of 1948, and put into effect on December 1st of 1951. In the words of Article 1 of the OAS Charter, the goal of the member nations in creating the OAS was "to achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence."

On the other hand, from *below*, over the past 15 years, groups of citizens have taken advantage of increased personal and political freedoms and have come together to give voice to their concerns and advocate for greater inclusion in national and international affairs. At the national and regional level, civil society organizations (CSOs) and citizens have become increasingly active in local issues and national politics, demanding accountability, promoting transparency and access to information. This is especially true in security and defense affairs. The development and consolidation of civil society in countries across the Americas has been uneven. In some countries, civil society has established strong roots and productive working relationships with governments, helping to guide academic research and playing a key role in challenging security and defense concerns, while in other countries this has not been the case and CSOs remain excluded by suspicious and uncooperative governments. In this context it is more than reliable to think and consider what the role of civil society has been, and how it has evolved.