

Demands and incentives for political dialogue and security cooperation in UNASUR

By Alcides Costa Vaz

■ Executive summary

The South American security landscape has often been defined by the continual upsurge of violence resulting from organised crime and the trafficking of drugs, arms and munitions, as well as by issues affecting the military sphere, such as efforts to modernise and the adjustment of the armed forces to new realities and roles, including limited resources. In this context, a growing demand for regional cooperation arises; however, there are low levels of political willingness and scant incentives for national governments to prioritise such cooperation in their respective defence policies. This paper discusses the effects of this gap on the agenda and initiatives of the South American Defense Council.

Introduction

Since its inception, the South American Union of Nations (UNASUR) has been the most important institutional framework for political dialogue on security matters in the subcontinent, in accordance with its purpose and the mandate envisaged in the 2008 Brasilia Treaty. Even though the need for a genuine South American institutional framework for such a dialogue was widely recognised and the creation of the South American Defense Council (SDC) hailed as a major step towards regional cooperation in security and defence matters, the facts that the SDC embraced consensus as a primary criterion for decision making and had no powers to make binding decisions were perceived as important potential constraints were regional stability to be severely challenged and undermined and regional action deemed imperative. On the one hand, those facts reflected a pragmatic assessment of the political conditions that needed to be acknowledged and addressed to allow the very existence of the SDC and on the other, they introduced restrictions on the situations and ways in which it is entitled to act. This confirms its status as a dialogue forum and not a decision-making, operative body.

However, most of the analyses of the SDC's performance carried out in the past six years have been based on the examination of the political constraints on the SDC and the issues and goals set out in its action plans in the context of the most significant developments in the areas of regional security and defence policies and cooperation. In this text, such evaluations are reviewed with the purpose of identifying their core features and elements of convergence.

The present analysis also considers the regional political landscape and national policies in order to provide an assessment of the demands and incentives for political dialogue and cooperation on security and defence issues in the context of the SDC. The basic argument is that, while there is a growing demand for regional political dialogue and cooperation in defence issues, there has not been enough domestic political willingness and incentives to provide the SDC with the necessary resources and capabilities to meet that demand. This gap can be explained, tentatively, as a consequence of the prevalence of different and often competing views among member countries as to the object and the desirable scope and forms of regional cooperation and as to the weight they expect it to have in their respective policies on and strategies for security and defence. This analysis not only takes into account the degree of political willingness of national governments with regard to fostering regional security and defence cooperation, but also considers the political and economic conditions in which policy priorities in those realms – and the importance to be granted to regional cooperation in them – are defined at national levels. To test this hypothesis, in the next section a brief review of the assessments of the performance of the SDC is presented; the second section focuses on the agenda of the SDC and the third provides an analysis of the factors arising from national political contexts that restrict incentives for stronger regional defence cooperation.

An overview of the performance of the SDC

Official discourses about and most analyses of the SDC emphasise two basic premises that governed its creation.

The first concerns its own nature, that is, that it was intended as a forum for political dialogue and cooperation and not a collective security system or a body like the United Nations Security Council; nor was it supposed to be a military alliance or an instrument of opposition to any country or power in particular (Ministry of Defense of Chile, 2009: 37). The second premise concerned the SDC's core objective: it was intended to foster the consolidation of a regional area of peace and security. Therefore, the SDC is often depicted as the outcome of important political convergences among South American states regarding the need and the opportunity to forge an institutional framework and regional policy mechanisms. It is also widely praised as a sound qualitative step forward in the regional defence landscape, on the basis of which new forms and higher levels of cooperation may evolve, thus fostering a new regional environment supported by domestic political advancements in the same realm.

The protection of natural resources is a relevant objective of the SDC as a mechanism for cooperation and coordination – one that is strongly highlighted both in official discourses and in academic analyses (Forti, 2013; Schandeler, 2014: 5). Because of the absence of major conventional threats in the region and the ongoing developments in the field of international security that favour the prioritisation of energy, environmental and food security, the protection of South America's abundant natural resources has become and is recognised, particularly by the military, as a legitimate and necessary defence objective for countries in the region (Medeiros Filho, 2011: 186), one that should provide common ground and direction to South American defence cooperation.

However, early accounts of the creation of and expectations for the SDC also highlighted the great heterogeneity of and the asymmetries among its members (Ugarte, 2010), the diversity of defence policies and institutional frameworks (Comini, 2010) and the major conceptual differences among SDC members in relation to security and defence (Crolla, 2010) as factors that would prevent cooperation from evolving. Such differences have led to an absence of shared views on some core political issues of great relevance for defence policy concerns, such as the pattern of relationships to be sustained with important extra-regional players, and major powers in particular (Comini, 2010). These differences may be regarded as natural given the pre-existing differing and often competing views on defence and security concerns and priorities of the South American countries, and the fact that the region had no precedent for sustained political dialogue and regional cooperation in defence. Although, since the mid-1980s, some progress has been achieved through confidence-building measures, this lack of experience of cooperation continues to be a key issue for the regional agenda of political dialogue on security and defence issues, an agenda that evolved in the absence of a proper political framework. Confidence-building initiatives, such as those undertaken by Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru in particular, were of great relevance, as they contributed to the widely shared aims of overcoming historical bilateral

mistrust and undermining conflict potential.

It is widely acknowledged that the inherited agenda and the advancements related to confidence building and military cooperation provided incentives and opportunities for placing greater emphasis on political dialogue and cooperation on defence in domestic and regional policy agendas. On the other hand, analyses also converge in recognising that those incentives and opportunities did not suffice to counter and prevail over the strong sovereign bias that characterises security and defence policies in the region. Such bias, rather than contributing to overcoming heterogeneity as a feature of South America's security and defence policy landscape, ultimately reinforced it. On the face of it, most analyses strongly agree in identifying the changes to Brazil's defence policy introduced by Lula da Silva and the leading role played by Brazil as essential factors for the creation of the SDC. The Brazilian initiative has been interpreted not as expressing a common vision but as an integral part of the country's strategy to become an influential actor and to consolidate its regional influence. However, it also reflects the importance in South America of perspectives advocating greater international autonomy, particularly in relation to the U.S. This diverse set of approaches and explanations about the origins and motivations of the SDC gave rise, overall, to positive expectations on the part of intellectuals regarding the role and the prospects of the SDC (Ugarte, 2010: 17).

However, these positive assessments of the SDC's prospects were tempered by a cautious approach when the major short- and medium-term challenges and difficulties it would face were taken into account. There was a high degree of consensus among experts about what these challenges and difficulties were. Ugarte (2010) noted, among them, (i) the existence of different conceptual frameworks, (ii) the great diversification of security and defence policies, (iii) the uncertainties associated with the impact of political changes on the SDC as a state policy conceived to deal with strategic interests and (iv) the growing presence of external actors in the region. To these, others added differing views about the engagement of the armed forces in fighting non-military threats (Aranguiz, 2013: 73) and uncertainty about the role of the SDC in dealing with security issues (Teixeira Júnior, 2011: 144).

It is not the intention here to provide an exhaustive account of those challenges as conveyed in the literature, but rather to highlight the major security dynamics and trends shaping the global and regional strategic landscapes; these dynamics and trends require deeper and more intense forms of regional cooperation and the SDC must respond to them. Furthermore, the SDC's prospects should not be assessed only on the grounds of the better or worse outlook for the accomplishment of its core objectives; it is also important to take into account of the fact that the challenges faced by the SDC provide incentives for member states to sustain political willingness to commit political and economic resources to defence cooperation within it.

This provides the basis of the central argument of the present analysis, that is, that the inertia (which is not to be confused with paralysis) that has characterised SDC dynamics in recent years is closely associated with a persistent gap between a growing need and demand for cooperation in the field of security and defence, on the one hand, and limited domestic incentives to foster it, on the other. In order to deepen this argument, a first necessary step is to consider domestic contexts and the incentives for defence cooperation, which is the aim of the next section.

Domestic contexts, national policies and incentives for regional defence cooperation

In spite of the similarities with regard to some major political challenges that the defence sector across South America faced from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s – among them, the restoration of democracy, the consolidation of civilian control over the armed forces, countering U.S. security priorities in the region and the intention of the U.S. to engage the military in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism, and the adjustment to the post-Cold War scenario – security and defence policies in South America did not provide grounds for sustained regional dialogue and defence cooperation initiatives other than the traditional ones associated with bilateral military cooperation. This fact was expressed in the great heterogeneity and in the political and institutional asymmetries that existed when the SDC was created. Such heterogeneity and asymmetries, and the economic and social imbalances within countries and among them, were regarded as important risk factors in the region (Faustino, 2011: 40). A central issue in assessing the prospects for regional stability and the future of the SDC is whether or not such heterogeneity and asymmetries are still present or if they have given way to a more harmonious context with regard to the institutional and political developments in the field of defence in the region.

If one considers the conceptual dimension, there is no evidence to support the view that there has been a major change in the diversity of approaches to security and defence. As expressed by Crolla (2010: 11):

“there are conceptual differences regarding the meanings of defence and security among member countries, an issue that must be discussed within SDC and then submitted to the respective countries so that legislative harmonisation makes it possible to overcome them in favour of a regional defence framework in which both conventional and non-conventional threats can be addressed, ensuring that the twelve countries are speaking the same language when dealing with these issues and that each one will not embrace an interpretation that differs from its neighbour’s, thus creating unnecessary friction with other members of UNASUR.”

This heterogeneity acquires greater importance when one considers that the armed forces in South America are

increasingly exposed to domestic and external pressures to respond to a wide array of security challenges in the broadest sense, as evidenced by developments observed in Brazil (a country which, in the 1990s, was strongly opposed to rethinking the role of their forces in combating non-traditional threats) since the end of 2010; in Peru and Bolivia, in close association with environmental conflicts; in Colombia as a result of the protracted civil war; and in Venezuela as a consequence of the growing militarisation of domestic politics.

Another issue that raises heterogeneous assessments and policy responses within the region is the presence of the U.S. and extra-regional powers in South America and in the Caribbean area. Although developments in Colombia’s domestic and foreign policies have mitigated the need for cooperation with the U.S. as pursued under the Colombia Plan, and Venezuela’s present government has an inward-looking profile, contrasting with the international activism pursued by former President Hugo Chávez, who aimed to bring Russia and Iran closer to the region, it cannot be said that either the interests or the presence and influence of great powers in South America have become a major defence concern. The priority granted in the SDC to the protection of natural resources could provide some common ground for a regional defence approach that addresses the interest of great powers in securing access to those resources, particularly those which are regarded as being of major strategic importance; however, even this issue has not been compelling enough to forge convergent positions. The inexistence of a regional debate on the security and defence implications of the growing Chinese presence in the subcontinent is in itself evidence of how far South American countries remain from having a shared perspective on dealing with the security interests and concerns of extra-regional players in the region.

Another key issue for the Council’s agenda is the growing and direct engagement of the military in fighting the threats posed by trafficking in its different forms and by transnational organised crime. Largely different perceptions on these issues among UNASUR member countries are also reflected in the South American Council on the World Drug Problem and the recently created South American Council for Public Safety, Justice and Coordination of Action against Transnational Organized Delinquency. These councils were created as part of the effort to create proper institutional spaces to deal with those security challenges and restrict the scope of the SDC strictly to defence issues. The fact that the non-traditional threats have been brought to specific institutional branches of UNASUR other than the SDC represents a major development, but, at the same time, their treatment is still subject to difficulties derived from highly heterogeneous views among member countries. In the words of Zapata Mafla (2014: 165):

“the excessive focus on national security in classical terms and the invocation of sovereignty on every occasion that a crisis or problem arises makes it very difficult for those

threats that have had the greatest impact in South America – like the ones associated with drug trafficking and organised crime – to receive the due attention in UNASUR. Nearly five years after the creation of UNASUR, public security issues, and especially the problem of drug trafficking – the major security challenge in the Andean countries – are still treated in a quite ambiguous and unclear way in just two instances: the South American Council on the World Drug Problem and the South American Council for Public Safety, Justice and the Coordination of Action against Transnational Organized Delinquency.”

Sandra Borda (2010: 13) also points out that:

“the current debate has brought to light the differences among various approaches to these issues in the region. To begin with, there is no clear consensus as to the roles that the police and the armed forces should play in fighting drug trafficking. The challenge for UNASUR is to reach an agreement encompassing the positions of those countries where drug trafficking and organised crime have not reached the same dimensions they have acquired in countries like Colombia, where the idea of the armed forces as purely devoted to national defence has blurred; actually they have been given a key role in the fight against domestic insurgency which, in turn, is closely linked to the drug trafficking business.”

An examination of competing approaches to fighting drug trafficking and organised crime also provides an account of how close or distant South American policies are to or from U.S. policies, thus setting a spectrum at the extremes of which we can locate the members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), on the one hand, and Colombia, on the other. Such an examination also provides sound examples of how domestic political variables reduce incentives for regional cooperation.

In the face of the high levels of heterogeneity within UNASUR, a pragmatic stance has prevailed on how to respond to security and defence challenges, that is, exploiting opportunities to work on issues that involve less political resistance. This has led to an agenda that has allowed some progress, namely in areas in which important developments had already been achieved, such as confidence-building measures, areas in which cooperation poses no immediate political challenge. In some other cases, what is envisaged is the expansion of traditional cooperation initiatives, such as those in defence education and training, taking them beyond the strict military sphere. These cases are discussed further in the next section.

The agenda for cooperation in the framework of the SDC

A more objective way of identifying the SDC’s proposals and assessing the progress achieved by the SDC in fostering regional defence cooperation is to consider the action plans set forth since 2009, which are organised around four

core issues: (i) defence, (ii) military cooperation, (iii) the defence industry and technologies and (iv) defence education and training policies. It can be seen that some of the issues referred to in the previous section, namely the geostrategic interests and military presence of the U.S. and extra-regional powers in South America and the Caribbean and the engagement of the armed forces in countering non-military threats to security, are not contemplated in the SDC agenda, not even in the form of a tentative and preliminary dialogue from which political propositions could eventually emerge, as in the case of the working group referred to in Axis 1 (defence policy) of the 2013 Action Plan, which aims to establish regional mechanisms to deal with cyber threats in the area of defence, or the working group in charge of proposing mechanisms for cooperation to protect and defend natural resources and biodiversity (South American Defense Council, 2013).

There is no doubt that the agenda constituted by the SDC action plans includes new issues, notably in Axes 1 and 3 (defence policy and the defence industry and technologies, respectively), encompassing preliminary levels and forms of cooperation, basically the creation of working groups and the holding of seminars and workshops to identify opportunities and to generate proposals for concrete initiatives (South American Defense Council, 2014). Even considering the limited points of departure for fostering cooperation in the four axes, which make it necessary to spend time on the initial, preparatory stages, the inertial trend observed both in the structure and contents of the action plans and in the nature of the propositions envisaged in them is indicative of how insufficient political incentives have been either to take up issues of greater political sensitivity or to move towards deeper forms of cooperation that would entail greater political commitment to a regional endeavour. As stated by Soares (2011: 104):

“Integration processes are still in place, but with no deepening efforts. In the areas of security and defence, a meaningful set of initiatives in confidence building has been achieved, which seems satisfactory to most countries. That is, no new daring goals have been set, despite the creation of UNASUR and its Defense Council.”

Although it is not an item on the agendas of SDC action plans, responding in a timely and effective manner to acute domestic or bilateral political crises has been widely regarded as a major positive factor in the assessments of UNASUR’s performance over its first six years. It is true that the political dialogue and the initiatives sponsored by political authorities at the highest levels within the organisation to sustain favourable conditions for political stability at the domestic and regional levels is highly positive as a political asset for the region and for UNASUR itself. However, according to Zapata Mafla (2014: 163), “in the majority of cases, the responses to crisis have not followed procedures established for such a specific purpose. Rather, the responses by the members of UNASUR have been spontaneous and without regulatory or statutory bases.”

To some extent, and although in a different domain, this aspect is exemplified by the absence of UNASUR from the current peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). It can be argued that, because of the intrinsic characteristics of the conflict and the fact that neighbouring countries have traditionally refrained from a direct engagement and played limited roles in support of peace efforts in different circumstances, there are no sound grounds for granting UNASUR a major role in the current peace process. However, the fact that only recently its secretary general expressed a clear willingness to engage the organisation in post-conflict peace efforts also testifies to the difficulties that UNASUR has had in finding its way to influencing major security dynamics in the region. It is plausible that, once the negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas are over and those with the National Liberation Army (ELN) have been established and advanced, some UNASUR bodies, probably but not necessarily the SDC itself, may get involved, especially with regard to issues relating to economic and moral compensation, justice, truth and reconciliation.

These elements indicate that in the case of the SDC what has prevailed is neither a sense of strong political willingness to embrace more intense levels of defence cooperation nor a genuine commitment to a regional endeavour, but rather a pragmatic choice to avoid politically difficult, challenging and controversial issues and to favour low-cost, short-term opportunities that might provide some limited impetus to it.

Conclusions

The preceding analysis relies on two basic premises. First, there is a huge gap between the levels and forms of regional cooperation required by a complex array of domestic and international security and defence challenges, on the one hand, and those pursued and achieved within UNASUR and by its Defense Council, on the other. Second, this gap can be explained to a large extent by a lack of significant domestic incentives to grant cooperation a higher priority in the realm of national defence policies. Although in principle this might be regarded as a contradiction or paradox, the limited incentives to cooperate offered by UNASUR member countries provides an important explanation for the inertia that has characterised the organisation's own course and that of its Defense Council in the past three years. Intentions to explore the possibilities for moving forward in the four basic dimensions of the SDC action plans are conditioned by nationally defined factors. These, in turn, express themselves in the continued heterogeneity in the realm of defence and security policies, in terms both of conceptual frameworks and of the priorities and strategies embraced to respond to political and strategic dynamics and changes at global and regional levels.

The resistance to bringing politically costly and controversial issues onto the agenda for the sake of a tentative political dialogue contradicts the central objectives of the

SDC and, therefore, undermines both its immediate and its medium-term prospects, thus preventing South America from evolving towards a mature security community. Currently, the status of the region's security community is stalled somewhere between rising and mature. Here, in conclusion, we offer the words of Zapata Mafla (2014: 165), who argues that:

“the steps that member countries have taken in the security and defence realms through UNASUR and the SDC allow us to associate the South American region with some characteristics of a nascent, upstream, security community; at the same time, it has not managed to move further than that. That is, the lack of a common identity in the area of defence, the lack of a governance system to manage security problems and distrust among its members are all issues that shape South America's political and strategic dynamics, preventing us from theoretically envisaging South America either as a regional security community, *sensu stricto*, or as a security community in its mature phase.”

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