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South America's "Safe Haven"

Chile's armed forces have traditionally equipped themselves for conventional conflicts along its borders. That's 'old think', says Robert Shaw. Drug trafficking and organized crime now present a far greater challenge to Chilean security than its territory-disputing neighbors.

By Robert Shaw for ISN

Big Money for the Military

Students, miners and indigenous groups are once again preparing to take to the streets of Chile ahead of November's presidential elections. Among their targets this time around is a secretive multibillion-dollar defense program financed by Codelco, the state-owned copper mining company. The program reflects the considerable sway that the armed forces still have over a country that was once synonymous with military rule. However, the final victor come 17 November may have to confront an uncomfortable truth: Chile's defense and security spending is not in line with the internal challenges it faces.

Chile's reserves of copper have provided the military with a considerable source of funding since the 1990s. Carina Solmirano, senior researcher for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), told the ISN, "for a long while now, Chile has had a high per capita level of military spending compared to what it puts into education and health. The money skyrocketed in 2004 when global copper prices shot up, giving them a lot of scope to acquire big, modern and technologically advanced weapons".

Mauricio Weibel, a leading Chilean journalist told the ISN that since the 90s the Chilean armed forces have built up over \$15 billion through a 10% royalty on copper exports. "They've spent \$10 billion of this and now have a surplus of close to \$5 billion," said Weibel. *"This surplus will be used as a contingency fund by the Ministry of Defense"*.

"Primarily, they've been using their increased weaponry as a means of deterrence," added Solmirano. "Chile still has long-standing border disputes with Peru and more recently because of Bolivia's claims to Pacific territorial access. While this is being dealt with at the diplomatic level, you still need an elbow out there to say 'look I'm doing this'".

According to research undertaken by SIPRI, the need for increased military muscle led to Chile making several high-profile military acquisitions. These include 18 second-hand F-16C combat aircraft from the Netherlands and 266 refurbished Marder-1A3 Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFV) from Germany. However, a mix of economic, military and structural factors has slowed the country's acquisitions over

recent years. [Reconstruction efforts following the February 2010 earthquake](#) accounted for approximately 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Demand for copper from Asian markets has also started to slow. And organized crime and drug trafficking poses an increasing risk to the country's internal stability.

Chile's "Hidden" Security Risks

Chile has long and porous borders with Argentina, Peru and Bolivia that pose significant challenges to counter-narcotics programs. Francisco Morales (name changed for security reasons), an army officer from the Ministry of Defense, told the ISN, "drug trafficking on the northern desert border is Chile's major hidden security risk. Our intelligence services have found more and more shipments coming from Bolivia and Peru along with new signs of Mexican cartels involved in money laundering".

"Chile sells itself as an oasis of security but that's simply not true," added Morales. "Both the previous Bachelet administration as well as the current Piñera one have tried to hide the extent of the internal security issues like drug trafficking and organized crime problems. This is where we still have major gaps. We are not prepared for a major onslaught by heavily armed and invisible organized crime and drug trafficking groups either from Peru or Mexico and Colombia".

The country is also a major producer of [drug precursor chemicals](#). According to the [UNODC 2013 World Drug Report](#), Chile is the eighteenth "most frequently mentioned country of provenance" for cases involving cocaine seizures (base, salts and crack). "We know that the 'narco's' have brought many of the undocumented Peruvians and Colombians who cross into Chile," said Morales. "We have detected cocaine laboratories in Antofagasta [a port city in northern Chile, about 1,100 km north of Santiago] including the chemicals needed to process the cocaine base".

"Drug shipments come in by land through the porous northern border and leave towards the US and Europe through ports like Iquique [500km north of Santiago] and Arica [1,000km north of Santiago]," Jorge Sanz, an international analyst from the Universidad del Desarrollo in Santiago, told the ISN.

Organized crime is also making its presence felt on the streets of Chile's largest cities. According to InSight Crime, [drug-trafficking groups now effectively run 83 neighborhoods in Santiago](#). This development adds to growing concerns that Chile's police forces are not in control of the streets. Accordingly, the return of the street protests is not only about the use of copper revenues for defense expenditure.

"The key internal security problem here has to do with the public's perception that Chile is an unsafe country," Ricardo Muga, an editor with El Mercurio, told the ISN. "In Chile the murder rate is very low with no kidnappings or acts of terrorism. However, close to 70% of the public feels that the country is unsafe mainly because the police don't have the capacity to investigate or punish criminals".

Santiago Responds

To address the growing problem of organized crime and drug trafficking, the Ministry of Defense launched a [new national strategy](#) in mid-2012. Santiago has also strengthened [its Northern Border Plan](#) by increasing the presence of police and armed forces across the region. Early results have been impressive. InSight Crime reports that the anti-narcotics unit of the Carabiniers seized [8,007 kilos of illicit drugs](#) in the first half of 2013, a 77.4 percent increase on last year's corresponding figures.

Chile also recognizes that its counter-narcotics strategy needs the support of neighboring states. In early 2012, the Ministry of Defense set up a [UN peacekeeping operations training center at Fort Aguayo](#) in the Valparaíso region of Chile. Several Latin American countries are now using the camp to

train their military personnel in urban warfare and anti-guerilla fighting skills.

More needs to be done

Many Chileans nevertheless remain skeptical that the country has the necessary capabilities to tackle drugs and organized crime head-on. According to Hugo Fruhling, Professor at the Universidad de Chile, the country's police forces remain poorly-trained and lack the knowledge required for effective counter-narcotics operations. To help overcome this, he thinks that the next president needs to decentralize control of local municipalities across the entire country.

There have also been calls for the armed forces to become more involved in safeguarding the country's internal security. "Legally the armed forces can't carry out active operations inside Chile but this is quickly being re-interpreted as they provide logistical support on the borders", added Morales. In July 2012, for example, a Chilean court allowed the navy to support a police operation by sinking a Peruvian vessel off the northern coastline that was carrying 40 kilos of marijuana en route to West Africa.

"You've got to give the armed forces something to do, either bolstering their role as an international peace-keeping force or bringing them more and more into internal operations like controlling our borders," said Morales.

That won't be easy for a military that is trained for desert warfare along Chile's northern border with Peru. In addition, Chile remains one of the few countries in Latin America that does not use its armed forces for internal security, a stance that Santiago would understandably like to maintain. But in doing so, the next Chilean president may be vulnerable to criticism that the country's policymakers are not prepared to confront the still-powerful military establishment. This might result in the continuation of inappropriate defense expenditure and the worsening of Chile's increasingly precarious domestic security.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Drivers of Strategic Contestation in South America](#)

[Chile: Political and Economic Conditions and US Relations](#)

[Journal of Politics in Latin America, Vol.5, No.2](#)

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