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## New Security Structures: A Healthy Trend?

Brazil and Colombia may be at the forefront of trying to develop ambitious security architectures for South America but is the region actually capable of developing integrated solutions for its distinct security problems?

By Robert Shaw for ISN

The United States' influence within South America has been on the decline since at least the turn of the 21st century. The 'leftward tilt' that began with the election of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez ushered an injection of soft power from Beijing, Moscow, Tehran and other actors at the expense of Washington. In terms of hard power, the United States is also losing ground. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), [US arms transfers to the region](#) have flattened and are now outstripped by Russian and French exports. A new-found confidence has also prompted South America to develop new political and security structures for a region that has been historically cast as the whipping boy of colonial powers. But is South America finally capable of overcoming traditional problems with corruption, bureaucratic inertia and cross-border tensions in order to make these new structures work?

### **Diplomatic movers and shakers: Brazil and Colombia**

It seems almost inevitable that Brazil is at the forefront of these new regional arrangements. As the world's sixth largest economy, Brasilia plays an increasingly important role at the World Trade Organization (WTO), vigorously pursues a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and remains a key player in discussions on a range of global issues. Brazil and Colombia (along with Chile) are also the *de facto* leaders of UNASUR, a regional bloc formed in 2008 that is quickly overshadowing the practical power of the Washington-led Organization of American States (OAS). It has been argued that, in a short space of time, UNASUR has managed to start shaping a hands-on image of transparency and fostered 'southern-led solutions to southern problems'. It has also enabled Brazil and Colombia to forge a flurry of [new economic and military alliances](#).

In particular, experts have noted a tightening of military-to-military relationships between Bogota and Brasilia. Earlier this year, the Colombian Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón and his Brazilian counterpart, Celso Amorim, announced the creation of a [bi-national border commission](#), tasked with promoting new initiatives to improve trade security in the border region. Proposals include an integrated information center for the Amazon, industrial and military cooperation to advance defense technology and science, and a bilateral entrepreneur summit. The commission (set to be fully active by April 2012) follows on from a long-awaited [Free Trade Agreement](#) signed in late 2011.

Colombia's improving ties with Brazil appear to have benefited from the United States' continued focus upon the Middle East and Afghanistan. Instead of walking a political tightrope between the US

and more left-leaning neighbors, Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos has played a key role in organizing regional summits and mediating with Brazil in post-coup Honduras.

## **Military Rules!**

Yet South America remains bedeviled by a familiar set of security problems. In an interview with ISN, Adam Blackwell, OAS Secretary for Multidimensional Security, outlined the three greatest security concerns in the region as:

1. The 'balloon effect' of violence by organized crime groups moving across South America to Central America and Mexico
2. Increased sophistication of the drug trade with smaller packages being moved on make-shift submarines and light planes
3. The increase in domestic drug consumption in places like Brazil and Colombia

The final challenge demonstrates that South America's security dynamics are further complicated by domestic problems. With [homicide rates](#) on the rise across the region, countries continue to confront the dilemma of focusing upon internal security or cross-border issues like organized crime and drug trafficking. This provides many South American governments with an additional dilemma - what role should the armed forces play while the police remain plagued by endemic levels of corruption?

"Across our region there's an unwritten rule that the army can deal with the countryside while the police deals with the urban sprawl," explains Jorge Restrepo, the Director of the Conflict Analysis Resource Center ([CERAC](#)) in Bogotá. "But at the end of the day there are no clear rules for the armed forces".

And many South American countries are increasingly blurring the line. In a [sweeping series of moves](#) toward the end of last year, countries such as Brazil and Bolivia drafted in long-term military assistance to carry out policing roles in the fight against organized crime, gangs and drug-trafficking.

"The most significant pitfall [to this mismatch] is human rights abuses conducted by soldiers in the streets," says Sam Logan, the managing director of [Southern Pulse](#), a Latin American Risk Analysis firm. "The most complicated balance to strike is one between security and development. As long as the military are in the streets in a reactive posture, it is difficult to prepare the way for a preventative police to manage public security, which is often the first significant step towards balancing [the] police and military and balancing security and development".

In spite of this, the choice in several South American countries has been largely to play ball with the military, be it through salary hikes or purchasing hardware. A [recent report](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that delivery of conventional weapons to South America increased by 77 per cent between 2007 and 2011. Arms imports to Venezuela, for example, increased by 555 per cent between 2002-2006 and 2007-11 with the country rising from being the 46th largest arms importer to the 15th. Brazil also has a wide range of arms on order that will dramatically increase the volume of its imports in the coming years. These include licensed production deals with France for 4 Scorpène class submarines, 1 SNBR nuclear-powered submarine and 50 EC-725 helicopters, and with Italy for over 2000 VBTP Guarani Armored Personnel Carriers (APC).

Of course, it's not just about getting weapons. "Militarily Brazil wants to make its own weapons whilst simultaneously brokering high-level technology transfer deals with countries like France," says Mark Bromley, a senior researcher with the SIPRI Arms Transfer Program. "The key is to both gain technological know-how to build your own weapons and to develop this, like the Europeans have,

through arms-producing private companies across countries in the same regional bloc”.

### **Same Old Sources of Friction**

Yet Brazil’s attempts to simultaneously enhance its armed forces and defense sector suggests that South America still has a long way to go before it fully eradicates geopolitical tensions.

“Though UNASUR is in place, when any country purchases a considerable amount of military hardware, the geopolitical ripple effect sometimes ruffles feathers in rival countries, which for Colombia would be Venezuela and Ecuador, for Brazil, Argentina”, says Sam Logan.

Yet there are signs that economic development may trump geopolitics and allow South America’s new security structures to thrive. A battle between South American states and business for control of natural resources in the Amazon basin also continues to rank high on the list of security concerns in the region. In mid-April, at the OAS Summit of the Americas meeting in Cartagena, Colombia, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff highlighted these concerns saying, “Following the economic tsunami, we [emerging economies] must ‘defend’ and not just ‘protect’ our national interests”. “We will not allow our national industries to be cannibalized”.

Conversely, a significant expansion of weapons stockpiles - particularly small arms and light weapons - increases concerns that some will eventually be used.

“With poor institutional capacity and high levels of corruption, many weapons sold on the Latin American market end up floating across porous borders and into the wrong hands,” adds Adam Blackwell.

“The most likely scenario is that these weapons are sold by corrupt officials to criminal groups. Another [option is that they’d be used for] border disputes or incidents that could flare up,” explains Adam Isacson, a senior researcher at WOLA. “Another are efforts to arm populations and form militias which don’t exert close enough control over the arms”.

### **The way forward - ‘southern brothers in arms’**

Closing these porous gaps, UN experts say, is vital. They advocate the reinforcing of an ‘open door policy’ for registering and tracking arms sales - as well as monitoring existing munitions stockpiles - to help build regional trust.

“The trend at the national level is encouraging, with some states now providing quite detailed information on their military expenditure and arms acquisitions”, says Carina Solmirano of the SIPRI Military Expenditure Project. ‘But the information available in many states leaves important questions open regarding exactly what is being spent and why.’

“Rapid military spending increases and major arms purchases in Latin America and the Caribbean come at a time when the region is relatively peaceful yet is still plagued by poverty and inequality”.

Adam Blackwell further emphasizes the importance of military interventions in South America being short and focused activities. He also warns against states “going down the slippery slope of pushing the ‘militarization of policing’” thereby starting an extremely dangerous trend across the region. As a better example, Blackwell sees Brazil’s use of the military to “clean up the shantytowns” and then leaving normal policing activities to the police as the ideal role model.

Nevertheless, in spite of regional anxiety generated by increased arms sales, organized crime and other cross-border issues, there are real signs that new security architectures are emerging within

South America. With Brazil and Colombia at the helm, these include a new UNASUR-led initiative to share information on defense expenditures and building more transparent military alliances. Accordingly, for each and every South American initiative, the key ingredient needs to be transparency and a better civilian-military balance in tackling security problems both nationally and regionally.

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