

Unexpected Civil-Military Relations in 21st Century Latin America

DAVID PION-BERLIN

After a long history of coups and dictatorships, Latin America has achieved a more or less effective subordination of the military to the civil authorities. This proved possible largely as a result of the widespread repudiation of the wave of authoritarian governments, but it by no means signifies that the Armed Forces have definitively retired to their barracks: in recent years, growing public security and development problems have led civil governments to recur increasingly to the military to fight the drug trafficking, to control criminality and to help out with social programs. Surprisingly, despite this, the subordination of the military to the civil authorities is apparently not in danger, at least for the moment.

David Pion-Berlin: Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Riverside. He is widely known for his research on Argentina, civil-military relations, security, and human rights. He is the co-editor (with Edward Epstein) of *Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy* (Lexington Books, 2006).

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At the beginning of the twenty first century, civil-military relations in Latin America are more stable and the armed forces politically weaker than at anytime in recent memory. In most countries of the region, the military has been diminished in size, resources, influence and stature. It cannot wield the threat of coup d'état as it had in the past. The professional and political costs to the military of overturning constitutional governments are greater than ever. Two safe generalizations can be made about the Latin American military: it is less oriented toward regime overthrow and more preoccupied with retaining some influence within the democratic regime; and it is less able to and interested in confronting civilians about national policy and

more concerned with protecting its institutional well-being. Today's military is learning to live within the rules of democratic systems.

One interesting indication of declining military influence is the succession of presidential crises that have occurred in recent years. Chief executives have been on a collision course with other branches of government over lawmaking, accountability and the checks and balances of power. This has resulted in gridlock and the failure to govern effectively. In the past, these crises would have been resolved through military intervention and the installation of an authoritarian regime. Not any more. Presidents *have* been forced from power before they have completed their terms of office. Yet they have not been removed by generals, but by legislators, protesters or the force of events. In every case, the democratic *regime* has survived, but the military has been unable to «save» the *government* it served.

For example, after having failed to manage an economic recovery, Argentine President Raul Alfonsín had to resign from office five months before his term ended in 1989. In 2001, Fernando de la Rúa had to flee the presidential palace as angry protesters swarmed into the Plaza del Mayo, demanding his resignation. The military remained quartered. The Brazilian military also stayed confined to the barracks in Brazil, when the Congress impeached President Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992 on corruption charges. In fact Latin America militaries have not prevented any presidential impeachment over the last 15 years. In Peru, the military could not save Alberto Fujimori from his disgraceful fall from power in 2000, nor could the Bolivian military rescue President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada from ruin in 2003, after mass protests demanded his ouster. And again in 2005, when President Carlos Mesa had to resign under similar pressures, the military stayed on the sidelines. In fact, since the turn of the new century, no military has successfully rescued a presidency from defeat at the hands of civilian rebellions.

The trend toward presidential crisis, regime survival and the «demilitarization» of conflict is clear. In a study of executive-legislative conflicts in Latin America, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán finds that before the beginning of the «Third Wave» of democracy in 1977, 73 percent of presidential crises resulted in regime disruptions, usually at the hands of the military. After 1977, only 13 percent resulted in such disruptions.¹ Democratic regimes persist while the military stays out of most political

¹ Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 62.

controversies, and that is good news indeed. The military is no longer the political power broker it used to be; it cannot single-handedly shift the balance between contending branches of government or competing political forces, nor does it want to. However, if these problems have been demilitarized, other problems have not.

Democratic governments seek military assistance in resolving security and development dilemmas. Security dilemmas lure the military in either when an armed threat is obviously of great magnitude (guerrillas in Colombia) or when it is less so, but still sufficient to overpower police and internal security forces. Governments with anti-guerrilla, anti-narcotics, anti-crime, anti-terrorist agendas will call on the military to either take the lead or assume supportive (i.e. logistical) roles because they have no choice. Refusal to allow military participation in internal security affairs could very well place the nation or communities within it at considerable risk. Dilemmas of development exist wherever nations confront persistent poverty, malnourishment, unemployment, disease, and lack of infrastructure. Governments that have a shortage of well trained, financed civilian agencies to assist disadvantaged populations will often call upon the military to help out. Military units engage in everything from elaborate, long-term civic-action projects to emergency relief efforts. Reluctance to take advantage of military assistance could jeopardize populations in need, rebounding to the political detriment of governments.

Because the democratic governments still depend upon the military to carry out security and development operations of one kind or another—many if not most inside the territorial borders of their nations—there is cause for concern. If history has taught us anything, it is that militaries were once able to extract political concessions from governments that were desperate for their assistance. The military developed new, vested interests through its extensive involvement in aiding the nation, and demanded—even expected—greater rewards or perhaps expanded decision-making powers as a *quid pro quo*. Governments that were too willing to grant these concessions undermined their own power.

Is that still the case? How well have civilians taken up the challenge of controlling the armed forces even as they continue to rely on them for security and development assistance? Can they manage military and defense affairs, or have they relinquished too much influence to men in uniform? This article will assess these issues and others through observing a set of curious, sometimes paradoxical circumstances. While history has much to teach us, politics surprises us. There are often unexpected twists and turns to the political road and that is certainly true within the civil-military

relation. The results of civil-military interaction are not always what we might expect. What follows are four cases of the unexpected, and a surprising conclusion.

■ **1. Regional strengths make the costs of military coups greater than ever but domestic governmental weaknesses make costs of military non-involvement greater than ever**

The era of the military coup may be over, but not the era of military involvement. Latin American militaries have been involved in a multitude of functions. But they do so at the request of –not against– democratically elected officials. And they do so with great frequency. Politically authorized military interventions, to address a number of domestic social, economic, and physical problems, persists in this region, even as the threat of the military coup d'état dissipates.

The Latin American community is more resolute than ever in its defense of democracy, and its institutional and legal machinery more finely tuned than ever to enable it to react in a decisive, timely fashion when a democracy is under siege. Regional organizations such as the *Organization of American States*, subregional organizations such as *MERCOSUR* and even the United States have raised the costs to military led overthrows of elected governments.² Latin American militaries and their civilian allies had to think twice about coercively seizing power, knowing that were they to do so, the regional community would respond quickly and decisively; that those reactions would trigger diplomatic and economic sanctions that could do their regimes great harm. Future trade, investment and financial relations with the rest of the region and especially with the United States and other developed democracies would hang in the balance should a non-democratic government seize political office. So effective have been the regional measures that they have dissuaded coup plotters from even trying. In those few cases where coups were actually carried out, the juntas that were installed lasted less than 48 hours, succumbing to enormous internal and external pressures. I refer to these as ephemeral coups.³ But while stronger regional and subregional institutions have stood as barriers to military takeovers, weakening

² David Pion-Berlin, «A New Civil-Military Pragmatism in Latin America,» *Security and Defense Studies Review online*, 4,1 (Spring 2004).<http://www.ndu.edu/chds/journal/index.htm>.

³ The ephemeral coup seems to be some product of swift and decisive regional action combined with a strong reaction from civil society within these states. Officers and their civilian allies are undoubtedly aware of the costs to democratic disruption since these have been made known repeatedly.

institutions and performance failures inside these democracies have constituted invitations for lesser forms of military involvement, which brings us to the domestic context.

Democracies in Latin America have survived for the longest period in their history precisely because the region has stood as a bulwark in their defense. But that means that problems that were once dealt with through regime change are now left at the door step of democratic administrations. And these same democracies are under increasing stress. Societal demands for income, jobs, justice, medical services, collective and individual security are greater than ever, but the capacity of governments to deliver these «goods» has not grown. The gap between needs and performance has widened. Economic and social crises have fueled doubts about the problem solving abilities of those in power. The less able democratic governments are at closing the gap, the more reliant they become on the military to help out where it can.

From state and society, there are greater pressures on the military to help control crime (Central America, Brazil), lead counterinsurgency efforts (Colombia), lend a hand in counter-narcotic missions (Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil) aid in poverty relief programs (Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador), disaster relief (Central America, numerous other countries) provide health services to rural areas (Uruguay) and general developmental assistance (throughout the region).

As a result, the military finds itself implicated in all sorts of internal roles. Clearly the military cannot solve most of the problems that beset these democracies. But they can and do provide services where states cannot financially support civilian agencies to carry out vital tasks. Take the example of development assistance. Military units are called upon to undertake long-term civic-action projects or to temporarily come to the assistance of afflicted communities. They have the built-in capability (bases, personnel, communications, transport, logistics, etc.) to launch wide scale operations of a non-lethal nature. This can usually be done within pre-existing budget lines – something fiscally-minded governments greatly appreciate. In the long term, democracies are almost always better off if they can build civilian agencies to deliver food, clothing and medicine, transport mobile health services to rural areas, construct roads, fortify dams and bridges, and so on. In the short term, resource-poor governments must keep the military option open.

Thus we have the unexpected push and pull of competing influences: as regional institutions push the military back to the barracks and away from the political arena, domestic problems reach out and pull it back into the economic and social arenas. The good news is that internal military missions are not inherently risky, which brings us to the second unexpected finding.

■ **2. The number of internal security and development missions have grown since the return of democracy, and yet civilian control has not been adversely affected by it**

Civil-military relations experts have long warned against the participation of armed forces in domestic missions within democratic societies. They argue that such involvement bolsters the military politically and could eventually lead to the overthrow of democratic governments.⁴ This is not the case when governments train their militaries to confront external threats, but it is so when the armed forces turn inward and move away from their core defense mission.⁵ They widen their activities to include domestic, non-defense related functions such as those mentioned previously. This phenomenon is referred to as role expansion.

The thinking goes that as governments become more dependent on the armed forces to undertake these missions, they in turn demand more for their cooperation. They press for more resources or decision-making powers. They also try to convert temporary assignments into permanent missions. It gets written into their doctrines and becomes a part of their *raison d'être*. Soon they expand their prerogatives further, insisting on greater autonomy over their own sphere of influence and greater involvement in the political sphere of influence. Before long, they have assumed tutelary powers, and it is just a short distance from there to taking over the reigns of government altogether. In other words, democratic government is the primary victim of military internal role expansion.

But this is no longer true. The contemporary military has not converted internal missions into political power; it has not translated its internal security and

⁴ A proponent of this view is Alfred Stepan, «The New Professionalism of Internal Warfare and Military Role Expansion,» In *Armies and Politics in Latin America*, edited by Abraham F. Lowenthal and J. Samuel Fitch, 134-150. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986.

⁵ See Michael C. Desch. *Civilian Control of the Military: the Changing Security Environment*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

developmental roles into a right to make or veto policy decisions or to appoint or displace political leaders. Role expansion has not led to any greater military autonomy in Brazil and in Argentina where presidents have enlisted the military's help in curbing drug-related crime, distributing food and medical services. El Salvador's success in reining in its armed forces following its civil war has come despite the continued employment of the military to address natural disasters and domestic crime. And Colombian President Alvaro Uribe maintains civilian control over the military despite his troops' heavy involvement in the counter-guerrilla war.

Internal missions are not *inherently risky*, nor are they more perilous than external missions. Likewise, non-traditional military roles (civic action) are not anymore difficult to manage than are traditional roles (defense). The same requirements for civilian operational control exist whether the military is sent on a foreign assignment or a domestic one: Leaders must be able to establish their ultimate authority over the military and its mission; they must lay out clear objectives, set limits, exert oversight and call off the operations when they see fit. Oftentimes, the greatest challenge to civilians lies in the area of managing an operation once it is underway. It is tempting for politicians to adopt a *laissez-faire* approach, allowing military commanders to call all the shots. Sometimes, civilians order a military operation and then grant the military too much discretion, by allowing it to operate autonomously within some preordained territory or sphere of influence. But again, this problem surfaces just as easily during external missions as it does for internal ones.

And yet, civilian governments have had greater success controlling military operations than one might imagine. A study that I and Craig Arceneaux conducted of some 33 military operations in Latin America from 1980-1997 found that civilians achieved moderate to high levels of control over military operations in the same proportion (60%) *regardless of whether the campaign was internal or external*. The same study reveals that civilians have just as much success regulating role expansive campaigns as they too role restrictive ones.⁶ Another way of phrasing this is that the military has not had much success at expanding its autonomy or political power even as it continues to engage in internal missions.

Ultimately, what matters is who decides? If civilian control is to be achieved, and if democracies are to endure, then it is for civilians to decide when, where and how the armed forces are to be used. It is for civilians to decide where the line should be drawn between means and ends. Otherwise, problems could arise when soldiers

⁶ David Pion-Berlin and Craig Arceneaux, «Decision-Makers or Decision-Takers? Military Missions and Civilian Control in Democratic South America,» *Armed Forces & Society*, 26,3 (Spring 2000):413-436.

extend the boundaries of a conflict or change its form, thinking that they are merely making an operational adjustment when in fact they are interfering in policy objectives. When the legitimate political authorities render these kinds of decisions on a regular basis, they can achieve control over internal missions. Civilian leaders need not dominate all military functions, but they at least must have ultimate authority, meaning they must be able to decide who decides. Accordingly, the key to success is to set limits within which the armed forces respect functions delegated to it by government, regardless of what these functions may be or where they may be located.⁷ When this is done, democracies are never threatened by internal military missions.

■ **3. Civilian leaders know little about managing defense. But this does not impair their ability to manage the military**

Generally, civilian democratic governments can manage their military affairs, but they cannot manage defense affairs. There is a difference. On the one hand, Latin American political leaders have had considerable success at subordinating their armed forces to civilian rule. This has been done politically, through the adroit manipulation and management of interpersonal, legal, and fiscal resources to constrain military influence. But they have done so *without a fundamental knowledge of defense*. Democratic leaders and their civilian ministers come to the job ill-prepared to discuss let alone exert leadership over defense preparedness, deployment, objectives, strategy or doctrine. Governments are not building strong defense related institutions, nor are they acquiring greater defense wisdom. *Yet while the balance of defense-related competence still tilts heavily in favor of the military, the balance of power tilts in favor of the civilians.*

Presidents and their defense ministers have had (with a few obvious exceptions) success at building respectful relations predicated on military subordination to civilian control, despite considerable gaps in defense related knowledge—gaps which have not closed appreciably. The balance of power has moved decisively in favor of democratic governments in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. To a lesser extent, but still visible, is a movement in favor of civilians in Guatemala. Even in Colombia, with a brutal civil war raging on, there is no talk of the civilian government losing control over its

⁷ See Claude Welch, Jr. *No Farewell to Arms? Military Disengagement from Politics in Africa and Latin America*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1987.

armed forces any time soon. Only in Ecuador and Paraguay have efforts to appreciably reduce military political power fallen short.

Civilians maintain these advantages through a form of *political civilian control*.⁸ This is a low cost means of achieving a relative calm in civil-military affairs without investment in extensive institution building, expertise, legislative oversight and large budgets. And it has been the *modus operandi* for the majority of Presidents and Defense Ministers in Latin America for some time now. Political civilian control is personal. Rather than trying to socialize the entire military to a civilian point of view, presidents rely on a few key officers who will conform to their wishes and promote their positions with subordinates. These are officers they may be familiar with, who they may have known through political party or familial connections, and who they surmise will be loyal to them. At the same time, they try to purge from the top ranks, those soldiers who may cause them trouble. In doing so, they sometimes have to upset rules of seniority to find that officer who will demonstrate maximum compliance, forcing those above him to retire. But presidents have commonly done so.

Presidents also appoint ministers who are adept at managing the military. These are individuals who come to the job *without* defense experience or education behind them. They are not knowledgeable about defense but they are politically skillful; they know how to keep the military off the front pages of newspapers. They smooth over the rough edges, put out small brush fires, calm jittery nerves, make pledges of support, reinterpret political messages in a positive light, etc. The skilled civilian managers of the military are those who are able communicators: they can address military concerns while conveying in a diplomatic yet firm manner, the preferences and demands of the chief executive they serve. Having an effective advocate at the helm of the defense ministry is especially important when the government's policy priorities diverge from the military's. Governments must be able to make and enforce unpopular decisions. But they have not and will not gain military consent by proving their defense credentials; they do so by reminding the military that it is they and their administration that make policy, and that it is the military's firm constitutional obligation to fulfill policy in a subordinate manner. Thus civilian authority and the military's respect for that authority do not stem from civilian defense knowledge.

In fact, politicians and their ministers generally try to avoid meddling in core military affairs so long as the military observes similar rules when it comes to the

⁸ David Pion-Berlin, «Political Management of the Military in Latin America,» *Military Review*, 85, 1 (January-February, 2005): 19-31.

government's sphere of influence. They adhere to the principle, «live and let live.» The military's core pertains to the administration of each of its services but more importantly, to the planning, preparation, and programming of defense. This separates the Latin American model from the North American one, where the Secretary of Defense and his largely civilian staff are in charge of defense policy and strategy. In Latin America, questions having to do with defense planning, strategy, tactics, and their relation to force training, structure, and deployment, have been left almost entirely in the hands of military personnel. Meanwhile, the armed forces leave civilians alone to make policies outside the realm of defense, and neither do they interfere in the choice of political leaders and cabinet appointees. Unlike the United States, Latin America is situated in a security environment where the threat of war is remote and the need to build an elaborate defense system is low. Thus, there is less need to rely on defense experts when the critical issues have less to do with war preparation and more to do with domestic political relations. Civilian leaders must politically manage the military so that it remains respectful, obedient, and stays out of contentious policy matters.. But they do not manage the defense sphere, and so far at least, that has not proven to be harmful to civil-military relations.

■ 4. Latin American politicians' ignorance about defense is not only perfectly rational; it is also unavoidable

Defense policy is not a priority item among Latin American politicians of the region. These political leaders remain woefully ignorant about defense, and it is unlikely that this reality will change anytime soon. This is principally because politicians have no rational incentives to learn about defense. Latin American nations do not face serious threats of foreign invasion, and the militarized disputes they do enter into are not serious enough to trigger genuine civilian interest in defense. Over the course of a century or more, militaries turned inward to engage in political conflicts and conspiratorial plots against elected governments. These moves prompted civilian attention to coup avoidance, not war avoidance. Moreover, politicians have no incentive to become defense savvy in a region where defense establishments and their supporting industries provide few employment opportunities for constituents.⁹

There are almost no external threats of the kind that create existential risks to Latin American nations. The region has been largely peripheral to world wars and major

⁹ For more on these points, see David Pion-Berlin and Harold Trinkunas, «Attention Deficits: Why Politicians Ignore Defense Policy in Latin America,» *Latin American Research Review*, 42,3 (October 2007): 76-100.

geopolitical conflicts. It is rarely subject to the security dilemmas, threats, or arms races more typical of other regions of the world. In fact, many describe Latin America as a zone of peace. Thus, politicians may ignore defense without incurring great risks to national security. In the absence of actual or potential military threats, civilian inattention to defense policy is understandable.

Furthermore, there are no major economic or social constituencies in Latin American democracies that favor national defense issues. Defense contracting is not a big business as it is in the United States, and thus is not a major employer. There are simply not enough civilians involved in defense related activities in Latin America for attention to defense policy to provide an electoral payoff to politicians: not on bases, not in ministries, not in the military academies, nor in munitions factories. It is hard for political figures—be they governors, legislators or presidents—to prioritize defense in the face of relatively low security threats when defense budgets do not translate into significant employment opportunities for the civilian population and into a potential pool of grateful voters. Those few voters who have defense jobs constitute such a small proportion of the public that they are in no position to adequately reward political leaders for attention to defense issues.

Legislators in particular see no gain to be had in becoming defense savvy since they cannot deliver defense jobs to their districts in exchange for votes. In some countries, congressmen acquire expertise by serving on defense commissions for lengthy periods of time. But Latin American legislators do not stay in the congress long enough to accumulate real expertise in any subject, let alone defense. Re-election rates are low either because congressmen do not succeed in retaining their seats, or more commonly because they seek new opportunities outside of the legislature.¹⁰ Committee assignments are made by parties more as payments for services rendered to the party bosses and less as venues for acquiring substantive expertise. These committees also have a restricted mandate which proves unattractive for legislators looking for institutionalized power. For example, most defense commissions are not empowered to reopen, examine and rewrite the defense budget. There is no item by item review, no markup and thus no real capacity to assign or reassign military resources. This then impairs the committees' ability to carry out another vital function: oversight. Without the necessary expenditure information, the congress cannot take the military to task for misallocations, wasteful spending or fraud. The commissions have no auditors at their disposal to pore over military accounts.

¹⁰ Scott Morgenstern, «Explaining Legislative Politics in Latin America.» In *Legislative Politics in Latin America*, edited by Scott Morgenstern and Benito Nacif, 413-444. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Without the proper incentives, politicians will remain ignorant about defense for the foreseeable future. The promotion of defense policy demands ample resources and a sustained long term commitment, one that politicians have not been willing to assume. Because defense is complicated to master, it is especially tempting for political leaders to defer to the armed forces themselves. After all, officers devote their lives to learning their trade. Years spent in the military academy and in training exercises equip them with the necessary skills and defense wisdom. Even if civilian politicians were to invest more time and energy to understanding defense, they could never achieve parity with the military. So why not then take the easier path of simply deferring to military judgments? Why not transfer the authority to soldiers of devising defense plans, strategies, doctrines, etc and then claim political credit for it? That is in fact what most politicians in Latin America have done.

This may not be the desirable path to take, because without some knowledge of defense, it is hard for civilians to oversee efforts to reform military practices and doctrines. This leaves the military to resort to self-management which could breed higher levels of autonomy. It will also be difficult if not impossible for political leaders to build stronger defense institutions within which they employ a trained civilian staff to measure up to the military personnel. But these dilemmas are unlikely to disappear any time soon so long as politicians follow their electoral self interests, which dictate that they ignore defense and pay attention to other issues with greater value to voters.

■ Conclusion


I do not foresee any serious military threats to democracy and civilian control in Latin America in the near future. The costs to military intervention are too high, and the benefits too few. Unexpectedly, even the political turn to the ideological left has not increased the risks of military intervention. Soldiers continue to respect civilian commanders in chief that are politically progressive. The Latin American military and the political left often had a stormy relationship marked by mutual distrust, intolerance, and violence. Those days have passed. In part, this is because many leftwing leaders have turned out to be more moderate than expected, once they assumed office. Presidents Michele Bachelet in Chile, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Tábere Vasquez in Uruguay and Nestor Kirchner in Argentina have all pursued growth-oriented economic programs which do not threaten the interests of

conservative businessmen, bankers, landowners, and others who in the past were part of the pro-coup coalition. Hence, the military are not under any societal pressure to veto or overturn the economic policies of these democratic governments.

Still, these same leaders have not stood in the way of, and some have even encouraged the courts to pursue human rights inquests and trials against military perpetrators. Why wouldn't this pose an intolerable threat to the military? It hasn't because political leaders make the distinction between today's soldiers and yesterday's soldiers. The great bulk of the officer corps, who have risen through the ranks and experienced career advancement under democratic rule, are told they have nothing to fear from the system of justice, and they don't. Those who are vulnerable to prosecution constitute a handful of officers—many already retired— who rose to positions of authority during the dictatorships; they are yesterday's soldiers. The contemporary military seems to accept this distinction, knowing that the great majority of its rank and file will be unaffected.

Unexpectedly, even the more radically left wing presidents of the region have not faced resistance from their armed forces. Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia seem, so far, to be able to politically manage their armed forces. President Chávez has done so by cleansing the services of «golpista» elements from the aborted coup of April 2002, and by handsomely rewarding officers who stay loyal to him. Chávez has not only managed the military politically; he has politicized the ranks, by directly involving soldiers in his ideologically-based social projects. This could be potentially risky, but so far he has gotten away with it. Morales has also cultivated a rapport with his senior officers. But rather than force them to embrace his «revolution» like Chávez, he has resorted to a more traditional appeal: nationalism. Latin American militaries are nationalistic, instinctively favoring policies aimed at controlling vital national resources. Morales nationalized the hydrocarbon sector and enforced it with enthusiastic military assistance. And he shares with the military a common concern: preventing the Bolivian nation from breaking apart. The wealthier eastern provinces have sought greater political autonomy in order to control resources, and have periodically threatened to secede from the Republic. Morales rallies the military to his side when he combats efforts of these provinces to weaken the Central Government's hold on them.

These then are the unexpected realities of Latin America's contemporary civil-military relations: democracies which continue to rely on military assistance without succumbing to military power; militaries which remain internally active yet respectful

of civilian control; civilian leaders who can manage the armed forces politically without effectively managing defense; and leftwing politicians who pose no threat to and are not threatened by, the military. 

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