

IS THE MOLD BEING BROKEN? DEFENSE MINISTRIES AND DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Analysts of civil-military relations disagree on the progress civilians have made in establishing civilian supremacy over the armed forces in Latin American. How do we reach consensus about the effectiveness of formal political institutions vis-à-vis the military? Examining the Ministry of Defense provides an excellent starting point, since it is the primary political institution that coordinates many aspects of civil-military relations. This article analyzes the effectiveness of the ministry in four Latin American countries. For the most part, the ministries have developed into vehicles for military political activity, and so the traditional mold of weak and politicized Defense Ministries is nowhere near broken.

INTRODUCTION

Even as Latin American experiences with direct military rule continue to fade into the past, the role of the armed forces remains a central political issue. In particular, governments in the region face the persistent problem of compelling military leaders to adhere to formal political institutions. For civilian supremacy to hold, such institutions must represent the primary means by which civilians exert authority over the military. This article analyzes the role of the Ministry of Defense, which is one of the most important institutions mediating civil-military relations in Latin America.

Analysts of civil-military relations disagree about the progress civilians have made in establishing civilian supremacy over the armed forces. To achieve supremacy over the military, civilian governments must be able to forge policy without interference (in conjunction with a legal-constitutional structure asserting civilian control over all aspects of policy making), to make the final decisions regarding national defense, to formulate and implement defense policy, and to oversee the military's internal policies (Agüero 1995). More important than mere analytical disagreement, however, is the inability to utilize common criteria for measuring civilian supremacy. How do we reach consensus

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about the effectiveness of formal political institutions vis-à-vis the armed forces?

Examining the Ministry of Defense provides an excellent starting point, since it is the primary political institution that is charged with coordinating many aspects of civil-military relations. The minister is the intermediary in the executive branch between the military and the president. In a democratic context, the ministry would be an important civil-military nexus for conversation, negotiation, and consultation about a wide range of issues, including budgets, weapon procurement, long-term military strategy, and promotions. Military leaders would have the opportunity to state their case – most often to the president through the minister – but the president would make final decisions.

The importance of Defense Ministries in establishing civilian supremacy has wide consensus in the literature, both on civil-military relations in general and specifically with regard to Latin America. In his classic *The Soldier and the State* (1957), Samuel Huntington analyzed extensively the development of the U.S. Department of Defense in detail – even specifying the desirable characteristics of a Secretary of Defense – and viewed it as a critical institution to counterbalance the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the post-World War II era.² That sentiment of centrality is echoed in more recent theoretical treatments of civil-military relations as well. In his “unified” theory of civil-military relations, Bland argues that examining ministries of defense might be the only way “to gauge the degree of collaboration and conflict between military and civilian leaders” (Bland 1999:17). Even in discussions of civil-military relations in the United States, the struggle of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to establish firm control over the Department of Defense emerges as an important variable in civilian control (e.g., Kohn 1994).

The lack of detailed research on the topic is especially notable with regard to Latin America, since it is often cited as a critical variable. The ministry has been identified as one of the most important civil-military institutions, one that requires strengthening, especially since few civilians have proven to be experts in the realm of defense. Zagorski (1992: 197) notes that “this deficiency is virtually universal” while Bland (1999) argues that it is one of the four primary problems in civil-military relations. In his “democratic professionalist” model of civil-military relations, Fitch (1998) also ascribes a central role to the Defense Ministry. In general, numerous authors emphasize the value of a strong ministry staffed by civilian experts (others include Stepan 1988; Rial 1996).

² In particular, see Chapter 16. In his opinion, the Secretary should have experience, command respect (“publicly recognized as a man of stature, integrity, responsibility, and respectability”), and be “a man of dedication, acting and thinking purely in terms of the need of the office” (pp. 453-454).

Nonetheless, Pion-Berlin (2001) argues that circumvention of the Defense Ministry may in fact go hand in hand with the strengthening of civilian supremacy, at least in Argentina, where ministerial irrelevance has not been accompanied by military strength. What this does not address, however, is the long-term effect of institutional weakness. Currently, Argentina has arguably the most discredited and least popular military in the region, which means it is easier for civilians to ignore the ministry's irrelevance. Over time, it is quite possible that the military will rebuild its image, but the ministry will remain weak. For example, it is very easy to forget that after numerous unsuccessful attempts to rule the country in the 1920s and early 1930s, Chile's military was universally viewed as inept and incompetent, and civilian policy makers did not see any point in utilizing institutions like the Defense Ministry.³ Civilians believed that military intervention was unthinkable and assumed that civilian supremacy was assured, so the long-term effects of institutional neglect were ignored.

We can therefore identify three critical measurements of "effectiveness." Most important is whether the ministry is involved in decision-making. In particular, does the military consider it a relevant contact point, or is it peripheral when civil-military dialogue and negotiation take place? One serious consequence of the latter is increased unpredictability and *ad hoc* arrangements when disagreements arise. Second, do presidents name ministers who are experienced and therefore respected by senior officers? If the minister has no experience in defense-related issues, the military will not bother to consult the minister and will likely also view the nomination as an indication by the president that he or she does not view the ministry as a priority. Third, is it possible for the president to name a civilian as minister? Having an officer as minister does not automatically mean civil-military conflict, but it greatly reduces the civilian government's ability to exert control over dispersion of budget, development of doctrine, implementation of strategic goals, and other issues that take place within the ministry.

DEFENSE MINISTRIES IN LATIN AMERICA

The defense ministries in the region have greatly varying histories. In Mexico, a *Secretaría de Guerra* dates back to 1814 whereas in Brazil the *Ministro da Defesa* was created in 1998. Two countries—Costa Rica and Panama—do not have regular military forces and consequently no Defense Ministries at all.⁴

³ For a discussion of Chile during that period, see Nunn 1976.

⁴ In Costa Rica, Article 12 of the 1949 Constitution outlaws the army (unless the country is attacked) and allows only for the existence of a police force to maintain internal order. The police are organized under the Ministry of

Gradually, policy makers in the region are paying closer attention to the ministry, but in most countries it has been irrelevant for decades. Even the United States government has focused more on these ministries. In 1995, the U.S. hosted the first Defense Ministerial of the Americas, which excluded only Cuba. Three additional meetings have already followed in various Latin American locations, with more being planned. Defense Ministers from the region come together with the official agenda of discussing a shared commitment to democracy, the rule of law, conflict resolution, defense transparency, and mutual cooperation.⁵ The emphasis of the United States on formal structures raises the questions of who precisely is in control of those institutions. The idea of a "pentagonal panacea," referring to the idea that the mere existence of the institution provides stability, may overlook the lack of effectiveness of those institutions.⁶ Precisely how successful have individual ministries been in fulfilling the commitment to democratic rule? That is the central question addressed in this article.

Case selection is intended to highlight differences between those countries "most likely" to have a strong ministry and those that are "least likely" cases, while also providing some measure of geographical representation. A survey of the literature on democratization and the military demonstrates considerable consensus regarding the progress that individual countries have made with regard to civil-military relations.⁷ If a given government has often been cited as being further advanced in asserting democracy and civilian supremacy, then we would expect its Ministry of Defense to be relatively strong and effective. Some countries have had less conflictive civil-military relations than others. The cases of Ecuador and Guatemala stand out as least likely to have attained civilian supremacy, whereas Argentina and Mexico are more commonly cited as "most likely."

This article will argue that even in the most likely cases the ministries have not been effective vehicles for asserting civilian supremacy. Differing combinations of military intransigence, distrust, politicization, and lack of civilian expertise have meant that the ministries are unable to modify or, in some

Public Security, Governance and Police. In Panama, Article 305 of the 1972 Constitution does the same, and the police are organized under the Minister of Government and Justice.

⁵ For the entire report from the first meeting, see <http://www.summit-americas.org/Williamsburg-spanish.htm>

⁶ I am grateful to Fred Nunn, who suggested the term.

⁷ Although a full literature review is beyond the scope of this article, recent edited volumes on Latin American democratization and civil-military relations demonstrate the consensus regarding the progress made in individual countries and sub-regions. E.g., See Agüero and Stark 1998; Pion-Berlin 2001.

cases, even to oversee many military activities. The gap between the government and the armed forces is still considerable, and so civilian supremacy and democracy remain goals (and perhaps commitments) instead of achievements. Instead, even in “most likely” cases we can see signs of institutional decay, which in turn can limit the ability of civilian governments to control the armed forces when conflict arises. The regional history of weak and/or politicized Ministries of Defense is a difficult mold to break.

MOST LIKELY CASES

ARGENTINA

Argentina is often held as one of the Latin American nations that have moved toward greater civilian control of the military since the transition from military to civilian government. The economic mismanagement of the military regime (which took power in 1976), combined with widespread abuses of human rights and the disastrous 1982 war against Great Britain, left the armed forces greatly weakened when they left power in 1983. In 1990, the last of four uprisings by army factions resisting civilian authority and policies collapsed and was not supported by the military as a whole. The Argentine military seemed to be in no position to defy civilian authority.

As a consequence, we would expect that the Ministry of Defense would constitute an effective link between the military and the government. The ministry itself proclaims an extensive mission, covering all aspects of military planning, budgeting, coordination, and even discipline.⁸ As part of a series of laws regarding military organization, President Juan Perón created it in 1949 in an attempt to ensure that the armed forces would have a unified, centralized command (Pion-Berlin 1997: 155). Before long, the military viewed it as unimportant. Perón used it in a personalistic manner, which made the ministry illegitimate in the eyes of many officers and doomed it to decades of irrelevance. During the military regime of 1976-1983, the ministry remained out of the effective chain of command, with individual service chiefs acting autonomously (*ibid.*: 157). As a result, it was a bureaucratic shell that was never central to expressing military preferences or making policy decisions.

After the end of the military regime in 1983, civilian governments sought to put the ministry more in the center of civil-military relations. For example, the 1988 National Defense Law formally placed the Defense Ministry in the chain of command over the individual service chiefs, and the president was free to choose anyone he or she wanted as Minister. But the history of

⁸ For the ministry’s website, go to http://www.mindef.gov.ar/mision_del_ministerio_de_defensa.htm.

ministerial irrelevance made even a legal assertion of influence problematic because the ministry lacked any practical base upon which to establish legitimacy in the eyes of the military. The result is that each branch of the armed forces retains considerable autonomy even with the new law, allowing them to skirt the ministry when making decisions (ibid.: 160). Even into the mid-1990s, while "the armed forces did not formally control the Defense Ministry, they did dominate it" (McSherry 1997: 283).

Given that lack of legal prerogatives, the ministry is not central to decision-making and the military is accustomed to bypassing it. In 2000, when an official army delegation visited a detained officer as a sign of protest, President Fernando de la Rúa's Defense Minister Ricardo López Murphy could do nothing except offer the comment that he supported the army's actions (McSherry 2000). Several months later, the army ignored a direct order from the ministry intended to halt the sale of army-owned land to a local government in northern Argentina (*La Nación* 2000). The army has not worked well with the ministry and does not suffer any sanction when it ignores it. López Murphy, like virtually all defense ministers in the region, came to the position with no previous experience in defense issues, having instead extensive training in economics. That lack of experience, in turn, represents an obstacle to fostering military confidence in civilians' ability to play an integral role in defense.

Nonetheless, at least in principle, the armed forces accept that civilians should play an integral role in defining and implementing defense policy. Partly in response to the ministry's weakness, in 1999 Argentine civilians and officers produced the *Libro Blanco de la Defensa Nacional*, a document outlining the country's defense. At the very minimum, it demonstrates civilians' commitment to learning more about military affairs and defense issues. Given historical precedent, a critical issue is whether or not the military leadership ultimately acts in tandem with civilians, especially since the ministry is seeking to shed more than a half-century of politicization and antagonism. While some limited progress in civilian-military collaboration is evident in the area of discussing defense policy, it remains to be seen whether the Argentine defense ministry will become a key player in coordinating government-armed forces relations while establishing more civilian control over the armed forces.

MEXICO

Mexico is the only country under examination that has not emerged from a period of military rule in recent decades. Instead, the civilian-led Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has dominated the political system since the late 1920s, avoiding the frequent military intervention that plagued most of the region. Given the lack of overt military political activity, one would reasonably expect that the Defense Ministry (called the Secretariat of National Defense, or SEDENA) would be a civilian-led institution representing an

effective avenue for civilian supremacy. The ministry evolved from the 1814 *Secretaría de Guerra*, finally resolving its name as a result of presidential decree in 1937. By law, the Secretary of Defense must be a three-star general and have Mexican parentage (Camp 1992: 202).⁹ Generally, the most senior army general takes the position. The fact that a civilian cannot be minister and the president's choice must come from a very small pool represents an obstacle to civilian supremacy.

Despite that impediment, for many years the ministry helped to promote the PRI's control over the armed forces. Military ministers did not pose a threat to party dominance, even in crisis situations. Different opinions exist, for example, about the decisions that led to the 1968 massacre of students in Tlatelolco Plaza, but in all of them the Minister of Defense (General Marcelino García Barragán) took initiative in moving troops, acting on the order of the president (*ibid.*: 28). Although the incident had an adverse effect on the military's perception of civilian decision-making, it did not make the ministry any less subordinate to the president.

Into the 1970s, the ministry became more assertive vis-à-vis the president. In 1970, when General Hermengildo Cuenca Díaz became Defense Minister, he was the first of a new generation of officers who had a more formal military education and who had not joined the army in the violent period of 1910-1920 (Williams 1986: 145). By the 1980s, the ministry had been active in engaging the military both in fighting the drug trade and fighting guerrilla movements. The Defense Minister also gained more influence within the cabinet.¹⁰

By the 1990s, the issue of subordination to the president would become increasingly relevant. Over the years, the president had commonly utilized the military to quell internal unrest. Those experiences were beginning to wear on the armed forces. In particular, the inability of civilian political elites to deal effectively with both guerrilla activity in southern Mexico and drug trafficking throughout the country damaged the military's confidence in the government's strategies. Especially after the 1994 uprising in Chiapas, "not only have civilians shown their incompetence in dealing with military and security affairs, but most military affairs have been left in the hands of military men" (Serrano 1995: 448).

⁹ In addition, there is a separate cabinet level post for the navy (the Secretariat of the Navy), which is headed by an admiral. Mexico is the only Latin American country with two ministries dedicated to the military.

¹⁰ For example, the Defense Minister was one of the few cabinet members to have prior knowledge of the 1982 nationalization of the banking system (Williams 1986: 151).

Furthermore, the military and SEDENA's roles have expanded as officers become more involved in combating drug traffickers and fighting crime in Mexico City (López-Montiel 2000).

Military role expansion has not yet caused friction between the minister and the president, though the PRI's loss in the 2000 presidential election raises questions about how the military leadership will react to a new political landscape. In particular, the armed forces gradually conformed to a one-party system that provided political stability and protection of military interests in return for obedience and limited autonomy. That situation has forced SEDENA to make public declarations of its respect for presidential election results no matter which party wins (Wager 1995: 24).

The military has made every indication that it will respect the elections and the authority of the new president, though within the ranks there may be concern about what changes President Vicente Fox will make (*Excelsior* 2000). Given the fact that the president -- regardless of political affiliation -- has strictly limited options with regard to the choice of minister, the military-dominated SEDENA will likely play a large role in determining the degree to which non-PRI presidents will continue to assert civilian supremacy through defense institutions.

LEAST LIKELY CASES

ECUADOR

Ecuador fits squarely into the "least likely" category. In the late 1990s and into 2000, the armed forces acted as political arbiters, even forcing out a president. Although the military leadership would immediately hand power over to another civilian, no one doubted that presidents were working under the military's watchful eye and not vice versa.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the institutional autonomy and prerogatives of the Ecuadorian armed forces expanded significantly. In the 1948-1966 period, the defense minister was generally a civilian (Fitch 1977: 23). However, during the 1972-1979 period of military rule, legislation was approved to reserve the position of Defense Minister for the highest-ranking military officer (Isaacs 1993: 120). The new civilian president in 1979 "agreed to guarantee the armed forces the institutional autonomy that civilian leaders had repeatedly denied and that the military now viewed as a precondition for their withdrawal" (*ibid.*: 123). Officers widely consider the military government a success, which further limits the authority of civilians. In one extensive study conducted in the 1990s, over 80 percent of officers interviewed believed that military governments have been better than civilian governments (Fitch 1998: 75). Those views make clear that the defense ministry would not become a channel for the assertion of civilian authority over the armed forces. On the

contrary, strong beliefs about civilian incompetence ensured a ministry largely devoid of significant civilian input.

Civilian presidents after 1979 were so weak and erratic that not only did they not establish civilian supremacy, but rather they actually helped legitimize the military's political influence in the eyes of the public as well as much of the civilian political leadership (*ibid.*, 152). The military became an arbiter of national politics, even meeting in 1988 to decide whether to stage a coup if populist Abdalá Bucaram won the presidency (*ibid.*: 151). With that level of political involvement, the ministry simply could not become a vehicle for civilian supremacy.

The president's authority over the military gradually diminished in the 1980s and 1990s, and this was accompanied by a rise in the influence and autonomy of the armed forces generally and the defense ministry more specifically. Civilian presidents were careful not to encroach on military prerogatives, which included the ministry. In some cases, the ministry was a vehicle through which the armed forces could issue ultimatums and/or make demands.

Most prominently, in January 2000, President Jamil Mahuad was overthrown in a military coup. One of the precipitating events was the president's refusal to listen to his defense minister's (Army General José Gallardo) insistence that he meet with high-ranking officers to hear the concerns of the armed forces (*Hoy Digital* 2000a). That minister subsequently resigned and Army General Carlos Mendoza (who at the time was also the head of the Armed Forces—"Jefe de Comando Conjunto") was appointed to the position. Soon afterward, President Mahuad requested that military force be used to disperse indigenous protestors who were openly questioning the president's authority. The military leadership, however, was unwilling to risk being unresponsive to the public. The defense minister refused to issue the order, and the president was ousted the next day (*Hoy Digital* 2000b). At first, a civil-military "Revolutionary Junta" took power, and it included a leader of the indigenous rights movement; however, in a rapid chain of events, General Mendoza joined the junta, dissolved it, handed power to the civilian Vice President, and then resigned.

The Defense Ministry in Ecuador is therefore not only headed by an officer, but when they disagree the officers in charge have also reserved the right to ignore presidential orders and even to direct a coup. Furthermore, the military will even oust presidents in the age-old tradition of the Latin American military as political arbiter. It has become highly politicized and largely outside civilian control. As such, the ministry has actually been an impediment to democratization.

GUATEMALA

In 1996, Guatemala emerged from a long and very violent period of military domination and civil war. In the latter years, the so-called "political-military project" devised by the armed forces "crafted a unique Counterinsurgent Constitutional State in which State violence has been reincarnated as democracy" (Schirmer 1998: 258). Clearly, it constitutes a "least likely" case for civilian supremacy.

By the twentieth century, the ministry had become highly politicized. President Juan Arévalo named Colonel Jacobo Arbenz as Defense Minister in 1944, a post which subsequently launched Arbenz into the presidency in 1951. During the series of military or military-dominated governments that took power in the decades after his overthrow in 1954, the political importance of the ministry varied with the personalities that filled it. During that period, defense ministers periodically became Chief of State, such as Colonel Enrique Peralta in 1963 and General Mejía Victores in 1983. Toward the end of military rule, Defense Minister Héctor Alejandro Gramajo became a central political figure in the transition. The ministry coordinated the so-called "Civil Defense Committees," which pressed civilians into military patrols. In short, the ministry was deeply involved in the civil war.

Gramajo asserts that after a coup attempt in 1988, he made every effort to prevent another from occurring. His strategy in doing so, however, demonstrates the gulf between the ministry and the president. He held discussions with members of the army and gave talks to civilian organizations, but he *never* discussed the issue with members of the government itself. In his words, "I wanted to persuade army officers that there was no chance of the defense minister making an alliance with politicians" (Gramajo 1997: 131). If the minister is not allied with the politicians in power, then the ministry itself is not promoting civilian supremacy.

Article 246 of the 1995 constitution makes the president the "General Commander of the Army" and the president's orders are to be carried out by the Defense Minister. However, the same article further stipulates that the president must choose a military officer (from any branch) with at least the rank of colonel for that role. It is an important position, entailing decisions about all promotions as well as allocation of resources within the military. This makes the position delicate and often highly politicized. In 1999, a proposed constitutional referendum would have allowed a civilian to be minister, but was defeated.¹¹

After the peace accords of 1996, the ministry became a way for the civilian leadership to shake up the higher ranks. In 1997, President Alvarado Arzú

¹¹ The referendum was a complicated and controversial collection of reforms to the constitution. Ultimately, the "No" vote won, accompanied by an 81.45 percent abstention rate. See Jonas 2000, Chapter 8.

removed the pro-peace minister, thus raising the question of whether it was an example of assertion of civilian authority or acceding to demands from hard-line officers (Jonas 2000: 145). When President Alfonso Portillo took office in January 2000, he immediately sought to purge the military through the Defense Ministry. He named army colonel Juan de Dios Estrada as Defense Minister, thus forcing the resignation of all generals (*Prensa Libre* 2000a). Estrada subsequently was promoted to general. Nonetheless, these maneuvers have not increased the ministry's authority over the armed forces. Estrada's speech honoring the Day of the Army the following June was notable for its almost total lack of reference to the ministry, focusing instead on the Guatemalan army's role in defending democracy and "defending the constitutional order when it was assaulted."¹²

Among the first laws President Portillo sent to congress in 2000 for consideration was an effort to allow a civilian to be named defense minister. The project stalled, however, and even the United Nations mission in Guatemala expressed concern that the bill greatly diminished the authority of the defense minister while enhancing the influence of the military leadership (*Prensa Libre* 2000b). For the time being, the legal basis for military domination of the ministry remained intact.

Civilian presidents in Guatemala must therefore overcome the recent history of a highly political ministry that served to pursue the aims of a genocidal regime. Purging unwanted high-ranking officers may serve a short-term purpose, but if repeated over time would likely make the military more suspicious of the ministry, which in turn would lead the military leadership to circumvent it. Given the failure of reform, civilians and officers coexist uneasily and the ministry will not likely be an avenue for establishing civilian supremacy.

CONCLUSION

With these brief surveys, we can immediately identify specific problems with the legitimacy of the Defense Ministry in Latin America. In the two cases where effective ministries would most likely be found, it is troubling that Mexican presidents have no choice but to name an officer to the post of Defense Minister, while in Argentina the civilian minister has virtually no *de facto* authority regardless of the position's legal-constitutional status. Although Argentine policy makers have made notable efforts to increase civil-military interaction, especially around defense issues, in Mexico the military often views civilians as incompetent and unqualified to direct the nation's defense forces. As argued earlier, the current weakness of the Argentine military makes it tempting

¹² "Discurso Oficial, CXXXIX Aniversario, Ejército de Guatemala." <http://www.mindef.mil.gt/Mindef2000/varios/discurso/>

to believe that a strong ministry is simply unnecessary. That assertion, however, ignores the institutional decay that, over the long term, can prove disastrous. Deeper analysis of institutions such as the Defense Ministry may demonstrate that the "most likely" cases are not as strong in terms of civilian supremacy as generally believed.

Meanwhile, the "least likely" cases conform to expectations, with weak ministries where civilian authority is either highly contested or, in the case of Ecuador, simply absent. In Guatemala, the military dictatorship is still a fresh memory and the role of the ministry is not yet clear, but it is not generally propitious for civilian supremacy. The president has used the ministry to "clean house" but constitutional limitations remain.

All four cases have one common (and problematic) characteristic. In none of the countries has the Defense Ministry been a historical contributor to civilian control of the armed forces. During military dictatorships, the position was either reduced to that of administrative backwater or became a platform for military coups and counter-coups. Even before the most recent era of authoritarian rule, it was often subject to cronyism or ignored. As a result, civilians are not only building from scratch, but also trying to erase decades of anti-democratic practice.

Clearly, one serious effect of those years of defense inattention has been a dearth of civilian knowledge of defense matters. Latin American defense ministries cannot be effective until there are sufficient civilian defense experts to fill them. That would also increase routine civil-military interaction, thus increasing the levels of mutual understanding and trust. In all parts of the region, very few civilians have profound knowledge of procurement, resource allocation, weapons systems, regional security, and military culture and history. Without such experts, the armed forces will probably continue to assume that civilian-led defense ministries are not legitimate and necessary institutions.

Many political institutions in Latin America have experienced significant democratization in the postauthoritarian era, but defense ministries in the region clearly have not been part of that success. For the most part, they have developed into vehicles for military political activity. The mold of weak and politicized Defense Ministries is nowhere near broken, and this represents yet another serious obstacle to establishing and strengthening civilian supremacy over the armed forces in the region.

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