

Civilian Expertise and Civilian–Military Relations in Latin America

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Even as the era of military rule in Latin America fades well into the past, empirical and theoretical questions about civilian–military relations remain highly relevant. For the first time in the region’s history, most governments have been working to manage civilian–military relations within a setting of democratic rule. This article is intended to contribute to the debate over the importance of civilian expertise in the relationship between Latin American civilians and the armed forces. Its main argument is that broader *permanent* defense-related civilian positions in government contribute the most to democratic civilian–military relations, whereas *nonpermanent* positions are also important but transitory and do not necessarily foster long-term democratic stability. The policy implication is that governments should focus on expanding the number of permanent civilian positions related to defense in both the executive and legislative branches.

Mientras que la época de regímenes militares en América Latina se desvanece, interrogantes empíricas y teóricas respecto a las relaciones entre civiles y militares se mantienen de manera relevante. Por primera vez en la historia de la región, la mayoría de los gobiernos trabaja por manejar las relaciones entre civiles y militares dentro de un marco de reglamentación democrática. Este artículo tiene la intención de contribuir al debate sobre la importancia de la profesionalización del servicio civil respecto a las fuerzas armadas en Latinoamérica. Su principal argumento es que posiciones más amplias y permanentes para cuadros civiles en posiciones gubernamentales relacionadas con la defensa contribuyen más a la relaciones democráticas civil-militares, mientras que las posiciones no permanentes no necesariamente fomentan una estabilidad democrática a largo plazo. La implicación para la política pública es que los gobiernos deben enfocarse en expandir el número de posiciones permanentes para cuadros civiles en materia de defensa tanto en el ramo ejecutivo como en el legislativo.

Key words: civil-military relations, defense, democratization

Even as the era of military rule in Latin America fades well into the past, empirical and theoretical questions about civilian–military relations remain highly relevant. For the first time in the region’s history, most governments have been working to manage civilian–military relations within a setting of democratic rule.¹ That process has involved normalizing relationships that are difficult at times and determining the proper balance between different military functions.

Nonetheless, democratic civil–military relations and civilian supremacy over the armed forces are not simply a matter of changing the military’s role, although that is a critical aspect. A system of stable, well-established, permanent, formal connections between the military and civilians in the government is an essential part of a democracy, however defined. Such channels generate trust, empower civilian elected governments, facilitate clear enunciation of doctrine and national defense goals, and establish lasting professional links. That in turn can gradually transform military attitudes, which in most countries have been characterized by varying degrees of skepticism of civilian leaders (Fitch, 1998). Across Latin America there is little or no historical model of smooth relations but instead a string of conflicts that at times have been extreme, leading to political crises or even to coups d’état.

Given the lack of previous experience with democratic relations, there is no consensus on precisely how these formal channels should function and more specifically on what the role of civilians realistically can or should be. Understanding the specific roles of civilians is central to identifying and encouraging the creation and maintenance of lasting linkages but receives much less attention in the literature on Latin American civilian–military relations. This article is intended to contribute to the debate over the importance of civilian expertise in the relationship between Latin American civilians and the armed forces. Its main argument is that broader *permanent* defense-related civilian positions in government contribute the most to democratic civilian–military relations, whereas *non-permanent* positions are also important but transitory and do not necessarily foster long-term democratic stability. The policy implication is that governments should focus on expanding the number of permanent civilian positions related to defense in both the executive and legislative branches.

Not all Latin American countries face the same level of civil–military discord, and it has waxed and waned over time, yet in every country—with the exception of those that do not have militaries—civilian leaders must find ways to lead their military forces even when conflict is not present. In Chile during the middle of the 20th century, elected leaders widely assumed that civil–military problems were a thing of the past and did not pursue any effective means of understanding and leading the armed forces. That later proved problematic as the country became increasingly polarized.² This article argues that there are lessons applicable to every country and that those lessons will pay political dividends in the future.

The Historical Dilemma of Civilian Expertise

Civil–military relations center on the interaction between a professional military and the state. Along the lines of Samuel Huntington (1957), I define a “civilian” as a policy maker within the state who is involved with the armed forces in some manner but is not an active-duty member of the military. This can include retired military officers, whose positions change once they are no longer part of the military hierarchy.

Historically, civilians in Latin America have paid little attention to defense or other military-related questions outside the narrow scope of political control of the armed forces. Instead, governments ceded direction to military leaders or

even partially to the United States, which beginning in the early Cold War period, offered a wide variety of training and acquisition opportunities, such as the International Military Education and Training program (IMET).³ Rarely have civilians in Latin America made an effort to delineate clear military roles or to help define doctrine. For decades after independence, the military was the most organized state institution, certainly more so than any branch of government, and therefore established a precedent of political influence and autonomy. Civilian leaders tended to view the military in strategic terms as an institution that supported or threatened the regime. This was true in Chile, which had only periodic civil–military conflict, as much as in Bolivia, where that conflict was more or less constant. If not a threat, then the military was largely left to its own devices. Across the region, detailed decisions about doctrine were made with minimal civilian participation or even interest. Legislatures spent little time scrutinizing military budgets and often had few constitutional–legal rights to do so in any case. That was the case in small and impoverished countries such as Honduras as much as in large, relatively well-developed countries such as Argentina.

That type of interaction led to a deeply entrenched perception within Latin American armed forces that civilians were not competent to lead them. This attitude had strong roots in the 19th century, and by the Cold War era, it was pervasive. From the military’s perspective, one of its central roles was to protect the nation from the machinations of self-serving politicians. In turn, civilians responded with mistrust and even less professional interest (Loveman & Davies, 1997). Over time, this had disastrous consequences for democracy in many countries. The military leadership felt that civilians were unable to lead, and civilians had little understanding of defense policy or military doctrine more broadly. When political crises erupted in the 1960s and 1970s in most Latin American countries, mutual trust was nonexistent, and in many instances democracies fell to military intervention. Analyses of these democratic breakdowns tend to examine structural conditions, the role of presidentialism, antidemocratic military doctrine, and the constitutional autonomy of the military, but there was also a fundamental knowledge gap between professional militaries and politicians. That type of gap did not disappear even after elected governments returned.

Since the end of the Cold War, which coincided with the culmination of widespread transitions from military to democratic governments in the region, there has been increased scholarly attention to the civilian side of civilian–military relations. Until recently, military-centric analyses that viewed civilians largely in terms of whether they were in “control” of the armed forces largely dominated the literature.⁴ This is understandable, because many governments were making nascent efforts to reduce the prerogatives of militaries that in some cases had ruled for years. The first priority was therefore to expand civilian authority. Questions revolved around constitutional–legal military prerogatives, military doctrine and self-perception, legacies from the era of authoritarian rule, and resistance to human rights trials.

In this context, Latin Americanists looked to classic works by Samuel Huntington (1957), Morris Janowitz (1964), and others for analysis of the tensions between civilian governments and professional militaries.⁵ From a theoretical standpoint, civilians needed to undertake certain strategies—which remained a

matter of scholarly dispute—to direct the military establishment and avoid the development of praetorian tendencies, whereby military leaders entered politics through undemocratic means on behalf of that establishment. The proposed strategies differed, but all were based on the essential difference between “civilian” and “military.”

The issue of praetorianism has by no means disappeared and deserves continued attention. It is clear that democratic civil–military relations—and democracy itself—remain fragile in a number of countries. Honduras suffered a military overthrow and exile of a president in 2009. In 2010, Ecuador—which already suffered a coup in 2000—experienced another serious crisis, although the military sided with the government in the face of police protests that included the tear-gassing of President Rafael Correa. Meanwhile, Paraguayan President Julio Lugo has faced near constant rumors of a coup and has replaced military commanders multiple times as a result. Current presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Ollanta Humala of Peru first became politically prominent as army officers trying (unsuccessfully) to overthrow a government.

Unfortunately, many civilians and members of the armed forces alike continue to see the military as a moderating power that periodically steps in when political factions are unable to mediate their differences.⁶ Further, the doctrinal orientation of most Latin American militaries remains focused on *la Patria*, or the idea of nationhood.⁷ In times of crisis, this idea can create serious conflict if military leaders believe a government, even a democratically elected one, has done something to threaten the nation’s security (Loveman, 1999). Fortunately, many constitutions have been amended to erode the legal right of military intervention, but the armed forces’ belief in civilian incompetence is harder to erase.

Civilian Challenges in the Democratic Era

More than ever, polyarchy is becoming a norm in Latin America, and the institutional structure of civilian–military relations is an integral part of the ongoing process of democratization. Military intervention is an exception rather than a rule. Civilian leaders must lead, because democracy is not simply a matter of civilians “taming” the armed forces, thereby achieving some type of end point. Relatively little has been written that differentiates between civilians rather than viewing the category as a generic bloc. There are many different components of democratically elected governments that have different tasks and serve as civil–military conduits.

Differentiating between civilians becomes important in the context of a central question increasingly examined in the recent literature about how much civilians should be knowledgeable about defense. The civilian–military gap in the United States has already received considerable (and controversial) scholarly attention and generated debate on how civilians and military leadership should interact (e.g., Feaver & Kohn, 2001), but this discussion is much less developed in the study of Latin America, where most attention remains focused on points of contention. Although the lack of civilian expertise may be mentioned in passing, it is rarely examined in any depth.

David Pion-Berlin (1997) in particular has argued that, although civilian expertise is desirable, it is not necessary for democracy. As long as civilians continue to

have ultimate control over the political arena, delegating defense knowledge to the military need not represent a threat. Democratic institutions can limit military influence, even when the government is unpopular and the armed forces are discontented. As long as democracy endures, civilian–military relations can remain stable even in the absence of civilians knowledgeable about military matters. He is also pessimistic about civilians ever learning more about defense because they have no rational reason for doing so. There is no electoral payoff and no political career payoff.

By contrast, Thomas Bruneau (2005) emphasizes the need for civilians to have at least certain types of knowledge. In particular, civilians need to know enough to ensure that the armed forces are doing their jobs correctly. This is central to accountability, because a lack of knowledge prevents civilian policy-makers from understanding whether certain strategic goals are being achieved or whether defense policy should be modified. The military leadership understands defense very well, whereas civilians must understand many different areas, which creates a type of balancing act. Civilians must therefore build institutions that serve to foster and perpetuate expertise.

Other studies focus specifically on the Ministry of Defense, particularly in terms of whether the minister is (or is even allowed to be) a civilian (Sotomayor, 2006; Weeks, 2003). Because the Ministry of Defense is the main link between the commander-in-chief and the president, a civilian chosen by the president should ideally head it. If an active duty officer holds the position, the chain of command is distorted because that officer by definition will hold an inferior rank to that of the commander-in-chief. Ministries of Defense in Latin America are also important institutions for the dissemination of knowledge between civilians and military officers (Pacheco, 2010). It is the one institution where, by definition, civilians and officers are interacting daily, even in the same physical location, but precisely who should occupy posts below the rank of minister remains largely unexplored.

These views advance our understanding of political–military relations by bringing civilians front and center analytically, but they still lack a more-nuanced consideration of precisely how we conceptualize civilians. It is apparent that most analyses use the general word “civilian” without determining who such an individual is, or which civilians are more important than others. Civilian is sometimes also used interchangeably with “politician,” but as this article argues, politicians are not the political actors in the civilian world who most need to understand defense. Civilians are simply individuals who are not active-duty members of the armed forces (although they may be retired), and in the context of political–military relations, the concept refers to those serving in some government capacity.

Permanent Versus Nonpermanent Civilian Positions

Particularly in the Latin American case, it is analytically useful to disaggregate “civilian” into two broad categories of defense-related positions that are *nonpermanent* and *permanent*. This disaggregation defines more clearly which civilians need expertise more and which need it less. Civilians in *nonpermanent* positions are elected or appointed for political reasons, and their job status can change rapidly according to political whimsy. This category includes the president,

members of the legislature, and all political appointees who serve at the pleasure of the executive, including the Minister of Defense. These individuals often shift over a short period of time between government and nongovernment positions. As Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2007) have argued, politicians in Latin America have little incentive to gain much knowledge about defense because they are focused on elections and because civilians are more concerned with regime defense (avoiding coups) than leading defense policy in a context of low levels of interstate conflict. Even important advances of civilian supremacy over the armed forces—such as having a civilian rather than military Minister of Defense—do not necessarily translate into votes.

Permanent refers to individuals in government positions whose careers are dedicated to defense in one form or another. The position they hold is intended to exist indefinitely. They are part of the bureaucracy. “Permanent” captures the notion that elections will not affect their employment status. Their job is to provide background, briefs, and information to elected officials, all the while retaining close contact with their military counterparts. Their incentive is to build a career so that their knowledge is sought after and remunerated over the course of a lifetime. Examples include the civilian staff of a Ministry of Defense, intelligence agency, or defense commission within the legislature. Permanent staff members have more time to spend becoming educated in defense. Indeed, their careers are dedicated to it. They will learn more about civil–military relations by working in Ministries of Defense but also through educational institutions and defense-oriented think tanks, at home and abroad (Bruneau & Goetze, 2006). Politicians are far less likely to do so. There are exceptions, such as former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, who studied defense in Chile and in the United States, but such examples are not common.

The incentive structures for permanent and nonpermanent civilian positions are different. The argument is that elected or appointed civilians do not need to be experts on defense, but they need to be advised by people who are. This will facilitate short-term defense policy and long-term regime protection. As Pion-Berlin (2009, p. 564) notes, “Institutions have a tendency to persist, and if they can be arranged to maximize civilian leadership, authority, input, and oversight, then control can be achieved for the long haul.” In many countries, the level of trust between civilians and the armed forces is limited, and strong institutions provide a context for establishing and maintaining formal channels of communication and sharing of knowledge. It may seem odd to advocate for more bureaucrats, particularly in countries that may suffer from entrenched corruption and clientelism, because an increase in the number of civil servants can exacerbate those attributes, but Latin American defense bureaucracies are small and often understaffed.

Ideally, these positions will be spread across state institutions. Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2007) focus on the number of defense civilian employees, but absolute numbers tell us less about distribution. In any given country, the total number of people who have defense knowledge does not need to be high, and in Latin America it likely will never be, but these people should be spread around the executive and legislative branches. If the legislative staffs are underfunded in comparison with the executive branch, that will simply exacerbate the traditional problem of presidential dominance over policy making. This problem has been

examined in the literature on the U.S. Congress. As Krehbiel (1991, p. 5) argues in an influential work, "Only by extricating themselves from dependence upon information from the executive branch were legislative bodies able to play distinctive and effective deliberative roles within separation-of-power system."

What this means is that attention should not focus on legislators per se, but rather on the staff that inform them. In some cases, such as the Argentine and Brazilian federal systems, there is incredibly high turnover in the legislature because the real power lies in the executive and in regional political elites, who bargain constantly. In other cases, such as Mexico, consecutive congressional terms are prohibited, so legislators are never in office long enough to gather any additional knowledge. The legislature is therefore seen primarily as a springboard to other, more influential positions. Members likely know little about complex defense issues and in their short time in office will focus on other matters. A knowledgeable staff in defense-related committees ameliorates that problem.

Even with low turnover, few legislators will have the time to learn defense in any detail. With limited budgets for their own offices, elected officials will hire individuals with knowledge about domestic issues that can provide public results that translate into votes. In countries where civilian–military relations have been relatively smooth for years, there is even less incentive to spend the necessary time on a topic that for many may seem obscure or not pressing.

Finally, given Latin American presidentialism, where the executive tends to hold the lion's share of political power, including over civilian–military relations, legislators have less incentive to spend time learning military issues. For example, even when civilians are able to cut military budgets, often they do not influence precisely how the funds are spent and do not offer much of a formal blueprint in that regard (Giraldo, 2006). Individual members of the legislature must become interested in defense on their own accord, and perhaps even against the wishes of their party's leadership, which is focused on other matters deemed more salient.

An increase in the number of permanent civilian positions does not suddenly increase legislative power, but it does lay the groundwork for assertion of such power in the future, at least to the point of demanding more accountability from the executive branch. There is a certain chicken-and-egg dynamic at work. Legislatures are not interested in defense because they cannot affect it enough, but they will never affect it significantly without demonstrating a certain level of mastery of such topics. That is what a small staff increase has the potential to achieve. Once key legislative committees can interact with the executive branch on defense with some mastery, they will be in a position to demand more voice.

A major dilemma in expanding permanent civilian staff is that politicians must agree to increase budgets in a way that provides sufficient funds for career positions. If they make decisions based primarily on reelection, we might expect no such positions ever to appear because they are essentially invisible to the voting public. What is required is an independent judgment by the executive that reform is beneficial even if it entails little or no political gain.

There is already some movement in the region in this direction. In 2010, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva announced plans to reorganize the defense ministry and add permanent civilian positions to it. In Chile, a similar

strategy was completed in 2010 under President Michelle Bachelet (herself a former Defense Minister) to rationalize the defense ministry and creation of a Joint Chiefs of Staff. There is reason to believe that modest increases are politically feasible, but more movement in this direction is needed.

There are also nascent efforts to bring high-level officers and relevant civilians together to produce defense white papers (generally called “books of national defense”). In practice, these documents have tended to be vague, but are perhaps more important as symbols of positive civilian–military interaction. Such documents have been produced in many countries around the region.⁸ They can serve as a springboard toward more substantive reform. At the very least, their proliferation signals recognition on the part of civilian political leaders that greater civilian–military interaction is intrinsically beneficial and that it must include greater civilian expertise.

At the presidential level, there has to be recognition that a small investment yields high payoffs. Even in a context of bureaucratic battles over resources (and perhaps meager resources to begin with) a small increase in permanent civilian positions will improve mutual civilian–military trust. In other words, politicians do not need to divert significant resources from other higher-profile projects that appeal more to voters by bringing them immediate benefits. They can appeal to their constituents while simultaneously setting a firmer foundation for democratic rule.

Conclusion

A scholarly and policy focus on permanent versus nonpermanent civilian positions can provide greater insight into the long-term stability of civilian–military relations in Latin America. There is a large and valuable literature on exerting civilian supremacy over the armed forces, but a finer-grained analysis requires closer attention to how civilians routinely interact with their military counterparts. The argument here is that “civilians” should not be lumped into one generic category. Those who spend their careers studying defense and working with military officers can have a quiet but significant influence on positive civilian–military relations.

In addition, the growth of permanent civilian staff is slow and uneven. Because defense is rarely a high priority in Latin America, even important decisions are postponed or shelved if other, more-immediate matters require attention. Even more importantly, civilian expertise cannot resolve long-standing weak political institutions or social polarization. Nonetheless, stronger institutional connections can at least serve as conduits during crises. In policy terms, a focus on permanent civilian positions should be viewed as a long-term project rather than a short-term fix. Over the long term, they can improve the trust and connection between the government and the military, which will change military attitudes toward civilian rule and will pay dividends when conflict almost inevitably arises in the future.

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Notes

¹Exceptions include countries such as Costa Rica and Panama, which have no formal armed forces, and Cuba. At the least, all Latin American countries except Cuba can be labeled as “polyarchies,” where real, even if imperfect, political competition occurs. With regard specifically to the armed forces, it means that, “the military is sufficiently depoliticized to permit civilian rule” (Dahl, 1971, p. 50). There are many different definitions of democracy, and even variants of definitions, but for this analysis, the critical point is that democratically elected civilians rule, and not the military.

²On this point, see Nunn (1976).

³For an excellent historical overview, including the extensive role of the United States, see Loveman (1999). Lieuwen (1965) was already noting the same decades ago.

⁴There are countless examples. A representative survey is Croissant, Kuehn, Chambers, & Wolf (2010).

⁵Huntington in particular is cited in virtually every book on civil–military relations. According to Google Scholar, *The Soldier and the State* is cited 2,607 times. Janowitz is cited 1,639 times.

⁶The classic work on “moderating powers” is Stepan (1971). The 2009 coup in Honduras is an excellent recent example.

⁷Governments with ideological differences as far apart as Venezuela (Article 328) and Colombia (Article 217) have wording to that effect in their constitutions.

⁸For a list, see the Website of the Organization of American States <http://www.oas.org/csh/spanish/doclibrdef.asp#libros>

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