



"Cooperation in Natural Disaster Relief as the best Confidence Builder in Hemispheric Defence Relations"

Dr. Jordi Díez
(University of Guelph)

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Summary

Given the disparities that exist across the hemisphere in national security priorities and the long-standing distrust that seems to prevail among large sectors of Latin American societies in transnational military cooperation, especially with the United States, as well as the progress that has been made in establishing democratic civil-military relations, any successful attempt at increasing cooperation among American countries will largely depend upon the level of confidence that is built behind such enterprise. Although possibly surprising to some, the Latin American armed forces are systematically ranked as the most trusted institution by Latin Americans in opinion polling. The most important factor behind this trust is the very important role they play in providing basic services to marginalized populations and in lending assistance during natural disasters. As a result, if the aim is to increase collaboration and cooperation among the hemisphere's militaries, one of the most important ways in which it can be achieved is through an increase in cooperation in natural disaster relief efforts. Canada is well positioned to take part in this effort and would benefit significantly from the experience the Latin American armed forces have in these types of operations.

The annual Conference of the Defence Ministers of the Americas constitutes an ideal forum through which the countries of the region can engage in a dialogue to establish priorities on issues relating to hemispheric defence and national security as well as to determine the manner in which these priorities can be addressed. Since the first of these meetings was held in 1995, the security landscape has changed substantially on three main fronts. First, the region's largest, and most powerful player, the US, has set as its main national priority its so-called 'war on terrorism' since the terrorist attacks of 2001. Second, the illegal transnational trafficking of narcotics was entrenched itself in the region, partly facilitated by the easier flow of goods and services across borders, and it now includes a larger number of countries as the various drug cartels have expanded their trading routes. Third, despite disagreement regarding the reasons behind the increase in freakish weather events over the last decade, the number of national disasters has increased throughout the region. One element that these three changes have in common is their transnational dimension. It has therefore become more than clear that any attempt at dealing with these challenges must be conducted through an increase in cooperation and collaboration, as they are predominantly intermestic in nature.

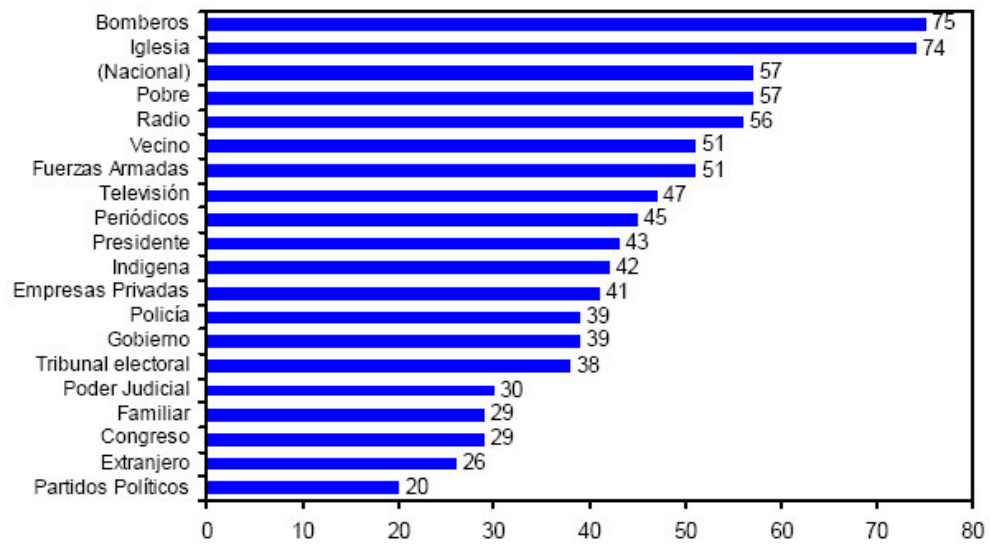
However, the history of military hemispheric cooperation has been fraught with challenges, challenges that have resulted in a great deal of distrust among large sectors of Latin American societies. The post-war golden period of military cooperation was replaced in the 1960s and 1970s by a turbulent one as the United States consistently backed the region's militaries in the suppression, and elimination, of dissenters as the perceived communist threat deepened. This development has had a really significant impact on the manner in which Latin Americans perceive and support military cooperation, especially with the US. This reality has been further complicated by the US decision to launch the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which most Latin Americans did not support) as well as the manner in which the current administration has dealt with issues relating to torture. Attempts at increasing defence cooperation face consequently the challenge of overcoming such suspicions and distrust among Latin Americans, whose confidence in hemispheric defence cooperation is necessary in a democratic context. This is especially the case given that most of the region's countries have not yet achieved democratic civil-military relations and the armed forces have not fully relinquished their role of defence policy formulators (rather than implementers).

The best way in which support for military cooperation can be fostered is through an increased in collaboration in natural disaster relief operations. I make this argument because, even though it may surprise some, Latin American militaries have been able – after having lost a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of many given the atrocities they committed during the last period of military rule – to re-gain the respect, confidence and trust of the majority of Latin America primarily through the role they have played in assisting populations during natural disasters since democracy has been restored (as the Graph below shows, the armed forces are the most trusted of any other public institution in 17 Latin American countries, after fire departments). Because they are the only institutions that possess the capacity to deal with natural disasters, Latin American governments tend to rely on them to provide such help. The armed forces are therefore the public institution upon which large sectors of society depend for survival in times of crisis. I would argue that it is in this area that efforts should be made in increasing defence cooperation, in an institutionalized and democratic manner, among the hemisphere's armed forces since it is likely to receive support from larger sectors of societies. Further cooperation in other areas can be pursued once it is seen as being collectively beneficial, thereby dissipating suspicions among the population.

Such cooperation can start with the launch of a series of meetings that would bring military personnel from the various countries to share experiences, expertise and information on how they have dealt with their own disasters. In the case of Canada, it would be very productive if it actively attempted to learn from the Latin American militaries, which have extensive experience in relief operations. This would help in ensuring that cooperation is seen as being collectively beneficial and in the establishment of communication capacity. Such first step could be followed by the establishment of training programmes that would allow units for various countries to train in these kinds of operations. Finally, the establishment of Training Centres should be pursued. These centres could be created within some of the already existing peace-keeping ones there exist. Canada is very well positioned to launch such initiative and propose that these centre be created at its Pearson Peace Keeping Centre in Nova Scotia and Peace Support Training Centre in Kingston.

Graph 1

Level of Trust in Actors and Institutions in Latin America, 2007



Source: Latinobarómetro 2007 Report (<http://www.latinobarometro.org/>), page 92.