

U.S. Internal Politics and Regional Security Policy¹

By Adam Abelson²

The end of the Cold War forced the U.S. to reevaluate nearly every aspect of its foreign policy, particularly in the area of security. When it comes to regional security policy, that reevaluation continues; the U.S. has not yet managed to clearly define its interests and policy goals in the region. Whereas during the Cold War the primary goal of U.S. regional security policy was to prevent the encroachment of Communism, since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has not been a single national interest to trump or define regional policy. This new environment has created an opening for various policymaking actors in the U.S. government to seek to define the debate on U.S. regional interests.

It is important for policymakers in Latin America to understand the role of internal inter-agency politics in defining U.S. foreign policy in the region. From the perspective of Latin America, U.S. security policy can often seem misguided, haphazard and, frankly, mysterious. Indeed, U.S. policy in the region has often been ineffectual at promoting U.S. interests and has often been severely detrimental to the interests of the countries in the region. In the post Cold-War era, it is tempting to throw up one's hands in confusion at the inconsistency of U.S. policy.

However, the explanation for that

inconsistency largely lies in the complex internal power struggles among U.S. government agencies. This bulletin examines the process by which the U.S. has defined its regional security interests in the post-Cold War era, and how that process has played out in terms of U.S. military and economic aid to the region.

U.S. INTERESTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

While overall U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean remains without a center of gravity, it is clear that security has largely subsided as a defining U.S. interest in Latin America. In its stead have emerged efforts to expand free trade and combat narcotics trafficking. However, while true security threats no longer define U.S. regional policy, an increasing number of other policy goals are being defined in terms of security. These seemingly contradictory trends, rather than signaling a policy shift, are a reflection of evolving civil-military relations in the U.S. as a result of the so-called "war on terror."

U.S. government agencies have sought to define U.S. interests in Latin America according to each of their unique perspectives (Table 1).

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Table 1
Agency Priorities

National Security Strategy 2006: U.S. priorities	State Department: Regional Objectives	Southern Command of the Department of Defense: Strategic Mission Requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bolstering security. ● Strengthening democratic institutions. ● Promoting prosperity. ● Investing in people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic partners that are democratic, stable, and prosperous. ● Friendly neighbors that help secure our region against terrorism and illegal drugs. ● Nations that work together in the world to advance shared political and economic values. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An improved ability to detect and support interdiction of illegal trafficking into the United States. ● Continued detainee operations at Guantánamo. ● Continued ability to provide partner nation Security Forces with equipment and training. ● Improved interoperability between our Armed Forces and those of our partner nations. ● Improved operational reach to rapidly respond to crises in the region.

Sources: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>, <http://www.state.gov/p/wha>, Posture Statement of General Bantz J. Craddock, United States Army, Commander, United States Southern Command, before the 109th Congress House Armed Services Committee, March 9, 2005. Available at <http://armedservices.house.gov/testimony/109thcongress/FY06%20Budget%20Misc/Southcom3-9-05.pdf>.

The determination of which of these policy goals ultimately defines the U.S. agenda, however, is determined by the interaction of three concerns: national economic wellbeing, national security, and domestic politics (Schoultz 2004: 258). The three concerns often compete for attention and resources. But today in Latin America the first and last—economic wellbeing and domestic politics—have largely converged, leading the U.S. to aim to expand free trade. At the same time, threats to U.S. national security in the hemisphere have largely disappeared. However, despite the fact that Latin America presents few security threats to the U.S., a growing menagerie of U.S. policies toward the region are being defined in terms of security. Since U.S. regional policy is fueled by the dynamics of U.S. internal politics, in recent years, those dynamics have been shaped in large part by the “wars” on drugs and terror.

One of the most evident manifestations of these dynamics has been military and economic assistance to Latin America.

THE “WARS” ON DRUGS AND TERROR

U.S. regional security policy continues to be defined by the so-called “war on drugs.” Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 and particularly since the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003, the “war on terror” has converged with the “war on drugs” and reinforced the military element of regional policy, particularly in combating drug trafficking. The “war on drugs” began during the Nixon and Reagan administrations, when the U.S. decided to address the domestic public health crisis associated with illegal drugs by seeking to decrease foreign production to boost prices and thereby decrease domestic consumption (Serrano, 2003). That policy has taken various forms over the past three decades and has culminated in Plan Colombia, the 5-year project that has ballooned to US\$7.5 billion to combat drug production in Colombia (White House, 2003).

The declaration of the “war on terror” placed combating terrorism at the center of U.S. foreign policy and increased the appropriations to elements of both foreign and domestic policy related to antiterrorism. While the U.S. has long sought to prevent terrorism from affecting the U.S., such a policy had not played a major role in regional policy. In fact, when the Department of Defense listed in 2000 what it saw as threats to security in the hemisphere, terrorism came in , after drug trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering, organized crime and illegal immigration.

The refocusing of U.S. national security policy on combating terrorism has had an ironic result in Latin America: while concrete security threats have subsided, U.S. government agencies have sought to define their relevant aspects of the regional policy agenda in terms of security, in order to remain relevant actors in the new national security policy environment (Youngers, 2003; Arrarás and Deheza, 2004). For instance, in 2005 the State Department invoked the word “terrorism” before Congress to justify military aid in sixteen of its Western Hemisphere country narratives (Isacson 2005). Such a shift by the State Department reflects the fact that, with the advent of the “war on terror,” resources and influence within the policymaking establishment have shifted toward the Pentagon.

The Department of Defense has also sought to take advantage of the shifting emphasis in order to seek a greater role in areas previously unrelated to military interests. One way the U.S. military has influenced the debate has been to redefine non-security interests in terms of security. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said at the 2005 US-Central America Ministers Conference, “Yesterday’s convenient division of bureaucratic duties has been deemed today to require some adjustment,” likely partially alluding to the bureaucratic division between the departments of Defense and State. Another salient example is the rhetorical shift from referring to drug suppliers as “narcotraffickers” to referring to them as “narcoterrorists.” As Schoultz points out, “the drug problem has become a convenient funding vehicle, an effort by U.S. officials who deal with military aid to Latin America to remain employed now that the original reason for their employment (the Cold War) has gone” (Schoultz, 2004: 257).

Within the Defense Department, two regional commands are responsible for U.S. security in the region. The Northern Command (NORTHCOM) includes the U.S., Mexico, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is responsible for the rest of the hemisphere, and has played a central role in the pushing for a greater military role in regional policy. SOUTHCOM is relatively autonomous in its policymaking, and manages significantly more resources than the U.S. embassies in the region (Youngers and Rosin, 2005: 20). It is responsible for leading all foreign military cooperation programs, carrying out military assistance programs, choosing military personnel for training programs, organizing joint military exercises and advocating for foreign militaries to purchase U.S. weapons and equipment. Some of those responsibilities are delegated to SOUTHCOM officials in the so-called “Milgroups”—offices in U.S. embassies in the region and sometimes within host-country ministries of defense (Ibid).

One way that SOUTHCOM has used the “wars” on drugs and terror to argue for a greater military role has been the attempt by its leadership to define “radical populism” as a threat to U.S. national security. Gen. James Hill, former Commander of the Southern Command, said in 2004, “This resulting frailty of state control can lead to ungoverned or ill-governed spaces and people, corruption, and clientalism.” SOUTHCOM officials thus argue that the U.S. should help countries in the region project “effective sovereignty” over “ungoverned spaces.” This argument seeks to justify an increased U.S. military presence in the region, which in turn would be the responsibility of SOUTHCOM. Such language is a clear strategy by SOUTHCOM to convince Congress and the Defense Department to increase the command’s budget. Thus far such a strategy seems to be working in SOUTHCOM’s favor. While it the smallest defense command relative to other regions in terms of funding and active troops, it plays an increasingly significant role in the formation of regional security policy. SOUTHCOM includes more personnel working on issues related to Latin America than at the departments of State, Commerce, Treasury and Agriculture, the Pentagon’s Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense combined (Dana Priest, 2003, quoted in Youngers and Rosin, 2005: 20).

Thus the “war on terror” provides the *vocabulary* with which SOUTHCOM attempts to remain a relevant actor in shaping regional policy in an era when the region presents relatively few security threats to the U.S. One example has been the emphasis maintained by various agencies on the terrorist threat associated with the so-called “tri-border region” of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Despite the fact that the State Department has stated that it has “no credible information” to indicate that terrorist groups operate in the region, various agencies continue to refer to the region as evidence of the potential terrorist threats that the region could pose.

The result of these institutional and political shifts has been the convergence of the “wars” on drugs and terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean. These gradual but sweeping changes have not only altered the distribution of influence at the institutional level. They have also played out concretely in terms of military and economic assistance to the region.

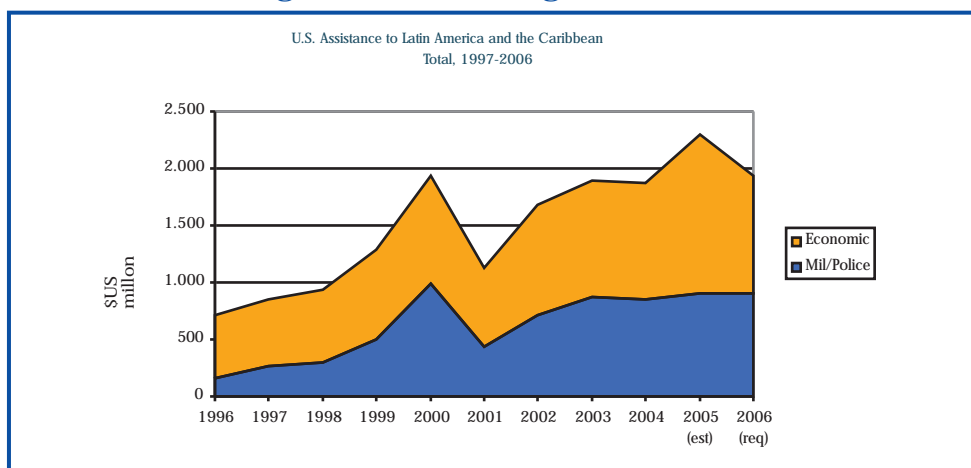
ECONOMIC AND MILITARY ASSISTANCE

The structure of U.S. economic and military assistance today was largely defined by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 which, for the first time, separated military and non-military foreign assistance. It also placed all foreign assistance programs under the supervision of the Department of State. It allowed Congress to place

limits on assistance and required that agencies involved publicly report all aspects of military assistance. During the Cold War, the Military Assistance Program (MAP) provided the most military assistance funds of any program. In 1976 Congress created the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program to separate training activities from the rest of military assistance. In the 1980s the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program replaced MAP. Training remained a fraction of total assistance, with \$2 billion going toward MAP and FMF and \$110 million to IMET from 1980 to 1981 (Youngers and Rosin, 2005: 17-19; U.S. Foreign Assistance Reference Guide; Labaqui, 2006).

During the 1990s, military assistance began increasing faster than economic assistance, and by 2003 the two were equal (Haugaard, Isacson and Olson, 2005: 5). Figure 1 illustrates the overall increase in assistance to the region as well as the proportion of military and economic aid. Total foreign assistance in 2004 (approximately US\$840 million) represents five times the total in 1996 (US\$161 million) (Barry, 2005: 23). More importantly, while military assistance in 1996 represented one-third of the total, in 2006 it represents one-half. The main increase was between 1998 and 2000 when Congress began allocating exponentially larger funds for antinarcotics efforts, particularly for Plan Colombia. If we exclude Colombia, military assistance has remained approximately US\$300 to 350 million since 1997 (Isacson, 2005: 16).

Figure 1: Total Foreign Assistance

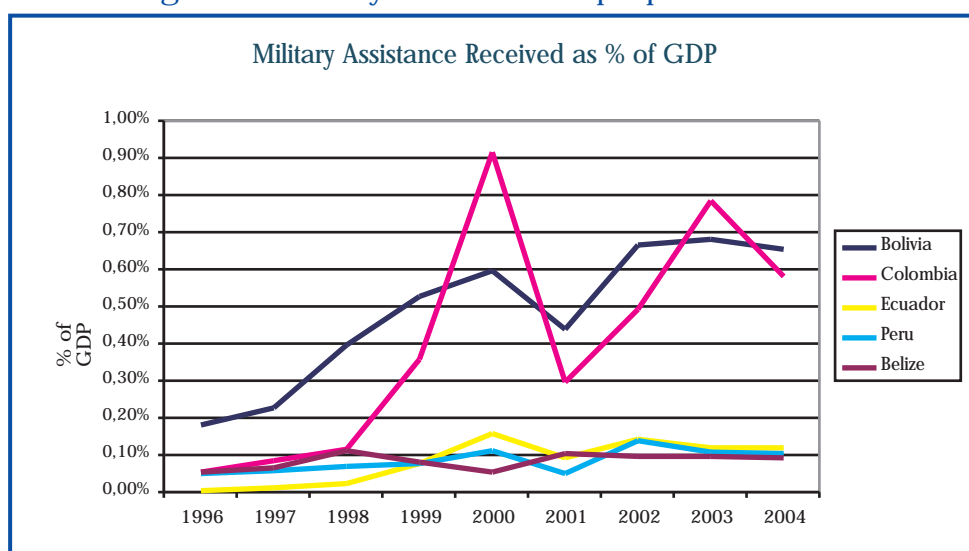


Sources: Center for International Policy, Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Washington Office on Latin America, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service. See <http://ciponline.org/facts/>.

As the ratio of military aid to economic aid has increased, so has the role of military actors in the U.S. government in defining the goals of this aid. As mentioned above, during the early 1990s, the military was cool to the concept of adopting responsibility for non-traditional threats such drug trafficking, international crime, illegal migration and criminal gangs. But by the time it became clear that large amounts of funding would be available to agencies combating such threats, certain agencies realized that to remain relevant –and even perhaps in existence– they would have to redefine their role.

As illustrated in Figure 3 (at end of bulletin), military aid to Colombia dwarfs the aid to the rest of the region, reflecting the high priority of anti-drug efforts. The countries that receive the next-highest levels of assistance are Peru, Mexico and Bolivia. All other countries in the region receive less than around US\$10 million. In 2006, U.S. military assistance to Colombia totaled approximately US\$641 million. Assistance to Bolivia totaled \$46 million. However, if we adjust levels of aid to the GDP of the receiving country, the percentage of GDP represented by U.S. military aid to Bolivia inflates to a level comparable to that of Colombia (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Military Assistance as proportion of GDP



Sources: Center for International Policy, Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Washington Office on Latin America, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service. See <http://ciponline.org/facts/>.

Thus on an aggregate country-level, the emphasis on the war on drugs is evident. When we delve deeper and look at how military and economic assistance is distributed between U.S. government programs, that emphasis is even clearer. By far the largest programs are International Narcotics Control (INC), the antinarcotics program of the Department of State, and Section 1004, the counter-narcotics program of the Department of Defense. In the past few years Foreign Military Financing (FMF) has directed more

significant levels of funding to Latin America. But other programs, particularly IMET, receive relatively negligible levels when compared to counter-narcotics efforts (CIP *et al.* data).

The centrality of the war on drugs is reflected in economic and social assistance as well. The largest source of such aid to Latin America in nearly every year since 2000 has been the International Narcotics Control program, since crop eradication is classified as “economic assistance”.

Today, U.S. policymakers face two self-imposed limitations when it comes to allocating foreign assistance. The first is the American Servicemembers' Protection Act, passed by Congress in 2002, which denies all non-drug assistance to countries that refuse to sign "Article 98 agreements" with the U.S., which provide immunity to U.S. military personnel from prosecution before the International Criminal Court (ICC). Eleven countries in the region that have ratified the treaty that formed the ICC have not signed Article 98 agreements, and thus have seen non-drug aid cut off³. The second limitation results from the U.S. war in Iraq, since the U.S. rewards countries that contributed troops to the war (Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic) by providing higher levels of military assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

The convergence of the "wars" on drugs and terror has distorted the perception of threats and interests in Latin America and the Caribbean, leading policymakers to see patently non-security threats in terms of security. It has also distorted the ways in which the U.S. pursues its regional interests, particularly by militarizing foreign assistance to the region (Barry, 2005: 15). The emphasis on combating terrorism has created incentives for policymakers to go to great lengths to redefine their areas of responsibility in terms of security. At the same time, members of Congress have no incentives to curb anti-drug spending, since doing so would be exploited by their political adversaries.

The shifting civil-military relations in the U.S., namely the relative increased influence of the Department of Defense in defining foreign policy since 9/11, have caused U.S. policy to move backwards on progress that had been made in recent decades to support the "civilianization" of defense. The shift also seems to be encouraging a dilution of the separation between the militaries and police forces in the region (Haugaard, Isacson and Olson, 2005). While it is clear that the phenomena being classified as terrorism would ultimately be better addressed through civilian judicial investigations, for example, such is not the policy communicated implicitly through military assistance; the message communicated through foreign assistance is the following: the U.S. does not truly care about the division between civil and military responsibilities (Freeman, 2005; Mora and Pala, 1999). It is true that various agencies, including SOUTHCOM, have periodically expressed the sentiment that U.S. interests would be better served by pushing for the democratization of the armed forces in the region. But such is not the policy reflected by military assistance.

As this bulletin has illustrated, it is important for policymakers in countries that receive U.S. economic and military assistance to understand the role of internal U.S. political dynamics in determining foreign policy priorities. This is particularly relevant in the Latin America, where U.S. policymakers have sought to interpret regional interests largely through the lens of national security, leading to the militarization of foreign assistance to the region.

³ These twelve countries are: Barbados, Bolivia, Brasil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela. See <http://ciponline.org/facts/art98.htm>.

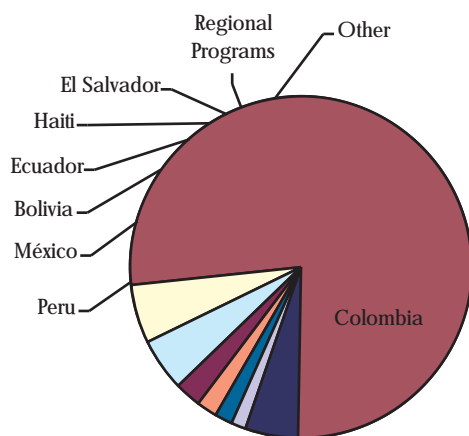
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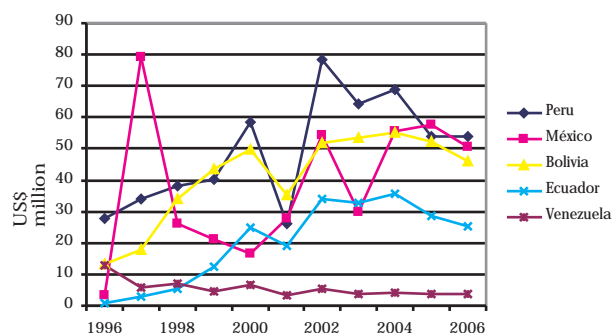
Figure 3: U.S. Military Assistance to Latin America

By Regions and Countries

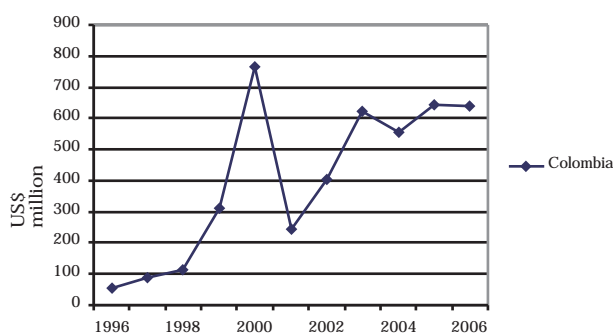
2006 Military Assistance (estimated)



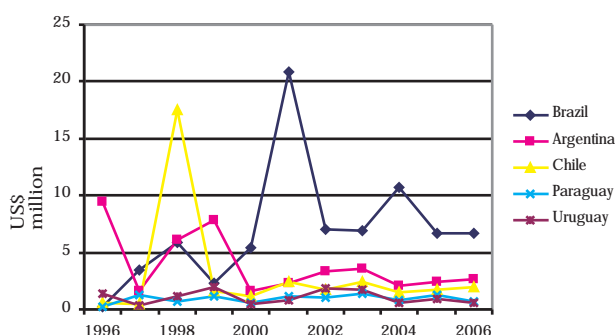
Mexico and Andean countries (minus Colombia)
Total 2006: US\$ 125.5 million



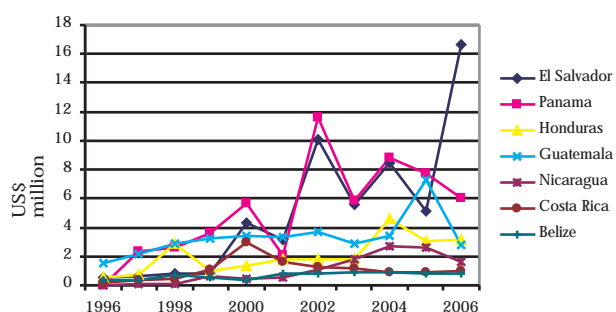
Colombia
Total 2006: US\$ 641 millones



Southern Cone and Brazil
Total 2006: US\$ 12.7 millones



Central America
Total 2006: US\$ 32 million



Sources: Center for International Policy, Latin America Working Group Education Fund, Washington Office on Latin America, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service. See <http://ciponline.org/facts/>.