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Pion-Berlin, David

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## DEMOCRATIZATION, SOCIAL CRISIS AND THE IMPACT OF MILITARY DOMESTIC ROLES IN LATIN AMERICA

DAVID PION-BERLIN

*University of California - Riverside*

HAROLD TRINKUNAS

*Naval Postgraduate School*

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*Civil-military relations theorists have long warned against the participation of armed forces in domestic missions in democratic societies. They argue that such domestic roles bolster the military politically and eventually lead to the overthrow of democratic governments. Yet for two decades now, democratic governments have enlisted the help of their militaries domestically without risk to the regime. Civilian leaders often provide the military with internal roles to compensate for the inability of the state to provide the public and private goods demanded by citizens, particularly in times of internal economic or social crisis. Even in the midst of crisis, democratic governments can withstand military involvement in a range of domestic projects, from food distribution to policing to provision of health services. This article argues that military political intervention that accompanies participation in internal missions is only one possible outcome of moments of severe conflict induced by crisis, and will occur only when weak democracies with low levels of civilian control are victims of such crises. We examine this relationship in a comparison of two Latin American cases: Argentina and Venezuela.*

Civil-military relations theorists have long warned against the participation of armed forces in domestic roles and missions in democratic societies. They argue that such domestic roles militarize society and politicize the armed forces. This suspicion is well represented in recent studies of democratization, and in Latin America, internal roles and missions have often been linked to the development of anti-regime sentiments in the officer corps, particularly in the cases of Chile, Argentina and Peru.

Keeping this in mind, it is curious that twenty five years of democratization in Latin America have not led to an elimination of the use of the armed forces in internal roles and missions. Latin America, a region with a particularly nasty history of military dictatorship and a relatively mature democratization process, would seem to be a prime candidate for the elimination of military domestic roles. In fact, experts writing from the region have long advocated such a goal, and a number of countries have considerably reduced the military's internal profile and imposed greater civilian supervision on their activities. However, even Argentina and Uruguay, who have made the greatest

efforts in this direction, continue to use the military for poverty alleviation and emergency response to natural disasters. In countries such as Honduras, Brazil and Venezuela, the armed forces have a developmental role, and in Bolivia and Colombia, the military has retained a significant mission in maintaining internal order.

If the reduction of military internal roles is such a good idea, then why have Latin American democracies not made greater strides towards this goal? Some would argue that the continuing participation of the armed forces in domestic activities is another example of the enduring resistance of the military to civilian rule in Latin America. In other words, domestic military roles are a sign that democracy is not consolidated and civilian control of the armed forces does not exist. However, there are any number of cases in Latin America, some of them quite distasteful, in which military participation in domestic affairs has been aided, abetted and ordered by civilian leaders. For example, in 1992, President Alberto Fujimori of Peru ordered his armed forces to shut down other branches of government in what became known as an 'auto-golpe.' In Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe has ordered vigorous military action against domestic insurgents and paramilitaries, often at a pace that exceeds that desired by the armed forces. The latest example of a democratically elected president expanding military domestic roles in President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who has introduced military personnel into almost all activities and institutions of government. Military domestic roles are frequently ordered and monitored by civilian leaders, not autonomous choices of the armed forces.

In fact, the causality of the conventional wisdom, which links military autonomy to domestic roles and missions for the armed forces resulting in military intervention, is incorrect and should be reversed. Instead, in Latin America, civilians *give* the military domestic roles to compensate for state weakness and the deterioration of regime legitimacy. In weak states, the military is ordered to counteract the state's inability to provide the public and private goods demanded by citizens in times of internal economic or social crisis. Separately, in countries where democracy is weakly consolidated, civilian leaders may attempt to use the armed forces to protect themselves from domestic adversaries in times of high social conflict, but then discover they are victims of military praetorianism. Logically, it is possible to consider a third instance in which relatively consolidated democracies with subordinate armed forces govern through weak states, leading elected leaders to use the armed forces in a domestic role in times of crisis with little threat to the regime since the specter of military intervention is checked by institutionalized civilian control.

This paper examines the connections between domestic military roles, internal crises and military intervention in democratic societies. It argues that while state weakness induces military immersion in domestic projects, variation in the scope of these roles is some function of the extent of the crisis that afflicts a society, and the degree to which civilians have established control over the

armed forces. In times of severe economic, social and/or political crisis governments will more readily call upon the military to lend a hand than in non-crisis situations. But where governments have lost authority over their armed forces, then the military is free to assign itself domestic missions that may best serve its own interests. The threat of military political intervention occurs only with the intersection of severe crisis and loss of civilian control. We examine these relationships in a comparison of two Latin American cases: Argentina and Venezuela. Both provide a useful range of variation across the independent variables at different points of their historical record, providing both cases of military intervention in democratic politics in moments of crisis as well as cases of non-intervention.

### **RE-EXAMINING THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: DOMESTIC ROLES FOR THE MILITARY IN DEMOCRACIES**

Since the third wave of democratization began in the 1970s, there has been a recurring argument in the literature, which states that military internal roles are detrimental to democracy. In a classic article, "The New Professionalism of Internal Warfare and Military Role Expansion," Alfred Stepan (1973) argued that military preparation for and participation in internal roles was likely to lead to greater autonomy and a propensity to intervene in politics. Brian Loveman (1999) has examined historical records, constitutional documents, organic laws and military publications to argue that Latin American armed forces remain beyond the reach of civilian control and actively pursue a role in domestic politics and development. Even in a relatively successful case of civilian control, such as Argentina during the last decade, J. Patrice McSherry (1997) argues that the Argentine military and intelligence services are not under the control of elected officials. Jorge Zaverucha (1994) similarly argues that the internal role of the Brazilian military precludes civilian control in that country. From this perspective, domestic roles for the armed forces are an indicator of failure to achieve military subordination to elected authorities. Recent books that examine civil-military relations in well established democracies, such as Michael Desch's book, *Civilian Control of the Military* (1999) no longer question the linkage between military internal orientation and poor civil-military relations.

The core of the argument against the use of the armed forces domestically centers around four hypotheses: (1) role expansion will lead to increased military prerogatives and autonomy from civilian oversight; (2) increased participation in internal roles leads to a sense of military entitlement to and doctrinal justification for a role in national decision-making, possibly leading to intervention in politics; (3) military role expansion into internal security is linked to increased violations of human rights, including intelligence activities against civilians, illegal detentions and excessive use of force; (4)

militaries that perform internal security roles are often poorly prepared to conduct external defense missions. If true, any one of these assertions would be reason enough for most democratic governments to rein in the military. However, the linkages between domestic roles for the armed forces and deteriorating civil-military relations were never drawn with sufficient clarity and empirical depth to establish direct causality.

In fact, recent trends raise doubts on the veracity of the four core arguments against internal military use. Role expansion has not led to any greater military autonomy in Brazil and in Argentina where presidents have enlisted the military's help in distributing food and health services (Pion-Berlin and Arceneaux, 2000). 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 (Peceny and Stanley, 2001). President Uribe has been able to both strengthen civilian control over the military and increase military roles in addressing Colombia's internal conflict (Bruneau, 2005). These missions have been undertaken, contained and terminated at the behest of elected officials. Second, since the waning of classic national security doctrines, militaries of the region have not argued that domestic roles should entitle them to a seat at the national decision-making table. Armies that are constitutionally mandated to engage in national development projects certainly make no bones about their enthusiasm for such endeavors. But their enthusiasm stops at the water's edge of politics; they do not translate developmental roles into a right to make policy decisions or leadership choices. Third, it is true that the military's internal security missions sometime lead to human rights transgressions. As unfortunate as these may be, they do not necessarily provoke civil-military crises, or crises of governance, as the Colombian case makes clear. The Colombian armed forces remain subordinate to civilian control, and the war against the narco-guerrilla forces commands popular support. And fourth, militaries and governments alike are mindful of the tradeoffs between preparation for internal and external roles. Fortunately, Latin America remains a peaceful continent, one where militaries seldom face the prospect of armed engagement with foreign forces. Thus, the risks posed to reduced defense preparation are negligible.

In recent decades, numerous scholars have cast aspersions on the core theses. As early as 1988, Alfred Stepan (1988) argued that what was truly important in a civil-military relationship is 'who decides'? Our research on Venezuela confirms that military involvement in domestic operations, even ones traditionally considered most threatening to democracy, such as counterinsurgency, can be conducted without risk to democracy if the operations of the armed forces are supervised and elected officials limit their missions, as occurred during much of the 1960s and 1970s (Trinkunas, 1999). While he is suspicious of potential consequences of internal roles for the armed forces, J. Samuel Fitch (2001) has argued that what is most important is how the military

thinks about these roles in a democracy, noting that in cases such as Ecuador, military ideas regarding these roles have not changed much between authoritarian and democratic regimes. In their article, "Decision-makers or Decision-takers? Military Missions and Civilian Control in Democratic South America," David Pion-Berlin and Craig Arcenau (2000) survey over 20 recent domestic military operations in Latin America during the 1990s. They conclude that operations where duration and scope are restricted by civilian authorities pose little danger to democracy.

The number of armed forces that continue to perform such internal roles in Latin America has remained relatively stable or grown over the last twenty years, yet it is not clear that democracy has been adversely affected. Also, a number of countries are experiencing deteriorating economic conditions or political instability that would have once triggered a military intervention, yet the armed forces continue to steer clear of any political role. The lack of any military reaction to the election of leftist party leader Luis Ignacio da Silva in Brazil is only the most striking recent example, particularly since the Brazilian armed forces have a large domestic role, and they always have been perceived as hostile to the new president's political party. All of this leads us to question whether the military's engagement in domestic missions leads it down a slippery slope toward political intervention.

The military's use in domestic missions is related to state weakness, and state weakness is endemic in Latin America (Evans, 1989). As Centeno (2002: 112) argues, the range of functions for which the state is responsible in Latin America (its scope) has been historically low and remains below that of advanced industrialized states even into the present day. Adherence to neo-liberal structural adjustment programs have made matters worse, reducing the state's ability to provide public goods and rents such as health services and education, subsidies, food assistance and employment. Within these states, governments are making pragmatic decisions to use the armed forces, deploying them in domestic operations where other government institutions lack the capacity to carry out state responsibilities. Governments that face acute and persistent dilemmas cannot be so principled as to erect a firewall of exclusion when it comes to military assistance. They rely on the military where they must and find alternatives to the military where they can. The military in turn can parlay these ventures into a justification for professional sustenance in the form of defense budget shares, salaries, and equipment. Neither armies nor politicians are being guided by grand visions and sweeping ideologies. What guides both is the notion that when push comes to shove, some reliance on military deployment, infrastructure, personnel and technology may be necessary to solve problems when there is no other recourse.

In the long term, democracies are almost always better off if they can build civilian agencies to address social crises. In the short term, cash-strapped governments often lack the resources to invest in these agencies. In the context

of economic crises that inflict widespread hardship on their societies, the temptation to fall back on those organizations that have the capacity to respond rapidly is great. Militaries have the built-in infrastructure (bases, personnel, communications, transport, and logistics) that can be easily repurposed to launch operations to bring services and relief to imperiled communities. This can usually be done within pre-existing budget lines, something fiscally-minded governments, under the gun to adhere to IMF spending limits, greatly appreciate.

The armed forces are not the only such alternative source of assistance handy to civilian leaders, but given the scarcity of state resources *and* the paucity of external conflicts in the region, there would seem to be an incentive to use the armed forces domestically without incurring an external defensive risk. As Mares (2001) points out, Latin America has experienced relatively few interstate wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even militarized interstate disputes tend to be characterized by the employment of modest forces. Others have gone so far as to identify Latin America as a zone of peace in which member states do not regard the use of force to resolve disputes as at all likely (Kacowicz, 1998).

While there has been relative tranquility at the borders, that has not been so inside many Latin American states. When domestic conflicts intensified, push and pull factors drew the armed forces into those disputes, sometimes to the detriment of democracy and civilian rule. In the past, this meant the military sometimes practiced political intervention – up to and including the toppling of civilian regimes – and the commission of widespread human rights abuses. Were it not for Latin America's negative historical experience with military intervention, many would look more kindly towards substantial domestic roles for the armed forces.

### **DEMOCRATIZATION, CRISIS, AND MILITARY INTERVENTION**

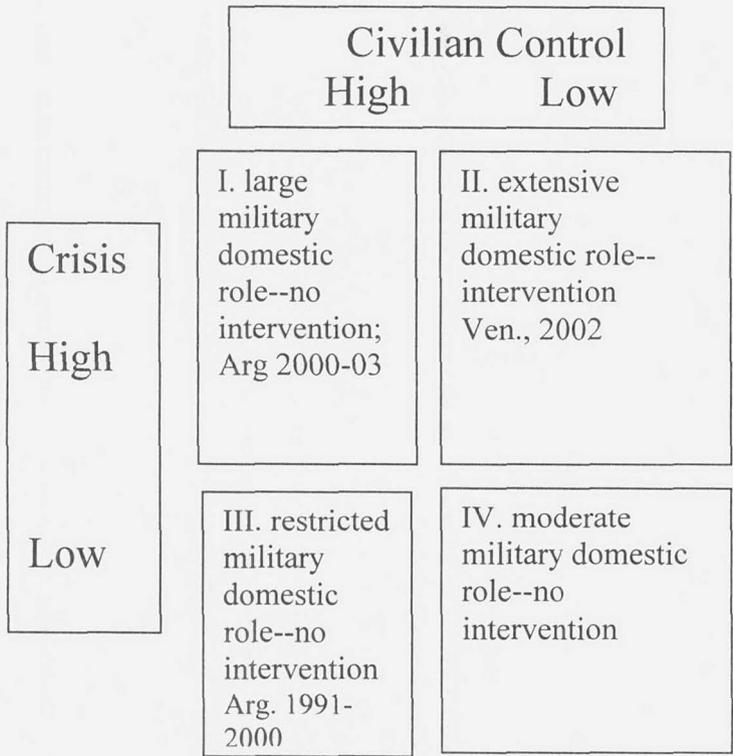
When does the military intervene politically in democratic societies? The third wave of democratization in Latin America has not provided many definitive cases of failed transitions, but it has produced a handful of cases in which democratizing regimes facing severe social and political conflict have been removed or transformed with the assistance of the armed forces, including Peru in 1992 and Ecuador in 2000. Other regimes have survived attempted coups in spite of such levels of conflict (Venezuela 1992) while others have faced such situations with no instances of attempted military intervention (Argentina 2000-2002). This suggests that that democracies experience an uneven ability to resist military intervention in moments of crisis.

Why is that so? This article argues that military political intervention that accompanies participation in internal missions is only one possible outcome of moments of severe conflict induced by economic or political crisis. In fact, it

is likely to occur only when weak democracies with low levels of civilian control are victims of such crises. Intervention does not occur because armies serve domestic roles. Rather it is the consequence of inadequate civilian control in the context of severe crisis that prompts the military to fill the power vacuum left by weakened civilians.

Intervention is unlikely to occur when democracies are strong and civilian control is present, however active the military may be inside the nation's borders. Armies cannot easily parlay domestic roles into positions of political authority--even in the midst of crisis--when democratic institutions are strong and elected officials enjoy some semblance of civilian control. Problem solving abilities aside, the military do recognize the great risks to themselves of overturning an elected government that still commands authority and legitimacy. Internal division and rebellion, deep public animosity and international isolation are some of the costs likely to be incurred. Figure 1 illustrates this argument (see Figure 1).

Our hypothesis is that even in weak states, strengthened democracies with higher levels of civilian control over the armed forces should be able delimit military roles and missions in such a way as to avoid politicizing the ranks and provoking their intervention. In fact, state weakness should make military domestic roles likely, even during non-crisis periods. Such regimes would still probably survive economic and political crises --whether endogenous or provoked by external shocks--without inviting military intervention. In weak states governed by poorly consolidated democracies which lack institutionalized civilian control over the armed forces, we should expect to see military domestic roles as well, but more extensive in nature. However, we argue that military political intrusion occurs only during moments of severe economic and social crisis. A country such as Honduras may experience prolonged periods of military quiescence even though it lacks institutionalized civilian control simply because domestic crises or shocks have not shaken the regime. In such cases, military intervention remains a possibility even after long periods of civilian rule.



**FIGURE 1**

In quadrant I, the military is called upon to provide security, developmental and/or emergency relief services at the behest of elected or authorized civilian political leaders. Regardless of the specific operation, the military remains decision-takers—not makers. Thus, even when dispatched to fulfill politically sensitive functions--be it rationing of food, crowd control, seizure of property, arrest of dissidents or drug traffickers--it acts apolitically, in a non-deliberative and subordinate fashion. It does not follow that once asked to fulfill functions imbued with political content that the armed forces turn into autonomous political actors.

In quadrant II, the military-- either at the request of civilians or on its own accord--provides security, developmental or emergency relief services at a time of severe crisis, but because institutions of civilian control are weak or absent, government officials do not conduct oversight of military activities. In the context of government performance failures, the withdrawal of public support for political leaders, and societal unrest, an undeterred military can reverse the chain of command by filling the power vacuum left by a fatally weakened administration. Alternatively, civilian opponents can attempt to convince the military to replace a government beset by crisis. The military intervenes not because it had engaged in expansive domestic roles. Rather, a power vacuum had given it the capacity to do so, popular or elite support had given it a motive, and the ongoing crisis provided the opportunity. The military is drawn from the barracks---not the countryside---to intervene politically against a government seemingly paralyzed in the midst of national crisis.

Quadrant III represents the most optimal environment, where civilians maintain control over the military in the absence of national crisis. Yet owing to state weaknesses in Latin America, there may still be a need for limited military involvement in domestic projects to provide public or private goods. In quadrant IV, state weakness also invites military role expansion. But in the absence of civilian oversight and authority, the military also acts autonomously, inviting itself to engage in domestic roles for its own institutional gain or to the betterment of societal allies. Here lies a latent danger.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This article focuses on the likely roles for the armed forces under varying political conditions in Latin America. It draws on cases from states in which democracy has been established for a considerable duration: Argentina (1983+) and Venezuela (1958+). These are also cases in which there is considerable evidence in the existing literature on the weakness of their states and their use of the armed forces in domestic roles. Moreover, there is variation on the two independent variables that we have defined: civilian control of the armed forces and crisis. The historical evidence from the two cases should provide an adequate array of 'cases-within-cases' with which to probe the

plausibility of the hypotheses presented here. We do not present a case for quadrant IV in figure one since many of the phenomena present in this situation are well studied in any number of previous analyses of civil-military relations in Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

### **CASE I: ARGENTINA 2001-2003**

During 2001-2003, Argentina was victim to one of the greatest crises in recent Latin American memory, one that generated unprecedented rates of unemployment, poverty, divestment, contraction, and capital flight. The crisis was marked by a complete breakdown in economic policymaking capacity and a violent social explosion that left dozens dead and brought down four presidents in the span of twelve days. What was the nature of the crisis, and the military's role in it?

For almost a decade, the nation had persisted with a convertibility scheme that had kept its currency pegged to the dollar. While helping to dramatically lower inflation and restore economic stability, the plan also prevented the nation from easily adapting to the competitive environment generated by its MERCOSUR participation. Argentina's trade position deteriorated in relation to its regional partners, while falling confidence in the currency and persistent speculations about an impending devaluation prompted citizens to shift savings into dollars. A \$132 billion public sector debt was increasingly difficult to pay and, for once, no bailouts from the IMF were on the horizon. Unemployment and poverty rose, and a once middle-class country saw an unprecedented 53% of its inhabitants slip below the poverty line. The burgeoning economic crisis led President Fernando De la Rúa to cap bank withdrawals in a desperate effort to save the financial system (New York Times, 12/3/2001). That move would precipitate his political demise.

The economic crisis touched off massive street demonstrations throughout Buenos Aires and other cities. Marauding groups of "piqueteros" attacked the homes of several political leaders (Clarín, 12/20/2001) while tens of thousands of angry protesters descended on the Plaza del Mayo and advanced toward the Casa Rosada. Taunting the police, demonstrators charged the Presidential palace to demand that De la Rúa step down. Police held the protesters at bay, but on December 20<sup>th</sup>, the President had to flee by helicopter from the Casa Rosada rooftop, not before tendering his resignation (Associated Press, 12/20/2001; Clarín, 12/20/2001)

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<sup>1</sup> Any number of well done studies have been made of the phenomenon of military autonomy in civilian led regimes. During the twentieth century, these situations all too often erupt into crisis and military intervention. For a contemporary case of this phenomenon, see J. Samuel Fitch (1998) on Ecuador.

Protest and repression continued after De la Rúa's departure, and by the end of that month, 28 lay dead and hundreds more wounded, in this some of the worst urban violence Argentina had seen in decades. Not surprisingly, the government had declared a state of siege in order to confront the uprisings. Under this constitutional provision, the government was legally entitled to call upon the armed forces, but during this crisis, police and internal security forces alone handled the confrontation. The civilian government would not resort to the use of military force, and the military did as they were told: they remained in the barracks. This reflects the high degree of civilian control that had been achieved during the previous fifteen years.

Nor was the military involved in the settling of the nation's political crisis. De la Rúa's resignation on December 20, 2001, touched off an unprecedented chain of leadership turnover. By the end of the month, the presidency would change hands four times, before finally resting in the hands of Eduardo Duhalde as chief of state. If there ever was a vacuum of power at the apex of the political system, it was during the last 12 days of December 2001. But that vacuum was filled by Argentine lawmakers who, meeting in joint session and operating within legal guidelines, determined how the nation's top post would be filled. The Argentine democratic system had risen to the occasion, obviating the need for illegal and unsavory solutions. Throughout it all, the military remained garrisoned. Commenting on De la Rúa's demise that triggered these unprecedented events, former army commander Martín Balza said, "This was the first time a [Argentine] government is ousted without military intervention, without a tank in the streets" (Agence France Presse, 1/12/2002).

However, it was Argentina's economic crisis that brought the military out of the barracks and into the center of an emergency effort to help suffering communities. In March of 2002, President Duhalde directed the armed forces to participate in a massive program to provide emergency food, medical, and sanitary relief to those zones hardest hit by the crisis. The Government budgeted some 350 million pesos annually for its emergency food assistance program—equal to six percent of total social spending (Clarín, 3/3/2002). These funds were distributed to provincial governments based on relative need. The provinces would, in turn, rely on the Catholic Church and its philanthropic agency, *Caritas*, along with other social agencies and the military, to purchase and distribute the relief items.

The Argentine army seized upon this opportunity to place its resources at the disposal of the people, perhaps to recover some of its social standing lost during the last two decades (La Nación, 12/8/2002). It configured its structure, its territorial deployment, and its operational resources for dual use, collaborating in the delivery of basic necessities to poor communities. For example, in the beleaguered province of Tucumán, the military offered up 163 medics and paramedics, medicine, ambulances, mobile hospitals, sanitation

facilities and mobile kitchens. By August of 2002, the defense minister reported that the army was rationing 200,000 meals per month nationwide (Clarín, 8/27/2002). The military has operated within civilian oversight, not displaced the Church and other relief agencies, nor exploited its relief role as a means of expanding its own power. Moreover, there is absolutely no indication that the military was able to expand this mission into other unauthorized areas.

The military's involvement in the relief effort came not only at the orders of the civilian government but fell in compliance with existing legislation governing its roles inside the nation. Article 6 of the 1998 *Law of Military Restructuring* authorizes military involvement in "support of national communities" (Proyecto de Ley de reestructuración, 1988). The language is broad enough to justify military participation in poverty alleviation programs. This law would seem to give the military an opening for ongoing assistance, since it makes no mention of crisis, defines emergencies or provides timelines. But the Government has sought to place geographical and temporal limits on the military's involvement. President Duhalde spoke to the armed forces, stating that the "highest calling for a soldier is to align with the people in time of need, *with the constitution and the law in mind*" [emphasis ours].<sup>2</sup> The message was clear: role expansive military ventures are worthy, but must be conducted within the objectives and guidelines stipulated by the constitutional authorities. The military has so far complied, and Argentine civil-military experts agree that the military efforts to relieve hunger in this time of great crisis do not constitute a new permanent mission, nor pose any threat to civilian control.<sup>3</sup>

## CASE II: VENEZUELA 2002

The April 2002 coup attempt against president Chávez may seem, at first glance, a clear example of the connection between military participation in domestic programs and military intervention. Certainly, one of the early changes in Venezuelan civil-military relations that followed Chávez's electoral victory in 1998 was the inauguration of the Plan Bolívar 2000 that expanded military support to civilian communities to an unprecedented extent. However, the 2002 coup attempt is more directly the product of both a long-term weakening of institutions of civilian control and the short-term explosion of a political crisis involving primarily civilians, not the armed forces. The expansion of military

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<sup>2</sup> This quote can be found at the official Argentine army website. See [República Argentina Sitio Oficial del Ejército Argentino, Noticias, "el Presidente convoca a las fuerzas armadas para la lucha contra el hambre," http://www.ejercito.mil.ar/index\\_ppal.htm](http://www.ejercito.mil.ar/index_ppal.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Author's communication with two of Argentina's most respected experts on military affairs: Ernesto López, email communication, February 10, 2003; José Manuel Ugarte, email communication, February 24, 2003.

roles that preceded the crisis is a reflection, rather, of state weakness and President Chávez's attempts to deliver public goods to his constituents.

In the Fifth Republic (1998+), the armed forces became one of the principal executors of government social policy. From the beginning of his term, President Chávez argued that the only way to meet the current national crisis in Venezuela was to take advantage of the human and technical resources provided by the armed forces (El Universal, 2/28/1999). Furthermore, President Chávez explicitly called on the armed forces to join and support his revolutionary project (El Universal, 6/22/2000). Plan Bolívar 2000 included infrastructure refurbishment and construction, health care for the poor, combating illiteracy and unemployment, and food distribution. Hundreds of millions of dollars in aid was distributed through local military garrisons in each of Venezuela's 23 states. Local garrison commanders had wide latitude in determining the scope of programs, selecting suppliers and providers, and balancing their new social role with traditional defense requirements. What little oversight existed was conducted by the armed forces themselves (Trinkunas, 2002).

While these military-led efforts at poverty alleviation and economic development provided significant public benefits, they came at a time when President Chávez was undertaking a parallel effort to replace institutionalized civilian control of the armed forces with direct presidential control. The 1999 constitution, whose design was guided by President Chávez, provided the legal underpinnings for a sweeping expansion of military jurisdictional boundaries. Moreover, President Chávez became the ultimate arbiter of military promotions by virtue of article 236 which gives him the right to approve promotions of officers of the rank of colonel and general (or their naval equivalents), while at the same time depriving the legislature of any role in the promotion process.

President Chávez used his direct control of the armed forces to promote his control over the rest of the public administration. Active duty and retired military officers staffed critical mid-level political and bureaucratic positions in the public sector, forming a military 'backbone' for government ministries. Retired and active duty military officers have held up to one third of the portfolios in the presidential cabinet, including the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Infrastructure, and the governorship of the federal district during the first year of the Chávez administration. President Chávez was also careful to appoint officers who supported him in the 1992 coups to head the political and judicial police forces as well as the Ministry of Communications and Ministry of Interior (Trinkunas, 2002).

During the first three years of the Chávez presidency, the politicization of the armed forces (both for and against the new regime) became increasingly visible in reaction to the new military policies. Junior officers began to conspire in small groups and distribute *samizdat* style anti-Chávez literature and videotapes. Others retired from the armed forces in protest over political manipulation of the officer promotion process (El Nacional, 9/14/2000).

Similarly, a group of retired senior military officers, known as the Institutional Military Front, formed for the purpose of opposing the government's use of the armed forces in political and social programs but their longstanding opposition to Chávez himself rendered this rational suspect (El Nacional, 6/30/2000).

Although these activities revealed the increasing stress generated within the officer corps by President Chávez's reforms, the active duty military seemed most displeased by the changes in the instruments of presidential control of the armed forces rather than the domestic roles *per se*. Civilian opposition to the President Chávez became especially trenchant after the administration began to make changes in the senior leadership of the state owned oil industry (Mommer, 2004). The appointment of Gastón Parra, an academic highly critical of PDVSA, to its presidency detonated a rebellion by the middle management that found support in civil society at large (El Nacional, 4/16/2002). After it became clear that President Chávez would continue his efforts to seize political control of the oil industry, the civilian leaders of the opposition called for a general strike for 9 April 2002. Progressively larger anti-government demonstrations were held on successive days in Caracas, leading to a clash between the private sector media and the Chávez administration over news coverage of the strike. Tragically, a massive anti-government march on 11 April ended in violence when protesters converged on the presidential palace. Here, they clashed with pro-government members of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and were fired upon by snipers. An estimated 12 persons died and over 100 were injured. President Chávez also ordered the armed forces at this time to take military control of the capital, an order that senior officers claim led them to begin a coup attempt (El Universal, 4/21/2002.)

In the face of a worsening crisis, the military acted, but in reaction to a new internal security role rather than their Plan Bolívar 2000 role. The rebellion became public when the commander of the Army, General Efraim Vásquez Velasco, stated in a televised address surrounded by his officers that he would not obey presidential directives to suppress anti-government demonstrations and ordered all of his troops to remain confined to base. In his speech he characterized President Chávez's directives as illegal, and in short order, senior generals in *Guardia Nacional* (a militarized national police force charged with internal security) and admirals in the Navy echoed his sentiments in radio and television broadcasts. A transitional government soon formed under Pedro Carmona, leader of the national business federation FEDECAMARAS, and it attempted shut down other elected and appointed branches of government (El Nacional, 4/17/2002).

General Vásquez Velasco's refusal to obey the president made it appear that the armed forces had turned decisively against the Chávez administration, yet the military rebellion never extended very far beyond the upper ranks of the officer corps. Although some senior officers admitted after the rebellion that they had been conspiring since summer 2001, they did not secure support from

officers outside Caracas (El Nacional, 4/13/2002). The military consensus in favor of deposing President Chávez rested on the shared conviction among officers that they should not be involved in repressing civilian anti-government demonstrators. Once the unconstitutional nature of the transitional government became clear with its attempts to eliminate the legislature and the judiciary, this consensus fell apart, allowing for a swift return of Hugo Chávez Frias to power on 14 April 2002 (Nuevo País, 4/17/2002).

We should underline it was President Chávez's orders to the military to employ violence against civilian demonstrators that precipitated the rebellion, rather than a reaction to military domestic relief roles. The decision by President Chávez to bring the armed forces into Plan Bolívar 2000 was a reaction to state weakness and a need to solidify political support among newly incorporated political actors. The later attempted use of the armed forces for internal security roles was another sign of the fundamental weakness of the Venezuelan state and democratic regime, which lacked either mechanisms to resolve a political crisis peacefully or the state security apparatus to maintain political order short of calling out a very blunt instrument, the armed forces. The military's refusal to participate in internal security missions and its revolt against the president simply confirmed the deterioration of civilian control over the armed forces.

### **CASE III: ARGENTINA 1991-2000**

The military had once been the most powerful political actor in Argentina, but the terrible political, economic and military failures of the *Proceso* (1976-1982) regime disgraced the armed forces. In disarray, it was in no position to influence the democratic governments that would follow its fall from grace. The military made something of a comeback during a series of insurrections in the latter part of the Alfonsín (1983-89) years, yet the crushing defeat of the final rebellion of December 1990 and the pardon of the *Proceso* junta shortly thereafter eliminate the sources of military unrest. President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) was able to establish an institutionalized commander in chief relationship with his military subordinates through the civilian-led ministry of defense, ensuring civilian control.

The military no longer defined for itself what roles it would play; democratic government now did this. The rule of law became the order of the day, the political class legislated new limitations on the military's mission, and it codified a new hierarchical system of civilian control. Its congress passed an historic defense law in 1988 that defined the military's primary mission as defending the nation by deterring *foreign* aggression. The military would be externally oriented, and leadership on defense issues would fall to the President of Argentina and his Defense Minister. The military chiefs of staff were firmly subordinated to the defense minister who in turn reported to the President.

That Defense Law and its companion, the 1992 Law of Internal Security, made a clear separation between systems of defense—of which the military was a central part—and internal security—of which the military played an unofficial, minor role. Internal security would be primarily the business of the police and security forces such as the Border Patrol (*Gendarmería*) and Coast Guard which were removed from the Defense Ministry and placed under the authority of the Interior Ministry.<sup>4</sup> Article 27 of the Law of Internal security allowed the military to lend a hand to security forces should the government request it, but its assistance was confined to the logistical realm. For example, in 1991 President Menem created a Federal Narcotics Control Service to help stem the illegal transshipment of narcotics through Argentine territory. The agency placed the *Gendarmería* at the center of these operations, but also employed the air force to identify clandestine airstrips through radar and aircraft interception. The army and navy played minor supportive roles (Huser, 2000: 138).

The same security law allowed the president, in exceptional circumstances and via a declared state of siege, to deploy the military as a coercive force and only as a last resort, should police and other security organizations be overwhelmed by some domestic insurrectionary force. While that specific scenario never developed during this time period, a few social disturbances did occur and some of these were violent. Unlike the past, the armed forces were never used to quell these protests, demonstrating the severe restriction on the military's domestic security role. The primary security operations were external in orientation. At the government's behest, the Argentine navy sent a ship to the 1991 Gulf War, and thereafter, the army participated a series of U.N. sponsored peacekeeping missions (Palá, 1998). By all accounts, these missions were professionally rewarding, and helped to instill within the ranks a greater respect for those civilian authorities who had made these missions possible.

Internally, the military engaged in limited, non-lethal, civic action operations designed to help individuals and communities in need. These activities included flood and fire relief, housing, health, educational services, and infrastructure construction and repair. These operations are what we would expect from a democratic yet weak state, with civilian control. Unable to fund let alone create new civilian agencies to handle these vital tasks, politicians directed the military to undertake them. The army was already organized into regional taskforces, and equipped and trained to assist neighboring

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<sup>4</sup> For these provisions of law, see SER en el 2000, Base de Datos, Argentina: White Paper on National Defense, 1998, Part V, Chapter XI, p. 4. <http://www.ser2000.org.ar/protect/libro-argentina-eng/arg-part5.htm>.

communities.<sup>5</sup> If any state could least afford to do without these military services, it was the Argentine state under President Menem. His uncompromising neoliberal adjustment plan featured vast cutbacks in state spending along with the privatization of state-run firms. The emphasis was on the market, and while the private sector economy did fairly well during this period, the shrinking of the public sector meant a reduced capacity to address domestic relief and support to needy communities.

The military provision of these public goods seldom made the headlines, but was vital means by which Argentina could respond to the recurring needs of its citizens during a period of resource scarcity. However, internal military missions were defined as complementary—not primary—military missions. In every case, they were carried out under the auspices of the Defense ministry and usually in coordination with the functionally relevant health, social or educational state agencies.<sup>6</sup> We are not aware of any occasion on which the Argentine armed forces acted autonomously, engaged in mission creep, or exploited these assignments for political advantage.

Having said that, the military brass never hid their desire to expand these operations, largely to justify a larger defense budget after years of contraction. To emphasize the importance of these missions, the army's own mission descriptions are infused with a developmental jargon that is sweeping, lofty and at times self congratulatory.<sup>7</sup> So far, the civilian governments have not conceded to the military—either in practice or in law—a broader and more permanent developmental mission. Hence, under conditions of strong civilian control and in the absence of severe crisis, the military's domestic roles are both carefully circumscribed and politically unobjectionable

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<sup>5</sup> See Argentina: White Paper on National Defense 1998 Part VI, Chapter XIV.

<sup>6</sup> See República Argentina, Ministerio de Defensa, Revisión de la Defensa, 2001, "Nuestras Fuerzas Armadas en acción, desde el EMC," p. 1-2, y Desde el Ejército Argentino," pp 1-2. <http://www.mindef.gov.ar/revision/accion3.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See República Argentina, Sitio Oficial del Ejército Argentino, "Apoyo a la Comunidad" [http://www.ejercito.mil.ar/index\\_ppal.htm](http://www.ejercito.mil.ar/index_ppal.htm).

**CONCLUSION:  
RETHINKING THE CONSEQUENCES OF  
DOMESTIC MILITARY ROLES**

Both Argentina and Venezuela are cases in which the armed forces developed domestic roles during periods of social crisis in response to state failures to provide public goods. The difference is that in Argentina, civilian control of the armed forces, institutionalized through a civilian-led ministry of defense, set limits on domestic military roles. The armed forces acted to shore up the state in a moment of social crisis by alleviating the most extreme consequences and filling in gaps in the provision of services by both the government and NGOs. In Venezuela, the expansion of the military role occurred in parallel with a dismantling of institutionalized civilian control. While the social relief mission of the armed forces did not per se threaten democracy, it did crowd out other state and NGO providers. Plan Bolívar 2000 provided local garrison commanders considerable latitude in how they used the large financial resources to address local social and economic problems.

The shortcomings in civilian oversight of the military in Venezuela were deepened by the constitutional and administrative reforms enacted by President Chávez, who preferred personal channels to administer military affairs. In fact, he encouraged a sense within the armed forces that they were co-partners in the Revolution. In times of political crisis, Argentine institutions were sufficiently consolidated to maintain the presumption of civilian supremacy despite rapid changes in leadership. In Venezuela, institutional channels for civilian oversight no longer existed, and military autonomy grew apace. When an internal political crisis erupted in April 2002 and the Revolution called on them to carry out distasteful internal security actions, senior military commanders preferred to abandon their partnership with the regime, and disregarding their constitutionally subordinate role, rebelled.

Although President Meném in Argentina also built personal relationships with senior military commanders during the 1990s, a civilian-led Ministry of Defense continued to administer and oversee military affairs on a day-to-day basis, slowly consolidating the rules and standard operating procedures that guide Argentine civil-military relations. Turbulent leadership changes within the political leadership of the state were not reflected in the management of the armed forces. The Ministry of Defense civilian bureaucracy continued to monitor military activities, and the armed forces acted within the boundaries set by their expanded missions. In other words, role expansion did not encourage increased military autonomy or a protagonistic role for the armed forces in Argentine politics in 2001.

Events in Argentina and Venezuela in 2001 and 2002 remind us of the continuing shortcomings of state institutions in Latin America and the latent (and sometimes overt) social and economic tensions that fuel periodic political

crises in the region. It is difficult to imagine that democratic leaderships, no matter how suspicious of military designs, will willingly abstain from using the armed forces and their capabilities to address domestic crises. What the comparison of Argentina and Venezuela confirms is the key role of institutionalized civilian control in sustaining democratic regimes during these moments, preventing the growth in military autonomy and protagonism that has historically provoked regime change in times of crisis.

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**RICHARD L. MILLETT** received his AB with honors from Harvard and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico. He did postdoctoral work at Ohio State University and is a graduate of the Air War College. He taught at Southern Illinois University from 1966 through 1999, and held the Oppenheimer Chair of Warfighting Strategy at the Marine Corps University in 2000 and 2001. He has also taught at the University of Miami, St. Louis University, the Air War College and four universities in Colombia. He is the author of *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S. Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* and co-editor of *Beyond Praetorianism: The Latin American Military in Transition*, among numerous articles and chapters in edited volumes. He has testified before the U.S. Congress and appeared on all the major broadcast programs as an expert commentator on U.S.-Latin American relations and security issues. His e-mail address: [Millet1@aol.com](mailto:Millet1@aol.com)

**ORLANDO J. PÉREZ** is associate professor of political science at Central Michigan University, where he teaches courses in comparative politics, Latin American politics, and U.S.-Latin American relations. He has carried out field research in several countries of the region, including Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador and Venezuela. As a consultant, he has worked on public opinion surveys, democratization, civil-military relations, and corruption issues for USAID and the UN Development Program. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, *Hemisphere*, *South Eastern Latin Americanist*, and *Political Science Quarterly*, among numerous chapters in edited volumes. He is the editor of *Post-Invasion Panama: The Challenges of Democratization in the New World Order*. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pittsburgh. His e-mail address: [perezloj@cmich.edu](mailto:perezloj@cmich.edu)

**DAVID PION-BERLIN** (Professor) is a Latin Americanist widely known for his research and writings on civil-military relations, military regimes, military political thought, security, political repression and human rights. His most recent book, co-authored with Craig Arceneaux, is *Transforming Latin America: The International and Domestic Origins of Change* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). Currently, his research focuses on why scholars and politicians alike pay scant attention to defense issues in Latin America. His e-mail address: [david.pion@ucr.edu](mailto:david.pion@ucr.edu)

**RONALD D. SYLVIA** is Professor of Political Science at San Jose State University, specializing in Public Administration. His other scholarly interests are Latin American politics, ethnic politics, and the US Presidency. He has consulted at all levels of government and served for five years as a member of the Oklahoma Merit System Protection Board. His e-mail address: [rdsylvia@sjsu.edu](mailto:rdsylvania@sjsu.edu)

**HAROLD TRINKUNAS** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. His research and writing focus on Latin American politics, particularly democratization. He received a Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University in 1999, was a Stanford Ayacucho research fellow in Venezuela and Argentina (1994-95), and a MacArthur fellow at the Center for International Security and Arms Control in 1996. He also served as the field officer for the Carter Center electoral observation mission in Venezuela during the highly contested 1998 congressional and presidential elections. In addition to being a faculty member in the NSA department, Dr. Trinkunas also serves as the program manager for the U.S. National Guard Distance Learning Initiative at the Center for Civil Military Relations in Monterey, California. His e-mail address: [hatrinku@nps.edu](mailto:hatrinku@nps.edu)

**CYNTHIA WATSON**, Professor of Strategy, has taught at the U.S. National War College since 1992, including serving as Associate Dean for four years. She has analysed Colombian affairs for almost forty years. Dr. Watson has written on civil-military relations, national security, nuclear issues, and political development for a variety of publications. Her volume, *NATION-BUILDING*, was published in 2004 by ABC Clio of Santa Barbara, California. Her e-mail address: [watsonc@ndu.edu](mailto:watsonc@ndu.edu)

**DANIEL ZIRKER** is the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and Professor of Political Science at The University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. He is currently (since 1999) the chair/president of the Research Committee on Armed Forces and Society of the International Political Science Association, and the President of the New Zealand Political Studies Association (2004-05). A former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Northeast Brazil (1970-72), he was a Fulbright senior lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania—East Africa) during the 1989-90 academic year. He has published in academic journals on democratization, economic development and civil-military relations in Brazil as well as in Africa and Eastern Europe. His e-mail address: [dzirker@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:dzirker@waikato.ac.nz)