
The return of the generals? Civil-military relations in Latin America at times of pandemic

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Theme

This paper analyses changes in civil-military relations in Latin America in the crisis scenario created by the rise of organised crime, the deterioration in the socio-economic situation and the pandemic.

Summary

The recent warnings from politicians and academics about the re-emergence of Latin American military power as a threat to democracy are based on the expansion of armed missions in spheres such as the fight against drug trafficking and their role in crises such as the one that befell Bolivia. These concerns do not however reflect a reality in which armed forces have seen their resources dramatically reduced over recent decades and have come under the control of civilian governments. In reality the new role being played by the armed services has less to do with the growth in their political influence and more to do with the feeble efforts to modernise Latin America's civilian administrations. This failure has made them a key tool for civilian governments wanting to react to a crisis, whether a public health emergency or an epidemic of crime. Under these circumstances, it is essential that the region's governments strengthen the armed forces' oversight and control mechanisms in order to be able to use their resources to tackle what promise to be years characterised by instability and violence in the region.

Analysis

A characteristic of academic debates in Latin America is their capacity to rumble on long after the political and social conflicts that generated them have been superseded. Some intellectual arguments seem condemned to remaining alive even after the contexts from which they arose have changed and the actual problems are markedly different. One such 'zombie' debate revolves around the alleged predilection for coups among the Latin American armed forces and the permanent threat they pose to democracy. More than three decades since General Pinochet handed over power, thereby ending 17 years of dictatorship and marking the twilight of the military regimes that had ruled the region in the 1960s and 70s, Latin American academics and politicians revive the menace of *coups d'état* with warnings about sabre rattling and concern about the growing power of the armed forces. Amid so many scares and accusations, the inevitable question is how much truth and how much fiction resides in the apparent persistence of a military threat to democracy in Latin America.

Coup-plotting under a new guise?

Accusations of coup-plotting have proliferated in Latin American politics in recent years, but most have been attempts to discredit rivals and have had nothing to do with the armed forces. Both the ousting of the Paraguayan president, Fernando Lugo, in 2012, and the parliamentary trial that led to his Brazilian counterpart, Dilma Rousseff, being removed from power in 2016, gave rise to accusations of coups, despite the fact that both processes were conducted in accordance with constitutional rules. Other more serious incidents have sown a degree of confusion with the popular image of troops overthrowing unsullied democratic governments. The most recent was in El Salvador last February, when President Nayib Bukele ordered the military occupation of the congress building to put pressure on the lawmakers to agree the negotiation of a loan to modernise the police and the armed forces. Although tensions between the executive and legislative branches were defused, the sight of armed soldiers in the congress building revived memories of a past that many thought buried.

The most recent alleged coup attempt was in Bolivia in November 2019, after the protests against the electoral fraud perpetrated by Evo Morales, as the OAS and the EU publicly denounced. After refusing orders to curb the demonstrators, the commanders of the armed forces and the police both issued statements requesting the resignation of Morales, which induced him to leave the country, paving the way to a provisional government led by Jeanine Áñez, the second Vice President of the Senate and the legal replacement for the ousted President. The odyssey had a happy ending for the Bolivian leader when fresh elections last October were won by the candidate from his party, and he was able to return to the country without mishap. At no time did the armed forces or police, which a year earlier had been accused of engineering a coup, intervene in this process.

Scenarios such as the Bolivian one, where the armed forces played a somewhat prominent role in a political crisis, have been replicated in other countries in the recent past. A case in point was the mutiny organised by a part of the Ecuadorean police force in September 2010 in protest against changes to their working conditions endorsed by President Rafael Correa who was detained for a number of hours at the National Police Hospital. The episode soon came to a head, however, when the senior military commander declared his support for the President, mobilising troops towards Quito, and a special operations unit from the National Police succeeded in freeing him.

A year earlier, in June 2009, the Honduran President Manuel Zelaya had been ousted after insisting on his plans to hold a referendum to reform the constitution, opening the way to his re-election, despite the fact that this course had been rejected by the Congress, the Electoral Tribunal and the Supreme Court. After the President had dismissed the commander of the armed forces for having refused to distribute electoral material for the referendum and the Supreme Court had issued a warrant to arrest him, the army captured and subsequently expelled him to Costa Rica. Led by the President of the National Congress, Roberto Micheletti, the new government faced internal protests and international isolation. The situation stabilised with new elections in November, with Porfirio Lobo emerging victorious. The latter authorised Zelaya to remain in Honduras (he had taken refuge in the Brazilian Embassy, having arrived in September). The crisis

showed how the armed forces played a decisive role in a dispute between civilian politicians, but without replacing them in government.

As well as the prominence of the armed forces in some political crises, theories that emphasise the persistence of military power in Latin America also cite the growing tendency of specific missions to be placed under military control, particularly in the fight against organised crime. These operations, linked to the maintenance of public order and the fight against drug trafficking, have proved a source of scandal and controversy, as became clear in Mexico last October when Salvador Cienfuegos, the Defence Secretary under Enrique Peña Nieto, was arrested in Los Angeles accused of being an accomplice of Beltrán Leyva. The denouement of this episode hangs in the air, because the US authorities agreed to send the senior official back to Mexico so that the investigation into his possible links with drug trafficking could be carried out in his own country. But regardless of the conclusion this particular case reaches, for those who insist on seeing the armed forces as a threat to democracy, corruption in the military is not only indicative of a lack of institutional integrity and transparency, it is also a symptom of something more dangerous. According to this perspective, the armed forces are not interested in combatting drug trafficking –a business from which they benefit– but in using such a mission to increase their political influence over civilian governments.

The existence of corruption fuels the conspiracy theories that see Latin American armed forces as criminal enterprises. The reputation of the Mexican armed forces was severely damaged at the end of the 1990s when a group of deserters –including various members of GAFE, the Special Forces Airmobile Group– created the *Zetas*, which became the country's most violent criminal organisation. Episodes of narco-corruption have continued since then, as shown by the most recent case involving collaboration between members of the 22nd motorised cavalry regiment and the Sinaloa cartel in Sonora in 2015. Similar episodes have come to light in other armies. There have been numerous accusations of drug dealers infiltrating their way into the Guatemalan armed forces, with such notorious episodes as the recruitment of former members of the *Kaibiles*, Guatemala's special forces. The trial of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, *El Chapo*, in New York revealed that the Sinaloa cartel's bribery machine had penetrated the ranks of the Ecuadorean army.

Criticisms of the role of Latin America's armed forces in combatting organised crime have also been fuelled by reports of human rights violations taking place during such missions. A case in point are the accusations made against the conduct of the Brazilian armed forces in support of police operations in the favelas of Rio. Apart from their impact on the legitimacy of governments and military institutions, such reports have become arguments deployed by those who see the role of Latin American armed forces in internal security missions as a continuation of the repressive activities carried out during the dictatorships of the 1960s and 70s. In the context of this perception, the solution put forward by the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights and the former President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet, is simple: 'any use of the armed forces in public security should be strictly exceptional'.

The more the region's governments have resorted to the armed forces to tackle public order problems linked to the recent political and social crisis, the greater the criticisms

have become. This new role for the armed forces became apparent during the protests in Ecuador and Chile in October 2019, when Presidents Moreno and Piñera relied on their armies to support police forces overwhelmed by violence. In both cases they were pilloried for what was interpreted as a return to the repressive conduct of the military in the dictatorial era. The condemnation was particularly strong in Chile, where the decision to declare a state of emergency, convene the National Security Council and deploy troops in support of the national police force led to inevitable comparisons with the dictatorship. Álvaro Elizalde, the leader of the Chilean Socialist Party, said that 'Chile has had a dire experience with the doctrine of national security', a reference to the doctrine that inspired Augusto Pinochet's coup in 1973.

The response of most Latin American governments to the pandemic was to mimic the Europeans, with restrictions on social life to halt the spiral of infections and placing responsibility for enforcement on the police and the armed forces. This has been true of Chile, Peru, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. The armed forces have also broadened their involvement in providing emergency services, including healthcare and distributing food as a means of alleviating lockdowns. This blend of roles –patrolling and supporting the provision of social services– has rekindled the combined security and socio-economic assistance missions associated with the counter-insurgency campaigns that laid the foundations for the political influence wielded by the armed forces decades ago. Predictably enough, the response has not been slow in coming. The Argentine political scientist Fabián Calle summed it up by saying that the armed forces would take advantage of their prominence in the fight against the pandemic to augment their political clout: 'There will be... more funding and more influence, because this won't come for free'.

What has changed: weaker and depoliticised armed forces

In this context it is worth asking whether the fear of a revival of military power in the region has any basis. To answer this question, it should be remembered that the political heft of the armed forces in Latin America –as elsewhere– rests on three factors: economic resources, social influence and a political-strategic conception that justifies their intervention. But the region's armed forces fail on all three counts. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 1989 and 2019 defence spending fell in Argentina from 1.9% to 0.7% of GDP, in Brazil from 2.7% to 1.5%, in Chile from 3.6% to 1.8% and in Peru from 2.2% to 1.2%. The only exceptions to this trend were Mexico, where it has remained stable, at 0.5% in both years, and Colombia, which shot up from 2.2% to 3.2% of GDP, an anomaly that is easy to explain bearing in mind that both countries have faced growing levels of violence fuelled by drug trafficking.

Troop numbers have also fallen substantially. According to calculations based on data from Military Balance, produced by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, over the same period Argentina went from 2.3 to 1.6 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants, Brazil from 2.2 to 1.7, Chile from 7.6 to 4.3 and Peru from 5.8 to 2.6. Again, the only exceptions were Mexico (1.7 to 1.9) and above all Colombia, which went from 4.4 to 6. The paradox that definitively quashes any suspicion that the armed forces have remained a power behind the scenes is that it is precisely the countries that suffered coups in the 1960s

and 70s –Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru– that have instituted radical cuts to their defence capabilities, while those that remained exempt –Mexico and Colombia– have increased their defence budgets and the size of their armed forces. In other words, the political elites formerly on the receiving end of military might recovered the levers of power with sufficient strength to inflict substantial reductions on the budgets of their military establishments.

Apart from the budget cuts, the total absence of a political-strategic doctrine hampers any attempt to justify or conduct any military intervention in politics. During the 1960s and 70s, a series of theoretical tracts, many of them inspired by the European concept of ‘total war’, circulated among Latin American chiefs-of-staff and military academies as the conceptual basis to account for their countries’ crises and advocate the installation of military regimes as the best response. This set of ideas, which many politicians and academics dubbed the ‘national security doctrine’, justified the armed forces’ ambitions to replace the civilian political elites in running their countries.

These days not only is there a complete absence of such proposals, the armed forces seem to be utterly convinced that their role does not lie in politics and that crises need to be resolved by the civilian elites. This perspective explains the fact that in the episodes cited as alleged coup attempts, the armed forces of Bolivia, Ecuador and Honduras never sought to seize power and replace the civil authorities. Their interventions arose from the need to take a stance on political conflicts where the opposing sides appealed for their support. Their involvement was restricted to supporting one of the sides, subsequently falling back to their institutional role so that the politicians could continue at the helm and seek a definitive way out of the crisis, typically by means of the ballot box. One may agree or disagree with the stance taken in each case, but it is difficult not to accept that their conduct was radically different from that of their predecessors in the coups of 50 years ago.

In the light of these facts, some academics and politicians argue that the military threat has mutated and that they use electoral methods to maintain their political influence. This assertion ought to be questioned for two reasons, however. First, the electoral successes of certain ex-officers do not equate to victories for their institutions. Latin American armed forces –like those elsewhere– are far from being homogeneous entities and harbour individuals with diverse political outlooks. It is significant that officers who attain power through the ballot box (such as Hugo Bánzer and Ollanta Humala) subsequently implement highly diverse policies. Secondly, the officers who attained power generally left it as a result of an institutional process and, if it reached such an eventuality, were dismissed or put on trial. This was the case of the Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina and the arrest of the Peruvian Ollanta Humala shortly after leaving presidential office. In neither instance did their military background help them find support among the armed forces to avoid their political debacle. With these precedents it is worth asking whether the fears of President Jair Bolsonaro fuelling a new militarism in Brazil arise from over-estimating his influence on his former army colleagues or an under-estimation of Brazilian armed forces’ professionalism.

The great exception to this rule was [Hugo Chávez](#), who attained the presidency through the ballot box to subsequently dismantle Venezuelan democracy and instal a dictatorship

that has outlived him. Two key differences distinguish his case from the earlier ones however. First, from the outset Chávez had an antiliberal ideological project that justified his assault on democracy, offering him a roadmap for running his government and a desired end state in the form of an authoritarian nationalist-populist regime. Secondly, Chávez relied on a coalition of extreme left-wing groups aligned with his project who provided him with a powerful mobilisation network to compete in election after election and gradually take control of parts of civil society and sections of the state apparatus, including the armed forces. Chávez had an ideology and a party –or an alliance of parties– that enabled him to take and keep himself in power. By contrast, these elements were not present in the electoral ventures of other former officers. None have put themselves forward at the head of a project aimed at replacing liberal democracy – despite the criticisms directed at it from some quarters– and they have not benefitted from a political mobilisation structure as large and effective as in Venezuela.

The causes of military prominence: the failure of state modernisation

Under such circumstances it is worth asking why it is, despite the budget cuts and the widespread distrust among significant sections of society, that the armed forces have remained a key instrument at the service of Latin American governments, particularly when it comes to responding to a crisis, whether involving criminality or public health. Partly at least the answer lies in the failure of the political elites in their attempts to construct effective civil administrations and the permanent need to resort to military institutions to cover the deficiencies and failings of the state bureaucracy.

Thanks to the boom in raw materials, the size of the public sector has ballooned substantially in recent decades. According to calculations based on ECLAC data, average annual growth in public spending between 2000 and 2018 was 3.2% in Argentina, 5.8% in Bolivia, 4.2% in Chile, 5.3% in Colombia, 5.5% in Ecuador and 5.8% in Peru. However, this increase in funding was not accompanied by a comparable rise in the states' ability to respond to the needs of the population. A LAPOP survey conducted in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries in 2018-19 reveals some alarming findings: for example, popular support for the political system fell from 54.5% to 48.8% between 2010 and 2019. Trust in the justice system fell from 47.5% to 41.1%, the credibility of the legislative branch fell from 46.4% to 39.4% and trust in the executive plummeted from 55.2% to 42.8%. Although governments spent more, the increased funds available did not mean that the people felt better served.

Part of the problem can be attributed to the rise in people's expectations, which has led to an increase in their demands and less tolerance for state failings. It is possible that, in certain cases, voters receive more but they do not feel particularly 'appreciative' because their aspirations have grown as they have joined the precarious ranks of the middle class. In addition, however, there have been state failings that governments have been incapable of remedying. States spend more, but have not improved either the quality of their services or their ability to distribute them throughout society or the geographical territory.

Partly at least this failure can be attributed to the way in which public funds are spent, being frequently wasted by corruption or syphoned off by political interests and

ideological biases. An example of the way inordinate sums of money are squandered with little return in terms of general welfare, and none for the modernisation of the state, lies in the proliferation of subsidies that do little to help low-income sectors and much for populist politicians and economic groups embedded in the productive apparatus. This is the case of fuel subsidies in Ecuador, just recently abolished by Lenin Moreno's administration. The same can be said of the many public services subsidised by Peronist governments. These squandered public funds often end up in the pockets of privileged sectors, as was the case with a large part of the healthcare spending in Colombia.

Apart from the problems of public spending, the fragility of the state is exacerbated by the shortcomings in managing human resources. The quality of civil service recruitment leaves much to be desired. Those aspiring to work for the government do not on the whole come from the finest universities and are often the losers of educational systems afflicted by major inequalities. In many cases, the recruitment of civil servants lacks even minimal objectivity and ends up being a component of the patronage-based system with which political allies are rewarded after each election. Often the consequence is that the increase in funding serves to swell the ranks of civil servants, but not their quality or commitment to the public, or the effectiveness of the administration as a whole.

Moreover, political leaders are aware of the extreme political tact required to manage state civil servants. Government bureaucracy is a sector involved in the provision of key public services, that is heavily unionised, that may resort to strike action and other forms of pressure and that enjoys privileges that impede dismissals and salary reductions. Such workers have a significant ability to put pressure on political leaders, something the governments are unable to do much to avoid. A good example is the state education unions in countries such as Mexico –the National Education Workers' Union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE)– and Colombia –the Colombian Federation of Education Workers (Federación Colombiana de los Trabajadores de la Educación, FECODE)– which have maintained their political influence despite their governments' liberalisation and educational reform programmes. This is why the possibility of trusting civil servants when it comes to addressing a crisis has serious limitations.

This list of shortcomings and weaknesses becomes much more extensive when attention switches to the government institutions in the interior, away from national capitals. It is easy to form a mistaken idea of the solidity of state architectures when observers restrict themselves to visiting the continent's largest cities, where the wealthiest members of the population, the most modern infrastructure and the most effective state institutions are invariably concentrated. Things are markedly different when one visits the 'interior' or 'the regions', where it is all too plain to see the gulf in terms of governments' ability to provide basic services or ensure that the capital's instructions are implemented. As far as institutional solidity is concerned, there is an abyss separating Bogotá from the department of Choco, between Lima and the department of Madre de Dios and between Buenos Aires and the province of Jujuy. The ills that beset state institutions are not equally distributed across the national geographies, reaching critical levels on the periphery, where problems such as corruption and the lack of training among public sector workers are common.

Army, police and gendarmerie

Many of the problems besetting the civil service are replicated in the police forces and help to account for the fact that attempts to construct modern internal security forces, rendering reliance on the armed forces to maintain public order redundant, have failed in many countries. Resources tend to be invested not where they are needed but where they best serve the popularity of politicians and the enrichment of businesspeople, which is greater in well-off than in poorer and more dangerous districts. In certain cases, recruitment is far from ideal. Personal influences and corruption play their part. As in the case of other public sector employees, police officers are in charge of a critical task – public security – are difficult to dismiss and may go on strike. The strikes organised by the Federal Police in Mexico in July 2019, the police in the Brazilian state of Ceará in February 2020 and the province of Buenos Aires last September are cases in point.

The problems of the police are aggravated because their institutional model tends to be based on rather unrealistic principles. Starting in the 1990s the majority of police forces were designed using a conception of citizen security that emerged in the wake of the democratic transitions in the Southern Cone. This view of policing emphasised a preference for civil institutions, extreme decentralization at the local level, focus on combatting petty crime, commitment to a minimal use of force and strong reliance on the ability of social programmes to single-handedly stem the rise in delinquency. Furthermore, the model focused on big cities, paying considerably less attention to smaller towns and rural areas. The aim was to prevent the police from being turned into agents of an authoritarian regime, while simultaneously hoping that the reduction in petty crime would engender a context of law and order for the general public.

But such aspirations overlooked the booming illegal economies and the criminal networks linked to them that are prevalent in most of Latin America. The concept of citizen security copied from Argentina and Chile, which at that time were not facing significant levels of organised crime, encouraged policing models that were ineffective at combatting these phenomena. The commitment to local policing may have proved a step in the right direction in terms of a closer relationship with the public, but it aggravated problems of coordination between security forces that often suffered from underfunding, poor technical training and considerable vulnerability to corruption. The preference for a policing model with severe restrictions on the use of force may well be desirable, but it also placed limits on the abilities of the police to tackle enemies on the scale of the Brazilian prison gangs or the Mexican cartels.

Most Latin American police forces did not apply this concept wholesale, and accepted the evidence showing that security models focused on combatting petty crime were unviable in the face of criminal organisations with an overwhelming ability to engage in violence and corruption. As a consequence, a considerable number of police forces combined the approach mentioned above to public security with the development of more robust capabilities for tackling major threats. Perhaps the clearest example of this balance comes from the Colombian National Police, who managed to construct a broad-spectrum organization capable of policing parks in Bogotá and dismantling cocaine-producing laboratories in the jungles of Putumayo.

But not all police forces can count on the resources, the technical expertise and the political support needed to construct organisational models as complex as the Colombian one. In many cases, the concept of citizen security directly transposed from the democratic transitions in the Southern Cone became the paradigm of what was desirable and acceptable, creating a roadmap for the development of doctrines and investment in resources that proved inadequate precisely when the region was being subjected to a massive wave of organised crime. Many governments' failure to reduce violence in a sustainable way is largely attributable to this wrong approach to public security.

Amid such failings, one idea that has gained currency is that of creating militarised police forces or gendarmeries to shore up the fragile civilian forces and avoid resorting to the military in the fight against criminal gangs and cartels. The idea is not new and gendarmeries are not uncommon in Latin America; witness the Argentine Gendarmerie, the Chilean Carabiniers and the Military Police of the Brazilian states. The question is whether it makes sense to replicate these institutions with the sole objective of replacing the armed forces in the fight against crime. The answer is related to the structure of the security system in each country and one of the few unwavering principles of security: the simplest is always the best.

Gendarmeries have been the formula chosen by governments seeking institutions of a military character that are capable of running internal security operations requiring a greater use of force than would be normal in a civil police force –counter-narcotics operations, border security, etc– in the context of decentralised security systems. This was the case of the Argentine Gendarmerie and the Venezuelan National Guard, before the Chávez reforms of the security system subverted the model to ensure political control. The creation of a militarised police force has not been the only way of performing this type of internal security tasks, however. The other frequently-used option has been to draft in the armed forces in support of the civil police. Far from being an outlandish option, it has also been used by countries as little given to authoritarianism as the UK to tackle terrorism in Northern Ireland and Italy in the fight against the mafia at the end of the 1980s. All this came before the threat of Islamist terrorism saw soldiers patrolling the streets of France, Belgium and Austria.

Latin American countries display a multiplicity of security models in which the armed forces, gendarmeries and civil police combine in different ways. The question is whether the participation of soldiers in the fight against organised crime and drug trafficking is so toxic that it justifies those countries that use them in modifying their security architectures and creating a new militarised police force to replace them. This is the path taken by López Obrador and the Mexican National Guard, with the proviso that it is not formally a military body, although it contains former members of the armed forces, is equipped with military-grade weapons and conducts missions befitting a gendarmerie.

It is worth remembering that there were cases, such as Argentina in 1976 and Uruguay in 1973, in which the intervention of the armed forces in internal security operations was a prelude to coups. But it is also true that countries such as Colombia and Mexico, which have systematically deployed troops within their own borders, have been spared coup attempts. Consequently, it is not easy to find a direct relationship between military participation in internal security and a predilection for coups. Meanwhile, gendarmeries

have also been accused of human rights abuses. A case in point is the Honduran Military Public Order Police (Policía Militar de Orden Público, PMOP) –the result of transforming the armed forces’ military police corps into a gendarmerie– which was severely criticised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for its conduct during the 2017 elections.

The combination of military capabilities and policing roles –including criminal investigation– that forms the defining characteristic of gendarmeries makes them effective but enormously powerful organisations. Those who see militarised police forces as a less dangerous alternative for discharging internal security functions overlook the fact that troops are usually restricted in their operations to supporting the police, patrolling and combatting armed groups considered legitimate military targets in accordance with international law. They cannot, however, investigate crimes or carry out arrests without the presence of the police. This restricts their power over the population, a restriction that gendarmeries do not have.

Constructing a security force from scratch requires time, is expensive and faces the prospect of uncertain results. Security institutions –like virtually any other organisation– are living entities that accumulate experience –good and bad– and learn from their mistakes. It is therefore unrealistic to cobble together a gendarmerie at reduced cost and in a short period of time. The recruitment, training, organisation and deployment of an effective force that also respects human rights takes years and massive investment, requirements that are unacceptable to political leaders who urgently need to obtain short-term results.

The way in which these difficulties are avoided has not always been the most appropriate. This is the case with the PMOP in Honduras and the National Guard in Mexico. Both organisations were constructed from fragments of the respective armed forces –amalgamated with the former Federal Police in the case of Mexico– with the result that troops were replaced by other troops, this time as part of an institution lacking cohesion, doctrine and experience. This is a recipe for a plethora of problems that both organisations have accumulated, even if many observers have been less critical of López Obrador’s experiment than that of his Honduran counterpart Juan Orlando Hernández. So before disrupting a country’s security system and creating public order institutions from scratch, it is worth considering whether it is strictly necessary. Reforms tend to be a safer path to follow than revolutions, and this is true of the fight against crime too.

Conclusion

The fragility of the state and the difficulties of finding a replacement have consolidated the role of the armed forces as an attractive tool for Latin American governments, particularly when it comes to tackling a crisis. Although their recruitment and training processes suffer from significant shortcomings, the personnel management of the armed forces is less susceptible to political interference and personal favouritism than the civil administration. Presidents and ministers can change the military leadership at will, but it is much rarer for them to interfere at lower-ranking levels in the chain of command. The principles of hierarchy and discipline ensure that orders are obeyed without the risk of strikes and labour protests. Lastly, the armed forces are probably the only institution

under government control that have national scope. Not only can military bases be found in the most remote regions of Latin America, but navies and air forces can also ensure low-cost transport to anywhere in their countries.

When it comes to combatting organised crime, the armed forces also offer certain advantages that are valued by governments of the day. They have the ability to confront criminal groups however well armed they may be. Moreover, if their units engage in this type of mission for a limited time and are then replaced by others, they are more difficult to corrupt than local police officers, who are permanently vulnerable to threats and bribery. Meanwhile, populations tend to view them more sympathetically than local law-enforcement officers given that soldiers tend not to regulate their daily lives and do not have the power to arrest them. Lastly, the missions involved in combatting crime can be undertaken without any need for major increases to defence budgets, which have been kept at a minimum for years. In other words, the military contribution to the fight against criminal gangs and cartels comes cheap.

The prominence acquired by the armed forces in recent years harbours a profound paradox: it has nothing to do with the strengthening of the military institutions or their capacity to take over areas of state activity, and everything to do with the failure of a generation of politicians to modernise the state and relegate the armed services to tasks befitting them, without being obliged to turn to them each time a crisis overwhelms the limited capacity of the civil administration. The coveted return of the armed forces to their barracks that the leaders of anti-militarism have long advocated will only be possible when the modernisation of the region's states is successfully addressed.

The problem is that it may already be too late. On the brink of a depression that will set the region back in terms of economic development by many years, it appears unlikely that there enough resources or political will be left to address reforms that were not implemented during the 'good times'. Consequently, the region's governments and those in the US and Europe that aspire to help them navigate through the impending storm will have to look to the armed forces as the last resort of perennially enfeebled states. The combined effect of the public health crisis, the economic catastrophe and their inevitable consequences in terms of political instability and violence promise to turn them into a key instrument for protecting populations and underpinning institutions. The real challenge will lie in how to establish the mechanisms of civilian control and military adaptation in order to use the armed forces in support of the fragile Latin American democracies, simultaneously threatened by chaos and authoritarianism in a scenario not seen since the 1930s.