

South America

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, South America has experienced a decline of traditional conflicts and a rise of 'unconventional' violence. Current territorial disputes – such as those between Bolivia and Paraguay or Chile, Argentina and Chile, or Venezuela and Guyana – are expressions of centennial conflicts of interests that still reinforce differences and consolidate age-old rivalries. However, in the past few decades, these instabilities have not led to open warfare. 'Peace' in the orthodox sense – no active political confrontation and warfare – has finally become a rule in the region, albeit a fragile one. Inter-state incidents are almost inexistent; the last examples include Peru and Ecuador (1995), and Venezuela and Colombia (2008).

But the lack of trust among several South American countries has created the need to effectively safeguard the region to prevent intra-regional armed conflicts. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, all South American countries have developed confidence-building measures such as the signing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the abandonment of nuclear programs, among others. These initiatives supported the consolidation of a 'no-war zone', which was recently rephrased to a more positive expression, '*zona de paz*' or 'peace zone'. Fostered by regional and sub-regional organisations, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the overall process also took advantage of the consolidation of democracy and economic growth.

The current peace and security architecture reflects an historical approach by Latin American countries in general and emphasises non-interference in domestic issues, territorial inviolability and sovereignty. Nevertheless, the real challenge to peace comes from unconventional forms of violence. Examples include armed conflicts in Colombia (FARCs and paramilitary groups) and in Peru (*Sendero Luminoso*, or Shining Path), and situations of armed violence in urban settings in Brazil. Across South America, governments, private sector actors and civil society groups are experimenting with new methods and approaches to building peace from below, especially at the city level.

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This paper is structured in three main sections. Section 1 presents issues related to conventional violence in South America and the existent peacebuilding structure to prevent and contain it. Section 2 tackles the current status of non-conventional violence, which is in fact the main threat to peace in the region. Finally, Section 3 explores key opportunities to build peace in South America in the near future. Despite the serious limitations, this relatively recent and very dynamic situation also provides opportunities to explore different and innovative policies that could lead to positive change.

Challenges to building peace in South America

Conventional conflicts and the South American peace and security architecture

Most armed conflicts among South American countries were solved in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the second half of the 20th century, more specifically, several protracted conflicts throughout the region were overcome by dictatorships, which were then replaced by a wave of democracies in the early 1990s. In 2014, the list of unsolved situations that could eventually escalate into open warfare include the Chaco War (Bolivia and Paraguay), the Pacific War (Bolivia and Chile), the Beagle Channel dispute (Chile and Argentina) and the dispute in the Essequibo region (Venezuela and Guyana). Recent tensions between Argentina and an extra-regional player, the United Kingdom, could also be included.

Hot issues among South American countries often relate to territorial integrity and include lack of border delimitation and even lack of demarcation, especially in forested areas, dating to the colonial era. Peace is still fragile in the region and was, in fact, a major element to animate the efforts towards regional integration in three dimensions: economic, political and security.

The most relevant regional organization for building peace is the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, South America has been portrayed as a no-war region, or, more recently, 'zona de paz',¹ which is explicitly reflected in all UNASUR documents.² The organisation is today the main regional forum to exchange information and promote transparency on security and defense in order to build mutual confidence among its members; that is, all South American countries. It was through UNASUR that states were able to handle constitutional crises in Ecuador and Paraguay, as well as to settle a dispute between Venezuela and Colombia (2008).³ It is also a space for a common defense policy, especially to protect the region's natural resources against outsiders.

There are clear limitations to the incipient and precarious peacebuilding structure of the region. First, behind regional and sub-regional organisations that deal with political and security issues, such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), *Alianza Bolivariana para las Américas* (ALBA), or Andean Community of Nations (CAN), there is a mindset privileging the principles and norms that cemented stability in the region in the last century. These include utmost respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, very much linked to a fear of interference in domestic

¹ See F. Calle, 'El espacio sudamericano como 'zona de paz' a preservar frente a factores de turbulencia intra y extra-regionales', in N.A. Jobim, S. W. Etchegoyen and J. P. Alsina (Eds.) *Segurança Internacional: perspectivas brasileiras* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2010); L. C. Amado, 'A crise na América do Sul e a solução diplomática', 2008; M. Herz, 'Segurança Internacional na América do Sul' in N.A. Jobim, S. W. Etchegoyen and J. P. Alsina (Eds.) *Segurança Internacional: perspectivas brasileiras* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2010); D. Mares, *Violent Peace in Latin America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

² The latest example is the Outcome Document of CELAC's II Summit, held at La Habana, Cuba, on 28-29 January 2014.

³ Pabon & Bermeo, 'Las relaciones de seguridad entre Colombia y Ecuador: una nueva construcción de confianza'. RESDAL – Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina, 2008; B. Pothuraju, 'UNASUR and security in South America', Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, 2012.

affairs, either as an inheritance from colonial times or to avoid neo-colonialism, for example through the United States' influence.

By reinforcing these principles and norms, South American countries tend not to include situations or tensions concerning the borders of one another, or internal matters that could affect regional, national or even local security, in their foreign policy calculations. This masks a reality of existing and increasing situations of armed violence *inside* most of these countries, making it very difficult to overcome some of the key challenges to building peace. As a consequence, real progress has been frustrated by a lack of genuine integration. What is emerging are separate sub-regional 'political' and 'economic' communities, emphasising prosperity as the model for stability and apparently ignoring that unequal growth has an impact on high levels of lethal violence, thus threatening stability.⁴

South America and the intensification of unconventional violence

Data gathered in the first decade of the 21st century clearly indicates that the main threats to peace in South America come, in fact, from unconventional forms of violence. Factors such as rapid and uncoordinated urbanization, inequality, chronic unemployment, institutional underdevelopment and impunity, as well as a repressive war on drugs have triggered spiraling rates of violence within countries and cities in the region. This is often recurrent, and many countries are experiencing repeated cycles of criminal violence.⁵

According to the 2012 Report on Citizen Security, published by the Organization of American States, the average homicide rate in South America has dropped considerably from 2000 to 2010, from 26.1% to 21.1%. In the same period, the average rate in the Western hemisphere has also decreased, albeit less significantly, from 16.4% to 15.6%. When compared to other sub-regions of the Americas, homicide has dramatically increased in Central America (from 26.6% in 2000 to 43.3% in 2010) and remained more or less stable in the Caribbean (from 16.4% to 21.9%), but especially in North America (from 7.3% to 7.8%).⁶ It is also relevant to note that, between 2005 and 2009, 25% of all violent deaths in the world happened in only 14 countries – half of them in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Colombia and Venezuela, but also El Salvador, Jamaica, Honduras, Guatemala and Belize.⁷ In Brazil alone, more than 50,000 people were killed by firearms in 2013.⁸

These pressures are particularly intense in border areas, which are often no-man's lands. In Latin America as a whole and South America more specifically, border areas are highly complex spaces, often marked not only by lethal violence, but also forced displacement of people (including human trafficking), the existence of illegal groups, state corruption and a general sense of impunity. In some cases, these issues have undermined governance, forcing governments to cede authority over some areas to criminal groups. Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela are key cases. In the north of the region, for example, Colombian borders are remarkably turbulent, especially near Venezuela and Ecuador. This led the Ecuadorian government to accuse Colombia of bringing its domestic issue to three Ecuadorian provinces by the border, becoming the most violent in the country. In the south, Ciudad del Este – a Paraguayan city in the tri-state border area of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay – has become a

⁴ World Health Organisation, 'Preventing violence and reducing its impact: how development agencies can help'.

⁵ World Bank, 'World Development Report 2011 – Conflict, Security and Development', Washington, DC, 2011.

⁶ Organisation of the American States, 'Report on Citizen Security in the Americas', p. 20, OAS Hemispheric Security Observatory, 2012.

⁷ K. Krause, R. Muggah and E. Gilgen, *Global Burden of Armed Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸ J. J. Waiselfisz, 'Mapa da Violência 2013', 2013.

safe haven for money laundering, smuggling and suspicious activities with radical Islamic communities.⁹

Parallel to that, South America retains three of the most wanted assets of the 21st century: oil, land and water. Despite holding only 6% of the world's population and about 12% of the global territory, South America grasps almost 20% of the global proved oil reserves,¹⁰ 25% of the world's arable land and 23% of all freshwater reserves.¹¹ Legal or illegal disputes over these and other natural resources found in the region (timber and gold, among others) will certainly become a major issue for disturbing peace. This is already true for disputes among countries and as sources for power disputes among transnational and local illegal groups.

As of today, drugs are the main fuel for most armed violence situations in the region. They play a direct role in influencing high homicide rates (especially among youth), including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and overpopulation in prisons, among others.¹² Recent and unprecedented developments at the regional level (UNASUR and OAS) and national level (Uruguay) have triggered a serious debate on the regional drug policy. In 2012, the Uruguayan Ministry of Defense declared that the war on drugs did not reduce consumption and, what is worse, contributed to making trafficking networks increasingly violent.¹³ In the same year, during UNASUR meetings in Cartagena, Colombia, the former UNASUR Secretary General, María Emma Mejía, declared that 'the war on drugs has failed' and that non-military solutions need to be found.¹⁴ One year later, the OAS launched two unparalleled reports on the matter, and its General Assembly opened debates aimed at developing a comprehensive policy to drug issues in the Americas.¹⁵ The expectations are that these changes, if effectively implemented, could influence stability in the region and may lead to a new drug policy at the global level.

Opportunities for building peace in South America

Building peace in such a complex environment requires long-term planning and a list of recommendations to be potentially explored. These could include the following themes: (a) strengthening effective regional integration; (b) focusing on an expanded concept of prevention and early diplomacy; (c) working at the normative level to strengthen regimes that would discourage transnational crimes; (d) fostering South-South and triangular cooperation; and (e) incentivising positive bilateral or triangular experiences.

Strengthening effective regional integration. Fostering and deepening regional integration is key to strengthening not only the relations between countries, but also to create stronger mechanisms to protect and regulate borders that could potentially be overseen by regional supragovernmental bodies. This should promote a broader perspective of regional integration, one that goes beyond state-level conflict issues. In a 2012 meeting of the South American Defense Council – UNASUR's body for defense and security – held in Cartagena, Colombia,

⁹ I. Briscoe, 'Conflictos en la frontera: las nuevas zonas calientes en América Latina' in C. Brigagão (ed.) *A América Latina e os Conflitos Fronteiriços* (Rio de Janeiro: Universidade Candido Mendes, 2010).

¹⁰ Thanks to Venezuela (211.2 billion barrels), and to a lesser extent, Brazil (14 billion barrels) in 2012.

¹¹ P. Gama and M. Vinícius, 'O Conselho de Defesa Sul-Americano e sua instrumentalidade' in N. A. Jobim, S. W. Etchegoyen and J. P. Alsina (eds.) *Segurança Internacional: perspectivas brasileiras* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2010).

¹² I. S. Carvalho, 'O Despertar da América Latina: uma revisão do novo debate sobre política de drogas', Instituto Igarape, 2014.

¹³ M. Moffett and E. Kaplan, 'Uruguay considers selling marijuana', Wall Street Journal, 21 June 2012.

¹⁴ B. Pothuraju, 2012, *op cit*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

participating ministers discussed for the first time the idea of creating a specific council for crime and security, especially for transnational organised crimes, possibly involving Ministries of Justice and Interior. It remains to be seen when, how and what format this new council, which is still to be created, will have. But this could be a key opportunity to effectively influence the scope of South American integration, since it would deal with the major issues that challenge peace and security in the region.

Developing an expanded concept of prevention. Strengthening the focus on prevention and early diplomacy is essential, but through an expanded lens; one that includes not only conflict but also the prevention of violence at all levels (regional, national and city levels). This implies creating policies, programs and measures to prevent crime and violence, including projects related to gender-based violence and the protection of victims. It is also relevant to better control and regulate the main triggers of violence in the region: alcohol, drugs and weapons.¹⁶ Solutions to these problems should not, however, be purely based on repressive and punitive measures, such as those implemented in some countries in the region, but should be centered on progressive and humane policies focused on prevention.¹⁷ The World Bank, for example, has suggested a three-fold approach to prevent conflict and violence, and to allow the adequate reconstruction of nations and states, focusing activities on citizen security, justice and jobs.¹⁸

Strengthening regimes to discourage transnational crimes. Treaties of direct relevance to conflict and violence prevention must be signed, ratified and effectively implemented in the region. As of April 2014, the Arms Trade Treaty was signed by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname and Uruguay, but ratified by none. Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela have not even signed it. This is due not only to the fact that these four countries are domestically involved in armed violence (Brazil is too), but mainly due to the lack of trust that still reigns among them.

Fostering South-South and triangular cooperation. South-South and triangular cooperation have a pro-active role to promote peace and to dismantle transnational crimes. There are sensitivities around border control, again due to the lack of trust, but positive examples include efforts to improve community policing and enhance judicial/human rights provisions in third countries. It would be worth exploring opportunities to foster networks of South American cities that are investing in peace architectures – especially through progressive violence prevention activities, crime prevention and environmental design measures. Recent findings indicate that the most effective citizen security activities were implemented at the city level and include positive experiences in Bogotá, Cali and Medellín (Colombia), Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Brazil), among others.¹⁹

Incentivising positive experiences. Highlighting and incentivising positive bilateral or triangular experiences in promoting peace by South America could be extremely significant. Several countries in the region, like Brazil and Colombia, are true laboratories of experimentation and, in some cases, of innovation in terms of safety and security.²⁰ Moreover, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), through head-office or in-country teams, could embrace or

¹⁶ UNDP, 'Informe Regional de Desarrollo Humano 2013-2014 – Seguridad Ciudadana con rostro humano: diagnóstico y propuestas para América Latina', 2013.

¹⁷ The prison system in Brazil is an example of a malfunctioning public security system that has unduly imprisoned 50,000 people. These policies have failed miserably and, besides not contributing to decrease criminal activities, they have also created problems such as overcrowded prisons and human rights violations.

¹⁸ World Bank, 2011, *op cit*.

¹⁹ R. Muggah and K. Aguirre, 'Mapping citizen security interventions in Latin America: reviewing the evidence', NOREF, 2013: http://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/265_91204_NOREF_Report_Muggah-Aguirre_web1.pdf.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

foster development projects that are sensitive to violence/conflict, and be oriented towards those groups and sub-groups most affected by it. Another incentive would be to create an annual regional peace prize that could be delivered by the United Nations, World Bank, UNDP or by UNASUR.

Conclusion

The current peace and security structure in South America might be the solution to traditional conflicts, but it also represents an obstacle to effectively building peace in the region. The current approach is necessary, but not sufficient. It needs to be updated and expanded in creative ways, guided by some of the audacious and innovative processes and methods that are found throughout the region, predominantly at the local level. These experiences, when systematically organised and analysed, could help to prevent and reduce violence at national and regional levels, and could be a valuable source of inspiration for other countries in the Global South currently facing similar challenges, such as in Africa.

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About this Paper: This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

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About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

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