



REPORT ON THE VI DEFENSE MINISTERIAL OF THE AMERICAS QUITO, ECUADOR

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The VI Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas was held in Quito, Ecuador from November 16 to 21.¹ The meeting was held in the context of increasingly ambiguous definitions of threats to hemispheric security and national defense. The redefinition of the concepts of regional security, defense, public security and terrorism that is being discussed at these meetings affects nations' situations directly and indirectly. On one hand, it could change the role of the armed forces in the countries of the hemisphere in coming decades. In addition, and considering the recent history of authoritarian regimes and armed conflict in the region, issues such as the militarization of public security or the vague use of the idea of terrorism is already causing an increase in human rights violations and weakening of democratic institutions in some countries.

Some organizations had asked to participate as conference observers and were accepted. Among them were WOLA, CELS, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ) Ecuador, FLACSO Ecuador, and Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL).

Terrorism and “Narcoterrorism”

The conference strengthened the use of a vague and nebulous concept of terrorism which is being promoted by the United States and especially the U.S. Southern Command, and increased the tendency to view the region's social and political problems through the prism of security. Since the incorporation of the “multidimensional” concept of security, adopted by the Declaration of Security in the Americas of 2003, both the work groups and the declaration consolidated a broad and confused definition of terrorism. Thus, at times, terrorism, drug trafficking, illicit arms sales and transnational crimes were all treated as the same problem.

The Declaration of Quito should be analyzed in this context. Like the Conference on Hemispheric Security in October of 2003, the declaration recognizes that every state has the sovereign right to identify its own national security and defense priorities.² At the same time, the defense ministers recognized that it is necessary to strengthen sub-regional alliances to guarantee the hemisphere's security.

¹ The process of Defense Ministers' Conferences began in 1995 at the request of the United States, since defense and armed forces issues had not been included in the first Summit of the Americas in Miami the year before.

² Paragraph 5 of the Declaration.

Some aspects of the meeting are worth noting. The Colombian delegation, with U.S. support, proposed some measures that tended to overemphasize the problem of “narcoterrorism” as the main threat to hemispheric security and the struggle against it as a central priority that should be shared by all countries. This was evident throughout the working sessions. However, when the Declaration was drafted, the other delegations rejected many of these proposals. Among them were the ideas of establishing within the OAS a list of terrorist organizations and individuals and the formation of a regional Latin American army to combat “narcoterrorism.”

A clear example of the inclusion of different practices under the common denominator of terrorism was the negotiation of a paragraph dedicated exclusively to terrorism—and declared the conference’s support of the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE) and its commitment to international agreements and Security Council resolutions on the fight against terrorism.³ However, when the plenary session began to discuss the final text of the declaration, the paragraph appeared with the following proposal for language to be added at the beginning.

“The prevention, opposition and elimination of all forms of terrorism, organized crime and illegal drug and weapons traffic and their association and effects on the region’s security is a shared objective.”

In this way all the practices mentioned were associated with the mechanisms and norms related to terrorism. Finally, thanks to the efforts of some civil society organizations, Brazil proposed a change to the text. While it still links the practices, it includes the support for CICTE and international anti-terrorism standards in a different paragraph and adds a new paragraph supporting the work of CICAD and CIFTA, which are OAS commissions working against drug abuse and illegal arms traffic respectively. While it was not possible to separate and distinguish the practices, it was made clear that there were mechanisms—and norms—to treat them differently from those of the CICTE.⁴

In the negotiations, while the U.S. proposed stronger language on terrorism⁵, on several occasions it refused to incorporate respect for international human rights and humanitarian law as conditions for the fight against terrorism.

The position presented by Brazil contrasted with the positions of the United States and Colombia concerning terrorism. Brazil’s vice president and defense minister, Alencar Gomes da Silva said that strengthening international law and multilateralism is the only way to keep the peace and legitimize the use of force under exceptional circumstances. He also stressed that cooperation is the only way to combat structural threats such as terrorism by attacking extreme poverty, hunger, increasing social inequality, etc. “Extreme poverty and social exclusion of broad sectors of the population are also affecting stability and democracy, eroding social cohesiveness and undermining the security of the states.”⁶

³ Paragraph 23 “They reiterate their most forceful rejection of all form of terrorism and their support for the work of the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE). They also reiterate their support of the Inter-American Convention Against Terrorism, international conventions aimed at fighting terrorism, United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1566 (2004) and the 12 UN conventions and protocols on terrorism in accordance with the respective domestic laws of each State.”

⁴ Paragraphs 26 and 27 of the Declaration.

⁵ The words of the chief of the U.S. delegation during the last plenary session were very eloquent: “Do not be timid in the face of terrorism.” Equally eloquent were the statements of Colombia’s deputy defense minister: “It is necessary to strengthen the Declaration in referring to terrorism.”

⁶ Paragraph 2 of the Declaration.

Division of the Concepts of Security and Defense

The declaration and the plenary sessions and working groups strengthened the recent trend to confuse the concepts of defense and security and treat them almost the same. In this way, the conference legitimized practices and political debates that have progressed in many countries of the region about the participation of the armed forces in internal security. In his opening speech, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld implied that armed forces must have a mandate to act in matters of domestic security.⁷

By incorporating the multidimensional concept of security, the Declaration of the Quito deals with the concepts of defense and security almost as one and sometimes it is difficult to identify their differences and specificities in the text. In addition many paragraphs refer to the armed forces and the public security forces. Some countries, including Argentina, urged incorporation of the phrase “according to the case” to make it clear that when the text mentions public security forces it is referring to those countries (Costa Rica and Panama) that do not have armed forces. It was so confusing that during the session to discuss a subtopic a group spoke exclusively of security and public security forces. In this case, the Brazilian delegation had to remind participants that it was a conference of defense ministers and not police chiefs.

On this point, the vice president and defense minister of Brazil made it clear that for countries that are members of the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI) the armed forces’ role is defense of national sovereignty and the national territory. On the other hand, the police and intelligence forces have jurisdiction over prevention and opposition to terrorism and transnational organized crime through cooperation and exchange of intelligence. Unfortunately, this regional position was not reflected when time came to negotiate the final text.

Joint Actions and Peace-Keeping Missions

On the other hand, the ministers underlined the importance of joint participation of various countries in peace-keeping missions. Along these lines, they stressed the importance of strengthening U.N.-authorized peace-keeping operations or those conducted within the framework of treaties and peace agreements.⁸

In recent years, the Southern Command has urged coordination of intelligence and maritime operations in the hemisphere under the proposal called Enduring Friendship. This project would establish a multinational naval force of the Americas headed by the United States to deal with what that country considers international threats to its security on the high seas, such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling, uncontrolled migration, terrorism, drug traffic, illegal fishing and other threats to marine life, dangers to navigation and humanitarian emergencies. With respect to the Quito Declaration, the United States promoted the idea that interoperability (that is, joint action) of the armed forces includes naval cooperation

⁷ Speech by Donald Rumsfeld: “[...] Terrorists, drug traffickers, hostage takers, and criminal gangs form an anti-social combination that increasingly seeks to destabilize civil societies.[...] Since September 11, 2001, we have had to conduct an essential reexamination of the relationships between our military and our law enforcement responsibilities in the U.S.[...] Our citizens depend on us to clearly define the roles, the missions, and the responsibilities of our various security forces.[...]”

⁸ Paragraph 16 or 19 of the Declaration.

for the protection of trade routes and transportation infrastructures. However, the final document of the conference is limited to mentioning interoperability relating to maritime safety and peace-keeping missions.⁹

The IADB and its Relationship to the OAS

The conference's treatment of the Inter-American Defense board (IADB) had raised great expectations since there are countries that promote including terrorism in its mandate and changing it into an operational organ.¹⁰ Brazil's vice president said in his speech that the IADB must be a technical military advisory agency of the OAS with no operational functions. Finally the declaration was limited to recommending that member states include representatives of defense ministers in groups now working on this topic within the Committee on Hemispheric Security.¹¹

Strategic Alliances

The close alliance of the U.S. and Colombia was a central factor in defining the meeting's agenda. At the same time, the countries of Central America and the Caribbean did not seem to differ much from the U.S. agenda in terms of the view of security, particularly in terms of treating terrorism and organized crime in the same way. Also, during the debate over several articles, the members of CARICOM united to support a joint position. Finally, the expectation that the expanded MERCOSUR would have a united position was not satisfied. Beyond the speech of the Brazilian vice president and defense minister, at the time the final text of the conference was being negotiated, the countries of the expanded MERCOSUR did not present, in general, common positions about critical issues such as terrorism or the importance of including respect for international humanitarian law while combating it.

Civil Society Participation

For the civil society organizations that attended, it was obvious that security and defense issues are being defined at these kinds of meetings, and the way they are defined have a great impact on national situations and regional discussions.

Since several states were opposed to the participation of civil society organizations at the conference, the invitation to be present was a step forward. We think that this type of opportunity can be very important since the discussions and decisions resulting from such a meeting can seriously affect respect for human rights and democratic institutions. For this reason, we believe that nongovernmental organizations must increase our representation in meetings of this type and, at the same time, improve the quality of this participation.

⁹ Paragraph 19 of the Declaration. Although support for the Enduring Friendship proposal was not included in the Declaration, the Southern Command continues to promote this program in its bilateral relations with countries.

¹⁰ The United States is a leading supporter of this position to expand the mandate of the Inter-American Defense Board, which was created in 1942 as a technical advisory body on defense issues. Central American countries and some Caribbean countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago) share this position. The remaining Caribbean countries have not taken a position. The ALADI members oppose the broadening of the IADB. Canada maintains an intermediate position.

¹¹ Paragraph 34 of the Declaration.