Capabilities of Police and Military Forces in Central America -- A Comparative Analysis of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua

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Abstract
A difficult transition to a new paradigm of Democratic Security and the subsequent process of military restructuring during the nineties led El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua to re-consider their old structures and functions of their armed forces and police agencies. This study compares the institutions in the four countries mentioned above to assess their current condition and response capacity in view of the contemporary security challenges in Central America.

This report reveals that the original intention of limiting armies to defend and protect borders has been threatened by the increasing participation of armies in public security. While the strength of armies has been consolidated in terms of numbers, air and naval forces have failed to become strengthened or sufficiently developed to effectively combat organized crime and drug trafficking and are barely able to conduct air and sea operations.

Honduras has been the only country that has maintained a proportional distribution of its armed forces. However, security has been in the hands of a Judicial Police, supervised by the Public Ministry. The Honduran Judicial Police has been limited to exercising preventive police duties, prohibited from carrying out criminal investigations. Nicaragua, meanwhile, possesses a successful police force, socially recognized for maintaining satisfactory levels of security surpassing the Guatemalan and El Salvadoran police, which have not achieved similar results despite of having set up a civilian police force separate from the military. El Salvador meanwhile, has excelled in promoting a Police Academy and career professional education, even while not having military attaches in other countries. Regarding budgetary issues, the four countries allocate almost twice the amount of funding on their security budgets in comparison to what is allocated to their defense budgets. However, spending in both areas is low when taking into account each country's GDP as well as their high crime rates. Regional security challenges must be accompanied by a professionalization of the regional armies focused on protecting and defending borders. Therefore, strong institutional frameworks to support the fight against crime and drug trafficking are required. It will require the strengthening of customs, greater control of illicit arms trafficking, investment in education initiatives, creating employment opportunities and facilitating significant improvements in the judicial system, as well as its accessibility to the average citizen.

Comments
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Nicaragua is Central America's poorest country, yet its children aren't fleeing to the border along with their Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Honduran neighbors. Experts say that's because of the country's low crime rate, effective police force and unique migration history. A map shows Mexico and the countries in Central America — Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and Colombia. The alarming influx of children and families from Central America has fueled demonstrations and debate over U.S. immigration policy.