

SYMPOSIUM: PARTNER'S OF CHOICE? A WESTERN HEMISPHERE SECURITY CONUNDRUM

PANEL: SECURITY COOPERATION AROUND THE CARIBBEAN BASIN

CENTRAL AMERICA'S APPROACH TO SECURITY INTEGRATION

CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES AND MILITARY INTEGRATION

Challenges of the Nineties.-In the 1990's Central America had overcome the experience of the East-West confrontation that had turned the region into a battleground causing the expansion of the military and police establishments. The region was getting ready to live under a new set of rules. This meant facing significant challenges such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, depredation of natural resources, corruption and very little economic growth. Governments saw the need to confront these challenges as a vehicle to achieve a much needed change of the economic and social status of the vast majorities of the Central American population.

A New Set of Rules.-Signing the Protocol of Tegucigalpa in 1991 signified instating the Central American Integration System. Its underlying purpose was to transform Central America into a region of peace, liberty, democracy and development. It had as an ultimate end creating a community with shared values in the search of common welfare for all. No doubt that the region had embarked in a new quest.

This in turn became the basis for the military forces to initiate confidence building measures to achieve a better understanding and reliable communications between them. The goals were to assure a democratic security model that would permit no more intestinal wars and instead provide a climate of security to allow integration and economic development. Gone were the days of unlimited funds for the continuous growth of the military establishments.

On November 12,1997 the Presidents of Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua signed a decree creating the Conference of the Central American Armed Forces or CFAC, the Spanish acronym by which it is known. Its mission was to contribute to security and to regional military development and integration. Its purpose was to promote a permanent and systematic process of cooperation, coordination and mutual support. The ultimate goal was to provide an optimum level of defense against the threats that could imperil democratic security and regional development.

Unity and Understanding.-Most of the central american countries recognized the need to work together to face the threats that were common to them. This was the motivation needed to enhance unity and understanding among the military institutions. Eventually new threats would arise as part of the commercial and economic openings that were taking place between these countries. One must realize that progress also has its side effects and Central America was not immune to it. Organized crime saw the opportunity to reach out and enhance their presence by taking advantage of the undergoing changes in the region.

Soon Central America realized that drug, people and weapon trafficking posed a real threat to social stability and governance. This went beyond the domains of the members of CFAC and affected non members such as Costa Rica and Panama. A common enemy had been identified and the challenge was how to fight it with effectiveness.

Emerging Threats.- First, the nature of these threats has to be understood. The fact that they 1) have a transnational and non military nature, 2) operate across national borders with no containment, 3) surpass current military doctrine as well as national capabilities and resources, 4) thrive on poverty and unfavourable economic conditions and 5) have a dynamic organization makes them a complex problem to work with. Collaboration between governments had to be taken seriously to attain a certain degree of success in this confrontation.

Joint Efforts.-This led to accepting that through inter-institutional efforts, at a national level to start with and followed by an international instance, can one expect to have the tools and resources, (-logistical, political and financial-), to achieve adequate results. This involves not only the public sector at its different levels and institutions, but also the participation of civil society, which comprises different organizations representing all sectors of society.

An unexpected factor was the questioning of the armed force's participation in repressive actions during the eighties. The reaction from the military establishment to clear those accusations gave way to the beginning of a modernization process within the institution. It led to more awareness in their role not only as defenders of national sovereignty, but guardians of internal security and wellbeing of the people.

CLIMATE OF TRUST IN THE REGION

Confidence Building Measures.-The climate of trust in Central America strengthens with the confidence building measures that the military and the police have been able to establish through CFAC and the Commission of Central American Police. The latter includes Costa Rica and Panama, countries not present in the military establishment of the region. Within this context, there is a fulfilment of the purposes and principles of the Letter of Creation of the American States, in terms of guaranteeing the application of international rights and giving impulse to friendly and cooperative relations to strengthen security in the region.

- **Presidential Summits.-**A very important element in generating a climate of trust has been the Presidential Summits. This event gathers all of the Central American presidents, including heads of state of Panama, Belize and Dominican Republic to discuss issues pertaining to the economic, social and security status of their people. Their objective is to define measures that contribute to the overall welfare of the population. Political will, a fundamental asset in making things happen, no doubt is the catalyst in getting initiatives set forth and going. This high level of decision making opens up the way for other instances, such as the Security Commission, which is part of the System for Central American Integration, (SICA), to carry on those mandates.

- **Recognition of a Common Enemy.**-The fact that all countries in the region recognize and accept drug, persons and arms trafficking as a threat to their social stability and governance is in itself a crucial element in building a broad climate of trust. The outsized proportions of these threats compared to states' capabilities and resources serve to promote reliance and confidence between them and facilitate working together to confront or dissuade the growth of organized crime in the region. This joint response is essential to be able to counter their common enemy's plans to increase its activities and eventually exercise more control in the region.
- **Armed Forces and Civil Society.**- Globalization has also brought about changes in policies and strategies in the armed forces. Most military institutions have started a rapprochement with human rights organizations to discuss issues involving the forced disappearances of civilians during the eighties, the climax of the effects of the cold war in CA. This opening has led to more thorough discussions of what and why it happened, but most important is having these two sectors coming together through dialogue and understanding the need for a renewed working relationship.

Working together is no easy task, not internally let alone regionally, but advances are seen through the inter-institutional efforts set forth by the Central American states. Clearly, objectives have been identified and results are being seen in the pursuit of a common strategy for the region.

Difficulties to Overcome.-Still, there is a long road ahead, even though significant advance has been achieved in strengthening inter-regional cooperation between the heads of state of these countries, some obstacles are still present.

- **Different State Policies.**-Case in point is the reluctance of Costa Rica and to some extent Panama to have their security forces working close together with the armed forces of country members of CFAC. Both countries recognize the fact that drug trafficking is one of the major problems they face internally, but particular political policies, keep them from integrating more openly in this combined process.
- **Information Sharing.**-Another example of limited trust in the region is the use of information processed by the intelligence systems of each country. There is still great reluctance in sharing it in a more open manner and could be the weak link in this process of cooperative and integral security. The adequate and opportune use of information is essential for achieving success and consolidating a power structure that is capable of sending the right message to organized crime.
- **Balance of Forces.**-The initiative for a reduction of forces and the quest for equilibrium in armaments has become a plan, but still, there is no significant advance in the implementation of such objective. There is too much foot dragging and not only from the military, but also from the security forces. A much more open approach seems to be necessary to surpass this détente.

- **Territorial Disputes.**-To complete this picture, one has to take into account the territorial disputes on border issues that still trouble these countries. Usually these problems have more political connotation than the possibility of going to war over them. The latter is evidenced by governments' decisions in taking these issues to international courts to be settled pacifically. Still, problems of this nature serve a political purpose and will continue to arise. Regretfully, this serves to heat up tension within the region and gives the military a justification in continuing to arm up to defend national sovereignty instead of focusing more on the new threats that are the real risk to democratic institutionalism.

GUIDELINES GOVERNING INTEGRAL AND COOPERATIVE ACTION

Need of Stability and Governance.-The underlying principle here is achieving political and economical integration that provides the much needed stability and governance through the generation of more and better paid jobs. But also by generating a more secure ambient to assure the well being of most of the population in the central american region.

No doubt the steps are being taken in that direction. The presidents and heads of state of the region now have more political and private enterprise backing than before, probably due to a more defined set of rules to play by, which enhances the opportunity of achieving results.

Presidential Summits, Declarations and Treaties.-The summits have become an effective tool to center attention on specific issues and to elicit interactive response from the rest of the hierarchies of the governmental establishment as well as from the different organizations that comprise our society. Within this parameter, the joint efforts and actions gain more importance and provide the basis for a more effective course of action. The Declaration of Central America United Against Terrorism is a good example of this effort.

Another instrument that provides guidelines for integral and cooperative action is the Treaty for Democratic Security in Central America. It establishes that regional security requires participation of military forces and the police or security forces in order to combat effectively, at a regional level, the threats that compromise the democratic security such as terrorism, arm and drug trafficking and organized crime as a whole.

Police, Armed Forces and SICA.-The central american police forces have come together under a Commission and have at least thirteen plans for different actions against criminal acts. The military under CFAC have also come up with specific plans to confront terrorism, drug trafficking and other related crimes. The organization known as SICA has also contributed to establish mechanisms that support these initiatives and to provide standards and rules to make them viable.

Lack of a Standard Framework.- However, many of the plans that have been devised are not being implemented due to the lack of symmetry in the laws of each country and the risk of being accused of relenting national sovereignty, which is equivalent to high treason.

An appropriate and practical instrument that unifies the rules and facilitates the operability of these plans must be conceived and put into effect. We must think in terms of an international treaty for the region, it would be quicker and easier to get approval of one treaty than trying to reform numerous codes and laws.

Normally under the present laws governing Central American countries the international treaties have a privileged status, which allows its application without undergoing the process of reforming existing laws.

ADVANTAGES AND CAUTIONS ON CENTRAL AMERICA'S APPROACH TO COOPERATIVE SECURITY

Benefits of Cooperative Action.-The approach to cooperative security being followed by the Central American states seems to be the correct one considering the results seen so far. Though maybe limited, but one has to recognize the values of these efforts. The biggest advantage is the recognition that isolated actions will never suffice to fight the new threats effectively.

- **Awareness.**- Cooperative actions has allowed awareness of the capabilities of the enemy. By all standards the availability of financial resources, access to high tech equipment, logistical support and access to confidential information surpass the capabilities of the CA states.
- **Pooling and Optimization of Resources.**-The capabilities of this particular foe led to the conception of new strategies from the governments. Their lack of sufficient resources made them realize the importance of pooling resources and setting up joint efforts to counterbalance their limitations. It is important to emphasize that these efforts require the participation of not only public institutions, but the private sector and the organizations comprising civil society, as well, in order to have a better probability of success.
- **Sound Environment for Economic Growth.**- Combined actions should lead to more cohesion and more effective results among the different entities participating in the process. The actions should also lead to ensure a sound environment that will allow governments to concentrate in developing their plans to reduce poverty and achieve better levels of social stability. Complementary steps must be taken to attract local and foreign investment that is essential for sustained economic growth. All of this will reattribute the most poor with better living conditions.
- **Reduction of Illegal Immigration.**- Another advantage is the impact on immigration. A growing and sound economy will provide better opportunities and more jobs which will probably reduce the amount of people leaving their countries. It is worthwhile noting that this not only pertains to skilled labour but to professionals with university degrees that would consider coming back to their countries or not leaving them.

Precautions.-On the other hand, there are precautions to be taken.

- **Acceptance of a New Doctrine.**-The incorporation of the military in law enforcement activities requires a well conceived and marketable plan to avoid reluctance, from their part, in participating. Open discussions are necessary to

prevent them from perceiving it as a risk to their existence and power structure. The mission, the vision and its objectives have to be thoroughly socialized on the grounds of the changing scenarios regionally and world wide. At the end of the process, it should be clear that this doctrine will benefit and strengthen the military institution.

- **A Turn to the Left?**- Another aspect to consider is what to expect from the new government in Nicaragua. Will it play with the same rules as the rest of their peers or will it deviate from its course? If the latter happens, it could probably pose a political threat to rest of countries in the region. We can not close our eyes on the fact that Latin America is undergoing changes. Some governments that recently have come into power tend to emphasize a populist doctrine, but so far with a couple of exceptions most seem inclined in maintaining the course of a stable economy with fiscal discipline and respect to the institutional legal framework. Nonetheless, the rest of the Central American states have to be keep their attention focused to detect any significant departures from course that could affect the stability of the region.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A PARTNER OF CHOICE

This in effect is the riddle that has to be solved and due to its complexity a definite answer is going to be hard to find. Coming up with a wish list could make us feel very happy, but it would leave us with a false pretension of achievement and with more frustration than satisfaction.

Basis for Finding a Partner of Choice.-The dictionary defines partner as an associate who works with others towards a common goal. Under the circumstances, this could be the basis for finding a partner of choice. The countries of the region have no doubt advanced in setting common goals to achieve a strategy that will provide social stability and economic growth.

This is so, because the CA states 1) have come to terms with the changes that globalization has imposed in economic policies and security liabilities, 2) share the same criteria in terms of providing better living conditions to their population, especially those that have very low incomes or no income at all and 3) coincide with the need of an effective security plan to ensure a sound environment for development.

Characteristics.- To have a cooperative and integral security plan that works, partners should identify themselves with challenges they face and threats they confront. A great deal has to do with being able to share, in the broad sense of the word. Partners must share political views, technology, logistics and information. There must also be willingness to make financial and human resources available. And last but not least strong leadership and political will must be present.

But it is not only a matter of having these characteristics present, it is also a process that requires be understood and put to test. The central american countries have been quite successful in setting up quite a few **initiatives** that have required extensive lobbying to reach agreement. Many of them are supported by strong political will and share political views, but few have been able to surpass the barrier of becoming **operative actions**.

Becoming Operational.-This second phase poses a different scenario. The objective here is to get results that make a partnership worthwhile. It must relay the appropriate message to the different actors involved, friends as well as foes. But what has to be done to ensure success?

- **Legal Framework.**-We mentioned that a uniform legal framework is a must, especially to allow for across the border operations, which are fundamental to have effectiveness in the fight against organized crime.
- **Ensuring Military Participation.**- It must not be taken for granted that the military institutions are totally open to this process of cooperative and integral security. There is still an air of reluctance in terms of sharing information and of opening up their sovereign space, even if it is in a limited way. Also, the military have to accept a change of doctrine, which means redirecting efforts towards law enforcement instead of standard defensive strategies.
- **Political Will.**-Presidents have to set up executive working commissions with a definite time frame to produce results on specific issues. This is where all previous efforts and initiatives and the confidence building measures are going to be tested. Central America at present has a huge window of opportunity with the free trade agreement signed with USA that it can not pass away, plus certain countries are benefiting from the debt relief approved by the IMF, World Bank and IDB. This represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to overcome its lackluster performance of the past. Awareness of its importance could be the catalyst required to obtain approval for further actions.
- **Extra Regional Partners.**-Additionally, the Central American countries have the need to look for extra regional partners due to their own economic limitations, deficient logistics and non reliable intelligence systems, among others. These needs, to a certain degree, define the type of partner the region is looking for in terms of financial, technological, logistics and personnel capabilities. It is also important to recognize the asymmetries present and being able to interact respectfully, despite of them. The region needs to find a partner it can work with, not for and set up an enduring partnership based on long term objectives and not on a sporadic temporary basis which usually only serves unilateral interests.

Final Comments

Cooperative and Integral Security, a Must!-This exercise leads us to realize the importance of joint efforts to effectively confront the threats that most of the western hemisphere states face today. Cooperative and integral security has to be a fixed token in any strategy that is devised to achieve an acceptable degree of success. The central american region has been able to accept this and is well ahead than other regions in implementing these mechanisms. It still has to look ahead in terms of consolidating a more ample co-operational plan with its main partner, the USA, and also to consider the incorporation of new partners.

The geopolitical surroundings of Central America can be of great potential to try to bring about a regional security plan with extra regional partners that would serve the purpose of providing know how, resources and the necessary clout to combat organized crime effectively. This would ensure the sound environment CA needs to continue with sustained economic growth.

Plan Centro America.-It is logical to think in terms of a Plan Centro America with Colombia, Mexico and USA as the complementary partners in this venture.

All countries involved share common challenges, worries and threats, possibly with different degrees of impact among them, but all face one main concern which is the increasing rise of drug trafficking and its effects. Why not make it the common denominator for this partnership? A joint effort of this nature would no doubt encounter certain difficulties in setting it up, but in terms of its benefits it is definitely worth while trying.

Drug trafficking has grown tremendously and continues to do so with all the side effects that such a phenomenon comprises. It is not only the traffic, it is young people who are the potential future leaders of these countries getting hooked on drugs, it is arm dealers exchanging drug for weapons, it is the maras or gangs becoming dealers and paid assassins, it is the loss of sovereignty in scarcely populated areas. It is also the entrenchment of corruption within the Executive, Judicial and/or Legislative branches of each state, which include the police, the military, state prosecutors, judges, immigration and customs officers, just to mention the most sensible ones. Worst of all, it is the risk of putting at stake the institutionalism of our democratic system.

These are more than sufficient reasons to try the Plan Centro America approach. If successful, it will no doubt serve as an example for other regions of the hemisphere to follow along these steps.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

December 01,2006

Federico Breve-Travieso
Director of FUNDEMOS
Former Defense Minister of Honduras

