The Central American Security Complex

Central America has been witness to some of the most destructive and protracted internal conflicts of the last two decades. The civil war between the Sandinista government and the contra rebels in Nicaragua, between the armed forces and various insurgent groups in El Salvador and Guatemala, and the toppling of General Manuel Noriega by American intervention in Panama, has taken a large toll on the economic, political and social life of the region. Direct external threats between states have been relatively few (the main one being a territorial dispute between Guatemala and Belize), but the spill-over consequences of unrest and insurgencies have been a source of cross-border insecurity, especially for states such as Costa Rica, which does not formally maintain a national armed force (although it does have a paramilitary civil guard). By far the most important issues are regime and societal/human insecurities, generated by the explosion of crime in these states (and the relative inability of national police forces to cope with it), the precarious economic welfare situation of large segments of the population, and the relatively marginalized position of the indigenous populations in some states. These "indirect threats," when coupled with a poor distribution of wealth and relatively weak governance structures (often corrupt), have often resulted in direct consequences - political repression and instability, and social unrest. This general context of insecurity needs to be kept in mind when evaluating the appropriateness of the region's security expenditures.

Since the early 1990s, many of the region's states have started on the road to political democratization and economic reconstruction, one element of which has also been a regional multilateral effort to enhance "democratic security."[1] The most clear evidence of this is presented in Figure 5 below, which charts the decline in the security spending of the states of the region (except Belize). States such as El Salvador and Nicaragua have cut military spending dramatically, from highs of more than $300 million annually in the early 1980s, to levels of about $100 million and $50 million respectively. Guatemala and Honduras have also reduced spending, although not to the same degree, and security expenditures in Panama and Costa Rica (which are not technically "military," since these states do not have armed forces in the traditional sense) have remained relatively constant over the past decade.[2] This table at least implies that security

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[1] Discussions in late 1995 between foreign and security ministers of the regional states resulted in a Regional Democratic Security Treaty that includes elements concerning greater regional transparency and information exchanges, and other confidence-building measures (which could include reductions in military forces and spending). It has not, however, been ratified. *Summary of World Broadcasts*, Latin America and the Caribbean, EE/D2466/L, 20 November 1995.

[2] The 1992 and 1993 entries for Panamanian security expenditures are from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance, 1995-96* and *1993-94*. ACDA lists zero as the military expenditures for Panama for 1992 and 1993, as a consequence of the army having been formally abolished. Security forces, and security expenditures, have not vanished, however.