DANGEROUS RELATIONS: STATE AND WAR IN LATIN AMERICA

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Summary

This essay begins by corroborating a paradox in the history of Latin American States, in which their fragile internal composition, reflected mainly in internal violence levels, stands in contrast to two centuries of relative peace beyond their borders, as evidenced by the small and dwindling number of wars between countries in the region.

An inventory of armed conflicts in the past two centuries confirms this trend. Indeed, seven of the twelve conflicts between Latin American countries characterized as international wars *stricto sensu* occurred in the 19th century and five in the 20th century. Only three of these can be considered major wars as determined by conventional army involvement, territorial impact, duration and casualty levels: the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), the War of the Pacific (1879-1884) and the Chaco War (1932-1935), the latter being the only one of any significant magnitude in the last century. It is significant to note in the regional military panorama that Argentina, Brazil and Mexico—the region's main "powers" in terms of military might, demographic and economic clout and geopolitical influence—have not waged war against any Latin American State in the past 100 years. In contrast, the relatively minor nations of Paraguay and Bolivia were involved, either separately or on opposite sides, in two of the three major armed conflicts.

The essay begins with a brief description of some of the smaller conflicts in terms of their scope and intensity. They include the 1932 dispute between Peru and Colombia over control of the "Leticia Trapezoid;" the intermittent confrontations between Ecuador and Peru in 1941, 1981 and 1995, over control of territories adjacent to the navigable portions of the Marañón River; and the Acre War, which began in 1899 and concluded with the signing of the 1904 Peace Treaty. This overview is followed by a more in-depth discussion of the causes and consequences of the three major wars: the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay, which was the most lethal and devastating of them; the War of the Pacific, the longest of the three, that pitted Chile against Peru and Bolivia; and the Chaco war between Bolivia and Paraguay, whose impact was limited geographically to the two countries in conflict.

This examination shows that in virtually all cases, armed conflict was preceded by legal disputes over the definition of land borders. In this sense, the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries did little more than prolong the inventory of unfinished business dating back to

when the States were founded. That said, very few border disputes actually erupted into all-out war: just 5%, compared to 62% in Europe. A common sequence of events can be identified in the origins of most of the wars. First, the disputed territories are located in border areas where the original State of jurisdiction had a weak institutional presence. Second, one or more highly lucrative export products in terms of their differential income are discovered, and this dramatically alters the heretofore minor importance of the lands in question. Third, a rapid "internationalization" occurs in the area due to the influx of people and capital of various nationalities. And fourth, socioeconomic conflicts lead to territorial disputes and ultimately to armed confrontation.

An examination of the impact of the major Latin American wars shows that, while limited in nature, they had important implications well beyond their toll in victims and substantial territorial gains or losses. They were instrumental in transforming various facets of the prevailing social, economic and political systems in the warring countries. While insufficient in and of themselves to bring about the changes identified in each case, they certainly set the stage for those changes to occur and, in some cases, shaped the social forces behind them.

Yet despite the significant impact these major wars had on the countries involved, the Latin American region, which comprises no less than twenty States, has enjoyed considerable and growing level of peace on the international stage. It is distinguished not by its armed conflicts, but rather for having created an intercontinental system of conferences and treaties for resolving conflicts well before this became common or widespread practice elsewhere. Conversely, while relatively successful beyond their own borders, Latin American countries seem to be more susceptible to internal violence and civil wars compared to the United States or developed European societies, where such threats declined steadily between the 18th and 20th centuries. The region's history of internal violence has taken several forms: civil war, periodic, bloody incursions of the armed forces into the political life of the country, guerrilla warfare—a chronic ailment until the end of the Cold War—and more recently, spiraling criminality placing rates of internal violence in Latin America among the highest on the planet.

This is essentially the inverse of the situation described in Hobbesian contractualism: while States are pacific and regulated externally, they are incapable of solving the problem of violence within their own borders. A reflection on the causes that might explain this state of affairs draws from the theory espoused by certain scholars who suggest a causal relationship between these two facets of the reality of Latin American States. The weakness of the region's States in terms of law enforcement, individual protections and control over their own territories is closely linked to the "pacifism" they have historically exhibited on the international stage. In the words of one author, the State's domestic incapacity can be attributed to the fact that "sad to say, it did not fight enough wars." This conclusion is reached by first determining that Latin American States are internally weak, and then pointing to the lack of wars as a cause of this widespread phenomenon in the regional context. It might also be possible, however, to reverse the direction of causality by arguing that the weakness of States explains the lack of wars—an inference that is ultimately explicit in this type of analysis.

To go beyond the speculative nature inherent to this type of reasoning, some authors suggest that the *origin* of successful State development is not found in war per se, but rather in its association with the process through which an elite prevails over other groups by concentrating power and universalizing the bases for its domination within a territory. The political variable, then, would have to operate in the same direction as the weapons, meaning towards State unification. This requires "the existence of an elite willing or forced to accept the loss of individual prerogatives in function of a collective good," in other words, the presence of a ruling class. This was not the case in Latin America, where war never succeeded in shattering the "inertial balance" that existed among various powers and social interests, nor, we might add, in spawning a single bourgeois revolution.

The point here is that explanations limited to identifying omissions and gaps in a State model born of circumstances that are not replicable are ultimately futile and obsolete. Indeed, when Latin American countries made their debut on the international stage, the State model was not the same as in the 15th or 17th centuries, nor could war play the same role that it had in the time of the Treaty of Westphalia. Moreover, the implicit anachronism in the war-centered perspective fails to explain why, in varying degrees, Latin American States are, by almost any measure, much better off on the domestic front today than they were in the past and, in most cases, war has contributed virtually nothing to this outcome. The conflict-centered focus in studies of the State has resulted in an almost exclusive emphasis on the war variable, when it may be that cooperation is equally, or more, important to understanding the characteristics of their development and consolidation in various dimensions, within or outside of Latin America. With this in mind, the search for an explanation for the paradox described must begin to include the course taken by Latin American States in the context of the international system.

The article concludes with some comments on the "arms race" of recent years, and suggests that the process of resupplying the armed forces in certain countries, particularly Chile and Venezuela, does not pose a threat capable of derailing the peaceful course of Latin American States.