

THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF ENSURING HEMISPHERIC SECURITY WITHOUT REPEATING THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST

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The deterioration of living conditions in the Americas is striking. While it is true that macroeconomic indicators—particularly in terms of gross domestic product—have rebounded in the five years following the pandemic, as has been rightly pointed out from a development perspective, this figure is not a good indicator of national well-being (Llena-Nozal, Martin & Murtin, 2019). GDP can be misleading, especially in models where wealth distribution is inadequate. Latin America has historically been a prime example of such mismanagement. (Calvo-González, 2024; see also Gortaire Morejón, 2024).

According to evidence gathered over the past few decades, unequal societies tend to be more violent (Wolf, Rebecca & Seena, 2014). This is linked to perceptions of injustice and the feeling that institutional channels are not valid means for achieving personal and community goals (Sakstrup & Henrikas, 2024). In this regard, the absence of a welfare state in the Americas (with exceptions, such as Canada, and significant limitations in Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay) is one of the key factors in understanding the high rates of violence and crime.

Numerous studies acknowledge the weakness of the state in Latin American countries. Mazzuca (2021) traces this back to the very origins of Latin American statehood, within a context of late integration into the global system and market, assigning the region's states a secondary role as suppliers of raw materials, with extractivist institutions serving the agendas of more industrialized countries in Europe and, later, the United States (Mazzuca, 2021).

This latter factor must be a central focus in decision-making to ensure security. As lessons from the political cycles of the early decades of the 21st century show, it seems clear that a stance of distancing and hostility toward the United States has not been effective in spurring regional development, much less in containing the hybrid threats that have emerged, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor, however, is it viable to completely abandon planning that acknowledges the existing power

asymmetry between the United States—as the continental “hegemon”—and its strategic interests in the region, compared to Latin America’s own agenda.

In some quarters, the concept of security is narrowly confined to thinking exclusively about acts of force and legitimate state violence, while ignoring the other dimensions necessary to achieve a state of security. Security is not the absolute elimination of the threat, primarily because achieving that state requires unrestricted control over all of the state’s internal and external processes—something that is either unattainable or dangerous. At one point, while speaking with a former security minister from a Central American country, he mentioned that “dictatorships tend to be quite secure.” What is the problem with this? While it is true that violations of the law by non-state and civilian actors are drastically reduced, in all historical examples the overreach of the state and its security forces ultimately transforms the state apparatus itself into a threat.

Drawing on concepts from biology, this process of authoritarian securitization operates like an autoimmune disease. The mechanisms and bodies dedicated to protecting the state’s most important core—which is none other than society itself—end up identifying society as a target, violating rights and freedoms, and, in the worst cases, acting as a brake on the state’s development, prosperity, and capacity for growth relative to its neighboring and international counterparts.

The crux of the matter lies in finding a formula that, without criminalizing its own cells, allows for the maximum reduction of security breaches. Once again, absolute sterility is not feasible. Just as in medicine, the overuse of antibiotics and disinfectants sooner or later opens the door to pathogens that are more dangerous to the body. The problem of “superbugs” is a pressing concern in the international medical community that could put the survival of the human species itself at risk.

In this comparative context, relying on security mechanisms that aim to create a scenario in which everything is controlled by the state should not be the goal, as this runs the risk of fostering more violent and dangerous threats to the state’s stability. Latin America experienced a long cycle of governments whose aspiration to bring order and structure to their countries led them to resort to military rule, often supported and encouraged by the United States

through its political decision-makers and intelligence agencies, as such regimes were considered useful for ensuring order, stability, the anti-communist agenda, and the protection of economic interests in the region (Schmitz, 2006).

Resistance, bolstered by the Soviet Union and its satellites such as Cuba, led to long and bloody asymmetric internal wars, which also served as a breeding ground for the growth of illicit economies. The absence of legal and political channels to resolve internal conflicts opened the floodgates for drug trafficking and other associated crimes to become sources of funding for armed groups (Palma, 2021). The “success” of this strategy was such that, even after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, armed groups continued to operate using resources obtained on the black market.

Another response from the system was the rise of political movements linked to the “21st-century socialism” movement, with leaders who had even had direct connections to or participated in groups that, decades earlier, had been identified as terrorists and threats to the state. Among the strategies implemented during the first five-year periods of the 21st century was a reconfiguration of the paradigm for responding to armed and criminal violence, focusing on approaches based on dialogue, tolerance, and the pursuit of development-centered agreements (Hamburger & Álvaro, 2014).

This became a period of relative regional stability, and several countries experienced a period of relative calm, improvements in living conditions, and even an opportunity to redefine the region’s position relative to its global peers—even as the United States took on a more distant and less interventionist role in regional decision-making (Levitsky & Roberts, eds., 2011). However, this cycle failed to break with historical regional patterns characterized by corruption scandals and abuses of authority against democratic institutions; it has even been accused of contributing to a deterioration in the capabilities of security forces and justice systems to respond to actors involved in organized crime (International IDEA 2016; see also Sánchez Berzain, 2022). In contrast, other groups argue that the contributions of this political proposal in the implementation of social plans and programs reduced crime rates and levels of violence, while improving economic growth and social well-being (Fourniere Bayardi, 2017).

Meanwhile, U.S.-led globalization failed to ensure an equitable redistribution of benefits across all segments of global society. Even domestically, the outsourcing of industrial capacity to other countries—in search of cheaper labor and fewer regulatory controls—led to the hollowing out of the industrial engine that had propelled the United States to its status as a world power (Gortaire, 2023). The educational system, championed by Ford in the early 20th century, was not reformed, and new generations of *blue-collar* workers saw their purchasing power increase for a time; however, subsequent economic crises—such as the 2008 housing bubble and the one triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic—demonstrated that their standard of living was not comparable to that of their parents.

The American dream of a single-income household where one person works only during the week—able to cover all household expenses, at least one car, a family vacation once a year, and the occasional treat—had become unattainable. Of course, modernity demanded more luxuries; it was no longer just about a television in the living room, but a personal computer in every pocket (an *iPhone* or other *smartphone*), a *tablet*, a *laptop*, a *smartwatch*, and so many other *gadgets* that are considered “priorities” both for status and to keep up with peers. But then it became increasingly evident that the Western model was not without its flaws.

The losers of globalization were not only in developing countries but also within the global powers themselves. In these contexts, the blow of injustice is even more evident. In less developed countries, the argument that they belong to a weak nation lacking capabilities mitigates and dampens demands for greater benefits; indeed, the lack of access to the wonders of modernity makes them seem less necessary. In contrast, in one of the cradles of innovation, these shortcomings become a source of distress and discontent. This has opened the door to a populist and demagogic approach to U.S. politics, undermining the quality of its democracy (V-Dem Institute, 2026).

This problem would be less acute were it not for the crisis in the healthcare sector. The privatization of what is a basic right in other countries has exacerbated national unrest and contributed to the search for mechanisms of distraction through illicit substances. The United States already suffered from a deep-seated addiction problem that worsened after

the Vietnam War, during which tens of thousands of veterans had fallen into the trap of narcotic substances. The war on drugs proved unsuccessful; although some criminal ringleaders were captured or killed and their networks were dismantled, in practice the root cause of the problem—consumption—was not addressed.⁵ Furthermore, according to studies on the subject, it has been found that prohibition and state repression focused on ringleaders lead to increased violence (Werb, Rowell, Guyatt, Kerr, Montaner & Wood, 2011; see also UNODC, 2025).

Thus, the current environment has become the perfect breeding ground for instability and insecurity. In the United States (and, increasingly alarmingly, in Europe) lies the cradle of the entire criminal infrastructure: *demand*. Weak Latin American states, unable to provide guarantees to their citizens, complete the cycle through *production* (UNODC, 2025). However, this complex phenomenon is compounded by the evolving nature of the threat. To a large extent, the money generated by drug trafficking is no longer used by armed groups for political or state-related purposes, but rather serves directly as a means of livelihood for organized criminal groups that parasitize the state (Gortaire Morejón, 2022).

The scope for action is entirely different. While it is true that the political sphere has established the notion of “narco-terrorism”—both in reference to acts of extreme violence and as a mechanism to apply the legal frameworks used to respond to extremist groups in the Middle East and Africa—in practice, these threats are not comparable. Terrorist organizations in other parts of the world operate under religious and political ideologies that aim to seize state power; from this perspective, it is even possible to envision a framework for renegotiating and reevaluating the threat. One need only look at what has happened with the current Syrian president, Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa (Abu Mohammad al-Julan), a rebel commander who went from being on the U.S. and United Nations lists of global terrorists to becoming a partner in the transition following the overthrow of Bashar Hafez al-Assad (Guldogan, 2025).

Although one might consider legal agreements to reduce penalties and ensure effective cooperation in dismantling criminal groups, in practice, a political aspiration must not be confused with a desire for illicit

enrichment. Even in the separation of powers, it must be recognized that some powers are more legitimate than others. In establishing fairer and more equitable systems, the use of force has been justified in the face of tyranny and abuse; however, the use of violence solely for the purpose of profit has no basis in any valid ideological or ethical framework.

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With regard to containing and responding to criminal groups and structures that use armed violence to achieve their ends, it is important to recognize that within the framework of international law there are legal gaps, which must be addressed, and amendments must be promoted to make it feasible to distinguish unconventional threats and transform the “gray zone” into a mixed-operation zone that combines the use of force with effective strategies for containing the threat. Consequently, we observe that in some states in the region, the use of states of emergency has been escalated to provide legal authority for military intervention, and the designation of “Organized Armed Groups” (OAGs) has been applied—even to actors who do not strictly fit this category—in an effort to ensure that the rules of international humanitarian law are applied to contain them and to provide a legal framework for military intervention.

In this context, the United States, under its current administration, is aiming for a return to the Monroe Doctrine, with its own corollary, now promoted as the “Donroe Doctrine” (Bremmer & Cliff, 2026). The problem is that the Monroe Doctrine already failed in

⁵ See also: *United States General Accounting Office, Drug Control: Observations on Elements of the Federal Drug Control Strategy*, GAO/GGD-97-42 (Washington, DC: United States General

Accounting Office, March 1997), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/ggd-97-42.pdf>

its time and is the very source of the environment that allowed the current conditions to arise. Nevertheless, no responsibility is acknowledged on this matter; instead, blame is shifted onto political opponents, both domestic and foreign (Ávila, 2025).

The militarization of internal security has also failed; at best, it has merely postponed the threat, but it has been unable to address the root causes, which have become chronic and have worsened.

In this context, the initiative known as “Shield of the Americas” generates hope in some quarters, amid expectations that the United States, through its capabilities in the fields of intelligence and fifth-generation technologies, will be able to “destroy” organized crime groups. However, effectively responding to and combating these groups requires strengthening other institutional pillars, so that security strategies and regional initiatives can succeed in the long term and do not become a threat to the security and sovereignty of the states involved.

Hence, it is necessary to develop parallel strategies to curb drug use in the United States and Europe, as well as measures to stem the “river of steel” that carries unregulated weapons from the United States to criminal groups in Latin America (GI-TOC, 2025).

Another area that needs strengthening is financial intelligence, aimed at identifying the financiers behind the cartels and gangs. Dirty money from drug trafficking and other related crimes forms a massive shadow economy, with little to no transparency.

What happens to the dirty money that enters the formal system? Some suggest that it is simply incorporated into GDP, and in some countries, such as Colombia and Mexico, it even becomes an almost pivotal part of their economies (Correa, 2025; see also Nájara, 2010). And the biggest problem lies in this: What is done with the money that is successfully identified as coming from illicit markets? Are there guarantees that it is used as a mechanism to address its origin, or is it simply used as a demagogic political tool?

The proposal for a security alliance should inspire confidence, but given the current positions and context of a weakening rules-based order, it generates uncertainty—primarily regarding the scope of military operations, as well as the viability of mechanisms that

promote accountability for the implementation of the agreements embodied in this initiative.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Virtually all the technical advances in public policy over the past few decades are being undermined by the public’s fear of criminal groups, leading people to embrace demagogic proposals that are closer to authoritarianism and political patronage than to a modern state. The exploitation of the current system’s shortcomings has also been accompanied by the demonization of various institutions dedicated to the oversight of power, including multilateral organizations (primarily the United Nations, which has been pushed to the brink of internal collapse by the legal straitjacket that limits the scope of its objectives), nongovernmental organizations (accused of being tools of insurgent and criminal actors), academia (discredited and marginalized in its role as a driver of intergenerational change), and the free press (stifled by a lack of resources, infoxication, and false information amplified by bots and troll farms); in the worst-case scenario, these actors are even criminalized.

Thus, although many issues remain unresolved—particularly when delving into other crimes such as illegal mining, logging, and fishing, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling, as well as other crimes that form part of a much broader chain—the final reflection can focus on an urgent call for greater transparency and a democratic spirit in the security proposals currently emerging. As Sabine Kurtenbach (2023) argues:

Comprehensive, long-term policies are needed to address the historical and structural violence experienced in Latin America. These must include the delegitimation of the use of violence and public policies to reduce social inequalities. Violence prevention must also focus on reducing impunity, reforming the security sector, and prioritizing the rule of law and human rights.” (Kurtenbach, 2023).

If current generations do not learn from the mistakes of the past, and these mistakes are repeated out of foolishness and indifference, the only certainty is that future generations will have to grapple with the same problems under less promising conditions and at the risk that there will be no institutions capable of mitigating the very threat that the state apparatus can pose to its citizens.

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