
Soldiers, Politicians, and Civilians: Reforming Civil-Military Relations in Democratic Latin America

By David Pion-Berlin and Rafael Martínez
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Reviewed By Craig Deare

David Pion-Berlin and Rafael Martínez have collaborated to co-author an important contribution to the rich literature of civil-military relations in Latin America. Both are well-known scholars in this specific field: Their partnership in this project adds another contribution with an emphasis on what they term “a multidimensional approach” to “examining what is a complex set of relations between soldiers, politicians, and civilians.” As they acknowledge at the outset of the book, the civil-military relations field is extensive, and is pursued from a number of angles, “perhaps too many.”

Although the study of civil-military relations was launched with the late Samuel Huntington’s classic *The Soldier and the State* in 1957, research on the theme of Latin America began in earnest in the 1980s as the transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic governments were underway. Part of the civil-military relations challenge stems from the basics: What is the question? From the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, through the independence movements of the 19th century, continuing through today, Latin American political history has been heavily affected by the strained relationship between society and its political system with the military. In the post-1980s environment, scholars

have examined a variety of issues regarding the role of the military in democracy, including (among others) the structures of military regimes, the role of the military in the transition to democracy, civilian control over the military, institutional reforms (such as the creation of and/or reforms of defense ministries), security sector reform, and militarization of internal security. That said, the civil-military relations conversation is typically linked to the discussion of democratic breakdown, authoritarianism, democratization, and democratic consolidation. It is squarely within this discussion—democratization and consolidation—that Pion-Berlin and Martínez engage.

Their purpose is to “contemplate what the entire complex of civil-military relations looks like” in order to lead to military reform “so that it compliantly services the democratic state.” In particular, they seek to examine the “triangular relations between soldiers, politicians, and society.” More on this later. To assess civil-military relations, their research examines four countries in South America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. Pion-Berlin and Martínez use these four because of geographical proximity, a similar low-risk environment, and a shared history of diplomatic settlements, treaties, and economic consensus. They also note that the four countries all experienced military authoritarian rule in the 1960s and 1970s, and began their transitions away from those regimes in the 1980s.

Pion-Berlin and Martínez broaden their analysis by establishing their “multidimensional” framework around six variables: power, law, institutions, knowledge, values, and performance. Further structure is provided through the disaggregation of these six “dimensions” into 25 components, and an additional five sub-components. The book is organized around chapters that analyze each of these dimensions and components sequentially, examining each country in terms of how it has evolved over

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time employing that specific lens. Prior to doing so, however, the first chapter explains the elements of the framework and its relation to the broader political system. The second chapter undertakes the task of establishing the larger historical environment in which each of the four countries developed their individual civil-military relationships, and is a very useful overview.

Pion-Berlin and Martínez undertake their very ambitious task with great attention to detail, and the book is filled with excellent historical evidence and valuable analysis. Each chapter systematically examines the cases of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay—in that order—through an assessment of progress from “authoritarian to full-fledged democratic rule” using “ordinal-ranked benchmarks for success (none, little, moderate, and substantial).” This methodology is innovative and laudable, and provides an excellent structure with which to assess the evolution of the progress toward more effective civilian control, which Pion-Berlin and Martínez posit is the process by which to move an authoritarian institution into one which is democratically abiding. As they argue, the key is to devise “a system that assures that this non-democratic entity falls in line with the decisions made by its executive overseers, whether it wants to or not, and whether it agrees with the policies or not.” The challenge, of course—as it is with themes that are difficult to quantify—is the difficulty of accurately evaluating the inherently idiosyncratic nature of the themes; the evaluation of whether the progress is none, little, moderate, and substantial, however objective the intent, remains subjective at the end of the day.

The net result of their extensive analysis is that the “average level of progress achieved for all the dimensions and countries is 1.9, which means slightly less than moderate gains.” They note that over 60 percent of all their established dimensions are either in a transition or consolidation phase; only 36 percent have been fully consolidated (and

the majority of that consolidation is in Argentina). Pion-Berlin and Martínez conclude that it “should not be surprising that much more work needs to be done in reforming CMR across the four nations.” The key findings that I took away from their analysis are these: the importance for politicians and their appointed civilians to conduct military reform through a civil-military relations construct; to step in and assume their proper roles with regard to strategy development and assessment; and to find ways to incentivize their legislatures to play a stronger institutional authorization and oversight role.

Despite a very-well researched and beautifully written volume, I continue to have reservations with the bias of much of the literature, which this volume supports. As a retired military officer, and based on decades of interacting with military professionals throughout the region, I view the literature from a different perspective than many of the scholars in the field. The very title of the Pion-Berlin and Martínez book—*Soldiers, Politicians, and Civilians*—betrays the prevailing bias. The continuing presence of the armed forces performing internal security functions throughout the region is the unintended consequence of democratically elected politicians’ (and their appointed subordinates) collective failure to strengthen civilian institutions across the board. More fundamentally, the low esteem in which politicians and political parties (the executive) and the legislative authorities are routinely ranked (at the very bottom of regional surveys) strongly suggests that most societies have failed to develop institutions capable of delivering effective governance. A large segment of the literature tends to stress the military’s role in the civil-military relations milieu, implicitly implying that the civilians and politicians bear lower levels of responsibility; I dissent from that view. *Soldiers, Politicians, and Civilians* is not—in my view—the correct order to assess the quality of civil-military relations; rather, *Civilians, Politicians, and Soldiers*,

in that order, makes more sense in terms of who should be held to account for the state of play. After all, both politicians and soldiers were civilian members of their societies before embarking on their chosen professions, and for that reason the examination must begin with the society itself.

Pion-Berlin and Martínez are clearly supportive of the Soldiers, Politicians, and Civilians perspective of how the debate should be structured. As they note, “What is critical to democratic governance is the need to reduce the military’s political clout,” and “The ultimate goal for a democracy is to irreversibly transform the armed forces into an administrative instrument of the state.” While it is without dispute that a nation’s armed forces should indeed be “instruments of the state,” I would argue that this is not the “ultimate goal for a democracy.” And although I do not minimize the importance of ensuring the military has no political clout, this is to confuse cause and effect. That is to say, the extent to which the military has any degree of clout is the net effect of a society’s failure to create structures and processes by which the political class effects governance; the residual clout is the unintended consequence of the absence of strong, effective, and honest political leadership. Effective democratic governance is a function of many interrelated factors, but I would submit that a reduced level of military clout is not at the top of the list. Indeed, Pion-Berlin and Martínez would appear to acknowledge this to some degree: “After all, civil-military transformations do not occur in isolation; they exist within and are shaped by the larger democratic system of which they are a part.”

My other concern with the Pion-Berlin and Martínez contribution has to do with what I assess to be a very ambitious and yet not terribly helpful comparison between their choice of cases. The model (perhaps with some additional refinement from other scholars) could prove to be a useful yardstick of sorts with which to generate some

type of coherent comparative analysis. That said, comparing four countries as different as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay leaves one with a bit of a “So what?” sensation. As Pion-Berlin and Martínez themselves acknowledge, “This Latin American Southern Cone subregion has provided, in a sense, a difficult test for CMR reforms because of the very low-threat security environment.” Although they make a persuasive case that studying this subregion has certain advantages, as one looks at the current levels of insecurity across Latin America and the roles being played by various countries’ militaries, the case selection (with the exception of Brazil) may seem less important than those of Colombia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, or Mexico (to name only a few). As most regional specialists acknowledge, each individual country has its own unique set of challenges and opportunities.

That said, the net takeaway of the Pion-Berlin and Martínez project is a well-researched, thoughtfully constructed, highly informative, and most readable contribution to the extensive civil military relations literature. Any student or scholar interested in the ongoing discussion of the role of the armed forces in Latin America should have this volume on their bookshelf. [PRISM](#)