

# SURVEYING CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY APPROACHES AND THEMES

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## ABSTRACT

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The aim of this article is twofold: provide a brief review of the most recent handbooks of International Security in Latin America published in English language and, by doing so, provide a brief mapping and evolution of the main themes, issues and theories used to study the international security in Latin America as these are reflected in these handbooks. In a region where many scholars diagnose a theoretical and methodological gap/deficiency, the four handbooks selected in this text pave the way to more powerful approaches to understand and explain security and defense in Latin America.

**Keywords:** International Security. Latin America. Handbooks

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## INTRODUCTION

Latin America is still regarded as a region with low interstate conflict concerns, but, as many scholars point out, the issues of “intermestic” security such as threats from non-state (organized crime) and sub-state military forces (such as paramilitaries), drug trafficking and transnational criminal gangs with ramifications throughout the region, are a local, international and global concern.

However, state to state conflicts and tensions are still relevant, as seen in several instances, such as long standing territorial contests and areas in dispute; sub-regional balances and instabilities; militarization and rearmament of many countries in the region; and other international issues of security and defense.

Cooperation to foster security and development in the region is very significative, however with few organizations which overlap in their scope and aims and still lacking institutionalization.

These issues reveal a complex reality regarding the international security, defense and peace in the region, and scholars are producing more and better analyses in the last few years. Latin America has seen an exponential growth in articles, thesis and university courses dedicated to international security in and about the region.

A very needed and welcome addition to the study of these issues is found in a number of international handbooks dedicated to the region, published in English language. The aim of this article is twofold: provide a brief review of the most recent handbooks of International Security in Latin America published in English language and, by doing so, present a brief mapping and evolution of the main themes, issues and theories used to study the international security in Latin America as these are reflected in these handbooks.

In a region where many scholars diagnose a theoretical and methodological gap/deficiency, the four handbooks selected in this essay review pave the way to more powerful approaches to understand and explain security and defense in Latin America.

“The Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security”, published in 2016, stands out as a very comprehensive, complex and yet didactic exploration of the issues and themes of international security and the region, but most importantly for its theoretical contribution to the scholarly work taken in Latin America. Attesting the importance of this work, the Handbook can be found in many Universities’ lists in the region

as obligatory reading for courses on security and international relations.

We begin with an exploration of the themes and problems of the studies of international security in and about the region from the end of the Cold War and the period of democratization, then, we analyze some of the handbooks of Latin American security published in English language in the last few years and, finally, we offer some concluding thoughts.

## **THEORIES AND THEMES OF LATIN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY**

Historical factors are fundamental to understanding the reality and configuration of International Security and Defense in Latin America. The process of independence and formation of the Latin-American nation states has produced political tensions, territorial disputes and social divisions that persist in multiple instances, especially the borders. In addition to the Historiographical perspective, Geopolitical Theory has, to a greater or lesser extent, governed domestic and foreign policies in several countries of the region, especially in certain periods - as in military governments - making this approach into an important element of analysis.

However, as in the mainstream perspectives in International Relations at the global level, most authors find in Realism-Neorealism the most appropriate approach to understanding this same reality. A central component of the Realist analysis is the balance of power, aspects such as the security dilemma and arms race, applied to the South American context.

In more recent times, approaches stimulated by the so-called "Third Debate" of IR have broadened the scope of the studies, notably using Constructivism as a basis and focusing on the analysis of issues such as whether South America, for example, constitutes (or could become) a security community. The analysis of the aspect of institutional overlap and security governance is also an important perspective for the understanding of the contemporary regional context.

Based on the studies of Buzan and Waeber (2003), a number of authors have adopted the Regional Security Complex Theory as a fundamental tool for the analysis of the region's international security context. This fact is evidenced by the profusion of scientific articles, dissertations and theses that use this conceptualization. Although it is an important and useful framework, the analysis based on Regional Security Complexes (RSC) also tends to divide South America dichotomously, that is, between two subcomplexes: the Southern Cone (detecting cooperation

and an incipient Security Community) and the Andean-Amazonian region (emphasizing conflict and balance of power). Despite providing fairly detailed analyses of the regional reality, this approach is still, in some instances, insufficient to cover all the complexity of the region.

Some authors, more recently, notice the limits of these same theoretical perspectives and propose multi-perspectival approaches (ADLER & GREVE, 2009). However, these authors point out to the need for more in-depth research for the study and development of these issues. Explaining and understanding conflicts, tensions, approximations, cooperation and enmities, is a challenge for the specialists and analysts in International Security dedicated to studying and theorizing about the region.

National Defense remains at the center of the concerns of many Latin American governments, even with little chance and/or probability of war between them, with military forces prepared for the possibility of imminent war. In this brief essay, we will focus on the more traditional concept of Defense, understood here in a military and state-centered conception, such as “the study of the threat, use, and control of military force” (WALT, 1991, p. 212). The justification for this limitation in the concept of Defense also finds resonance in the fact that most studies on Latin American defense are still based on the state and traditional aspects of threats. The notion of international security, which encompasses too many definitions and broadening of the topics to be addressed, would go beyond the scope of this text, however, will be addressed as exemplified and reflected in the chapters of the handbooks.

In the text “No Place for Theory - Security Studies in Latin America”, Tickner and Herz (2012), point out that up until the period of the Cold War, “(...) security was almost exclusively the work of generals. Both domestic and international defense policies and the concept of security itself are heavily influenced by the military approach to the subject” (p.92). The authors point to four major periods of thought on defense and international security in the region: 1) *geopolitical doctrine*: from independence in the 19th century to the beginning of the bipolar conflict, the concept was based on an approach influenced by Geopolitical Theory, reflecting the construction of States and concern for borders; 2) *national security doctrine*: during the height of the Cold War, the approach was based on concepts imported from the United States, which were based on the fight against “communist danger” and repression of domestic and regional leftist groups; 3) *democratic security*: with the wave of democratization in

the 1980s in the region, concern about the primacy of civilians in society, the role of the military and their relation to democracy; 4) *broadening of the concept* with the inclusion of the interplay between domestic security and transnational threats, among others (TICKNER & HERZ, 2012).

While military governments were only concerned with securing the State, the authors emphasize that, even with democratization and the broadening of the concept of security, most studies in the region continued to reflect this tendency, in a “state-centric obsession”. From the 90s and to this day, the authors point out four main problems in the studies of Defense and Security in the region: 1) parochialism, with no comparative studies between the region and other regions; 2) State-centrism, where issues involving non-state actors or other threats are relegated to the background; 3) policy-knowledge or prescriptive studies of practical utility for the State; 4) invisibility of theories - where researchers use imported theories and reproduce them on the regional reality, and even in cases where authors explore theory and concepts, they are largely based on descriptive and prescriptive reflections (TICKNER & HERZ, 2012) .

The recent publication of handbooks on Latin American International Security address many of the limitations of scholarly work on the subject in the region and offer a throughout exploration of International Security and Defense issues and theoretical lenses in the Americas, and most notably, Latin America and its relation to the wider global arena.

The lenses, issues and approaches seen through the handbooks present a comprehensive inventory of contemporary security challenges in the region, providing researchers the tools to explore not only traditional threats but more contemporary concerns and themes, opening the scope of academic works on these issues, and suggest new avenues of research, with more methodological tools and theoretical grounding.

## THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY IN THE “POST-COLD WAR” CONTEXT

One of the first comprehensive publications to address the international security and defense concerns of Latin America in the form of a Handbook published in English language in 1998, edited by Jorge I. Domínguez, is “International Security and Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era”, which has as its main focus

the nexus between security and consolidation of democracy.

It reflects on the impact of the post-Cold War context of political redefinition and democratic reestablishment in the region and on how this new outlook reflected on the themes and concerns of International Security in Latin America.

The intersection between regional security issues and the democratic process-building in the region caused the civil-military relations to be high on the agenda, especially as this change in regimes of government produced profound changes in the dynamics of Defense among the countries of the region, added to the fact that the systemic changes that occurred in the same period - related to redistribution of power, return of security issues to the top of the international agenda and growing importance of non-state actors in regional and international security interactions - have come to question the mission par excellence of the armed forces. Other results were the redefinition of the internal and regional security concerns, international conflicts and domestic transformations, challenging the capacity of States and institutions to deal with this new format of dynamics, especially considering that the agenda became more complex because, adding to the traditional frontier conflicts still existing in the region, they had to consider also conflicts with non-state actors, especially focusing on borders. These, to the detriment of those, have come to challenge the new democratic regimes in consolidation.

The book also reflects the context in which institutions such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the Interamerican Defense board and the Inter-American Defense College, were the only and foremost arenas where the issues and policies of democracy, security and defense were debated and developed.

Also prominent in that context was the growing diplomatic transformation in the Southern cone, which approximated former rivals Brazil and Argentina, leading to a nascent security community in that region and the development, aggregating Uruguay and Paraguay, of the South Common Market (MERCOSUR), which institutionalized the regional integration of these countries, as evidenced in the whole first section of the book, "The Transformation of Interstate Relations in Southern South America". This transformation is of fundamental importance because, together with democracy that has become effective in these countries, it has allowed the undoing of tensions and, with it, created a space for new regional institutions and the formation of a security regime.

The second part of the book explores the participation of Latin American countries in the United Nations Peace Operations, which had an exponential development in that period, and also reflected the concern of governments, civil society and the military of the region in redefining the role and the scope of the national Armed Forces in the region and their use as Foreign Policy tools and projection.

The third section of this handbook is dedicated to “New and Nontraditional Security Threats in Central America and the Anglophone Caribbean”, exploring the security collaboration and confidence building efforts in that sub-region, the illicit drug trade in the Caribbean, and the Central American regional security issues and architecture.

The closing part of the book is an exploration on the changing role of the Hemispheric institutions and the United States shifting priorities in the Post-Cold war context, the redefinition of U.S. Foreign and military policy and its impact on Inter-American security issues and institutions, and suggesting that, possibly at that time “free” from closer links and influence by the United States, “Latin America may miss the Cold War”, provokes one of the closing chapters.

## **LATIN AMERICAN SECURITY FROM 2000 ONWARDS**

As the foreword of “The Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security” points out, this book identifies key contemporary topics of research and debate in the region, considering that the study of Latin America’s comparative and international politics has undergone dramatic changes since the end of the Cold War, the return of democracy, and the relegitimization and rearmament of the military, against the background of low-level uses of force short of war.

Edited by David R. Mares and Arie M. Kacowicz, this indispensable handbook opens with Mearsheimer pointing out that even if much attention is dedicated to other regions of the world, Latin America is of much greater strategic importance for the United States, primarily because of its geographical proximity.

Mearsheimer also takes spot on two major issues: that studies in and about the region are more concerned about the IPE (International Political Economy) and generally case study (specific countries), not the interaction between the countries of the region and the world at large, or comparative studies.

Another very important and contemporary diagnostic is the

focus on method and not only theory, which is still to be overcome: “privileging methods over theory is a wrongheaded way of advancing knowledge” (p. x), “(...) creating theory and testing theory – which is what methods are ultimately all about – are both critical components of social science. Theory, however, is ultimately more important” (p. xi).

The first chapter provides an invaluable and concise historical review of the first two centuries of Latin American history and its policies, as it relates and interplays with security studies, recuperating the key themes that have roots in the past and are fundamental to understanding most of the contemporary issues of security (and beyond) in the region.

What follows is a relevant portion of the book dedicated to establishing its theoretical foundations, which consists of a pluralist methodological and theoretical approach, ranging from Constructivism, Liberalism, Marxism, and Realism.

In face of the shift in perspective on the concept of security and its studies since the end of the Cold War to include threats to human/citizen/personal security, for example, and the popularization of the theme of security in Latin America amongst undergraduate and graduate students, the book aims to provide an across the board toolbox, proposing practical avenues for research: “In addition to addressing a broad spectrum of security studies, another important agenda of this volume is to encourage well-theorized, empirically grounded, and methodologically rigorous research on these topics” (p. 1).

More traditional theoretical tools such as Detlef Nolte and Leslie Wehner’s “Geopolitics, old and new”, revisits the classic geopolitical thinking in Latin America, and updates this approach with insights from contemporary scholars such as Andres Rivarola Puntigliano and his “Geopolitics of Integration”, replacing the competition and balance of power of the old with a geopolitical aim at integrating the economies and societies of the region.

A very important theoretical contribution is also found in the chapter by Andrés Malamud and Leandro Schenoni, “Neoliberal Institutionalism and neofunctionalism and international security”, a rare exploration of the much utilized but not always explicit approach in Latin American scholarly works.

Carlos Escudé revisits peripheral-realism and international security, updating and making the case for the relevance of his unique

contribution to the IR Theory in Latin America.

The volume addresses a number of contemporary regional security challenges, including civil wars, the rise of Brazil, guerrillas and terrorism, arms races, civic-military relations, interstate disputes, illicit threats, and environmental threats, opening up to new and more contemporary concerns in the international agenda such as the interplay between securitization and democratic security explored by Arlene Tickner; Gender and security studies, which is still an incipient approach in the region, by Marcela Donadio; explores avenues between Constructivism and the English School, as proposed in the chapter written by Merke; and a very thought provoking chapter on identity, ethnicity and culture issues, which what José Antonio Lucero describes as the “Indian problem”.

The book also reserves chapters for a broader agenda such as citizen security and human security and the growing participation of the Latin American countries in peace operations; focuses then on different conceptions of security, including traditional (war and peace), cooperative and regional, citizen and human, cultural and alternative, military strategy, and pluralistic security communities.

Noteworthy are the chapters on organized crime, drugs and small arms by Phil Williams, which allows for a linking between the local/national ties between these issues and transnational/international and regional problematic in Latin America. Environmental security and disasters in the region are explored by Gavin O’Tolle, in what the author calls still a “blind spot” in the academic area of IR in the region.

The book concludes exploring the contemporary geopolitical shifts between the US and China, an issue that will most likely continue to be a “hot topic” not only in economic and trade terms, but also in governance and security, addressing Latin American security in the context of contemporary international challenges, as those issues reflect and impact the region, including those posed also by developments in the Middle East, the participation in peacekeeping operations, and the New World Security Architecture.

## **SECURITY IN THE AMERICAS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Having “the Americas” as the scope of study, “Reconceptualizing Security in the Americas in the Twenty-First Century”, edited by Bruce M.

Bagley, Jonathan D. Rosen, and Hanna S. Kassab, was published in 2015, and its main focus is to reestablish/reintroduce hemispheric dimension, not only Latin America, or the “Western Hemispheric”, approach to the debate of international security in the continent as a whole.

The authors point out that, in recent years, drug trafficking and organized crime, insurgency movements, as well as environmental deterioration are some of the major problems the Americas face. The war on drugs, especially, is one of the most important factors in the increase of violence and organized crime in all of the Western world, but in a more important degree in Latin America.

The authors call attention to the fact that in Mexico, for example, the war on drugs perpetuated by one single presidential term (Felipe Calderon) resulted in over 100,000 deaths and disappearances. Poor States and weak institutions contribute to the rise of organized crime, with an estimated 70,000 gangs operating in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala alone.

However, these shared problems across the continent do not exclude a need to analyze and study security in a different light for each different country, as each society has its own priorities and challenges. For this reason, the book applies the Copenhagen School, for example, as an approach to the intricacy of discussing security priorities as means to establish discourse both in a State and regional scale.

In that sense, a very noteworthy contribution is the chapter written by Hanna S Kassab, “Reconceptualizing Security Priorities of the Hemisphere”, which introduces the framework of analysis that builds on the Copenhagen School, reconceptualizing security as it relates to matters of urgency in the Americas, but “advances a more fluid concept of security as it is altered based on threats” (p. 26).

The author discusses the desecuritization processes as one of “reprioritization”, and, as the organizers of the book summarize, “(...) reprioritization is the deprioritization of one object and the securitization of another stemming from the urgency of another issue. Urgency is the perceived ideational importance of an object and the object in need of protection” (p. 26). The author concludes with an analysis of the main security threat that continues to plague the American hemisphere: structural violence.

The second part of the book is dedicated to “Terrorism, insurgency and the challenges to the state”, exploring the “endemic pattern” of violence in Latin America, the prospects for peace in Colombia in the 21st Century,

and a throughout search for explanation and examination of narco-terrorism and narco-related violence in Mexico.

In the third section of the book, the chapter written by Juan Carlos Garzón Vergara, “Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime”, on drug cartels and organized crime in Latin America, stands out as a very comprehensive and detailed analysis on the subject, where the author introduces the framework of “predatory micro networks” to explain the transnational dimension of the interplay between national violence and drug trafficking and their web effect throughout the region and beyond.

The concluding section of this handbook is dedicated to “The New Security Agenda”, with chapters exploring the rise of China in the Americas; the problems posed by development and inequality, with challenges for the international security of the region; a contribution on resource security in the Americas and beyond; and a chapter written by Sherri L. Porcelain, focusing on health security in the Americas, especially in contemporary international security discourse, where the author details the many infectious diseases that have plagued the region and much of the world most recently.

The main point of the book is, beyond the reintroduction of the Hemispheric dimension, the effort by the authors in both the theoretical and empirical/case studies chapters, to desecuritize the military and statist dimension so common in the region, and also pointing to a much needed push for a broader and wider debate on the academic and political spheres about intermestic issues, such as drug trafficking, human security, ecological and disaster concerns, among other themes sometimes relegated to a domestic or national domain in the region, and to call for more comprehensive, comparative, transnational and regional studies of these issues.

At the same time, this is also one of the pitfalls of the book, since the first theoretical part seem to suggest new / or revised frameworks for the security studies of the region (a case in point is the introduction of the prioritization theory by one of the opening chapters), but that effort falls somewhat short in that the following chapters are case studies (country by country) or, at most, sub-regional scope.

## **POLITICAL AND POWER SHIFTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR SECURITY AND DEFENSE CONCERNS AND INSTITUTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA**

The nexus between politics/power and regional security in Latin America is the main prism that delineates the chapters that compose

the book edited by Marcial A.G. Suarez, Rafael Duarte Villa and Brigitte Weiffen, "Power Dynamics and Regional Security in Latin America", published in 2017.

The editors point out that their handbook "studies the impact of global and regional power shifts on the rationale and dynamics of Latin American regional institutions as well as responses to regional security challenges" (p. 1).

The complexification of the international security and defense architecture in the region, with the creation, for example, of the South American Council of Defense (CDS) of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the overlapping with other institutions created in a time in which many countries in the region were under more leftist popular and progressive governments (also called by some authors as the "Pink Tide"), such as the School of Defense under the auspices of other new regional organization, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA), are reflected on the chapters, organized in very comprehensive examination of the contemporary interplay between power/politics and security and defense in the region.

Its main focus is on governance and security architecture, organizations, institutions, and the cooperative (but also competitive) political efforts and instances in the region, hence the "power" dimension explored in the book.

The editors point out that Latin America's biggest concern as a whole continues to be public security, with issues such as drug trafficking, organized crime, the legacy of civil wars and political factors in the center of the problem.

However, as the organizers of the book stress, "the mere description of the problems and causes behind them is not the focus of the book", so one of the aims of each chapter and the book as a whole is to reflect and discuss these problems against the international scenario, the power shifts, and analyzing them through policies adopted in regional and global scale, the changing role of the United States, as well as regional power dynamics.

The book examines the impact of global power dynamics shifts on regional security and its institutional policies in Latin America. This influence can be seen on regional cooperation, with the creation of more multilateral institutions and new interpretations of regionalism, which, in turn, affects the perspectives of border conflicts, migration, terrorism,

drug trafficking, and other issues in the region, as the editors explain (p. 4).

The rise in importance of Latin America in international affairs, as well as its gradual emancipation from North American and European powers is also inspected in the book. Brazil, specifically, adopted global aspirations as one of the BRICS countries, seeing its best diplomatic years under Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's term, and also by the "Bolivarian" efforts of Hugo Chavez, of Venezuela, and his initiatives.

Efforts were also made in strengthening relations between with other Latin American countries, seen as secondary regional powers, through UNASUR and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), for example. The handbook reflects how Latin America has been adapting to the global changes in power from unipolar to multipolar configuration, which opens up many possibilities for the region, but not enough to see itself inserted strongly in the international scenario.

## **AS A MATTER OF CONCLUSION: NEW AVENUES AND ISSUES STILL TO BE EXPANDED AND EXPLORED IN LATIN AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY**

In a region where many scholars diagnose a theoretical and methodological gap/deficiency, the four handbooks selected in this article pave the way to more powerful approaches to understanding and explaining international security and defense in Latin America.

As has been the global trend since the times of the Post-War and Democratization, widening the scope of academic works on international security and defense in Latin America is imperative, as well as opening new avenues of research with more encompassing methodological tools and theoretical grounding.

The boundaries between domestic and international security are becoming increasingly unrecognizable, transcending national states and regions (WEIFFEN, 2016). For this reason, the Americas, and most notably, Latin America's relations to the wider global arena must be investigated. Cross-border issues are of significant importance to Latin America, placing light on a central point: States in the region leave unmanaged spaces on their borders, and despite being prone to cooperation and regional institutionalization processes, their actions tend to be reactive to the problems, and with little capacity to generate trust between the actors.

These handbooks help us in this task, by not only presenting contemporary security challenges but also offering new insights and tools

for better and more complex examinations to understand and explain the realities of the Latin American context and interconnections with the continent and the world at large.

Still, there remains to be explored and catalogued by publications such as the Handbooks focusing on Latin American Security, a much needed opening for themes and approaches which are already being produced and published in (and about) the region. In that sense, it is possible to detect a largely neglecting of the contributions and a wealth of research based on theoretical tools which are leading to a reconceptualization of security and Defense in the region.

In that sense, adding to the relevant and indispensable more traditional approaches to Latin American international security and defense, the studies inspired and focused on, for example, International Political Sociology (IPS), "Post-modern" lenses, "Post-structuralism", "Decolonial" and "Post-colonial" research, Critical Security framework, among others, and themes/ empirical objects aiming at, for instance, the "practice turn", "everyday turn" (and many more "turns" in contemporary IR), "ethnographical" and "autobiographical" issues and themes, offer and explore a variety of insights, frameworks and empirical cases, in many very welcome, creative and fruitful new avenues for academics studying the region.

# INVESTIGANDO ABORDAGENS E TEMAS CONTEMPORÂNEOS DE SEGURANÇA INTERNACIONAL LATINO-AMERICANOS

## RESUMO

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O objetivo deste artigo é duplo: fornecer uma breve revisão dos manuais mais recentes de Segurança Internacional na América Latina publicados em língua inglesa e, ao fazê-lo, fornecer um breve mapeamento e evolução dos principais temas, questões e teorias utilizadas para estudar a segurança internacional na América Latina, na maneira como estas se refletem nesses manuais. Em uma região onde muitos estudiosos diagnosticam uma lacuna / deficiência teórica e metodológica, os quatro manuais selecionados neste texto abrem caminho para abordagens mais poderosas para entender e explicar a segurança e a defesa na América Latina.

**Palavras-chave:** Segurança Internacional. América Latina. Manuais

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