

Contemporary Dares of Strategic Intelligence in Latin America: An IR Perspective

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Abstract

After more than three decades of democratic ruling, no Latin American country seems to have been able to professionalize their intelligence system. At the same time, region-wide, there is neither a uniform path for intelligence democratization nor similar historical and geostrategic circumstances. This context highlights a particular concern, which is to elucidate the scope of strategic intelligence. To what extent are intelligence sectors adjusted and/or are adaptable to the needs emerging from the present international environment? What is the degree of impact of intelligence policies in national decision-making? What is the perception of the international environment? From the hemispheric national security doctrine to the current paradigm of the new transnational threats and multidimensional security, what is the room of maneuvers of Latin American governments? It seems indispensable to review if indeed Latin American countries have achieved an autonomous development of their strategic intelligence areas, or if the region remains subject to the global guidelines of Western powers. Building upon recent academic literature on strategic intelligence and the Latin American perspective of International Relations and security, this article will discuss the questions raised above to better understand the status of intelligence within the dynamics of the regional context.

Keywords: Latin America, strategic intelligence, International Relations, security, democratization

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Introduction

In their extensive work on Latin America's history in the last two centuries, Waldo Ansaldi and Verónica Giordano¹ proposed to reflect, understand and explain the region as a whole, although they warned that this totality did not implied homogeneity since the region turns out to be a reality composed of many diversities, which must be explained by looking at the significant problems that have manifested throughout the continent. Moreover, after the Cold War, within the framework of globalization, and in a context where countries differ with respect of their historical and geostrategic circumstances, the region embarked in diverse regionalization experiences. In addition, the becoming and evolution of the intelligence system(s) within Latin America have not been foreign to these geopolitical dynamics and challenges either.

After the Cold War and in the wave of the democratization allegedly embraced by the countries in Latin America, the intelligence sector arose as a common issue, beyond the diversity and heterogeneity seen in the region, recalling the scholarship's belief that "... intelligence is, in some sense, the last frontier for attempts to democratize previously authoritarian governmental structures and processes."⁴ This is strongly connected to the attitude towards intelligence of most Third World leaders which remains "at least equally mysterious", as stated by Christopher Andrew⁵, and also a major gap in Intelligence Studies (IS) that is yet to be addressed. However, while still an unexplored subject of major interest and value, its study in the broader context of intelligence research in Latin America requires the prior investigation and understanding of several challenges such as the history of repression, the new legal frameworks, the democratization and reform initiatives, the accountability and democratic control, or the various scandals and intelligence crises.

At the same time, an important aspect that needs to be noted before engaging in the research of Latin American intelligence, is that the modern history of intelligence services on the continent since the second half of last century is more about domestic intelligence, in the form of surveillance and repression practiced by authoritarian regimes (e.g., Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Guatemala)² and tolerated or even exploited by democratic administrations (e.g., Colombia and Mexico)³, rather than about strategic intelligence supporting foreign policy objectives. In addition, intelligence reforms prompted by Latin American countries have been scarce, occasional, or ephemeral, and largely, undertaken as a response to scandals – such as:

- the prosecution of high-ranking intelligence officials, illegal wiretapping and false propaganda against opponents conducted by the Colombian intelligence service DAS (Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad), which, as a result, was dismantled in 2011;
- the dubious death of the special federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman