

Confidence-Building Measures in Latin America

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Cooperation between and among Latin American countries has improved substantially in the last decade. Efforts at economic integration through multilateral organizations were renewed, cooperative relationships among member countries and their armed forces flourished, and the effectiveness of regional bodies increased. Nonetheless, obstacles to regional cooperation and prosperity still remain, even though Latin America is considered a region relatively free of interstate conflict. Cold War geopolitical concerns persist and important constituencies within countries often view their neighbors with suspicion. Moreover, many Latin American countries with democratically elected governments do not retain complete political control of the armed forces. The persistence of poverty in the region has impaired basic development strategies and contributed to social conflict. Although there are no near-term risks of confrontation in the continent and gradual progress has been made at arms control, new threats to stability, such as transnational organized crime and the narcotics trade, need to be addressed.

Within Latin America, pockets of scepticism and indifference toward confidence-building measures (CBMs) remain for several reasons. First, such measures appear to draw from the experience of Europe during the Cold War, a scenario rooted in the concrete possibility of a major world war. However, CBMs used to avoid misunderstandings among European countries have engendered economic and political integration which can also be beneficial to Latin America. Second, the possibility of an outbreak of serious hostilities is widely viewed as remote, leading some to conclude that the creation of further CBMs are unnecessary. However, flashpoints between Latin American countries, such as the Ecuador–Peru dispute, continue to occur. Thus preventive measures are invaluable to solving or avoiding unforeseen conflicts in the short term. Third, some object to the terminology of CBMs, which can have negative connotations and give prominence to mistrust. Accordingly, some prefer the terminology of ‘cooperative measures’ or ‘transparency measures.’

Despite these objections, there is room for forward movement on Latin American CBMs, largely because the scope for such agreements is wide. CBMs can play an important role in addressing unresolved issues in the hemisphere, such as boundary disputes between Argentina and Chile over a point in the Cordillera; between Bolivia and Chile over the former’s claim to an exit to the sea; between Venezuela and Guyana over border territory; and between Colombia and Nicaragua over the ownership of San Andres Island, as well as between Ecuador and Peru.

CBMs are also useful devices in managing civil–military relations in countries that in are still in the process of consolidating democratic institutions. Their uses are threefold. First, military-to-military CBM agreements promote transparency between militaries and encourage

multilateral cooperation within the region through institutions such as the Organization of American States. Second, bilateral or regional CBMs offer opportunities to build trust on issues that have sparked mistrust in the past—such as the nuclear programs of Argentina and Brazil—or to expand on economic arrangements that have as their goal increased trade and development. Third, the successful negotiation and implementation of CBMs can help consolidate democratic institutions while establishing the infrastructure for the resolution of future disputes through peaceful, political means. Overall, CBMs can aid the consolidation and preservation of democracy in Latin America.

