Strategic Assessment of Bolivia’s Defense Policy

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Considering Bolivia’s dramatic economic growth over the past decade, as well as the increasing sophistication of its defense policymaking process, it seems appropriate to make an assessment from a strategic point of view of its available military resources and current doctrine as they may pertain to achieving its future national policy objectives. This analysis is timely, considering Bolivia’s increasingly strident claim to a sovereign outlet to the Pacific Ocean as a permanent national objective. One such policy of concern reflects Bolivia’s interest in expanding its territory by reclaiming portions of the Pacific coast it ceded to Chile in a past war that is currently part of sovereign Chilean territory. To conduct this analysis, the ends, ways, and means formula will be used to synthesize the concept of strategy that predominates in the hemisphere.

Bolivia, under President Evo Morales, has recently achieved an unparalleled level of political stability and economic growth in its history. This progress has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a new elite that took...
political power in 2006 with a firm will and determination to transform the country by consolidating for the first time thirty-six ethnicities in an attempt to establish a genuine plurinational state.¹ To achieve this, new policy foundations are being established, which in turn are generating a new institutional framework of governance. With Morales’s reelection at the end of 2014 and his assumption of a third term in office in January 2015, these types of policies that aim at consolidating a plurinational state are projected to continue for another five years.²

Given these developments, it seems prudent to make an assessment of Bolivia’s defense policy as it relates to its geographical neighbors from a strategic point of view following the model developed by Arthur Lykke, which is based on the ends, ways, and means formula.³ Such an assessment is especially germane because of the recent resurgent Bolivian claim that it is morally and legally entitled to restoration of territory ceded by Bolivia to Chile after a war fought more than a century ago. The area is currently part of Chile, but Bolivia demands sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean and requires that the outlet be useful to harbor a port.

Reasserting this territorial claim has been institutionalized as a major Bolivian strategic objective as is evident in essential Bolivian strategic-level documents such as: Plan Nacional de Desarrollo [National Development Plan] (2007); Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia [Political Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia] (2009); and Bases para la Discusión de la Doctrina de Seguridad y Defensa del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia [Framework for the Discussion of Bolivian Security and Defense Doctrine] (2010). A clear articulation of this policy is found in the National Development Plan, as follows:

Bolivia has declared its maritime integration to the Pacific coast a permanent objective of its foreign policy, based on historical and judicial rights. This reintegration is justified due to commercial, economic, and political imperatives as well as access to the exploitation of marine resources.⁴

The national strategic objective of regaining previously ceded territory and gaining a sovereign corridor to the Pacific Ocean is also evident in the restructuring of the government’s administrative bureaucracy that established, under the guidance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Maritime Restitution Board as well as the Strategic Office for Maritime Restitution (both created in April 2011), and the publication of El Libro del Mar [The Book of the Sea] (2014).⁵

Other contributing elements that suggest a need for monitoring Bolivian steps to achieve this object are internal changes occurring in Bolivia noted below:

• The rapid growth of Bolivia’s gross domestic product (GDP), in fifteen years has increased 360 percent, reaching US$30.601 billion in 2013, which enables more aggressive policy initiatives.⁶
• Bolivia’s rapidly increased defense budget over a six-year span from 2008 to 2014, almost doubling with a 93 percent increase.⁷
• Bolivia emergence as China’s fifth-largest weapon-systems buyer, reaching US$289 million, just behind Pakistan and Bangladesh.⁸
• Changes in published national defense policy that emerged from the 2004 White Paper on National Defense.⁹

According to what has been shown so far, and following Lykke’s formula and definitions, an assessment of the main guidelines of Bolivian defense policy will be conducted as follows: the ends make up the objectives, the ways become concepts that are established in order to obtain those objectives, and the means become
resources on which the concepts are based. In this sense, we also incorporate salient perspective from H. Richard Yarger, another notable military scholar, who observes that a valid strategy should incorporate a balanced assessment of ends, ways, and means; otherwise, the success of the strategy would be at risk.10

**Ends**

The Bolivian constitution extends the traditional primary mission of the Bolivian armed forces to encompass internal aspects related to social and economic development as well as political stability. It establishes as its fundamental mission “to defend and preserve the country’s independence, security, and stability, as well as its honor and sovereignty; ensure the Constitution as the supreme rule of law, guarantee the stability of a legally established government, and participate in the comprehensive national development of the country.”11

Though the Plan for National Development reaffirms the previous armed forces missions, it goes even further by assigning to the defense sector the task of supporting socioeconomic inclusion as well as fighting against poverty.12 Consequently, the framework for the Discussion of Bolivian Security and Defense Doctrine determines four security and defense objectives:

- **Integral security and defense.** Ensuring the sovereignty and independence of the Nation, protecting the territory and its population, and defending its strategic natural resources against domestic and foreign threats.

- **Participation in the Nation’s comprehensive development.** Increasing defense sector involvement in the country’s overall development to improve the quality of life of Bolivians.

- **Integration and peace.** Promoting regional and global integration and peace in the defense sector.

- **Civil defense.** Developing an optimal and diverse infrastructure in this sector.13

In this regard, it is noteworthy that Bolivia’s White Paper on National Defense promotes the claim for sovereign access to the Pacific by designating it as a permanent national objective.14 Consequently, it incorporates “defeating any resistance that opposes the attainment of the national objectives” among the goals of the defense sector.15 The document overtly shows that Bolivian defense policy rests upon such aspirations, notably asserting a commitment “to stand firm in our unwavering desire to return to the Pacific with sovereignty.”16

All of the aforementioned points frame a policy geared toward the expansion of the country’s borders using whatever means possible. What has been recently highlighted is reinforced in the Framework for the Discussion of Bolivian Security and Defense Doctrine, in which the state’s objectives include promoting
maritime restitution with sovereignty,” as a vital objective for the development of the country.17 President Evo Morales referred to this objective in a direct and explicit way during a speech given to the Legislative Assembly on 22 January 2011: “Atacama belonged to Bolivia before. It is true. We hope to recover it soon.”18 It must be pointed out that Atacama, the name of the territory in question, is one of Chile’s fifteen political-administrative regions (specifically, the third), and it has a surface area of 75,176 km² (equivalent to Panama’s territory).

**Ways**

Bolivian defense policy incorporates the armed forces in internal and external security tasks, which in practice takes the form of an emphasis by the armed forces on support of internal development, public safety, and the fight against drugs and contraband. In this context, the Morales presidency has expressed its desire to formulate a defense policy “with the aim of reestablishing and strengthening its institutional capacities.”19 Therefore, it is developing a series of plans and programs geared to equip and modernize the armed forces; establish
control of the territory; support economic and social development, including socioeconomic inclusion as well as the fight against poverty; carry out health and educational campaigns with military participation; provide support to the civilian population in emergencies and catastrophes; support the development of borders; and support environmental protection and preserve cultural heritage in protected areas. 20 Added to this, in 2010, a series of initiatives were created to optimize the armed forces’ joint operative structure and their strategic deployment; encourage a culture of respect toward human rights; establish the armed forces as the protector of democracy and the state’s institutional framework; strengthen the state’s civil defense system; strengthen the defense sector’s projects in support of the state’s productive undertakings; and strengthen regional military integration for security and defense purposes, among others. 21

The Bolivian Armed Forces formally receive thirty-one armored vehicles from the People’s Republic of China as part of a military support agreement in a ceremony held 29 July 2016 in La Paz, Bolivia. (Photo by Daniel Espinoza, Bolivian Information Agency)
From a military point of view, Bolivia does not at present appear to contemplate a near-term scenario involving initiating military aggression outside its borders, even though it identifies a potential situation of conventional aggression against it, to which it has adopted an uncommon military defense model of joint responsibility, both military and civilian. This two-dimensional concept consists of the following:

- The use of conventional military force under the joint use of flexible units; and,
- If the scenario of an aggression with superior firepower arises, the conventional military force is to be modified and directed to avoid direct combat in order to gain more nonconventional maneuvering freedom in an irregular warfare scheme, adopting the so-called “Doctrina de Republiquetas,” which makes the citizen a soldier of the state.

In other words, Bolivia—aware that it is a poor country that would have a difficult time supporting or sustaining a conventional fight—appears to be contemplating an insurgent scenario against potential adversaries. One result is interesting work is being done to strengthen the Bolivian Special Forces, who specialize in unconventional warfare.

The direction of such developments should be evaluated and monitored in light of the stated policy of maritime restitution that has a prominent place in the concept of defense as it is curiously expressed in relation to the national development environment: “when maritime restitution becomes a vital aspiration for the development of Bolivia, the State sees the imperious necessity to maximize the necessary diplomatic efforts that enable the use of oceans and seas worldwide, with the purpose of obtaining economic development and enjoying the benefits that these related activities generate.”

**Means**

With regard to assessment of means available to achieve strategic objectives, it is noteworthy that Bolivia’s defense budget’s accelerated growth is directly related to the rise in GDP. Therefore, at present, improvements in the defense sector can take place without noticeable effect to funding of other projects related to the country’s development. In fact, the defense budget remained between 1.5 percent and 1.7 percent of the country’s GDP between 2008 and 2014. In this sense, we can conclude that, without an unusual perceived threat in Bolivia, this rate should remain stable in the short- and mid-term.

Expanding on this, if we consider that the government’s objective is to reach a GDP of U.S.$100 billion in 2020, then it is possible to project a defense budget of U.S.$1.5 billion. Taking into consideration that Bolivia’s defense budget in 2014 was U.S.$490 million, then by analyzing GDP growth, we can estimate that Bolivia could triple its defense budget in the next five years.

With regard to how Bolivia has targeted the rising funding available to the defense sector, the focus has thus far been on improving the conditions of the troops, quarters, and wages. The investment projects’ objective has been to improve the troops’ living conditions as well as to invest in the military units on the country’s borders. According to what the minister of the presidency, Ramón Quintana Taborga, has highlighted, 80 percent of the armed forces budget is earmarked for paying wages. The goal of improving wages is to reduce inequality in the ranks. For example, in 2009, there was a wage increase of 26 percent for low-ranking soldiers, and in 2012, there was an adjustment of 8 percent for sergeants.

Improvements notwithstanding, as previously alluded to, Bolivia lacks the material warfighting capability to conduct sustained conventional operations, including lacking such systems as capable radar systems and effective interceptor and air defense aircraft. The capabilities they do have remain at the low end when compared to the capabilities of its neighbors. As a result, Bolivia’s military is currently incapable of sustaining conventional offensive operations, night combat, and even maneuver against better funded and more technologically capable adversaries. Compounding its lack of technological and material warfighting capability, due to the relative weakness of the defense sector’s industrial base, the focus of which has primarily been supporting development (except the Navy’s shipyards), Bolivia is heavily dependent on imported replacement parts, ammunition, and other war-making material in general.

This lack of conventional capability stems in part from an emphasis on material acquisition decisions that aim instead at supporting the development of dual-purpose capabilities that could be applied to both unconventional warfare as well as the requirements of domestic law enforcement, including those required to support the fight against drugs and contraband, emergency and rescue situations, operations against border crimes, and the patrolling of regions with public safety issues. Such dual-purpose efforts are useful in
strengthening the country’s Special Forces unconventional warfare capabilities, which, it should be observed, is a traditional way underdeveloped countries prefer to fight wars, and which have sometimes been very successful in achieving objectives.

Final Considerations

Bolivia’s defense policy explicitly outlines diverse purposes that broaden the traditional concept of the military by assigning tasks to the armed forces that support internal security, political stability, economic and social development, and public safety. Such tasks respond ultimately to the urgent needs of one of Latin America’s poorest countries, but they also significantly extend the military’s range of action, basically exercising its logistical and organizational capabilities.

Consequently, the defense policy is structured from diverse concepts that seem to blur the notion of purely military effort and expand the focus on what is ultimately one of the nation’s root problems, the development of the country in general terms. In this sense, no matter how much of a correlation exists between ends and ways, an imbalance can be perceived, in Yarger’s terms, by paying attention to the essence of the armed forces and the utility of military means, which depend on the military contribution’s efficiency and efficacy in the extension of such involvement into what has otherwise been regarded as the purely civilian sector of the society.

From a different perspective, one can appreciate that the country’s current conditions for development prevent Bolivia from designing a force projection capability. Therefore, it employs its military resources to aid internal development; however, as long as its maritime aspiration to have a free, useful, and sovereign outlet to the Pacific Ocean through Chile remains, Bolivia’s defense sector will have to adjust its policies to generate concepts that will enable the attainment of such an objective and will be expected—as a matter of policy—to be developing the necessary means to make this happen as a policy option. The opportunity for such an adjustment stems from the fact that the country is growing like never before, which makes it possible to project a defense budget increase of 300 percent in the next five years.

Finally, as previously noted, the principal weapons supplier to Bolivia is the People’s Republic of China. Consequently, the direction of Bolivia’s policy with regard to reasserting control over Atacama could plausibly invite a somewhat more ominous dimension to the issue that should be of singular possible concern to the hemisphere in general, and that is the strengthening of its relationship with its ideological and strategic ally, the People’s Republic of China.

Biography

Cristián Faundes is a researcher for the Strategic Studies Center and the Chilean Army War College. He received a master’s degree in security and defense studies, specializing in defense policy, from the Chilean National Academy of Political and Strategic Studies, and a master’s degree in military sciences in international conflict and negotiation from the Chilean Army War College. He is a graduate from the Advanced Course on Hemispheric Security and Defense at the Inter-American Defense College, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C. He also took specialization courses at the William Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies and the Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy, National Defense University, Washington, D.C.

2. In 2015, Bolivian President Evo Morales called for a “re-referendum” to ask the Bolivian people for a second time for a modification of the constitution that would permit him to serve a fourth consecutive presidential term (from 2020 to 2024). The citizens voted against the modification in a February 2016 referendum.


11. Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, Constitución Política del Estado (La Paz: Gaceta Oficial de Bolivia, 2009), 244.


15. Ibid., 36.

16. Ibid., 42.


20. Ibid., 88–92.


22. Ministerio de Defensa de la República de Bolivia, Libro Blanco, 45.

23. Ministerio de Defensa del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, Discusión de la Doctrina, 34.

24. Ibid., 45.


26. Donadio and Tibiletti, 142.

27. Ibid., 141.


James R. Locher III, former executive director of the Project on National Security Reform, discusses the state of U.S. strategy formulation and management during an evening banquet at the U.S. Army War College’s 23rd Annual Strategy Conference at Carlisle Barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, held April 2012. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)