Международные отношения • Relaciones Internacionales

Research article

https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26

South America's military governments during the Cold War: a discussion of inter-state warfare

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Received: 25.07.2022

Revised: 23.08.2022

Accepted: 03.09.2022

For citation: Sánchez, Wilder Alejandro. South America's military governments during the Cold War: a discussion of inter-state warfare. *Cuadernos Iberoamericanos* 10, no. 3 (2022): 12-26. https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26.

→ Abstract

During the Cold War, dozens of military governments existed in South America. Some lasted only days or weeks, while others lasted years and even decades. The human rights abuses carried out by these military governments have been well analysed, like Argentina's Dirty War. However, an interesting fact about this period tends to be ignored: inter-state warfare between South American states, even during military governments, was very scarce. The Falklands / Malvinas war is the only case of a South American military government, Argentina, beginning a war against another state, the United Kingdom. There were other incidents that could have caused inter-state warfare during this era, but war was avoided. The only other inter-state war during the Cold War in South America happened in 1981 between Ecuador and Peru, both being under civilian rule. There were (and still are) reasons for South American states to attack one another, particularly to regain lost or disputed territory; however, as this essay demonstrates, war was almost non-existent. This essay will discuss why South American military governments did not attack their neighbours during this turbulent period.

→ Keywords

Military government, military junta, South America, war, inter-state war, civil-military relations, geopolitics

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Doctor Christian Joaquín Maisch, Ph.D., for his editorial suggestions and advice.

Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

The Cold War was a difficult period for democracy in South America. The struggle between the two Global Powers spilled over to the region, which prompted insurgent movements, repressive tactics, and a plethora of human rights violations. Governments were not safe, as coups were common. Chile is a well-known case study, as President Salvador Allende was overthrown in 1973 by General Augusto Pinochet. Allende's crime was his left-leaning ideology, and the Chilean military would not tolerate a leftist leader in La Moneda (the Presidential Palace).

Throughout the Cold War, many military governments appeared throughout Latin America, some lasting days or months, others lasting decades. The human rights violations and abuses committed by these governments have been well documented. Still, one curious aspect of military rule that tends to be overlooked is that, on very few occasions, South American military governments went to war against another state. In this essay, we will discuss this fact in greater detail and what it means for the legacy of regional military governments and civil-military relations.

The Elusive Democratic Peace

Any student of international relations has read Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace and the works of other proponents of democratic peace theory (DPT), who argue that democracies do not go to war with each other. "According to Kant, the foremost condition required for perpetual peace is the universal establishment of republican civil governance," summarizes Hayes.[1] Pugh expands on Kant's viewpoint, "because peace under Kant's paradigm is a function of the form of government of the two potential parties to a conflict, the logical implication is that liberal republicanism must be diffused and made universal to achieve perpetual peace among states."[2]

Over the decades, Kant's thesis has been analysed, discussed, dissected, and either challenged or supported by many authors.[3] "As the literature on the democratic peace developed, there arose a need to articulate the operative logics in a way that could be empirically verified," explains Simpson.[4] The link between commerce and DPT for Kant is somewhat murky. As Simpson argues, "complicating matters further are Kant's differing accounts of trade, commerce, and money [...] Kant calls the power of money 'the most reliable tool of war' on the grounds that hoarding riches causes conflict, while in the first supplement, he explains that this same 'power of money' is 'most reliable' in promoting a 'noble peace.'"[5]

Do Military Governments Go to War with Each Other? The Case of South America

Let us now look at South America during the period 1945–1990. Table 1 provides an overview of the various military governments across ten South American nations (we are not counting Guyana or Suriname) during the Cold War.

1 Hayes 2012.
2 Jeffrey Pugh, "Democratic peace theory: a review and evaluation," CEMPROC Working Paper Series in peace, conflict, and development, accessed June 25, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/2409260/Democratic_Peace_Theory_A_Review_and_Evaluation.
3 Hayes 2012; Layne 1994; Macmillan 1996; Starr 1997.
4 Simpson 2018, 111.
5 Ibid.

Now, let us compare Table 1 with Table 2, the number of armed conflicts during this period in South America. It is easy to see a significant discrepancy. Despite the large number of military governments during the Cold War, only two armed conflicts took place. The evidence becomes even more telling when we note that out of the four belligerent countries involved in these two wars, only one was a military government at the time.

→ Table 1

Military Governments in South America (1945–1990)

Country	Years in power	Notes
Argentina	1943–1946 (Revolución de 1943)	The 1943 coup removed civilian President Ramón Castillo. General Arturo Rawson, who led the coup, barely governed for three days before he was removed by his fellow officers due to unpopular decisions and plans. Generals Pedro Pablo Ramírez and Edelmiro Julián Farrell also governed.
	1955–1958 (Revolución Libertadora)	A violent coup, in which some military units participated, against Perón took place in 1955. General Eduardo Ernesto Lonardi was briefly the de facto president but was removed by his fellow officers, and Lieutenant General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu ruled until 1958.
	1966–1973 (Revolución Argentina)	Another coup ocurred in 1966 that removed civilian president Arturo Umberto Illia. Three military officers ruled in 1966–1973.
	1976–1983 (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional)	The third military coup took place in 1976, against President María Estela Martínez Cartas de Perón (1974–1976). a military junta took control, with four officers taking turns as president, until 1983.
Bolivia	1951–1952	General Hugo Ballivián Rojas (May 1951 – April 1952) became president, as the former president, Mamerto Urriolagoitia (1949–1951) did not recognize the winner of the 1951 presidential elections.
	1964–1979	The period 1964–1979 saw several military presidents govern the landlocked nation.
	1980–1982	There were three military heads of state between 1980 and 1982.
Brazil	1964–1985	Military officers ran in elections, supported by the military, as members of the political party Alianza Renovadora Nacional (ARENA).
Chile	1973–1990	President Salvador Allende Goens committed suicide on September 11, 1973, during the military coup led by General August Pinochet Ugarte. Pinochet ruled for almost two decades.
Colombia	1953–1957 1957–1958	Gustavo Rojas Pinilla overthrew President Laureano Gómez in 1953. He ruled until 1957, when he resigned. Afterward, a military junta ruled for one year, and the country returned to civilian rule.
Ecuador	August – September 1947	Colonel Carlos Mancheno ruled the country for ten days in 1947.
	1963–1976	Five presidents ruled between 1963 and 1976, two military officers and three civilians. Two civilian presidents were either "interim" or "de facto." President José María Velasco Ibarra won the 1968 elections and ruled until 1972, when he was overthrown by General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara, who governed from 1972 to 1976. General Rodríguez Lara resigned in 1976 after surviving a coup in 1975.
	1976–1979	Admiral Alfredo Poveda was President of the Supreme Council (Consejo Supremo de Gobierno) from 1976 to 1979. The Council was a triumvirate with an Army, Air Force, and Navy representative, with Admiral Poveda as the president.
Paraguay	1949 1954–1989	The 35-year rule of General Alfredo Stroessner Matiauda is known as "Strosnismo" or "Stronato." While a military officer, he was re-elected via elections, viewed as fraudulent

Peru	1948–1950	General Manuel Odría overthrew President José Luis Bustamante y Rivero in October 1948. Odría ruled as head of a military junta from 1948 to 1950. In 1950, Peru held presidential elections, and Odría won as the only candidate, governing until 1956
	1962–1963	In 1962, a military coup occurred against civilian President Manuel Prado Ugarteche (1956–1962), just ten days before his presidency ended due to concerns over the electoral process for the 1962 presidential elections. General Ricardo Pérez Godoy, as president of the joint armed forces, became the head of the junta. In 1963, General Nicolás Eduardo Lindley López removed General Godoy because he displayed interest in remaining in power. General Nicolás Eduardo Lindley López ruled from March to July 1963, when a civilian president took control.
	1968–1980	General Juan Velasco Alvarado removed President Fernando Belaúnde Terry from power in 1968. He ruled until 1975, when he was overthrown in another coup by General Morales Bermúdez, who ruled until 1980
Uruguay	1973–1985	During this period, there were civilian interim presidents, but the Uruguayan military was in charge of the country. The armed forces designated the civilian head of state
Venezuela	1950–1958	There are several peculiarities about this period: 1. The first president, the officer Carlos Román Delgado Chalbaud Gómez, ruled from November 1948 until November 1950, when he was assassinated. 2. The ruling military junta then chose a civilian, the diplomat Germán Suárez Flamerich, as president. He governed from November 1950 to December 1952. His civilian administration is generally regarded as a facade, as the armed forces were the decision-makers. 3. Suárez was replaced by General Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who ruled from December 1952 to January 1958. General Pérez Jiménez resigned as the armed forces disapproved of his repressive tactics. 4. A fourth officer, Rear Admiral Wolfgang Enrique Larrazábal Ugueto, ruled for less than a year (January – November 1958) before the country returned to civilian rule.

Resource: Created by the author, 2022.

→ Table 2

Inter-State Conflicts in South America (1945–1990)

Conflict	Year	Notes
Peru – Ecuador	1981	Peru and Ecuador fought three short wars over a border dispute: in 1941, 1981 and 1995
Argentina – United Kingdom	1982	The objective of the Argentine military operation was to regain control of the Falklands / Malvinas islands

Resource: Created by the author, 2022.

We will now briefly summarize each war. The first was the January – February 1981 conflict between Ecuador and Peru, also known as the Paquisha War (Conflicto del Falso Paquisha). The two countries have a contested border and previously fought a war in 1941, which Peru won. By 1981, Peru had become a democracy once again; the country held elections in 1980, putting an end to General Francisco Morales Bermúdez's military dictatorship (1975–1980), which were won by Fernando Belaúnde Terry (1980–1985). Ironically, Belaúnde Terry had already governed Peru between 1963–1968, when he was overthrown by General Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975). As for Ecuador, in 1981, the lawyer and politician Jaime Roldós Aguilera (1979–1981) was president until his tragic death in an airplane accident (May 24, 1981). In other words, two civilian leaders were at the helm of their respective countries when the short-lived war broke out.[1]

1 "Conflicto del Alto Comaina o Falso Paquisha 1981," Plataforma digital única del Estado Peruano, accessed July 2, 2022, https://www.gob.pe/institucion/munidesaguadero/noticias/78384-conflicto-del-alto-comaina-o-falso-paquisha-1981; Bonilla 1999.

As for the Falklands / Malvinas War, the reasons are well known. By 1982, the Argentine military junta (Junta Militar de Gobierno) had been in power for several years (1976–1983), and a rampant economic crisis was making the general population angry.[1] To rally the people in favour of the military government and distract them, the leadership chose to invade the British-controlled Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas), which both governments had contested for over a century.[2] The April – June 1982 war was a failure for the Argentine military, which provoked a return to democratic rule. The legacy of the war affected civil–military relations and defence strategies in the South American state.

Close Calls

A disclaimer about South American geopolitics is needed here: Just because there were only two armed conflicts in South America during the Cold War period does not mean that there were no "close calls," meaning incidents or tensions that could have ended in a war.

There are three noteworthy examples. First, in 1975, Peruvian General Velasco Alvarado mobilized the armed forces to invade Chile. The reason for the potential war was that the Peruvian military government wanted to regain Arica and Tarapacá, two territories lost during the 19th-century War of the Pacific.[3] Peruvian troops were deployed to their launching areas across the South. Ultimately, General Velasco did not order to commence the operation, apparently due to a disagreement with some military commanders and issues with his health. By 1975, Chile also had a military government, led by General Augusto Pinochet.

Another near-war occurred between Argentina and Chile. The two countries had historical tensions over a border dispute in the southern regions towards the Antarctic. In 1978, the two countries, governed by military governments, came close to war in a crisis known as the Beagle Conflict.[4] The Argentina junta mobilized troops and platforms as part of Operation Sovereignty (Operación Soberanía or Operativo afianzamiento de la soberanía); however, the operation was halted when it seemed that war was imminent. Papal mediation helped negotiations, and a peace treaty was signed in 1984 – at the time, Chile still had General Pinochet in power, but Argentina had returned to civilian rule and was led by President Raúl Ricardo Alfonsín (1983–1989).

Another incident took place between Colombia and Venezuela. The two countries also have a long-standing border dispute over the Gulf of Colombia; in August 1987,

1 Domingo Del Pino, "La quiebra económica argentina, mas importante que el fracaso de la guerra de las Malvinas," *El Pais*, July 12, 1982, https://elpais.com/diario/1982/07/12/economia/395272801_850215.html; Martin Kanenguiser, "A 40 años de Malvinas, cómo fue la verdadera economía de guerra que enfrentó la Argentina: causas y consecuencias," *Infobae*, March 19, 2022, https://www.infobae.com/economia/2022/03/19/a-40-anos-de-malvinas-como-fue-la-verdadera-economia-de-guerra-que-enfrento-la-argentina-causas-y-consecuencias/; Sánchez 1988.

2 Celeste Ainchil, and Enzo Scargiali, "Malvinas 1982: Patria, nacion y soberania," VII Jornadas de Sociologia de la UNLP, accessed July 2, 2022, https://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab_eventos/ev.1662/ev.1662.pdf; Leonardo Castillo, "La recuperación de Malvinas y el intento de legitimación de una dictadura agotada," *Telam*, March 19, 2022, https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202203/586920-recuperacion-malvinas-guerra.html; Calvert 1983.

3 "¿Es verdad que Juan Velasco Alvarado quiso invadir Chile?" *RPP*, October 3, 2018, https://rpp.pe/peru/historia/youtube-es-verdad-que-juan-velasco-alvarado-quiso-invadir-chile-noticia-1081739; Rafael Sagárnaga, "La guerra prevista para el 6 de agosto de 1975," *Los Tiempos*, July 31, 2021, https://www.lostiempos.com/oh/actualidad/20210731/guerra-prevista-6-agosto-1975.

4 Diego Zúñiga, "1978, el año en que Chile y Argentina se mostraron los dientes," *DW*, December 18, 2018, https://www.dw.com/es/1978-el-a%C3%B1o-en-que-chile-y-argentina-se-mostraron-los-dientes/a-46775165; Ugarte and Toso, 2008; Sergio Ostornol Varela, "La guerra antes de la guerra," *Revista de la Marina*, June 25, 2019, https://revistamarina.cl/es/articulo/la-guerra-antes-de-la-guerra.

the Colombian corvette ARC *Caldas* (FM-52) entered contested waters.[1] In response, the Venezuelan government deployed the patrol vessel ARV *Libertad* (PC-14). The situation escalated over the following days, as both sides sent frigates, corvettes, submarines, and warplanes. Interestingly, apart from threatening communications and postures, no reported shots were fired. After ultimatums and communications at the highest level, the ships from both sides eventually withdrew – including the Colombian frigate ARC *Independiente* (FM-54), which had relieved *Caldas* in the contested area.

Like the 1978 Beagle Conflict, the Caldas Incident did not escalate, and military platforms and troops returned to their home bases. However, it is worth noting that, unlike the Beagle Conflict, Bogota and Caracas have yet to solve their border dispute. Even more noteworthy and relevant for our analysis is that, at the time, Colombia and Venezuela had civilian, democratically elected leaders in power: President Jaime Lusinchi (1984–1989) in Venezuela and President Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) in Colombia.

Discussing the Lack of Inter-State Warfare

The question we need to answer is: Why were there so few inter-state wars during this period? Since military governments tend to be labelled "war-hungry" and "conflict-prone," it is remarkable that South America did not experience more inter-state armed conflicts during the Cold War period. The question becomes even more intriguing since, as we noted, there are several border disputes, old rivalries, histories of distrust, and "bad blood" between South American states. Moreover, popular beliefs, and even Kant's theory, suggest that military governments should have fought each other often, but the opposite occurred.

1. Internal threats were the priority: South American military governments were generally friendly with Washington during the Cold War, and were very concerned about the "Communist threat." It was thus unsurprising that military governments were members of Operation Condor, Washington's strategy to neutralize "red" hotspots that appeared throughout the region.[2] The obvious concern was that left-leaning political parties would be elected to power (e.g., Chile with Allende), or Communist / Socialist insurgent movements would violently take control of the country, as happened in Cuba (1959) and Nicaragua (1979). Anecdotally, these are the only two cases in Latin America in which left-leaning insurgents successfully implemented a regime change.

Thus, we can argue that the *raison d'être* of military governments during this period was internal security threats rather than external ones. This objective, unfortunately, justified and encouraged a plethora of well-documented human rights abuses. Examples of these internal "red" security threats abound, including the Araguaia guerrilla in Brazil, Bolivia's National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional de Bolivia, or ELN) led by Ernesto "Che" Guevara; Chile's Revolutionary Left Movement (Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria, or MIR), and Uruguay's Tupamaro National Liberation Movement (Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional-Tupamaros, or MLN Tupamaros).

Argentina's Dirty War (Guerra Sucia) is well known for the egregious human rights abuses committed against the population to defeat violent organizations like the People's Guerrilla Army (Ejercito Guerrillero del Pueblo, EGP), People's Revolutionary Army (Ejercito del Pueblo Revolucionario, EPR) and the famous Montoneros, a peronista (as in influenced by former President Juan Domingo Perón) insurgency.[3]

1 Mantilla 2015; Pilar Lozano, "Colombia y Venezuela pugnan por un Golfo," *El Pais*, September 25, 1987, https://elpais.com/diario/1987/09/25/internacional/559519218_850215.html.
2 Abrão 2015; Torres-Vásquez 2019.
3 Sánchez and Illingworth 2017; Barros 2003; Navarro 2014.

The 1953 military coup in Colombia was also justified for similar reasons. The country was in the middle of a period of instability known as The *Violence* (La Violencia) from around 1925 to 1958. The 1948 assassination of popular politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán worsened the situation. Civilian President Roberto Urdaneta (November 5, 1951 – June 13, 1953) was generally unable to control the violence; thus, Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, with support from some political factions, carried out a bloodless military coup on June 13, 1953 and governed until 1957.[1] Curiously, General Rojas Pinilla had to resign in 1957 due to a social crisis. He was succeeded by a short-lived military junta that lasted until 1958, when Colombia returned to civilian rule.

2. The cost of a war was too high? It is also plausible that military governments recognized that the price of war was too high, namely the destruction and loss of life. Thus, they, like civilian leaders, were reluctant to fight their neighbours. an obvious exception to this argument is Peru's General Velasco's plan to attack Chile and regain territories that Peru had lost almost a century previously. He spent seven years improving the Peruvian armed forces, including buying heavy Soviet military technology, such as T-55 battle tanks, for an eventual war with Chile.

In 1975, there was a high-profile and controversial meeting between Bolivia's General Hugo Banzer and Chile's General Pinochet. The meeting, held on February 8, was an attempt to repair historically tense relations due to Bolivia's loss of sea access to Chile after the War of the Pacific, which led to the signing of the Charaña Accords (Acuerdo de Charaña, commonly known as the "abrazo of Charaña" or "hug of Charaña).[2] While the agreement ultimately did not prosper – partially due to Peruvian protests – it is an example of military leaders seeking non-war alternatives to solve disputes. Similarly, the Beagle Conflict is an example of two military governments being very close to conflict but then choosing to de-escalate.

On the other hand, the Falklands / Malvinas War was a war of desperation, given Argentina's socioeconomic crisis.

3. Short-lived military rule: This is a complicated issue because of the length of some military governments. For example, Lieutenant General Juan Domingo Perón governed Argentina on three occasions: 1946–1952, 1952–1955, and 1973–1974. Meanwhile, General Pinochet was in power in Chile for 17 years (1973–1990), while General Alfredo Stroessner ruled Paraguay for 35 years (1954–1989).

On the other hand, some military leaders ruled for months or sometimes even days, as was the case of Bolivia's General Hugo Ballivián Rojas, *de facto* president of the landlocked country from May 16, 1951 to April 11, 1952, i.e., less than a year. Even worse was General Raimundo Rolón Villasanti, who governed Paraguay from January 31 to February 26, 1949. He came to power after a military coup against his predecessor, the civilian president Juan Natalicio González. However, he resigned after a popular uprising at the end of February. Another short-lived government occurred in Ecuador, as Colonel Carlos Mancheno Cajas overthrew civilian President José María Velasco Ibarra (June 1944–1947) on August 23, 1947. However, Cajas only governed for ten days, until September 3, when another military uprising forced him to resign. Finally, in Argentina, General Eduardo Lonardi ruled for less than two months, from September to November 1955; he was a member of the coup that overthrew then-President Perón, and also himself removed from power by his fellow officers.

It is impossible to reasonably hypothesize whether or not any of these short-lived military governments would have been more aggressive towards their neighbours than others. The point is that the length of some of these governments likely affected their foreign and defence policies.

4. Reasons for war / the historical angle: This is a critical issue that would clash with Kant's peace theory about democracies and warfare. Did military leaders in South America

1 Cruz 2010.
2 Figueroa Pla 2007; Quitral 2010.

want to go to war with their neighbours? General Velasco in Peru is an example that seemingly confirms Kant's theory. The Falklands / Malvinas War was a war of "desperation" by the Argentine military junta, which wanted to rally the masses behind it and divert public attention away from the country's internal problems. However, the Brazilian, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Uruguayan, and Venezuelan military governments did not appear to have had an appetite for inter-state war.[1]

One key issue here is necessary to mention: the causes of war. The tensions and armed conflicts discussed in this essay were not based on the whims or impromptu feelings of the military government *du jour*. In all cases, the wars or incidents were based around unsolved border disputes (Chile and Argentina; Colombia and Venezuela; and Ecuador and Peru) or recovering lost territories (Peru and Chile; Argentina and the United Kingdom). Peru's General Velasco did not want to invade Bolivia, as the two countries had historically close relations (they were one confederacy during the 19th century), nor did Colombia's Lt. General Rojas Pinilla want to attack Brazil.

What is more, the conflicts and incidents that occurred during civilian rule highlight that aggressive policies, even war, can be carried out by civilian governments if there are "valid" historical reasons. a case in point is Ecuador, which went to war with Peru on three occasions, in 1941, 1981, and 1995, when civilian leaders were in power. While political and nefarious personal interests of the leaders in power at the time had a role in starting the short-lived wars, the root of the conflict was a border dispute (a peace treaty was signed in 1998).

How to Remember South America's Military Governments

The legacy of military governments is a complicated issue. It is easy and generally correct to label South American military governments as "dictatorships" – "dictaduras" in Spanish, or "ditadura" in Portuguese. After all, these military officers came to power by overthrowing civilian governments (or sometimes fellow military officers). The military governments would then carry out human rights abuses and crackdowns on political parties, journalists, and other opposition voices, particularly if they had left-leaning ideologies. Constitutions were ignored or rewritten, and juntas kept themselves in power, sometimes for decades.

With that said, some sectors of local populations fondly remember military governments. For example, in Chile, Pinochet is still remembered positively by many Chileans because he brought security, improved the economy, and industrialized the country.[2] Similarly, in Argentina, the Partido Justicialista (P.J.) is the heir of the Partido Peronista, funded by General Juan Domingo Perón in 1946. The "Peronistas" are currently in power in Argentina, as President Alberto Fernández comes from the P.J.[3] Similarly, Peru's General Manuel Arturo Odría Amoretti (1948–1956) carried out significant infrastructure projects, including building schools, highway systems, and even the national football stadium in Lima. Moreover, thanks to the Odría government – a military, not a civilian government – Peruvian women obtained the right to vote in 1955.[4]

1 This statement deserves clarification. Argentina and Brazil fought a war between 1825 and 1828, known as the Cisplatine War. The two countries have remained competitors, most notably in sports such as football (soccer). Under the military governments during the Cold War, each side distrusted the other; however, as far as this author has been able to determine, there was no incident that could have provoked a war, like the cases mentioned in this essay. Nevertheless, distrust did certainly did exist; "Revelan que la dictadura brasileña temía una guerra con Argentina," *Clarin*, August 12, 2013, https://www.clarin.com/mundo/revelan-dictadura-brasilena-guerra-argentina_0_HypN6Srjv7l.html.

2 Gideon Long, "Chile: los que todavía defienden a Pinochet," *BBC*, September 9, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/09/130909_chile_aniversario_golpe_argumentos_pinochetistas_jp.

3 Hector Barbotta, "¿Qué es exactamente el peronismo?" *Diario Sur*, December 10, 2019, https://www.diariosur.es/internacional/america-latina/exactamente-peronismo-20191210220129-nt.html.

4 Poulsen 2016.

On the other hand, in Paraguay, the shadow of Stroessner is very present. His lengthy rule is blamed for making the landlocked South American nation one of the most "unequal countries in the world."[1] Similarly, the human rights abuses committed in countries like Chile during the Pinochet era are still remembered.[2] In Argentina, babies or toddlers were kidnapped and adopted by other families; even today, four decades after the end of the last military government, Argentinian citizens continue to search for their true identities and real families[3].

Analysis

What is the legacy of South America's military governments? Let us break down this question into sections:

1. Military coups in the region have been very scarce since the Cold War ended.

Two famous coups occurred in Venezuela. On February 4, 1992, then-military officer Hugo Chávez and his supporters, the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement–200 (Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200), attempted to overthrow President Carlos Andrés Pérez due to a severe economic crisis. The coup was unsuccessful.[4] Ironically, Chávez would then be democratically elected to power in 1998 and ruled from 1999 until his death in 2013. Also ironically, in April 2002, a decade after Chávez's coup, anti-Chavez military officers and politicians organized a coup that briefly removed Chávez.[5] However, he would ultimately return to power.

As for Peru, on November 13, 1992, a group of military officers attempted a military coup to remove dictator Alberto Fujimori from power.[6] The coup was unsuccessful. Years later, on October 29, 2000, Lieutenant Colonel Ollanta Humala organized an uprising in Locumba, Tacna Region, against Fujimori.[7] The rebellion and major civilian protests forced dictator Fujimori to flee the country and memorably resign by fax. Humala would then rule Peru from 2011 to 2016 after winning the democratic elections. Humala is not the only case of a former military coup leader or head of state to later be democratically elected president. Another example is Bolivia's General Hugo Banzer Suárez, who ruled the country from 1971 to 1978 after a successful coup. Banzer was democratically elected president and ruled from 1997 until 2001, when he resigned due to health reasons.[8]

One case in which a military uprising did result in a president resigning occurred in Ecuador in January 2000. Widespread protests against the new economic policies passed by President Jamil Mahuad (August 10, 1998 –January 21, 2000) prompted the armed forces

1 Veronica Smirk, "Cómo el régimen de Alfredo Stroessner convirtió a Paraguay en uno de los países más desiguales del mundo," *BBC*, February 3, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-47098176.
2 Mar Romero, "Chile recuerda a sus víctimas en el 46 aniversario del golpe de Estado de Pinochet," *France24*, September 11, 2019, https://www.france24.com/es/20190911-chile-memoria-dictadura-pinochet-allende.
3 "Hijo robado por militares argentinos encuentra a su padre," *ElFaro.net*, February 23, 2010, https://elfaro.net/es/201002/internacionales/1237/Hijo-robado-por-militares-argentinos-encuentra-a-su-padre.htm.
4 Alonso Moleiro, "30 años del 4-F, el golpe de Hugo Chávez que cambió el destino de Venezuela," *El Pais Internacional*, February 4, 2022, https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-02-04/30-anos-del-4-f-el-golpe-de-hugo-chavez-que-cambio-el-destino-de-venezuela.html.
5 Monica Nanjari, "20 años del intento golpista contra Chávez que terminó por fortalecerlo," *DW*, April 10, 2022, https://www.dw.com/es/20-a%C3%B1os-del-intento-golpista-contra-ch%C3%A1vez-que-termin%C3%B3-por-fortalecerlo/a-61409627.
6 Liz Meneo, and Jenny Cabrera, "Secretos del 13 de Noviembre," IDL-Reporteros, November 13, 2012, https://www.idl-reporteros.pe/secretos-del-13-de-noviembre/; Gianmarco Linares, "A 26 años: ¿Qué detuvo el plan para derrocar a Alberto Fujimori?" *Punto Seguido*, November 20, 2018, https://puntoseguido.upc.edu.pe/a-26-anos-que-detuvo-el-plan-para-derrocar-a-alberto-fujimori/.
7 "Así ocurrió: En 2000 Ollanta Humala se amotina en Locumba," *El Comercio*, October 29, 2014, https://elcomercio.pe/lima/ocurrio-2000-ollanta-humala-amotina-locumba-294122-noticia/.
8 Banzer was diagnosed with cancer and passed away in 2002.

to remove him from office. A military junta was briefly in charge, but, given the lack of support, power was given to then-Vice President Gustavo Noboa. The fact that the armed forces did not try to remain in power suggests they understood that the situation in 2000 was different than during the Cold War, and governing without domestic or international support would lead to isolation and potentially violence. A more recent example occurred in Bolivia in 2019, when President Evo Morales (2006–2019) resigned due to the controversial October 2019 general elections. While what happened remains debatable, it seems clear that some military commanders asked Morales to leave due to weeks of protests. While this incident does not qualify as a coup (unless you are a Morales supporter), it is another example of the armed forces of Bolivia intervening in electoral and political matters.

2. How did these governments affect civil-military relations and the overall status of regional militaries today?

The answer is mixed. In countries like Argentina and Uruguay, the return to civilian rule was followed by severely reduced defence budgets. Before the Falklands / Malvinas War, the Argentine military was one of South America's strongest; the Navy even operated a Colossus-class aircraft carrier ARA *Veinticinco de Mayo* (V-2). The Argentine military now has a non-operational submarine fleet, very few combat aircraft, and many legacy systems.[1] The Uruguayan military is in even worse shape. A limited budget means the military relies on donations from allies like Brazil and the United States for second-hand platforms like armoured personnel carriers, artillery systems, and coastguard patrol vessels.[2] While no politician will openly state that the military's defence budget should be cut because of the legacy of military governments, there seems to be an unavoidable link.

On the other hand, the militaries in Brazil and Chile have continued to enjoy a significant defence budget. In September 2022, the Brazilian Navy (Marinha do Brasil) commissioned its first ever domestically manufactured submarine, the Scorpene-class Riachuelo (S-40).[3] Three more Scorpene-class submarines will be built, while there are also plans for a nuclear-powered submarine, SN *Álvaro Alberto* (SN-10), a dream of the Marinha dating back to the military government of the 1970s.[4] Similarly, a legacy of the Pinochet government is that the Chilean military received royalties from copper exports for several decades. While the royalty deal has changed, the Chilean armed forces continue to acquire modern equipment, while its state-run shipyard ASMAR is currently building a polar vessel and a fleet of transport vessels.[5]

1 Mariano German Videla Sola, "Fuerza Aérea Argentina: balance negativo en cuanto a capacidades adquiridas en los últimos 25 años," *Zona Militar*, August 12, 2022, https://www.zona-militar.com/2022/08/12/fuerza-aerea-argentina-balance-negativo-en-cuanto-a-capacidades-adquiridas-en-los-ultimos-25-anos-%ef%bf%bc/; Valentina Borghi Ponti, "La Argentina ha tocado su piso histórico en materia de inversión en defensa," *Zona Militar*, August 11, 2022, https://www.zona-militar.com/2022/08/11/la-argentina-ha-tocado-su-piso-historico-en-materia-de-inversion-en-defensa/.

2 Wilder Alejandro Sánchez, "Brazil Aims to Donate Howitzers, Urutu APCs to Cash-Strapped Uruguay," *Shephard Media*, August 16, 2022, https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/landwarfareintl/brazil-aims-to-donate-howitzers-urutu-apcs-to-cash-strapped-uruguay/; "Abanderamiento de los tres guardacostas que se incorporan a la Armada Nacional transferidos por Estados Unidos," Ministry of National Defense (Uruguay), accessed August 16, 2022, https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-defensa-nacional/comunicacion/noticias/abanderamiento-tres-guardacostas-se-incorporan-armada-nacional-transferidos.

3 Francisco Thais Cerqueira, "Submarino "Riachuelo" reforça a soberania do País na Amazônia Azul," Ministério da Defesa (Brazil), accessed July 20, 2022, https://www.marinha.mil.br/agenciadenoticias/submarino-riachuelo-reforca-soberania-do-pais-na-amazonia-azul.

4 "Submarino Nuclear," Marinha do Brasil, Centro tecnológico da Marinha em São Paulo, accessed July 20, 2022, https://www.marinha.mil.br/ctmsp/submarino-nuclear; Kuramoto and Appolini 2002.

5 Wilder Alejandro Sánchez, "Chile picks design partner for Escotillón IV," *Shephard Media*, February 15, 2021, https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/naval-warfare/premium-chile-picks-design-partner-escotillon-iv/; Felipe Placencia, "Rompehielos que se construye en Talcahuano lleva 59% de avance," *Diario Concepcion*, May 9, 2022, https://www.diarioconcepcion.cl/ciudad/2022/05/09/rompehielos-que-se-construye-en-talcahuano-lleva-59-de-avance.html.

3. Did the military governments affect South American geopolitics?

The general answer is no. Since the end of the era of military governments in the region, there has only been one inter-state conflict there, between Ecuador and Peru in 1995, which had more to do with a historical border dispute and the Fujimori dictatorship than it was a consequence of the military governments in either country.[1] Tensions between Colombia and Venezuela continue due to the contradictions between the Nicolás Maduro regime against Colombia and the United States. While the fate of the Gulf of Colombia remains unresolved, it has been overshadowed by other issues. On the other hand, Peru and Chile did manage to resolve their maritime border dispute by way of a 2014 ruling by the International Court of Justice, while Argentina – Chile relations remain generally cordial. Nevertheless, in the case of Peru and Chile, distrust and resentment will continue to exist.

The one legacy of the military governments that remains very relevant today is Argentina, as the Falklands / Malvinas has become a pillar of Argentine national identity and patriotism. It would be political suicide for any politician, particularly a president, to not proclaim that one day the islands will return to Argentina ("las Malvinas son Argentinas").[2]

There are three final issues about our analysis that are necessary to mention. First, this essay has not discussed civil-military relations during the Cold War, due to space considerations. Second, an unanswered question is the degree of influence that armed forces enjoyed in policy-making, even when a civilian president was in power. In countries like Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay, there were "interim" or "*de facto*" presidents who gave a "civilian face" to a government in which military commanders made the decisions. What about the Caldas Incident of 1987, when there were civilian leaders in Bogota and Caracas? How influential were the armed forces, particularly naval commanders, during the escalation and subsequent de-escalation of that incident? More research is necessary.

Moreover, Table 1 highlights that military coups were not solely carried out against civilian leaders. In many cases, the armed forces were willing to remove fellow military officers from power if they did not accept his policies. Given the sheer number of precedents, military leaders must have been under pressure to avoid unpopular decisions and not alienate their troops and fellow officers. More historical research is necessary to understand how tensions and disagreements among commanders in military governments affected foreign and defence policies (including planning for war).

Finally, how does the South American experience of military governments during the Cold War relate to inter-state warfare and Immanuel Kant's famous democratic peace theory? I would argue that we have proven that military governments are not more likely to attack a neighbouring state than a civilian government. The critical issue is that South America's last wave of military governments occurred when internal security threats, namely communist/socialist guerrillas, were the primary defence/security challenge faced by countries. Should new military governments come to power nowadays, their foreign and defence policies (or we should call them "war policies") may be different.

Conclusions

This essay has analysed South America's military governments during the Cold War. "Military governments," "dictatorships," and "military dictatorships" tend to be used

1 Sánchez 2011.

2 Jordi Bacaria, "Nunca vamos a renunciar a las Malvinas," *El Economista*, April 19, 2020, https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/internacionales/Nunca-vamos-a-renunciar-a-las-Malvinas-20200419-0058.html; Jorge Fontevecchia, "Robert Fox: 'Hay una obsesión en el reclamo de las islas Malvinas'" *Perfil*, April 2, 2022, https://www.perfil.com/noticias/periodismopuro/robert-fox-hay-una-obsesion-en-el-reclamo-de-las-islas-malvinas-por-jorge-fontevecchia.phtml.

as interchangeable synonyms. There is an obvious logic for this, as military governments generally governed with an "iron fist," cracked down on civilian opposition movements and individuals, restricted freedom of expression, cancelled elections (or fixed them to remain in power), and carried out gross human rights violations.

We have also analysed the foreign and defence policies of these military governments, explicitly focusing on inter-state warfare, or the lack thereof. As we have seen, while these governments behaved aggressively on the domestic front to combat communist / socialist insurgent movements, inter-state war was virtually non-existent. This is a curious fact considering that there were (and still are) border disputes and "bad blood" between states in the region, while armed forces are stereotypically viewed as "warmongers."

Only two inter-state wars took place during the Cold War in South America: between Ecuador and Peru in 1981, and between Argentina and the United Kingdom in 1982. Of these countries, only one was ruled by a military government at the time (Argentina). There were undoubtedly other incidents throughout this period that could have resulted in a war, such as between Chile and Peru in 1975 and between Argentina and Chile in 1978, when all three countries had military governments, but (fortunately) war was averted. This essay has suggested various explanations for why this period of South American history did not experience more inter-state warfare than one could have predicted or expected. A significant reason is that military governments were more interested in combating internal threats (e.g., insurgents and civilian opposition groups) rather than fighting their neighbours. Another reason is that military leaders saw the cost of war as too high. However, even these potential reasons need more analysis on a case-by-case basis.

Throughout the Cold War, South American nations experienced violence and turmoil, with a plethora of insurgent movements, repression, demands for change by the population, and governments, civilian or military, not staying in power for long. However, this period of South American history did not include inter-state conflicts, even when military commanders were in charge.

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Исследовательская статья

https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26

Военные правительства в странах Южного конуса в период холодной войны: почему между ними не было войн?

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Статья поступила в редакцию: 25.07.2022

Доработана после рецензирования: 23.08.2022

Принята к публикации: 03.09.2022

Для цитирования: Sánchez, Wilder Alejandro. South America's military governments during the Cold War: a discussion of inter-state warfare. *Cuadernos Iberoamericanos* 10, no. 3 (2022): 12-26. https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26.

→ Аннотация

В период холодной войны в Южной Америке существовали десятки правительств, возглавляемых военными. В одних странах они продержались всего несколько дней или недель, в то время как в других военные находились у власти годы и даже десятилетия. Нарушения прав человека, осуществлявшиеся военными правительствами, в том числе во времена «Грязной войны» в Аргентине, хорошо изучены. Однако без внимания остается тот факт, что в период, когда у власти во многих странах Южной Америки находились военные, в регионе практически не было межгосударственных конфликтов. Фолклендская (Мальвинская) война между Великобританией и Аргентиной была единственным случаем, когда Аргентина – южноамериканская страна с военным правительством – объявила войну Великобритании. Еще одним межгосударственным конфликтом в регионе стала война 1981 года между Эквадором и Перу, в результате которой в обоих государствах к власти в конечном итоге пришли гражданские лица. В период холодной войны было больше инцидентов, которые могли бы спровоцировать межгосударственные войны в южноамериканских странах, но серьезных военных конфликтов удалось избежать. У государств данного региона были (и все еще остаются) причины для начала военных действий, особенно в целях возвращения утраченных или спорных территорий. Несмотря на это, автор приходит к выводу, что в изучаемый период войн в южноамериканских государствах практически не случалось. В данной статье делается попытка ответить на вопрос, почему южноамериканские государства не нападали друг на друга в неспокойные годы холодной войны.

→ Ключевые слова

Военное правительство, военная хунта, Южная Америка, война, межгосударственный конфликт, военно-гражданские отношения, геополитика

Благодарности: Автор хотел бы поблагодарить доктора Кристиана Хоакина Майша за его редакционные предложения и советы.

Конфликт интересов: Автор заявляет об отсутствии потенциального конфликта интересов.

Artículo de investigación

https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26

Los gobiernos militares de América del Sur durante la Guerra Fría: una discusión sobre la guerra interestatal

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Recibido: 25.07.2022

Revisado: 23.08.2022

Aceptado: 03.09.2022

Para citar: Wilder Alejandro Sánchez. Los gobiernos militares de América del Sur durante la Guerra Fría: una discusión sobre la guerra interestatal. *Cuadernos Iberoamericanos* 10, no. 3 (2022): 12-26. https://doi.org/10.46272/2409-3416-2022-10-3-12-26.

→ Resumen

Durante la Guerra Fría decenas de gobiernos militares existieron en Sudamérica. Algunos gobiernos duraron solo días o semanas, mientras que otros duraron años e incluso décadas. Los abusos de derechos humanos cometidos por estos gobiernos militares han sido bien analizados, como por ejemplo la Guerra Sucia en Argentina. Sin embargo, hay un dato interesante sobre este período que tiende a ser ignorado: las guerras interestatales entre los estados sudamericanos, incluso durante los gobiernos militares, fueron muy escasas. De hecho, la guerra de las Malvinas / Falklands es el único caso de un gobierno militar sudamericano, es decir, Argentina, que inició una guerra con otro estado, el Reino Unido. También hubieron varios incidentes que podrían haber terminado en una guerra interestatal durante esta época. De hecho, la única otra guerra interestatal durante la Guerra Fría en América del Sur fue en 1981 entre Ecuador y Perú, cuando ambos gobiernos tenian gobiernos civiles. Había (y todavía hay) razones para que los estados sudamericanos se atacaran entre sí, particularmente para recuperar territorios perdidos o debido a territorios en disputa, sin embargo, como este ensayo argumenta, la guerra fue casi inexistente. Este ensayo discutirá las posibles razones por las que los gobiernos militares sudamericanos no atacaron a sus vecinos durante este turbulento período.

→ Palabras clave

Gobierno militar, junta militar, América del Sur, guerra, guerra interestatal, relaciones cívico-militares, geopolítica

Agradecimientos: El autor desea agradecer al Doctor Christian Joaquín Maisch, Ph.D., por sus sugerencias y consejos editoriales.

Declaración de divulgación: El autor declara que no existe ningún potencial conflicto de interés.