

Reforming the Inter-American Defense Board

by John A. Cope

Key Points

The Western Hemisphere's delegations to the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) should represent and be responsible to ministers of defense or their equivalents, rather than to the armed forces, as is the case in most countries in the Americas today. This breakthrough reform would bring the Board in line with democratic constitutional practices, strengthen Organization of American States (OAS) support for democracy, and help implement the 2003 Mexico City "Declaration on Security in the Americas," which adopted a broadened multidimensional view of security. The reform could be accomplished without change to the March 2006 statutes and would bring the Board into the OAS General Secretariat associated with the Secretariat on Multidimensional Security.

This small but pivotal step toward developing a genuinely collaborative civil-military working environment could improve OAS effectiveness, contributing to matters of multilateral security and defense at a time of imperiled public safety in many countries and increased transnational crime and violence.

Starting from the above reform, this paper discusses improving IADB usefulness to the OAS and member states by modernizing its functions and broadening available

expertise on strategic issues. Revitalization in this follow-on phase would facilitate the adaptation of defense capabilities to regional issues such as disaster response, military support for police and other civil institutions, and subregional confidence-building. The process of reforming the IADB would require whole-of-government support from all OAS member states.

The Issue

Does the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) have a future in an era of multidimensional security? Burdened by a mid-20th-century military structure and a tradition of U.S. leadership, lingering deep antimilitary discomfort within the Organization of American States (OAS), and severely shrinking financial and human resources, the Board, with its secretariat and 27-member council of delegates,¹ has not been functionally useful to the OAS or its own membership and is ripe for disestablishment. Perceived to be out of touch, inflexible, and difficult to control, the IADB would cease to exist if funding were denied or markedly reduced.²

To preserve this important multilateral channel for communication, military standard setting, confidence-building, and col-

laboration, the Board must become more productive on defense and security issues, less threatening to diplomats, and clearly responsive to OAS direction. The existence of an international meeting ground for civilian and military officials is important for attenuating regional tensions as well as for strengthening hemispheric security cooperation and interoperability, processes in which the IADB must realize its full potential to contribute. A 21st-century Board should be rooted in the principles and priorities established 7 years ago in the "Declaration on Security in the Americas" and provide not only up-to-date technical expertise on current strategic and defense issues, but also planning capabilities in complex situations and a readiness to find ways to support civil institutions and law enforcement officials facing difficult domestic and transnational security problems with which no single institution or even nation can cope alone.

Background

The Inter-American Defense Board is the oldest international aggregation of armed forces in the world. With U.S. urging in 1942, the American Republics created the IADB to prepare for the defense of the hemisphere against external aggression from the

Axis nations through the conduct of collaborative studies and recommendations of appropriate measures. After World War II, to maintain continental security and regularize hemispheric cooperation, the countries of the Americas adopted the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Pact) in 1947 and created the Organization of American States a year later. But the IADB was not explicitly recognized in either treaty. Through most of its 68 years, the region's military leadership (including U.S. officers) kept the Board from subordination to the "political" organs of the OAS. Delegations also remained independent from their own diplomats at the organization. With little respect for military institutions in general, OAS officials have in turn limited IADB scope of action in regional affairs for fear the military would take over, belittled its usefulness, and desired to bring the Board under firm civilian control. In the process, OAS member states, led historically by Mexico, also tried to ensure that U.S. military influence at the IADB was restrained.

The advent of constitutional democracy in a post-Cold War world renewed attention to civilian control over the armed forces. The OAS community's reaction in the 1990s was to create a Committee on Hemispheric Security of the OAS Permanent Council and question the IADB's purpose and agenda in an era of democratic peace and bilateral confidence-building. In 2004–2005, a Secretariat for Multidimensional Security was created. Even so, it would take additional discussion to clarify the juridical and institutional relationship between the OAS and IADB. In a 2006 resolution, "Statutes of the Inter-American Defense Board," the Board became an "entity" of the Organization under its charter. The document emphasized the principle of civilian oversight of the armed forces and made clear that in no case would the IADB have an operational role. For the first time, the statutes directed the Board to elect its own chair, vice chair, and other senior officials instead of accepting officers provided by the United States.³ That

year, Brazilian Jorge Armando Ribeiro was the first elected chairman of the Inter-American Defense Board, which had been chaired by U.S. officers for 64 years. The 2006 resolution confirmed four tasks the IADB had accrued over time:

- provide technical and educational advice and consultancy services on matters related to military and defense issues
- offer to military officers and civilian officials advanced academic courses on military- and defense-related themes, the Inter-American system, and related disciplines at the Inter-American Defense College (IADC)
- promote cooperation between military and civilian officials of member states
- provide technical advisory services on demining operations; managing, safeguarding, and destroying weapons stockpiles; the development of national defense doctrine and policy papers; transparency, confidence- and security-building measures in the hemisphere and other regions; humanitarian assistance in the case of disasters; and search and rescue operations.

Assessment

At no time in the region's recent history have there been so many complex challenges and opportunities associated with defense and security, or with sovereignty and stability. The Organization of American States, hampered by its own shortcomings—exacerbated by ideological and geostrategic fissures among member states—faces the daunting task of becoming a more effective and influential multilateral forum. However, in this process of change, the OAS cannot afford to lose a professional voice on defense and military issues, which may happen soon if repairs are not made to the current relationship.

Beyond senior officials, most OAS staff members have little awareness of IADB activities (or those of the IADC). The Board's 2-mile physical separation from the diplomatic core of the OAS reinforces a Latin

tendency not to interact with military organizations. Recent Brazilian leadership led the Board in an attempt to improve communication with the OAS by proposing a liaison arrangement with the General Secretariat and the Committee on Hemispheric Security and trying to interact informally with the OAS diplomatic community. Unfortunately, these efforts were met with little interest.

The reluctance of diplomats to tap the Board's expertise, even when considering regional defense and security issues, and the IADB's unwillingness to subordinate itself in practice to the Committee on Hemispheric Security of the OAS Permanent Council or the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, present a serious impasse. To make the Board a more useful entity of the OAS, the United

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States and other interested member states must address two closely related problems. The first is an institutional obstacle—the IADB's exclusively military nature reinforces stereotypes, which hampers positive relations. Diplomats and civilian staff raised in antimilitary cultures tend to disdain uniformed officers. Most military men also remember less than harmonious relations and reciprocate by clustering with fellow officers and keeping OAS civilians at arm's length. Perceptions and tensions are unlikely to change quickly, and their persistence obstructs opportunities for cooperation and usefulness. A new approach more in tune with the region's democratization is necessary.

The second problem concerns the Board's role in today's multifaceted security environment. This issue has two dimensions. In reforming the IADB, member states must find ways to broaden the Board's traditional defense/military mindset and widen its narrow perspective and capacity to make it more valuable to the OAS and to the member states themselves in today's complex public security

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environment. It is also vital that the Board retain its advisory rather than operational functions. Equally important, OAS officials must be encouraged to accept the reality that civil-military relations in most countries have come a long way in a short time. It is important for diplomats and civilian officials to be willing to work with a new generation of military men and women as well as defense civilians.

Correcting an Institutional Anachronism⁴

The IADB structure evokes an earlier period in Latin American and Caribbean history when military institutions were largely autonomous and regularly played a significant role in politics. The legacy of civil-military tension still influences thinking and actions at both the OAS and IADB. Most delegations to the Board, including the United States, represent military authorities (for the United States it is the Joint Staff) and rarely consult with their own country's diplomatic missions to the organization. By and large, the region's military community still sees this unique body as its collective, albeit uncoordinated, voice inside the Inter-American System. While the region's armies, navies, and air forces have long had their own conferences, none have tried to play the IADB's broader integrating role.⁵

However, with the reemergence of democratic rule, the end of the Cold War, growing strategic independence among American states, and common multifaceted security concerns, should national delegations to the IADB continue to represent just the armed forces? Most (but not all) member states now have civilian-led ministries of defense that oversee the armed forces. In practice, the military has adapted to changes at home and abroad, but the transformation of relations with politics and societies has been uneven. With an array of professional changes and civil-military interactions, some positive and some negative, there has been little interest in the activities of a defense board. Most governments consider it far away and inconsequential. With a few exceptions, even civilian defense officials have avoided possible confrontations with military leaders and maintained the status quo at the IADB.

This trend began to change by 2008. Defense ministers started to play a more assertive role in shaping national security policy and had engaged counterparts in such international fora as the Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA)⁶ and the newly created Defense Council of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). At VIII CDMA in 2008, for the first time, the ministers twice reached out to the OAS and IADB to improve regional defense mechanisms that could support civilian authorities responding to natural and manmade disasters and to assess other modalities of cooperation, such as serving as the secretariat and institutional memory for the CDMA process. This interest in the Board, albeit lukewarm, opens the way to reform.

Healing relations between the IADB and OAS can begin by shifting official responsibility for national delegations to the Board from the prerogative of the armed forces (usually armies) to ministries of defense, introducing a civilian identity. The change recognizes that matters of defense and security are part of the civil sector's agenda and are no longer exclusively the domain of the armed forces. Civil power, informed by military advice, should decide how national capacities are shaped and employed. Times have changed: there now are well-informed, professional civilian defense cadres developing in most member states. The Board's statutes accept a high-ranking officer or a civilian official as chief of delegation. Membership on the full delegation can be military, civilian, or mixed as the government desires. Several countries already have a civilian chief of delegation. The statutes call for the Board's chair and vice chair to meet the same criteria as those established for a chief of delegation and stipulate that the IADB Secretariat and the Inter-American Defense College can be led and staffed by military officers and civilian officials.

A shift in IADB corporate military culture to an organization representing the broader perspective of defense ministers (or the equivalent in countries without military institutions) would reinforce the civil sector in its oversight of the armed forces better than the current OAS–IADB arrangement. In addition, the traditionally weak association between

military chiefs of delegations and the permanent representatives to the OAS would be strengthened by a defense ministry—to–foreign ministry liaison where both teams speak with one voice on policy issues. The shift also should facilitate the development of a constructive working relationship within the OAS, which could produce willingness by member states to increase funding and manpower support for a more engaged Board. A closer association between the IADB and Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, ending the IADB's longstanding autonomy, is essential to addressing problems neither law enforcement nor the military can solve alone.

While each member state can change the leadership of its delegation independently, a way to solidify the institutional shift in how the Board is perceived

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could involve the IX Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas in November 2010. At the meeting, the ministers of defense and heads of delegations could take the following actions:

- The 27 IADB member states would clarify officially that chiefs of delegation now represent the country's minister of defense (or equivalent office) rather than the armed forces. (This action is a confidence- and security-building measure to improve coordination among defense ministers. It strengthens hemispheric relations and contributes to international stability, peace, cooperation, and security.⁷)

- Member states would indicate their intention to have the IADB begin to work closely with the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, recognizing it as the institutional link

between the Inter-American Defense Board and General Secretariat of the OAS. This relationship creates a bridge for cooperation with the hemisphere's ministers who are responsible for public security.

■ The ministers would announce their intention to nominate for chair of the Board in 2011 a civilian official from a member state with prior service at a senior level in a ministry of defense.

■ The ministers would accept the offer of the Secretary General of the OAS to host the institutional memory of the conference and have the IADB, as part of the Secretariat of Multidimensional Security, serve as its secretariat.

■ The ministers would restate their support for the continued development of professional civilian and military expertise within national institutions responsible for defense and security and the strengthening of the Inter-American Defense College.⁸

Extending the Reform

Of the 12 specific functions listed in the statutes, the Inter-American Defense Board currently engages in only 3: an annual 10-month advanced defense course at the Inter-American Defense College; support for humanitarian demining efforts in the hemisphere; and, as requested at VIII CDMA, provision of technical advice for improving defense response capabilities in support of civilian relief agencies and humanitarian assistance organizations in the case of natural disasters. Several of the other functions are executed when required, such as advice on search and rescue and advisory services in developing national defense doctrine and policy papers. Contributing to the Board's limited productivity is its undermanned military Sub-Secretariat for Advisory Services, which lacks regional diversity and professional expertise on many current defense and security issues. The college only has a limited capacity to assist. Consequently, the Board tends to wait until the OAS tasks, as with the natural disaster project, rather than proactively taking the initiative. It is not surprising that the political organs of the OAS perceive the IADB to be cloistered and unproductive.

The Board also suffers from a deeper region-wide problem: neither the council of delegates nor the institutions they represent have integrated, comprehensive, multilateral approaches to the many security challenges addressed in the "Declaration on Security in the Americas," which member states endorsed in 2003. The OAS followed up that decision by creating the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security to address public security issues and assist OAS member states in their collective efforts to confront an increase in domestic and transnational crime. The civilian secretariat already has organized two meetings of a new conference of the Ministers Responsible for Public Security in the Americas (MISPA). The military Board has taken no action.

The IADB, it must be recognized, must function in a context of regional diversity and even controversy on how to approach defense and security. Countries have different models of cooperation (or lack thereof) as regards the approaches, legal standards, and instruments used in facing public challenges. There are two main schools of thought. Most of the larger South American nations recognize transnational threats but tend to want a clear differentiation between security/police and military roles. These states prefer to treat public security and defense as separate issues. Smaller Central American and Caribbean countries tend to view transnational threats as paramount and are less concerned about a whole-of-government response, but they often ignore the need for similar cooperation with neighbors. The United States tends to bypass doctrine in favor of pragmatic action, often minimizing the integration of civilian and military assistance components.

In almost all cases, governments tend to view collaboration between the armed forces and other security and police forces as a last resort. In practice, many countries are finding an absolute division between defense and security to be unworkable, particularly in violent urban areas. This pragmatic realization has yet to be translated into doctrine, a delay explained in part by civilian suspicions of military allegiance to democracy, concerns over human rights, and differing views of the proper roles of force, mitigation, and prevention.

To help the OAS be more effective, the Inter-American Defense Board under civilian leadership must show that the defense/military culture can adapt to today's security environment and to the principles and priorities established in the "Declaration on Security in the Americas." A proactive two-track strategy should be implemented after restructuring the Board. On the near-term track, the IADB must broaden and strengthen its technical defense/military advisory capacity, the main area in which it can contribute to the OAS. On the second track, looking longer range, the Board must develop relevant and innovative ways, consistent with the statutes, to support civil institutions and public security officials in times of need and then standardize these procedures.

Professional Expertise Track. The 2006 statutes define the purpose of the Inter-American Defense Board as providing technical and educational advice and consultancy services on matters related to military and

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defense issues. What should this mean today? The scope of strategic concerns is broader in 2010 than in 1942 and incorporates issues highlighted in the 2003 OAS Declaration as well as other contemporary security concerns. A partial list of today's defense interests includes nonproliferation, cyber security, strategic communication, law of the sea, energy, climate change and the environment, illicit trafficking, disaster response, peacekeeping, human rights, women in the military, contact with indigenous communities, and professional education. The staff of the future Board should be a repository of information, but it is currently ill prepared to offer advice on most of these issues. The professional expertise track would require a rotating staff of military officers and defense civilians from member states who have expertise

on an array of strategic issues and can assist the OAS Committee on Hemispheric Security and Secretariat of Multidimensional Security. The academic faculty at the IADC could also be chosen in part with an eye to becoming a source of knowledgeable support.

An equally important part of the professional expertise track is the need to find innovative ways to restore the confidence of the OAS and member states in the IADB. This involves improving the quality of its cooperation with the political organs of the Inter-American System. The first step on this path is for the Board to agree on its subordination to civilian control and receive confirmation from the OAS of what it can do professionally to improve its usefulness. There are at least six tasks the OAS should ask the IADB to explore now, which stay within the intent of the 2006 statutes. The six categories, with sample areas needing attention in each, include:

- regional standards for military preparedness—disaster response and cyber security
- technical best practices—attention to climate change and the environment, strategic communication, human rights training
- interoperability—peacekeeping, disaster response, education
- transparency—defense budgets, enforcement of military justice
- legal considerations—law of the sea, border demarcation, energy
- unique professional expertise—demining, search and rescue.

If tasked to create regional standards for military disaster preparedness, for example, the Board might recommend a system in which governments “ earmark ” for a specific period of time those military capacities they would contribute in response to a major disaster, such as a field hospital and water purification units. It also might propose developing region-wide common operating procedures to prepare military forces to work effectively together in such technical areas as integrated communications or coordinated airport operations during natural disasters.

Even on such essentially technical matters, it is not enough for the Board to be proactive. A country’s diplomatic and defense

delegations need to collaborate and be supportive at the political level in the OAS Permanent Council. In sum, the professional expertise track for improving the usefulness of a future civilian-led IADB suggests broadening defense knowledge in the Board’s secretariat and at the IADC to prepare the Inter-American Defense Board to address matters of current defense interest and be a repository of strategic and technical information for the OAS. This will require the adoption of a professional focus designed to build confidence at the OAS, improve cooperation among member states, and support the exercise of the organization’s influence in the Americas.

Defense and Public Security Track. The second follow-on track recognizes that defense and public security must be differentiated and that individual member states

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bring to them different approaches, legal standards, competencies, and instruments. While trying not to confuse the culture and missions of each, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza is cognizant that these institutions sometimes must work together. In a 2007 speech, he observed:

There exist today some threats to security, such as narco-trafficking and organized crime, among others, in which security functions can be complemented by the armed forces. The OAS is actually obliged to coordinate collective force to cooperate in confronting the new threats to continental security, especially in the countries most vulnerable.⁹

To date, neither the OAS General Secretariat nor the Inter-American Defense Board has developed ways to discharge this important obligation.

Exploring how “to coordinate collective force to cooperate in confronting the new threats” to regional security is an area in which the Board can demonstrate its readiness to assist the OAS without threatening to dominate. The council of delegates could create a strategic civil-military planning group in the Board secretariat and task it to examine the different models of military support to civilian institutions and to propose options for cooperation in situations in which it makes sense for the military to support civil authorities and law enforcement officials to preserve internal security. Steps the group might consider include an exploratory dialogue with a wide range of regional experts and an examination of recent experiences in Mexico, Central America, several Caribbean states, Colombia, and Brazil. There also are best practices to be identified in discussion with the secretariats for the Conference of American Armies, Inter-American Naval Conference, and System of Coordination Among American Air Forces. To make clear that the purpose of the planning group is not a military power play but an effort to strengthen civilian institutions and capabilities, the Board should work on these tasks with the Department of Public Security in the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security.

To improve its credibility, the new civilian-led IADB, working closely with the Committee on Hemispheric Security and other OAS entities, should show interest in public security-related discussions across the organization. The recent Brazilian liaison initiative should be resurrected. For its part, the Board cannot always wait to be asked to participate in relevant activities. It should advocate partnership. Additional topics for subsequent consideration for exploratory study by the strategic planning group, in collaboration with members of the Committee on Hemispheric Security, might include OAS contributions in whole-of-government security cooperation and the OAS’s strategic role in the global security environment (for example, cooperation with the African Union on counternarcotics issues).

Reform to Revitalize

The journalist James Fallows recently reminded us that the economist Mancur Olson’s “gospel of ‘adapt or die’ has spread

from West Point to the corporate world . . . with the idea that rigid institutions inevitably fail.”¹⁰ The Inter-American Defense Board is, unfortunately, a rigid institution with a static mindset. Member states should rescue it from disestablishment; restore its viability, potential, and credibility; and revitalize its usefulness in the Inter-American System. While severe financial problems will play a key role in OAS decisions affecting the Board, a more professional, adaptable, and cooperative entity would demonstrate the IADB’s usefulness to the organization. There is a valid need for a nonthreatening, responsive multilateral channel for communication, confidence-building, and wide-ranging collaboration.

The Board will not be saved, however, unless its member states accept reality: the purely military nature of the IADB

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obstructs its usefulness at a time of imperiled public safety and continued transnational threats. The armed forces are no longer the premier voice in regional defense matters—this role has shifted to defense ministers. For the Board this means member delegations should represent their ministers, and the IADB should elect a civilian chair and work closely with the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security. The contemporary strategic environment requires a genuinely collaborative civil-military environment at the OAS to improve its effectiveness on defense and security issues. The OAS cannot afford to lose its source of professional advice. The IADB and IADC, however, need to upgrade the scope and quality of their expertise to address matters of current and future strategic importance. The Board needs a new direction—the traditional passive interpretation of its functions should be replaced with creative and timely initiatives in at least the six areas mentioned above. Today, it is essential for a proactive IADB to

find ways to help the armed forces in the Americas work with civil authorities and law enforcement officials, who may be better attuned to today’s threats but still sometimes need professional military assistance.

Notes

¹ Seven Caribbean countries do not participate in the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB).

² Member states created a subordinate Inter-American Defense College (IADC) in 1962 to provide opportunities to military officers and, more recently, civilian officials (police and diplomats) to attend advanced academic courses related to military and defense issues, the Inter-American System, and related disciplines. The IADC is widely considered to be productive.

³ Reflecting unique legal and resource idiosyncrasies, and by agreement among member states, the director of the Inter-American Defense College remains a U.S. flag officer who has actively promoted modernization of the curriculum. The deputy director is from another IADB member state.

⁴ This subtitle is from the Chilean delegation to the IADB slide presentation, “*La Junta Interamericana de Defensa en la Actualidad y la Necesidad de Romper Su Paradigma*,” November 2009, slide 7.

⁵ There is no grouping of joint staffs in the hemisphere.

⁶ The Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas began in 1995. Its eighth meeting was held in Canada in September 2008.




⁷ Reflecting Article 5, “Declaration of Banff,” VIII Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, September 5, 2008.

⁸ Article 14.

⁹ Speech by José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States, on the 65th anniversary of the IADB, March 16, 2007.

¹⁰ James Fallows, “How America Can Rise Again,” *The Atlantic* Online, January-February 2010, accessed at <www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/201001/american-decline>.

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