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Demilitarization In Central America: Beginning Of A New Era

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. Robinson [The article below is the first of two parts. The second installment will appear in the 01/24/92 issue of the Central America Update.] Are the Central American militaries in retreat? After three decades of militarization, there is a growing consensus in and outside Central America against the militaries. Popular movements, US policymakers, multilateral lending institutions, and the "New Right" conservatives now in power throughout the region are converging toward a process of demilitarization. This process could become one of the most important developments of the 1990s. The current momentum towards demilitarization stems from the Esquipulas II accord signed by the five Central American presidents in August 1987. The accord called for talks to arrive at peaceful solutions to the regional conflagration and an end to armed insurgencies. Esquipulas emphasized achieving lasting peace, stability and economic recovery through simultaneous processes of democratization and demilitarization. The immediate impulse behind the accords was to avoid the degeneration of the crisis into all-out regional war by transferring confrontation from the military to the political arena. But the larger backdrop to Esquipulas, and to the current demilitarization process, has been the breakup of the old social order and a new configuration of organizations, interests and political trends in Central America, in which the relationship of the military to society has been fundamentally altered. Demilitarization has now become the most polemic theme in Central America. Although militarization has taken on different contours in each nation, it is increasingly seen as the hub around which peace, stability, democratization and economic recovery for the region as a whole may be attained in the post-Cold War era. From militarism to militarization Most of Central America has been ruled by repressive civilian-military regimes since the end of the 19th century, when the coffee oligarchies created their own armed forces. The system was consolidated in the 1930s and 1940s, when respective military institutions moved directly into government in most of the region's nations. Regional analysts, however, refer to a shift that took place in the past 30 years from "militarism" to "militarization." The former was a specific type of political system in which militaries, in or out of government, operated as instruments of oligarchic rule. The latter refers to the transformation of the military apparatus into a concentric entity which deeply penetrates all aspects of national life down to the grassroots level, militarizing social and political relations and subordinating the government and the economy to its own interests. The shift from traditional militarism to militarization began in the early 1960s with the development, under US auspices, of "national security doctrines," in which the military became responsible for combatting "internal subversion" and for ensuring internal order. Militarization also included a large-scale infusion of US military aid, and the formation of the Central American Defense Council at the behest of Washington. Militarization accelerated dramatically in the 1980s, under the US-supported counterinsurgency campaigns in El Salvador and Guatemala, military assistance to Honduras and Costa Rica, and the contra program against the Nicaraguan government. US military aid to Central America, which averaged about $10 million annually during the 1970s, abruptly increased 12-fold from 1980 to 1982. In 1982 alone, military aid to the region came to $120.8 million, or more than the combined total for the previous 10 years. US military aid peaked
at $190.9 million in 1986. Aid totals declined thereafter, although appropriations in 1991 were still high, at $110.4 million in 1991, mostly for El Salvador. (Military aid figures derive from the US Agency for International Development.) Under the national security doctrine, and the escalation of conflict and US intervention in the 1980s, Central American armies became supreme guardians of the existing domestic status quo, and the ultimate arbiters of national affairs. The armed forces gradually became entities unto themselves, self-defined defenders of the supremacy of military power over civil society. Militarization is a qualitative rather than a quantitative phenomenon. The crucial variable is not size, but role in society. The process has also been heterogeneous, with critical differences among nations. It is most advanced in El Salvador and Guatemala, whereas in Honduras the process has lagged behind even as that country has become thoroughly militarized. In Nicaragua, militarization took on a distinctly different cast after the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came to power in 1979. Costa Rica did not begin the process of militarization until the 1980s. The neo-liberal economic model and demilitarization Peculiar geopolitical circumstances and inconclusive social and political transformations have made demilitarization a contradictory process involving competing interpretations and clashing interests. After the upheavals of the 1970s and the 1980s, traditional oligarchic rule has crumbled and modernizing New Right "technocrats" have come to power. These new elites do not perceive the armed forces as capable of providing conditions for economic growth or political stability. Quite the contrary: corrupt military officers interested only in maintaining their own privileges have become a fetter to modernization and an impediment to the restoration of a stable capital accumulation process. With strong support from multilateral financial institutions and the United States, the New Right is seeking demilitarization as part of its larger project of bringing Central America into the world market on the basis of regional integration and a new model of capital accumulation. This project, promoted through neo-liberal structural adjustment, is dominated not by the old oligarchies and their armed forces, but by the new, modernizing sectors within the elite. For economic, social and political reasons, demilitarization is becoming an imperative for the success of this project. Economically, the logic of the neo-liberal model is a transfer of resources from "unproductive sectors" and the state to the private productive sector. Currently, defense spending ranges from 27.4% of the national budget in El Salvador, the highest in the region, to 13% in Costa Rica. (Source: Inforpress (Guatemala City), 10/24/91.) The military represents an unproductive drain on resources, necessary only insofar as social control requires a coercive component. A transfer of resources from the military to social programs is seen as a way to ease the dislocations caused by economic austerity and structural adjustment, and thus maintain social stability. More than 68% of Central America's 38 million inhabitants live in poverty; controlled demilitarization is not merely preferable over repression as a mechanism of social control, but in the long run the most politically viable option. Next, the New Right administrations want to see the military fully subordinated to civilian authorities as an essential element of modernization, or as a guarantor of orderly restructuring, reinsertion into the world market and capital accumulation. For this objective, the neo-liberal rulers are backed by Washington. The US government is currently promoting a complex redefinition of civilian-military relations throughout Latin America as part of its own hemispheric project of free trade, integration and modernization under US tutelage. The New Right in Central America is linked to the reorganization of the global economy via the multilateral financial institutions, which are now guiding neo-liberal restructuring throughout Latin America and controlling the flow of foreign capital. In their 46th annual meetings, held in Bangkok last October, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for the first time addressed the issue of military expenditures in developing countries, calling for military budget reduction and the transfer of military resources to
productive activities and social welfare programs. Other international organizations have adopted a similar position, including the European Economic Community (EEC), and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). In December, UNICEF director James Grant proposed that disbursement of special funds for child development programs be linked to demilitarization. In early 1991, the US Agency for International Development published a document titled "Economic Assistance Strategy for Central America 1991 to 2000." The document outlines a 10-year plan for structural adjustment, which includes reducing "the autonomy of the military in political and economic processes." The AID document emphasizes "support for civilian control of the police and the military and for demilitarization through encouragement of dialogue between civilian and military leaders, and promotion of civilian oversight of government." During his visit to Antigua, Guatemala, for the seventh Esquipulas summit, in June 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker warned the Central American presidents that peace and democracy in the region was dependent on a gradual process of demilitarization. New US aid, he said, would be conditioned on such a process and continued progress in economic restructuring. Demilitarization has thus become both a condition for external economic assistance and the support of the dominant outside power, the United States. It is driven as much by endogenous developments as by a broader process of new international relations and the reorganization of the global economy. Limited demilitarization and US hegemony For the more cynical, the change in US policy and the emergence of a New Right committed to a controlled demilitarization reflects efforts to reconstitute the dominant blocs in Central American societies and US hegemony in the region in a new historic setting. In this setting, military institutions have become an obstacle to the new model of capital accumulation under construction, which seeks social control through ideological persuasion and political management rather than military repression. These critics point out that neither the US nor the New Right want to dispense altogether with the military as an instrument of coercion. Military and security forces in all Central American countries, including Costa Rica, have violently suppressed popular demands and opposition to austerity programs. Similarly, the continued threat of revolutionary insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala has provided the generals and extreme right forces in those countries with a powerful justification for resisting demilitarization. Dominant groups do not want to see a Nicaragua-style situation, in which the state has found it impossible to use the armed forces to suppress the social demands of popular sectors. Analysts also point out that Washington supports the reduction of Central American militaries and their subordination to civilian government, but does not look favorably upon calls for the exclusion of foreign (US) bases and forces from Central America. The Pentagon currently runs extensive military facilities in Panama and Honduras, and has military training teams in El Salvador and Costa Rica. Some analysts say that the US project envisions a reduction of the Central American military apparatus to small national constabularies, while the Pentagon retains the role of regional policeman responsible for overall security, fighting drug trafficking, terrorism, and other "threats." With the shift in US military doctrine towards rapid deployment, "low intensity conflict," and orientation towards the Third World, say some analysts, the US would prefer to substitute its own military power for what until now have been surrogate armed forces. Washington thus seeks weaker Central American armies in order to be free to use the US military to accomplish security objectives in its "backyard," as it did in Panama. For these reasons, some regional analysts have referred to Panamanian and Costa Rican demilitarization, in which the Pentagon substitutes for local forces, as "dependent demilitarization" tied to larger US strategic considerations the Caribbean Basin. The popular project of demilitarization On the other hand, popular sectors are pressing for a more profound demilitarization in Central America. Beyond reduction of military personnel and spending and subordination of the military apparatus
to civilian authority, they are calling for the complete demilitarization of social relations and the removal of any military dimension from political and civic competition. These sectors also advocate change at the level of doctrine and international relations: limiting the role of the military to defense against external aggression, with no role for the armed forces in maintaining internal order, and the elimination of any foreign military presence in the region. The above changes are justified by pointing out that recent developments throughout the globe in a new historic context have opened the possibility for social confrontation to take place exclusively on the political terrain, devoid of a military dimension. In this view, demilitarization would allow for the political programs of the New Right and other social sectors in Central America to compete within the context of civil societies liberated from any form of military influence. Thus for the popular sectors, democratization and demilitarization have become inextricably linked. In Honduras, the "Platform for the Struggle," a coalition which unites several dozen unions and popular organizations, is demanding a 50% reduction of the military budget and an end to the US military occupation of the country. The "Platform" includes several guerrilla groups who disarmed in 1991 and joined the legal political process. According to Joaquin Villalobos, a commander of the Salvadoran Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), peace and stability in Central America require transformation of the "anti-civic and anti-democratic roots" of regional armies. In his view, only "the direct intervention of all of civil society in the renovation of society's military component can ensure [military] neutrality," and therefore peaceful civic struggle and democracy. In El Salvador, the issue of military reform bogged down peace talks between the FMLN rebels and the right-wing government of President Alfredo Cristiani for 21 months of tedious negotiations. The Salvadoran insurgents were finally able to secure agreement on reforms, including constitutional amendments eliminating military impunity and prerogatives within government and society, a drastic reduction of military personnel, and a new military doctrine which limits the function of the military to defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity from external aggression, with no role whatsoever in "internal order." These minimal guarantees opened the way for the two sides to reach a definitive peace accord, brokered by the United Nations, on New Year's eve 1991. According to Ruben Zamora, leader of the left-of-center Democratic Convergence party coalition and one-time civilian ally of the guerrillas, "The new framework will be one in which the military does not determine politics, but civilians and political parties do." The Salvadoran peace accord incorporates elements of competing New Right and popular projects for demilitarization. The accord reverses 60 years of military dominance over Salvadoran society. If faithfully implemented, the accord means that the Salvadoran state will be unable to utilize the military for any internal coercive function, thereby forcing the New Right to reconcile its interests with those of the popular sectors, and forcing both to rely solely on respective capacities for political mobilization and persuasion. The Salvadoran experience thus underscores the centrality of demilitarization to Central America in the 1990s.