



# Strengthening Regional Capacities for Preventive Action in Central America and the Caribbean

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by Matthew King and Irina Bratosin  
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## Executive Summary

Current challenges to peace and security in Central America and Caribbean, such as transnational organized crime, border disputes, and migration flows, are trans-boundary in nature and call for regional solutions. Existing security structures in both regions need to be reformed in order to meet these challenges. A reform process must aim to strengthen regional structures, create more effective legal mechanisms, and develop new tools and instruments that formalize current, ad hoc approaches to conflict prevention. Regional approaches to common security threats are not incompatible with state ownership of national security, understandably a major concern for most governments. A regional approach can, in fact, help strengthen key aspects necessary for national and regional security and at the same time help build trust between states.

Any reform process, however, must deal with the lack of political will of states in both regions to financially support regional organizations and to strengthen their mandates. This lack of political will has created a state-centric security approach in both Central America and the Caribbean, and has restricted the development of multilateral cooperation. It has led to the lack of recognition of regional organizations as useful actors addressing challenges to peace and security.

As both Central America and the Caribbean fall within the United States' traditional sphere of influence, national security priorities in the region are significantly influenced by U.S. strategic priorities. Since September 11, 2001, U.S. priorities have been focused on strengthening states' counterterrorism

capacity. This priority focus does not fully reflect the needs in either region, but can and should be adapted to account for the current security challenges. The U.S. should adapt its security strategies in the region to also take account of the existing trans-boundary challenges and focus on strengthening regional solutions to common security challenges.

To strengthen the capacity to deal with challenges to peace and security in Central America and the Caribbean:

- Governments in both regions must scale up their efforts towards regional solutions to common regional threats;
- Regional organizations need to enhance collaboration between states and, to that end, make better use of lessons learned and best practices;
- States, regional organizations, regional parliaments, civil society, and the international donor community need to cooperate more to build capacities to deliver meaningful solutions to current security challenges;
- The United States should adapt its security priorities in the region to include current regional challenges to peace and stability and commit resources and political support to build regional approaches.

This brief reflects a rich debate between representatives from defense, diplomacy, development, and civil society sectors in Central America and the Caribbean at a meeting in Panama on November 16 and 17, 2009. The meeting focused on identifying action-oriented recommendations that strengthen

This briefing paper will feed into a global meeting on preventive action in late 2010. The meeting is aimed at galvanizing a global action plan to prevent violent conflict and help integrate conflict prevention approaches into security and development policy.

To learn more about the global conference, please visit [www.ewi.info/globalconference](http://www.ewi.info/globalconference)

regional capacities for preventive action and was convened by the EastWest Institute in partnership with the United Nations Development Program Regional Center LAC.

## The Current State of Affairs

There is little disagreement in Central America and the Caribbean about the common nature of security challenges in the region. Security threats such as organized crime, trafficking of drugs and arms, border disputes, massive migration flows and a growing culture of violence are inherently regional in nature and demand regional solutions.

States have created a multitude of regional instruments over the past twenty years and therefore do appear to acknowledge, to some degree, that regional approaches have a role in regional security. However, states have failed to create the necessary political will to strengthen regional organizations. The state-centric security approach in dealing with regional challenges therefore still dominates.

In the context of Central America, several developments of the last twenty years highlight the recognition of the importance of a regional approach. The peace processes in the 1990s, and the signature of the 1992 Tegucigalpa Protocol embodied a new vision of Central America as a region of peace, democracy, and development. The 1995 Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America delivered a ground-breaking agreement that overhauled the region's national security doctrine and emphasized cross-border cooperation in a new national security approach. Despite the limited success of the treaty since then, the concept remains relevant and could serve as a starting point for a stronger regional security architecture, which could further be extended to Caribbean countries.

Although the context in the Caribbean is different, national, international, and institutional security developments are comparable. Caribbean states face similar challenges to those in Central America. There is also a high degree of interconnectivity with particular challenges such as transnational organized crime and the trafficking of drugs and arms. Like Central America, the state-centric approach to regional challenges in the Caribbean has prevented the implementation of regional solutions.

Regional organizations in both Central America and the Caribbean are arguably more engaged in security concerns than they are in any other region in

the developing world. An extensive array of regional agreements and other institutional developments show an official recognition of the need for regional solutions to shared threats. Some of these agreements include:

- The Conference of Armed Forces in Central America (1991).
- The Commission of Chiefs and Directors of Police Forces in Central America, Mexico and Caribbean (1997).
- The Integral and Cooperative Strategy to fight against regional threats (2004).
- Regional Coordination Centre against drug trafficking in Central America, Caribbean, and Mexico (2006)
- The OAS's Inter-American Observatory on Security. (2006)
- The Sub-Regional Security Strategy (2006).

Despite such regional agreements, states have not underpinned regional solutions with the necessary political will and remain focused on a state-centric approach when dealing with regional threats. This approach has so far failed to deal with the region's challenges. Strengthening national and regional security efforts in parallel would work to the benefit of national and regional security interests in both regions. A common regional security approach will help states tackle national security threats, contribute to a more effective approach in fighting common regional challenges, and help streamline security efforts in general. These goals can be achieved by ratifying and implementing existing regional agreements, such as the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America, that will help strengthen states' capacities and, at the same time, enhance the recognition of regional organizations as valuable actors in both regions. Failure to ratify and implement agreements will limit the prospect for regional solutions, and states will remain unable to deal with the security challenges.

A factor that bears extraordinary influence in the security debate in the region is the influence of the United States. Central America and Caribbean are part of the United States' traditional sphere of influence. Thus, national and regional security agendas are largely determined by U.S. priorities and interests. This influence has been particularly visible since September 11, 2001, when attention was redirected from the region's real security challenges towards counterterrorism.

There is a need for more dialogue and cooperation between Central American and Caribbean states and the U.S. This dialogue should lead to a regional security agenda that takes into account shared se-

curity threats and where third parties' interests can compliment rather than direct regional interests.

## Challenges to a Regional Security Concept

### The Role of Regional Organizations

In spite of the numerous regional agreements and mechanisms states can use to cope with common regional threats, they have been unwilling to adopt a regional approach to security challenges. This has led to the failure of states to ensure the security of their citizens, as highlighted by the 2009-2010 UNDP Human Development Report for Central America. The report points to Central America as the most violent region in the world today, with homicide rates increasing every year. Although there has been significant progress in the region to ensure public security, the reform process has been choked by high levels of criminality. This situation has also lead to the militarization of security issues and to the development of private security companies. The Caribbean situation is quite similar, with recent U.N. reports (2009's "Global Report on Trafficking of Human Beings" and the 2007's "Crime, Violence and Development: Trends, Costs and Policy Options in the Caribbean" point to growing rates of violence, crime, drugs, and human trafficking, and the failure of states to ensure security and well-being for their citizens.

This underpins the need for change and for states to commit themselves to strengthen security efforts through a common regional approach. Insufficient cooperation between national governments and the limits to the authority of regional organizations have restricted the development of a shared concept of regionalism and prevented regional organizations from supporting countries dealing with security challenges.

There is very little coordination between the region's many security initiatives, and very little dialogue between national and international actors working in conflict prevention. This situation leads to an undesirable duplication of security efforts and contributes to a poorly planned, ad hoc approach to conflict prevention in the region.

Further, regional organizations lack financial, technical and human resources and face a serious legitimacy deficit. In order to address this deficit, regional organizations must deliver value to states and help them address their security challenges. To

this end, participants suggest, regional organizations must:

- Collect and share lessons learned and best practices;
- Help states and civil society address security challenges by providing training, conflict analysis and legislative guidelines; and
- Share information with regional organizations and actors involved in conflict prevention in the region.

These simple and cost-effective measures can help regional organizations set norms, build trust, improve security cooperation, and influence approaches to conflict prevention. However, in order to serve these functions, regional organizations need the financial, human, and technical support of national governments and parliamentarians, civil society, and the international community. Unfortunately, the political will necessary to provide these resources has been lacking.

Regional approaches to common security threats are not incompatible with state ownership of national security, understandably a major concern for most governments. A regional approach can, in fact, help strengthen key aspects necessary for national and regional security and, at the same time, help build trust between states. For example, information sharing between foreign and justice ministries, national military, and police can be quite effectively done through existing regional structures. Regional organizations already are already mandates to support system-wide information-sharing efforts. This will help states strengthen their own information gathering processes in a manner commensurate with the region's security challenges.

### The Role of Parliamentarians

Parliamentarian democracy is a fairly new addition to Central American political culture. As a result, parliamentarians play a limited role in the security debate. Organized forums of parliamentarians—such as the Forum of Presidents of Legislative Branches in Central America and the Caribbean, the Central American Parliament, and the Assembly of Caribbean Community Parliamentarians—should more actively pursue innovative ways to improve security-related norms and legislation. Increasing regional collaboration among parliamentarians could encourage cooperation among states and regional organizations and help pressure states to ratify and fully implement existing agreements such as the Framework for Democratic Security in Central America.

## The Role of Civil Society

Civil society can play an important role in conflict prevention in the region. It can contribute with specialized and context-specific knowledge, expertise, and experience to compliment the efforts of governments and regional organizations. In Central America and Caribbean, civil society has played a limited role in the security debate, mainly due to its lack of capacity and the prevalence of a state-centric security approach. Many civil society organizations have also been too politically aligned with individual leaders, a tendency that has too often limited their legitimacy beyond their political allies. Civil society needs to be more involved in conflict prevention, especially in the preventive phases of security plans and programs, as they are best suited to implement local solutions.

## The Role of Police Forces

Civil institutions and police forces have failed to provide security in countries across Central America, leading the military to assume an ever-increasing role in national security. The military's role has produced some positive outcomes. But given Central America's history of coups and military involvement in politics—in the recent political crisis in Honduras, for example—the role of the military has become a cause of concern. Governments and regional organizations must strengthen national police forces, restore the confidence of citizens in civilian institutions and reduce the role of the military in domestic security affairs.

The development of national police forces can also bolster regional security. Governments can share experiences and conduct joint police training exercises. The Commission of Chiefs and Directors of Police Forces has shown that such collaboration can increase domestic capacity and also build trust and cooperation in the region.

# Recommendations

## For States

**Pursue multilateral approaches:** Governments should review and reinforce the mandates of regional organizations in peace and security and provide political and financial support to strengthen these organizations.

**Strengthen national police forces:** Governments should strengthen and empower national police forces to fill their traditional role in domestic security. Countries should conduct joint police training exercises to build domestic capacity and to increase regional cooperation and trust.

## For Regional Organizations

**Increase Regional Cooperation:** Rather than developing new mechanisms or strategies for conflict prevention, regional organizations and governments should:

- Share information about potential conflicts through institutions such as the OAS's Inter-American Observatory on Security;
- Organize joint technical training exercises to help build a common basis for cooperation; and
- Inventory past experiences on conflict prevention and management in the region and share lessons learned from these experiences in a way that makes these lessons relevant to current security challenges.
- Build legitimacy. Regional organizations must more effectively support states dealing with regional challenges by:
- Taking stronger action within their mandates to meet regional security requirements and to develop innovative proposals to address current challenges;
- Reviewing and reforming, where necessary, key policy documents that strengthen their mandates for action;
- Building top-level political support within states. Engage parliamentarians to develop collective preventive approaches and raise political support for regional organizations.

### **Engage and Leverage External Resources by:**

- Encouraging the private sector to fund regional organizations;
- Institutionalizing mechanisms, based on previous ad hoc experiences, that allow for civil society participation in the security debate; and
- Engaging the media to raise awareness among national parliamentarians and civil society organizations of the successes of regional approaches to prevention and security.

### **For The International Community**

**Increase dialogue, cooperation, and coordination:** The international donor community must develop a more coordinated and coherent approach based on an in-depth revision of current programs. Such a program will help avoid duplication of security-related activities.

**Strengthen Regional Security Structures:** The European Union, the United Nations and especially the United States should direct resources to strengthen the Central American and Caribbean security structures.

- International organizations should strengthen human and technical capacities of regional organizations in areas such as conflict analysis, evaluation of best practices, and dialogue facilitation.
- International organizations should strengthen regional parliamentary assemblies and fund regular dialogue and training programs for parliamentarians; and
- The United States must play an active role in strengthening regional organizations in both regions, for example by adopting regional, not national, cooperation strategies and redirecting their efforts toward the real regional challenges.

### **For Civil Society**

**Take a Nonpartisan Approach** to build legitimacy across political divides.

**Strengthen Capacity and Skills.** Civil society must organize itself and proactively develop adequate skills and conceptual frameworks for effective preventive action.



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