Limits to the Diffusion of Democratic Civil-Military Relations in Latin America

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Latin America would seem primed for the diffusion of institutions and norms of democratic civil-military relations. Economic, regulatory, and pension reforms have already successfully diffused across the region. Many of the indicators favorable to international policy diffusion point in the right direction: Latin American countries well know their own history of military intervention in politics; they are able to easily observe the payoffs of policy implementation in established democracies; and they benefit from fluid communication amongst themselves and with early adopters. Since the 1980s, U.S and European policy makers have also poured substantial resources into security and democracy assistance programs designed to promote civilian control of the military.

Yet, since the third wave of democratization began, many of the otherwise consolidated regimes in the region have made limited progress in institutionalizing democratic civil-military relations. Only Argentina and Chile exhibit evidence of a significant civilian role in defense policy making. In other major democracies in the region, such as Brazil and Mexico, there has been little progress towards institutionalizing control over the military, and in yet others, such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Peru, civil-military relations have been at times deinstitutionalized and even personalized by elected officials. This talk seeks to explore the limits to the diffusion and adoption of democratic models of civil-military relations in Latin America. It argues that while the mechanisms of international diffusion are indeed at work across the region, there is considerable variation in the degree to which defense policy is consequential for domestic actors, inhibiting the formulation of policy reforms.

Harold Trinkunas is an Associate Professor and former Chair of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. His research has focused on Latin American politics, particularly on civil-military relations and democratization. His recent publications include “Civilian Praetorianism and Military Shirking during Constitutional Crises in Latin America” (with David Pion-Berlin, Comparative Politics, July 2010), “Attention Deficits: Why Politicians Ignore Defense Policy in Latin America,” (with David Pion-Berlin, Latin American Research Review 42.3, 2007) and Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). He co-edited and contributed to Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to Governance in an Era of Softened Sovereignty (Stanford University Press, 2010), Global Politics of Defense Reform (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), and Terrorism Financing and State Responses (Stanford University Press, 2007). Professor Trinkunas received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University in 1999. Currently, Harold is a Visiting Scholar in CILAS, UCSD.

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