



**ODUMUNC 2011**  
**Issue Brief for the**  
**GA First Committee: Disarmament and International Security (DISEC)**

***The Prevention of an Arms Race in South America***

**By: Alessandro Shimabukuro**

**Introduction**

In recent years there has been a growing concern of a potential arms race in South America. Due to improved economic conditions, many South American countries have increased their defense spending, and purchased new aircraft, ships and weapons systems, triggering suspicion among neighboring countries.

**Current situation**

South America is a region which has not witnessed a major war among its states in decades. It is also a region with one of the lowest GDP investments in defense. The Western Hemisphere has long been considered a stable security zone, yet potential conflict remains.

With the end of the Cold War, countries in the region returned to civilian controlled democratic regimes, ending decades of military rule. During the 1990s many stabilized their economies and, with varying degrees of success, have been able to achieve greater levels of development.

Some of the economic reforms implemented by various governments did not deliver the promised results, thus leading to internal political discontent and the emergence of more populist regimes offering an alternative vision of development. The competing political and economic development models promoted by various South American governments have lead to tensions over various issues which concern the region.

Major military purchases and increase in defense spending by Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia in recent years have caused alarm, leading many to believe an arms race in South America has begun. Each have presented arguments that range from the need to modernize their forces to fear of foreign invasion to justify the increased spending and purchase of tanks, fighter jets, helicopters, ships, submarines, small arms, and missiles from Russia, the United States, and various European countries.

Many analysts disagree on if this trend is a long overdue modernization of these countries' military forces, or a destabilizing military buildup. The divergent worldviews of some South American governments, along with historical rivalries and unresolved border disputes, have added to the suspicion among the countries of the region, and concern over how each is spending militarily.



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In a region that still has essential development and social challenges to overcome, many local leaders question the increased military spending, which diverts attention and scarce resources away from much needed social programs and investments in infrastructure, essential for economic development.

This challenge has been recognized by the governments and discussed in the regions' multilateral forums and in bilateral meetings, and all have demonstrated willingness to discuss the issue. Greater transparency measures could be key to overcoming regional suspicions and reduction of tensions.

### **Country Positions**

Brazil, the largest South American country, justifies its military spending arguing for the need to modernize its forces to defend its vast Amazon borders against drug traffickers and to protect its newly discovered oil reserves off its shores.

Colombia has been at war with the insurgent FARC for decades and has long struggled against drug cartels, leading to a close relationship with the United States (receiving considerable resources from America) and having one of the highest GDP investments in defense among the countries in the region.

Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are suspicious of U.S. involvement in the region and seek to equip themselves in case of foreign intervention. The U.S.-Colombia informal alliance only increase their suspicions, aggravated by Colombia's trans-border raid against a FARC encampment in Ecuador in early 2008.

Venezuela has caused the greatest controversy with major purchases from Russia, including not just weapons but civilian nuclear power generation technology. Moscow insists that any nuclear transfers must be under full international safeguards and not include military-relevant capabilities. Venezuela notes it is far from the first country on the continent to develop nuclear energy; Argentina and Brazil used to have serious nuclear weapons programs but gave them up in the late 1980s.

Uruguay, Paraguay, and Peru have manifested concern over their neighbors increased defense spending, and called for measures to contain it and refocus on more pressing issues of interest to the region.



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The United States has expressed concern for Venezuela's military purchases and close links to Iran and Russia. Russia has been an important military supplier for various countries in the region, along with European countries, Israel, China, and Iran.

**Role of the United Nations**

The United Nations has not discussed the issue of a South American arms race specifically. The General Assembly has issued in recent years resolutions that focus on "conventional arms control at the regional and subregional level" (UN A/RES/64/42) and an "arms trade treaty" (UN A/RES/64/48). The UN Security Council also has not issued any specific resolutions on the military build-up in South America.

UN negotiations in this specific region over basic principles to reduce tensions that arise from military spending, and bolster confidence building measures, along with negotiation of verification measures, can provide experience and guidelines for similar agreements in other regions and other arms control related issues.

UN expertise and greater cooperation with the Organization of American States (OAS) and emerging regional organizations, such as UNASUR, are approaches that would also be welcomed by the region's countries in dealing with this issue.



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**Author's Biography:** Alessandro Shimabukuro is a Brazilian PhD student at Old Dominion University's Graduate Program in International Studies.