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Issue Brief

Paraguay's Military: Internal Security Challenges vs Block Obsolescence

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S*ummary*

Paraguay's military faces the twin challenges of maintaining internal security and fighting narco-trafficking while facing block obsolescence of its existing assets. To its credit, it has also stayed away from interfering in the political process during the current political disturbances. This is in stark contrast to decades gone by when Latin America was plagued by an unrelenting series of military coups following any sort of political unrest.

Paraguay (406,752 sq km), one of two land-locked countries in South America – the other being Bolivia – has one of the most uncompromisingly martial histories of any country. In the War of the Triple Alliance between 1864 and 1870, the small country took on the combined armies of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, and fought the invasion valiantly for six years though ultimately it was defeated. The result of this was the complete decimation of Paraguay's population with its size decreasing from between 450,000-500,000 to a mere 160,000, of which only 28,000 were males.¹ Following that, between 1932 and 1935, Paraguay fought Bolivia in the Chaco War which to date has been South America's greatest modern conflict. During both conflicts, the Paraguayan armed forces earned an enviable reputation for tenacity, professionalism, and tactical innovation through which, during the Chaco War, the smaller nation managed to comprehensively defeat a country with three times its population and armed forces nearly double its own.

Yet, despite emerging victorious in the latter war, Paraguay with a current population of about 6.7 million people, is one of the poorest countries in the region and has had a chequered political history. South America's longest-lived military dictatorship – that of General Alfredo Stroessner – started in 1954 and only ended in 1989.

Currently, bounded on the South and Southwest by Argentina, Brazil to the East and Northeast and Bolivia to the Northwest, Paraguay has been fortunate in that its relations with its neighbours are for, the most part, peaceful. None of its neighbours have territorial aspirations in respect to Paraguayan territory which has meant that Paraguay's armed forces do not face and are unlikely to face the spectre of an external invasion. However, they have faced internal security challenges which, while not posing an existential threat to the country, present a danger to the stability of the South American republic.

Recent Events

The months of March and April 2017 have been particularly unkind to Paraguay. On 31st of March, rioters stormed and set Paraguay's Congress ablaze after the country's senate voted in secret for a constitutional amendment that would allow President Horacio Cartes to seek re-election – this previously being prohibited by the 1992 Constitution adopted after the fall of the dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner in 1989.² The situation was seriously exacerbated when 25-year old Rodrigo Quintana of the Liberal Party was shot in the back by Paraguayan police at

¹ G. Esposito, **Armies of the War of the Triple Alliance 1864-70**, (Osprey: Oxford, 2015), p.3

² D. Desantis & L. Cohen, **Paraguay Rioters Set Fire to Congress After Senate Re-Election Vote**, *Reuters*: 31st March 2017 at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-03-31/paraguay-senators-vote-in-secret-to-allow-presidential-re-election> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

the party's headquarters, triggering a storm of protests.³ This represents Paraguay's worst political crisis since the controversial impeachment of President Fernando Lugo in 2012 when opponents alleged he failed to maintain social order following bloody confrontations over land evictions.⁴

The military, which had placed on alert units of the School of Cavalry (RC4) and the Presidential Guard Regiment, deployed a strong force of EE-9 *Cascavel* armoured cars to the First Military Headquarters at Asuncion but does not appear to have taken any part in suppressing the riots with the military insisting that only if a State of Emergency was declared would they move onto the streets.⁵ This is in stark contrast to decades gone by when Latin America was plagued by an unrelenting series of military coups following any sort of political unrest.

Security Challenges

However,, Paraguay's internal security stability is deeply compromised by much more than the political shenanigans taking place in Asuncion. Paraguay has been battling a tenacious guerilla group known as the *Ejército Paraguayo del Pueblo* (EPP) since 2010. Reputed to have links to the formidable Colombian narco-terror organization FARC, the EPP has been able to tap into rural dissatisfaction and exploit legitimate agrarian grievances to become a destabilizing force in northern Paraguay.⁶ The Cartes administration has been singularly unsuccessful in reining in the depredations of the EPP, with allegations that Cartes himself has links to drug cartels.⁷ The EPP has been able to inflict significant casualties on both the Paraguayan Police and even the army, with eight Paraguayan soldiers being killed in an ambush on 27th August 2016.⁸ This reflects the difficulties inherent in conducting counter-insurgency operations where porous borders and inadequate means of surveillance complicate interdiction operations.

Paraguay's operations against the EPP, which are in the hands of a joint police-army task force known as the *Centro de Operaciones Tácticas*, (better known as

³ L. Blair, **Paraguay's youth mobilize against president: 'Anger needs to be organized'** *The Guardian*: 9th April 2017 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/09/paraguay-constitution-student-protest-horacio-cartes> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

⁴ Op. cit. n.1
⁵**Mueven tanquetas en sede military** *ABC Color*: 28th March 2017 at <http://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/militares-estan-en-alerta-1578352.html> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

⁶ M. Crawley, **Narcos Exchanging Arms for Protection From Paraguay's EPP: Officials** *Insight Crime*: 27th August 2013 at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/narcos-exchanging-arms-for-protection-with-paraguays-epp-officials> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

⁷ M. Crawley, **100 Days In, Paraguay President's War on EPP Sees Little Progress** *Insight Crime*: 22nd November 2013 at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/100-days-in-paraguay-presidents-war-on-epp-sees-little-headway> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

⁸ D. Gagne, **Suspected Guerrilla Ambush Leaves 8 Paraguay Soldiers Dead** *Insight Crime*: 29th August 2016 at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/suspected-guerrilla-ambush-leaves-8-paraguay-soldiers-dead> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta - FTC), have been less than successful. The unit has now had seven commanders in the last four years with the latest being appointed on 29th May 2017 after an embarrassing series of errors between 14th and 15th May allowed an EPP column to escape.⁹ This serves to highlight a continuing problem of coordination between various units operating against the EPP.

Paraguay's security situation is further complicated by the depredations of criminal gangs operating from neighbouring Brazil, the most notorious being the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) which conducted a devastating cross-border attack on Monday 24th April 2017 in Paraguay's Ciudad del Este. Using a force of over 50 men, the PCC attacked both the local police headquarters and a security vault before escaping with a sum of approximately USD 8 million.¹⁰ This brazen assault cast serious doubts on the ability of the Paraguayan security apparatus to deal with narco-criminals.

Like so many countries, endemic corruption has hurt Paraguay's fight against narco-trafficking with police corruption being an issue of great concern.¹¹ In 2015, the commander of the National Police, Francisco Alvarenga, had to be removed following his implication in a corruption scandal, showing how far the rot has spread.¹² In addition, corruption amongst aviation officials has had an adverse impact upon attempts to halt drug trafficking by air. The airport in the town of Pedro Juan Caballero has become a virtual epicenter of organized crime thanks to its weak administrative norms.¹³ As might be expected, it is widely suspected that the narco-traffickers enjoy political patronage which hinders the efforts of Paraguay's police and armed forces.¹⁴

⁹ T. Clavel, **Military Commander's Firing Highlights Failures in Combating Paraguay Rebels** *Insight Crime: 31st May 2017* at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/military-commander-firing-highlights-failures-combating-paraguay-rebels> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

¹⁰ J. Watts, **'Heist of the century': Brazilian gang hits security vault and police HQ in Paraguay** *The Guardian: 25th April 2017* at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/25/paraguay-heist-brazil-gangsters-dynamite-speedboat> (Accessed 7th June 2017)

¹¹ K. Gurney, **Widespread Police Bribery Network in Paraguay Marijuana Hub** *Insight Crime 6th January 2015* at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/widespread-police-bribery-network-in-paraguay-marijuana-hub> (Accessed 7th June 2017)

¹² L. Riesenfeld, **Paraguay Police Cmdr Charged as Corruption Scandal Grows** *Insight Crime: 20th May 2015* at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/paraguay-police-commander-charged-as-gas-scandal-grows> (Accessed 7th June 2017)

¹³ T. Clavel, **Corruption Undermining Paraguay Efforts to Combat Drug Flights** *Insight Crime: 1st June 2017* at <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/corruption-undermining-paraguay-efforts-combat-drug-flights> (Accessed 7th June 2017)

¹⁴ **Titular de Senad admite que políticos protegen a narcos** *Ultima Hora: 22nd October 2014* at <http://www.ultimahora.com/titular-senad-admite-que-politicos-protegen-narcos-n840626.html> (Accessed 7th June 2017)

Paraguay's Police Forces

Paraguay's National Police, including the elite *Fuerza de Operaciones Policiales Especiales* (FOPE), *Secretaría Nacional Antidroga* (SENAD), which responds directly to the Presidency, is particularly strong (14,800) and have been tasked with aggressive counter-narcotics operations.¹⁵ These organisations, and the Paraguayan military's special operations units such as the anti-hijacking unit *Grupo Fenix* and the *Destacamento Conjunto de Empleo Inmediato* (DECEI), have received training and undertaken exercises with elite units from Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, the United States and Western Europe, maintaining close training ties with those countries.¹⁶ It should be noted that at the small unit level, the Paraguayan paramilitary police and armed forces have been amply supplied with modern small arms. Older weapons, which were used until the 1980s and sometimes into the 1990s included some 30,749 Garand M1 rifles and a large stock of even older bolt-action Mauser rifles. These have been completely replaced in police service by a new generation of small arms which, at the very least, ensures that the National Police can match the narco-traffickers in firepower should the need arise.¹⁷

Paraguay's Armed Forces

Paraguay's armed forces which comprise some 17,500 active personnel, despite facing the bloc obsolescence in respect of a large proportion of its military equipment, maintains a remarkably well-organized and active establishment. It has managed to sustain elderly equipment in good working order to retain the nucleus of a capable conventional military force that maintains close training relationships with its neighbours and benefits from active cooperation with the armed forces of Brazil in particular. However, as will be shown, Paraguay's armed forces are operating on borrowed time as spares and ammunition used by its antiquated arsenal are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. The defence budget of approximately USD 400 million constitutes 1.8% of the GDP and has hovered between 1.1% and 1.8% for over a decade.¹⁸

The Paraguayan Army

The basic organisation of the Paraguayan army has not changed for several decades. Divided into three "Corps" with three "Divisions" each, Paraguay's army is comprised of three brigade-sized formations (the so-called "Corps") each with three

¹⁵ J. Montes, **PARAGUAY: SMALL ARMS IN THE LAND OF THE GUARANÍ** *Small Arms Review* at <http://www.smallarmsreview.com/display.article.cfm?idarticles=1079> (Accessed 6th June 2017)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ [Paraguayan Military Budget](http://militarybudget.org/paraguay/) <http://militarybudget.org/paraguay/> (Accessed 8th June 2017)

regiments/battalions – two of infantry and one of cavalry (the so-called “Divisions”) with supporting units of engineers and communications.

- 1st Army Corps (Curuguaty)
 - Infantry Division 3
 - Infantry Division 4
 - Cavalry Division 3
- 2nd Army Corps (San Juan Bautista)
 - Infantry Division 1
 - Infantry Division 2
 - Cavalry Division 2
- 3rd Army Corps (Mariscal Estigarribia)
 - Infantry Division 5
 - Infantry Division 6
 - Cavalry Division 1

In addition to these formations, there is a Special Forces Command at Cerrito which has on strength a single special forces battalion along with its training school. Two artillery groups, an anti-aircraft group and a Presidential Guard Regiment complete the Paraguayan Army's Order of Battle.¹⁹

While Paraguay has made substantial investments in modern small-arms, infantry support weapons and optical and night-vision equipment, its vehicle inventory is ageing and has been requiring more investment in spares and maintenance.²⁰ Paraguay's artillery is old but serviceable and includes a dozen 25 pounders and twice that number of M101 105mm guns with around 30 ageing 40mm and 20mm anti-aircraft guns providing a veneer of air defence capability.

While the nucleus of a modern armoured force exists in the form of 24 EE-9 *Cascavel* armoured cars and eight EE-11 *Urutu* armoured personnel carriers, a recent report suggests that despite some efforts at keeping vehicles operational, the cavalry units, , including the elite RC4 at the School of Cavalry, are in poor

¹⁹ A.J. English, **Regional Defence Profile: Latin America** (Janes, London: 1988), pp. 221-224

²⁰ **Stormy Paraguay**, *Small Arms Defense Journal*: 18th September 2013 at <http://www.sadefensejournal.com/wp/?p=2064> (Accessed 8th June 2017)

shape.²¹ Indeed, it is believed that nearly 80 per cent of Paraguay's armour is non-operational with vehicles lacking batteries and fuel.²² In light of the problems faced with the more modern vehicles, it is all the more surprising that Paraguay has taken the decision to restore ten of its M3 *Stuart* and three M4 *Sherman* tanks to service.²³ It remains to be seen how Paraguay intends to keep its armoured forces operational with such ageing assets adding to the maintenance burden.

The Paraguayan Navy

If the Paraguayan Army's armoured force is ageing, the Paraguayan Navy – effectively a riverine force, has the distinction of operating probably the world's oldest operational warships. The most modern asset is the Brazilian built, 371 ton *Itaipu (P-05)* which was commissioned in 1985. The next most modern are two ex-Argentine navy *Bouchard-class* minesweepers now used as patrol ships – *Nanawa (P-02)* and *Teniente Farina (P-04)* which were built in the late 1930s and transferred to Paraguay between 1964 and 1968. These three vessels, with 40mm guns, mortars and, in the case of *P-05*, a helicopter pad, constitute a potent riverine force supported by over a dozen smaller craft of modern design. However, pride of place in the Paraguayan navy goes to the *Capitan Cabral (P-01)* which was commissioned in 1908. As of 2017, the vessel, despite its incredible age, is in excellent condition.²⁴ However, despite the undoubtedly impressive feat at keeping these vessels operational, aided by the non-saline fluvial environment, Paraguay would need to consider replacements for this still potent riverine force. As a point of historical interest, a veteran of the Chaco War – and once the most powerful riverine naval unit in the region – the *Paraguay (C-1)* – remains notionally in service despite not having moved from her berth at Asuncion for several decades.

The Paraguayan Air Force

Unlike the Paraguayan army and navy which, despite problems with ageing assets and maintenance, have maintained their inventories and capabilities at a stable

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- ²¹ R. Lopes, '[Por Diós!...](http://www.planobrazil.com/por-dios-veiculos-sem-bateria-de-eletrica-improvisada-com-poucos-suprimentos-e-ma-manutencao-eis-o-retrato-da-unidade-que-concentra-a-maior-frota-de-blindados-do-exercito-paraguaio/)' **Veículos sem bateria, de elétrica improvisada, com poucos suprimentos e má manutenção: eis o retrato da unidade que concentra a maior frota de blindados do Exército Paraguaio...** *Plano Brazil*: 9th May 2017 at <http://www.planobrazil.com/por-dios-veiculos-sem-bateria-de-eletrica-improvisada-com-poucos-suprimentos-e-ma-manutencao-eis-o-retrato-da-unidade-que-concentra-a-maior-frota-de-blindados-do-exercito-paraguaio/> (Accessed 8th June 2017)
- ²² T. Velasquez, **El 80% de los blindados de las Fuerzas Armadas de Paraguay esta fuera de servicio**, *Defensa.com*: 9th May 2017 at <http://www.defensa.com/paraguay/n-80-blindados-fuerzas-armadas-paraguay-esta-fuera-servicio> (Accessed 8th June 2017)
- ²³ **Paraguay keeping M3 Stuart and M4 Sherman tanks in service** *Tank and AFV News*: 1st January 2016 at <https://tankandafvnews.com/2016/01/01/paraguay-keeping-m3-stuart-and-m4-sherman-tanks-in-service/> (Accessed 8th June 2017)
- ²⁴ S. Saunders, **IHS Jane's Fighting Ships 2012-2013** (IHS Janes, Surrey, 2013), pp. 602-605

level for some time, the Paraguayan Air Force has suffered a significant depletion in its capabilities over the last 15 years. A modest training force of 10 T-35 *Pillan* turboprop trainers and a small transport fleet of six transport aircraft (2 Cessna 208s and 4 CASA C-212-400s) along with 13 helicopters (nine UH-1s and 3 HB-350s) bear the brunt of the liaison, transport and communications tasks of the force.

The sole combat element is provided by a single squadron - 3° *Escuadrón de Reconocimiento y Ataque 'Moros'* comprising *Escuadrilla (flights) 'Gamma' y 'Omega'* operating six EMB-312 *Tucano* light attack/ trainer aircraft.²⁵ This is the sole surviving squadron of three that once comprised the *Grupo Aerotactico* (GAT). The other two were 1° *Escuadrón de Caza 'Guaraní' (Escuadrilla 'Orion' y 'Centaurus')* which operated nine EMBRAER AT-26 *Xavante* and 2° *Escuadrón de Caza 'Indios' (Escuadrilla 'Taurus' y 'Scorpio')* which operated six former Taiwanese AT-33A-5-LO light attack/ jet trainers. The latter two squadrons were heavily committed to counter-narcotics operations with airstrikes being launched on covert airstrips in the Parana Heights in 1995.²⁶ Now, the *Tucanos* form the combat element with Mk.81 or 82, Avibrás M2A1 400 pound napalm bombs, Avibrás 70/7M5A or Equipaer EQ-LMF-70/7AP seven tube 70mm rocket launchers or Twin Mag Pods with two MAG 7.62mm machine guns, using the four pylons under the wings.²⁷

The Order of Battle of the Paraguayan Air Force, including aircraft nominally on strength but non-operational is as follows:²⁸

²⁵ K.D. Konrad, **Paraguay looks to modernize its fighter planes to face new threats** *Dialogo Americas: 31st October 2014* at <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/paraguay-looks-modernize-its-fighter-planes-face-new-threats> (Accessed 8th June 2017)

²⁶ I. Guevara y Moyano **Latin American Fighters** (Harpia, Houston: 2009), pp.185-189

²⁷ S. Rivas, **A small force with a big task - the Paraguayan Air Force** *Polskie Forum: 26th January 2015* at http://www.fpfb.pl/analyses/view?analysis_id=525 (Accessed 8th June 2017)

²⁸ Ibid

PARAGUAY'S MILITARY: INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGES VS BLOCK OBSOLESCENCE

Unit	Model	Fleet	Inducted	Serial	Notes
1º Brigada Aérea					
Grupo Aerotático (GAT)					
3º Escuadrón de Operaciones Especiales Moros	Embraer EMB-312 Tucano	6	6/11/87	1051 to 1059	The 1054, 1055 and 1056 lost on accidents.
Grupo Aéreo de Transportes Especiales (GATE)					
	Cessna U206C/G	1	1980	0210	
	Cessna T206H	2	2013	0235 and 0236	
	Beechcraft 58 Baron	1	2009	0232	Belonged to the Army, out of service
	Cessna 310	2	2009	0231 and 0233	Belonged to the Army, out of service
	Cessna 402	1	1974	0221	
	Cessna Grand Caravan	2	2011	0250 and 0251	
Grupo de Transporte Aéreo (GTA)					
	DHC-6 Twin Otter	1	1968	2036	Officially enlisted by the FAP in 1989.
Servicio de Transporte Aéreo Militar	CASA C-212-200	4	1984	2027, 2029, 2031 and 2033	The 2029 out of service
	CASA C-212-400	1	2004	2035	
Grupo Aéreo de Helicópteros (GAH)					
	Helibras HB-350 Esquilo	3	1987	H-025 to H-027	Out of service
Escuadrón Helicópteros	Bell UH-1H	9	1996	H-0429 to H-0439	All donated by Taiwan
Escuadrilla Presidencial	Bell 427	1	2011	H-0401	Donated by Taiwan
Grupo Aéreo de Instrucción (GAI)					
	ENAER T-35A/B Pillán	10	1992	0101 to 0112	The 0103 and the two 0111 lost on accidents
Escuadrón Fénix	Neiva T-25 Universal	1	2005	0130 to 0135	Four out of service

Paraguay has sought to enhance its air surveillance capabilities, inducting two Elta EL/M 2106NG 3D mobile radars in 2012 to provide some measure of radar coverage of its airspace. In addition, Paraguay has established close ties with Brazil's Airspace Control Department to facilitate coordinated monitoring of narco-trafficking flights. This is in addition to a strong training partnership between the two air forces.²⁹ However, Paraguay has acutely felt the need to augment its *Tucano* force and has proposed the induction of jet aircraft such as the L-159 or the Yak-130 and turboprop aircraft such as the EMB-314 *Super Tucano* but these have not come to fruition because of budgetary constraints.³⁰ Until then, the *Tucanos* soldier on with Brazilian support.

Conclusion

Paraguay's armed forces, like those of many in the region, has found itself involved in internal security challenges. Political turmoil has thus far not prompted either intervention by or the use of the army to suppress dissent. However, the continuing threat of the EPP combined with the brazen operations of Brazilian cross-border criminal gangs creates the potential for violent unrest.

With limited budgetary support and an increasingly obsolescent arsenal, Paraguay has managed to maintain a core of combat capability. Nonetheless, the country is now facing a problem of having to replace either a large proportion of its combat assets or accept a degradation in capability. This has already been evident in the case of the country's air force, and now, that service finds itself increasingly dependent on Brazil to deal with the continuing menace of narco-trafficking flights. Maintenance challenges pose a serious problem for the army's mechanised forces while the navy faces the herculean task of keeping serviceable, vessels that are more than four decades old (over a century old in one case).

Yet Paraguay offers an interesting study of a country with an uncompromisingly martial past, an impressive record in two major regional wars (having initiated hostilities in both cases) and rule by a military dictator which has now made a relatively peaceful transition to democracy. Despite often high political tensions, the Paraguayan armed forces have not interfered in the political process and seem to be content with protecting the security of the country with ageing assets of increasingly dubious quality.

²⁹ P. Comunello, **Brazilian and Paraguayan Air Forces Cooperate against Drug Trafficking** *Dialogo Americas*: 10th February 2015 at <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/brazilian-and-paraguayan-air-forces-cooperate-against-drug-trafficking> (Accessed 8th June 2017)

³⁰ Op.cit. n.25



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