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ARTICLE

The Nature of Threats in Pan-Amazon

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The Nature of Threats in Pan-Amazon

Oscar Medeiros Filho

Summary

For decades, the Amazon Region has become a strategic and National Defense priority for Brazil. In addition to the vast territorial extension and the abundance of natural resources still little exploited, the region has gained prominence for concentrating the three dimensions that present threats to national security: 1) geopolitical or traditional issues; 2) security threats, related to state vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses and the fight against illicit acts of all kinds; and 3) socio-environmental challenges. In addition to the internal problems it faces, the region forms a vast collective space of eight countries that share similar challenges and need to seek joint solutions. For this reason, it is suggested that regional cooperation, through the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), proves to be the best strategy to address the threats affecting the region. The article is therefore divided into three sections and a brief conclusion. The first addresses the nature of the threats in the region. The second discusses the challenges, especially state vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses in border areas. The third seeks to discuss opportunities for regional cooperation, highlighting, in the conclusion, the relevant role of ACTO for the area.

Keywords: *Pan-Amazon, Threats, Borders, Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization, Regional Cooperation.*

Introduction

More than three decades ago, the Amazon became a strategic and defense priority for Brazil. This situation was driven by increased international pressure on the Amazon region and the proliferation of transnational crimes that increased its relevance. The process of securitization of the environmental crisis in recent years has contributed to give greater importance to the issue, placing this territory at the center of international security debates.

The importance of the Amazon for national security is based on two fundamental reasons: first, the growing scope of security observed in recent

decades; and second, the fact that the Amazon serves as the meeting point of all dimensions related to security concerns. This ranges from geopolitical aspects at the inter-state level, to cross-border and public security issues, to aspects linked to socio-environmental issues with both local and global implications.

The Nature of Threats in Amazonia

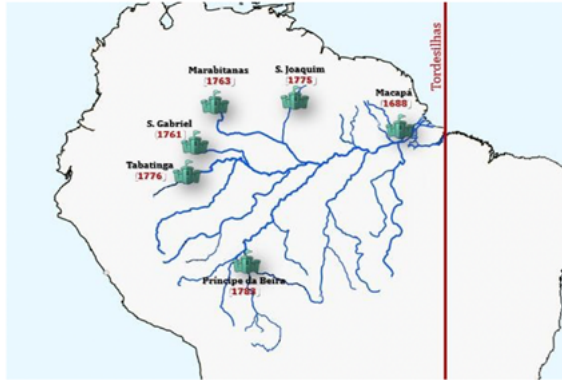
From the point of view of military threats and concerns, the Amazon is considered a “point of contact” where both the traditional functions of the Armed Forces (Armed Forces) related to external defense and the new defense and security demands in terms of combating environmental crimes and criminal insurgency converge. In order to understand the implications of these issues for national defense, an analysis of the nature of threats in the Amazon will be carried out, using a typology that divides the main security and defense issues into three categories: geopolitical, security and socio-environmental.

Geopolitical Threats

The oldest military concern in the region dates back to the territorial occupation strategy carried out by the Portuguese during the colonial period. This was characterized by the construction of forts and strongholds in the border areas of the different rivers of the Amazon basin (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Portuguese Presence and Territorial Control

Portuguese Presence and Territorial Control in the Amazon (XVII and XVIII centuries)



Source: Own elaboration¹

This closed territorial control approach, inherited from the Portuguese, has endured in both imperial and republican Brazil. In the mid-19th century, Brazil began to adopt the concept of military colonies, which represented an evolution of the old Portuguese concept. According to Meira Mattos,² “the empire, in 1840, by creating military colonies, intended to extend them as a process of the population in certain points of the uninhabited land frontier; the fort was no longer so necessary, but the barracks would replace it, offering a point of social support to the adjoining population”. With this strategy, the empire sought to “occupy its farthest frontier by blending the weapon of defense and the idea of man’s economic fixation on the land”.³

Therefore, geopolitical threats are related to the interests at stake between nations, the maintenance of sovereignty and the main function of any

1 Carlos de Meira Mattos. “Uma Geopolítica Pan-Amazônica” (Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 2011. v. 2), 21.
 2 Ibid., 108.
 3 Ibid., 112-113.

armed force: to guarantee the territorial integrity of the national state. In the specific case of the Amazon, the abundance of natural resources, such as water, diversity of flora and fauna, and rare minerals, gives its territory a strategic character. Historically, the military has feared the possibility of “territorial expropriation”, i.e., that the region would be coveted by external entities seeking to extract its strategic resources.

In more recent times, concerns have focused on the idea of “territorial denial,” which implies establishing global governance over the Amazon region, limiting or even preventing sovereign management of that territory. Under a narrative of protecting the global commons, the international community seeks to deny development proposals for the region, with the argument of “preserving it for future generations”. However, it is known that behind this supposed defense of the common good may hide the interests of the international commodities market, which seeks to “demonize” the image of national agricultural products and, ultimately, to regain control of the market and hinder the sovereign management of national spaces through actions of “territorial neutralization”, such as the creation of environmental preservation areas with direct or indirect international management.

Therefore, according to this typology, there are, among geopolitical issues, two types of threats: a) territorial expropriation (international greed for our natural resources) and b) territorial preservation (international pressure for environmental preservation in the region, with the use of this narrative to cause competitive losses to national agricultural products in international trade). International characteristics indicate that, without denying the former, the greatest pressures tend to be related to the latter. To confront it requires a set of state strategies that, in addition to military capabilities, involve the socioeconomic and environmental development of the region.

Security Threats

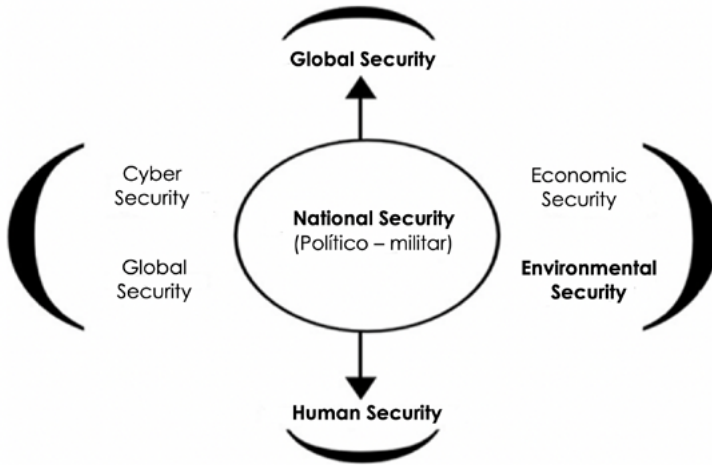
This second type of threat is not necessarily related to a power struggle between nations, but to the vulnerabilities and weaknesses that contribute to the proliferation of illicit activities in the Amazon region. These activities encompass a wide range of problems, such as poverty, natural disasters, the environment, arms and drug trafficking, which are now considered “new threats” from the multidimensional perspective of security adopted by the region’s armed forces since the Special Conference on Security promoted by the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2003 in Mexico City.

It is important to note that in this context a broad academic debate has been generated on the expansion of the concept of security, which now acquires a multidimensional character. This implies considering various sectoral issues, such as the economy, the environment, social and cyber issues, and broadening and deepening the levels of analysis. From a broad perspective, security ranges from global issues to more specific aspects, placing individuals (human security) as the reference objective.⁴ The following image illustrates this process (Figure 2).

4 Barry Buzan; Lene Hansen. “A evolução dos estudos de segurança internacional” (São Paulo, Unesp, 2012).

Figure 2

Expanded Security Concept



Source: Own elaboration

In the specific case of the Amazon region, in addition to the threats present along the entire border, such as international arms and drug trafficking, there are threats to the environment, such as fires, illegal deforestation and biopiracy. There is also the possibility of the growth of guerrilla movements in the region.

In general, it can be stated that security threats are related to the difficulties faced by the State to effectively exercise the monopoly of legitimate violence, which opens space for the proliferation of illicit acts, in a context of a vicious circle where misery, devastation and violence feed back on each other, hence they refer to the challenge of maintaining internal sovereignty over the vast Amazonian territory.

These are related to the risk of “territorial anomie”, which has been a historically present reality in recent decades, due to the expansion of organized crime in the region. These concerns arise less from military

threats “*stricto sensu*” and more from problems stemming from the fragility of the rule of law and the high degree of social violence present in the Amazon. These vulnerabilities are notably rooted in the lack of state presence in the provision of basic services to the population and effective law enforcement, combined with transnational crime in the Pan-Amazonian inter-border space.

Socio-environmental threats

This third type of threat has gained significance with the emergence of the “climate change” issue. The United States (US) Security Strategy, published last year, suggests that the climate crisis is the existential challenge of our time.⁵

Indeed, when associated with resource scarcity, climate change can catalyze existing conflicts and social tensions which, due to the fragile management capacity of institutions and states, can evolve into armed conflicts.⁶ Thus, the consequences of global warming increase problems and violence, especially in fragile countries, turning these regions into veritable incubators of insecurity.

It can be said that this third type of challenge enhances geopolitical and security elements. First, it involves power relations in scenarios of scarcity and disputes over natural resources that can generate direct conflicts between political communities (geopolitical issues). Secondly, environmental degradation and its socio-environmental consequences in vulnerable spaces, such as floods, collapse of hillsides, food and water crises, displacements, can generate social violence directly or indirectly (security issues).

Due to its transnational character, the debate on climate change implies a discussion on global governance and tends to generate more frequent

5 The White House. “National Security Strategy” (2022), 27.

6 Raul K. Boeno. “A militarização dos desastres: a securitização das alterações climáticas e o pensamento das Forças Armadas ibero-americanas” (Tese de doutoramento. Universidade de Lisboa, 2018).

questioning by the powers on the ability of some nation states to exercise sovereign management of their territories, with the Amazon being a constant target.

Given the complexity of this type of challenge, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon and communicate the relevance of the issue, both in relation to the fight against the causes of the problem and in maintaining the sovereign management of national territories. In this context, it is essential to seek political rationality, avoiding both geopolitical naivety and socio-environmental insensitivity.

Challenges: State Vulnerabilities and Institutional Weaknesses

As noted in the previous section, in the Amazon the different dimensions of security are intertwined with the notion of “national defense”, generating an insecurity complex with important challenges. The natural characteristics of the region, such as its vast territory covered by dense forests and crossed by rivers and streams, its low population density and the scarce presence of the State, have not been sufficient to counteract the illegal flows, especially those linked to drug trafficking, which have expanded in the region.

The fragility of surveillance mechanisms in the peripheral areas of the Amazon aggravates the concern. In the face of these challenges, two aspects are crucial: one of a geopolitical nature and the other of a military nature.

The geopolitical aspect highlights the need to understand that the Amazon not only belongs to the national territory, but is part of a complex region shared by neighboring countries facing similar problems. As Meira Mattos points out,⁷ “The words Amazon and pan-Amazon should symbolize the same geographical image. In reality, this is not the case. This immense natural region, with a uniform ecology, which encompasses the territory

7 Carlos de Meira Mattos. “Uma Geopolítica Pan-Amazônica” (Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 2011, v. 2), 16.

of six tributary countries, is approached by its owners under a particular vision". It is not possible to find effective strategies in isolation in the region. If problems are shared, solutions must also be shared.

The military aspect refers to the need for the armed forces to be present or "made present" through the development of remote surveillance and strategic mobility capabilities. The nature of the threats present in the region has required the military to adopt a kind of "dual doctrine". In this sense, it is necessary to pay special attention to the structure and preparedness of border units, making the most of technologies, intelligence and interagency operations to address the security nature of the threats present, in addition to fostering cooperation with neighboring or regional countries.

Opportunity: Regional Cooperation and Leadership

From a geopolitical perspective, the Amazon is considered a space for regional articulation and a key axis in South American integration. General Carlos de Meira Mattos proposed the strategic nature of Pan-Amazonian cooperation as a geopolitical arrangement to safeguard the sovereignty of the countries in the region. It is from this perspective that, in the face of growing pressure from extra-regional powers in the Amazon in the 1970s, Meira Mattos began to adopt the idea that shared territorial management of that region would not be allowed, except in the form of a "condominium", through cooperation with the Amazonian countries. This idea is set out in his work "A Pan-Amazonian Geopolitics", published in 1980,⁸ which includes as an annex a copy of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (TCA), signed in 1978. In this work, Meira Mattos reveals his strategic awareness and socio-environmental sensitivity towards the region:

"Weighty reasons militate the importance of the Amazon Pact for Brazil (...). One of the essential characteristics of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty is the sensitivity of its negotiators to one of the main sociological attractions of our time - ecological awareness. The importance of environmental

8 Ibid.

issues is reflected in the postulation of the purpose of balancing the needs of development with a harmonious ecological balance. In this sense, supporting such a current thesis, the Amazon Pact is the first agreement of this multinational dimension that embraces the very modern phase of ecological preservation”.⁹

Based on this awareness, Pan-Amazonian cooperation would be the best antidote against threats to the region. “Faced with the manifestations of foreign greed and the dangers of interaction under the pretext of sponsoring a world organization, it is up to the Amazonian nations to seek together a solution that will lift this area out of pauperism and backwardness. The pact represents an effort to sensitize the neighboring countries of the region to the need to create a regional cooperation organization to move together the levers capable of awakening the Pan-Amazonian region from its multi-secular lethargy. It will not be possible, in this heroic effort, to renounce the capital and technology of the most advanced countries in the world, nor international financial and technological support organizations. What the Amazon countries do not want is to lose sovereignty over this coveted region under the pretext of their inability to exploit it. For this, they will have to act together: show intelligence, put aside their mutual suspicions and reveal a real will to do so.”¹⁰

Thus, for Meira Mattos, one of the strategies to confront the increase in international environmental pressure and the supposed thesis of internationalization of the Amazon would be “to strengthen our relations with our Amazonian neighboring countries, seeking to integrate them in the mission of defense against the campaign of internationalization of the area”.¹¹

Another aspect highlighted in Meira Mattos’ work, which reinforces the notion of regional cooperation, is his reinterpretation of the concept of

9 Ibid., 119.

10 Ibid., 132-3.

11 Carlos de Meira Mattos. “A tese da internacionalização da Amazônia” (Revista da Escola Superior de Guerra, v. 21, n 45, 2006), 15.

frontier in the Amazon region. Historically, the idea of containing and closing borders prevailed, with a clear connotation of “border”. However, in 1977, a year before the signing of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT), he proposed the “creation of border exchange areas along the land line of the South American countries where they are confined”.¹²

Thus, in his approach to the concept of border, Meira Mattos goes beyond the idea of “border”, which focuses on the political-legal separation between sovereign territories. Recognizing this first expression, she also incorporates the concept of “frontier”, which refers to peripheral, underdeveloped regions with a lack of state presence and public policies to combat the region’s socioeconomic vulnerabilities. In this sense, cooperation and integration strategies acquire new meanings. It corresponds to a paradigmatic moment that he calls “a dawning touch, not only in Brazil, but in all our neighbors”.¹³

Conclusions

The article focused on the discussion of issues related to the security and defense of the Amazon, considering the strategic challenges and opportunities, as well as their military implications for the countries of the Pan-Amazon region. As a result of this analysis, it is highlighted that the strengthening of ACTO emerges as a significant strategic opportunity to preserve sovereignty and allow Brazil to exercise a prominent leadership in the region. ACTO emerges as a crucial element to counteract “internationalization maneuvers” by assigning to neighboring countries the exclusive responsibility for the destiny of the area. In addition, the possibility of it becoming a valuable regional instrument in the fight against cross-border crime has been highlighted. Although it was not part of the initial agenda, its central role as a necessary institutional arrangement for coordinating regional policies in the areas of defense and security has been recognized. This becomes even more relevant in view of the disappearance of previous regional agreements, such as the South American Defense

¹² Carlos de Meira Mattos. “Uma Geopolítica Pan-Amazônica” (Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 2011. v. 2), 202.

¹³ Ibid.

Council (CDS/UNASUR). In the absence of a regional agreement capable of coordinating policies that transcend national borders, ACTO appears as a legitimate and appropriate instrument.

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The author is a Colonel of the “Quadro Complementar de Oficiais” (ESAEX, 1995). He is a graduate and master in Geography (UFMS, 1995). He holds a master’s degree in Human Geography (USP, 2005), a PhD in Political Science (USP, 2010) and has completed a postdoctoral internship in International Relations (UnB, 2018). In addition, he serves as a professor at ESPCEX, AMAN and the Meira Mattos Institute (ECEME). Currently, he serves as Research Coordinator of the Center for Strategic Studies of the Army and is a professor of International Relations at Uniceub.