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The South American Defense Council: the Building of a Community of Practice for Regional Defense

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Abstract

While the South American Defense Council has been analyzed as a security community, we argue that it is best described as an early stage community of practice, since it has successfully set in motion a regular interaction dynamic between numerous defense actors, as we demonstrate with concrete examples. We further discuss political support as a prerequisite for regional defense identity.

Keywords: Security communities, community of practice, seminar diplomacy, South America, Defense.

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Introduction

In December 2008, member states of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) created the South American Defense Council (SADC), a specific forum for dealing with defense cooperation. Even though Argentina had been an active proponent of a Southern Cone defense cooperation dialogue mechanism during the 1990s and early 2000s, it only became a reality when Brazil supported the initiative and devised an active diplomatic strategy that could convince all South American neighbors of the initiative's relevance. During these early months of political and diplomatic negotiations to create the organization, in the heat of the dispute over the bombing of a FARC camping in Ecuador by Colombian troops, the proposal remained ambiguous on what kind of defense organism should be created, allowing each country to entertain a number expectations. Among the various topics of the SADC being discussed were dialogue, cooperation, disputes prevention, confidence building, the establishment of a regional defense industry, and, most controversially, the construction of a regional defense identity. The only point on which most of the

countries disagreed was the Venezuelan proposal of a collective security obligation that included the establishment of a regional army.

Since its creation, the SADC has attracted considerable academic interest in exploring the reasons, challenges and possibilities of the building of a regional defense institution (Fuccille 2015; Saint-Pierre and Silva 2014; Teixeira Júnior 2012; Vitelli 2015a). This attention is unsurprising given the prior existence of a rising South American academic community dedicated to studying defense policies, regional integration and military issues (Vitelli 2015b). In spite of the existence of specialists on cooperative defense policies and institutions, we believe that analysts of the SADC have often missed the point when attempting to answer questions on what type of security cooperation this institution is fostering.

While the SADC was created as a response to the acute interstate crisis mentioned above, and following another moment of tension – the renegotiation of a treaty on Colombian–North American military bases – it was not established as a regional security crisis management mechanism that had a similar form to the United Nations Security Council. Indeed, it was the Presidents' Council together with high-level diplomatic officials who met in April 2009 at Santiago and later in Bariloche to solve such crises. Similarly, while building a regional defense industry is a purpose included in the SADC's statute and often mentioned in presidents' and defense ministers' speeches, little progress has been made in this area. As some analysts have highlighted, confidence building and transparency have in fact been two of the purposes effectively put into practice during the immediate years after the SADC's creation, as an explicit response to the interstate diplomatic crisis that arose in the Andean region (Comini 2010; Saint-Pierre and Palacios Junior 2014; Teixeira 2015). There was consensus about the relevance of dealing with the existing deficit of mutual confidence regarding arms spending and about divergence related to the defense cooperation relationship between countries like Colombia and the United States.

Because there is emphasis on increasing mutual trust in order to consolidate an area of peace in a place that is known for its lack of acute armed conflict – despite persistent political tensions – many analysts believed that the security community perspective – founded by Karl Deutsch and further elaborated by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett – could be dutifully applied to this dynamic (Flemes et al. 2011; Leite 2015; Medeiros Filho 2014; Riquelme Rivera 2013; Rocha 2015a; Teixeira 2013). While most of these experts agreed that much could be done to enhance trust and transparency in the region, the focus of criticism was on the feasibility of the building of a regional defense identity, an objective made explicit in the organism's statute that has been regularly referenced in political speeches (Aránguiz 2013; Medeiros Filho 2013). Some have been skeptical about the possibility of forming a South American identity in the realm of defense among countries with divergent security and defense policies, clashing foreign policy stances *vis-à-vis* the United States and unresolved territorial disputes (Bartolomé 2009; Saint-Pierre and Silva 2013).

Although we consider that these questions constitute pressing issues, we believe that defense identity construction has not been adequately understood mainly because of two analytical errors: a lack of systematic analysis of the actions carried out by the SADC, and the inadequate conceptual

framework used to study this organism. Drawing on security communities and communities of practice literature (Adler 2008; Adler and Barnett 1998; Pouliot 2010), we suggest that collective identity regarding defense is achieved through two principal means: on the one hand, political and diplomatic concertation carried on by chiefs of state and heads of diplomacy and, on the other hand, regular face-to-face interaction among state officials dealing with defense issues at intermediate levels of the administration. Our argument is that South America is at an early stage of security community construction, stressing the latter element in spite of the weaknesses of the former. Contrasting with previous research that emphasizes opportunities and challenges related to high-level political and diplomatic dimensions, we focus on the initial phase which consists of establishing regular transgovernmental defense agent relations, particularly, but not exclusively, between defense ministries. In short, as a result of carefully analyzing the type of activities organized by the SADC and the multiplicity of state agents taking part in them, we argue that the organism is attempting to create a practice community of regional defense as a contribution to the building of a security community.

The next section of this article summarizes the conceptual discussion; then we draw on empirical data – namely official meeting acts, press information and informal conversations with defense practitioners – in order to show the multiplicity of ministerial and sub-ministerial areas involved in the organization and SADC activities, which we identify as constituting the beginning of a practice community for South American defense. After this, we address a particular form of activity – what Alder calls *seminar diplomacy* – referred to by security community literature as a key function of international institutions in security community building due to its positive impact on confidence building and mutual identification. The empirical analysis closes with a thorough description of the diverse areas involved in the strategic thinking, teaching and learning functions of the SADC and two of its subordinate organisms: the Center for Strategic Defense Studies (CEED) and the South American Defense School (ESUDE)¹. While most of the article focuses on the relevance of building a regional transgovernmental interaction dynamic between defense officials, in the conclusion we return to theoretical assumptions in order to address how a negative political scenario in the region could seriously jeopardize the existence of the incipient community of practice.

Security communities and communities of practice

In 1998 Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett edited *Security Communities*, a book that gathered insights of a group of researchers in their attempts to revisit Karl Deutsch's works on security communities in the fifties. During the worst years of the Cold War, an intellectual had dared to think outside the box, wondering whether it was possible for former enemies to adopt a peaceful pattern of interaction. Quite the contrary, the early nineties offered the perfect opportunity to understand contemporary events – particularly the reunification of Europe – from a theoretical framework of peaceful change.

¹ Acronyms are written in their Spanish form, except for the South American Defense Council, given that publications already exist with the English form of the acronym.

Based on constructivism's general premises, the authors argued that "community exists in international relations", even when national states do not create a supranational authority. What is more important, they contended, is that a communitarian element is paramount for the achievement of peaceful change, and consequently for guaranteeing international security. In short, a security community exists among states that have eliminated violence as a means of resolving disputes, a peaceful change that was made possible through the construction of mutual trust and a sense of "we-ness": a collective identification that goes beyond national borders.

As the authors pointed out, while formal institutions are a useful tool for creating trust and identification, they are not, however, a necessary condition. Most importantly, in order for community members to no longer fear being attacked or threatened by their neighbors, other less structured mechanisms such as political consultation and multilateral agreements are crucial for building trust, defined as "believing in spite of uncertainty". Accordingly, high-level political agreement between chiefs of state and heads of diplomacy represents a core element for the building of a security community². The reasoning is that, the more "in tune" the political leaders of those countries are, the better the prospects for building the necessary agreements on top issues regarding security. Despite recognizing the relevance of highlighting this type of consensus implicit in the security community literature, we argue that complementing the analysis with the concept of community of practice strengthens the understanding of the SADC in that it allows envisioning the positive influence on collective identity building represented by increased interaction between ministerial and sub ministerial government officials, especially when political consensus is challenged by ideological heterogeneity among the governments of member states.

In *Communitarian International Relations*, Adler (2005) gathered some previous and some original writings claiming that regional and international governance could be understood as a result of the construction of meanings and the cognitive evolution processes that occur inside transnational communities of officials and experts. From this perspective, cooperation flourishes when state officials take part in common practices during which ideas become internalized (Adler 2005, 21). A community of practice, thus, involves three components: a group of individuals (the *practitioners*), a common domain of knowledge associated with shared thinking, and a common practice which embodies that communitarian knowledge (Adler 2005, 199). Indeed, Adler states that both security communities and epistemic communities – among other possible types – are specific forms of communities of practice. But even though he did not explicitly affirm that communities of practice are constituted mostly by intermediate level state officials, he implicitly makes that assumption when he analyzes the community of practice of cooperative security that developed among the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) members (Adler 2008). It is precisely on the interaction of that type of practitioners that our analysis of the SADC aims to contribute to the current debate.

2 Certainly, high level agreements matter greatly. Relatedly, Merke (2015) has shown that political concertation is the dominant international institution in Latin America, a practice that, for example, has helped to accommodate Brazil's rise, easing the usual tensions generated by changes in power distribution.

When discussing cooperation inside the SADC, some analysts have shown how political and ideological coincidences among South American governments in the first decade of the 21st century were an auspicious context for the creation of the organism, understood as the institutionalization of the will to create a security community in the region (Battaglino 2012; Flemes et al. 2011; Fuccille 2014). In contrast, as mentioned in the introduction, others have drawn attention to the sharp divergences existing between countries with a neoliberal approach to economic and foreign policy – involving close ties to the United States – and those with more autonomous approaches. As a result of this ideological clash, together with conflicting defense and security policies on the issue of military employment in public security, some have shown skepticism about the possibility of agreeing on a regional strategic identity (Medeiros Filho 2013).

Indeed, security community building in South America through high-level political and diplomatic consensus has become problematic. Nonetheless, this should not obscure the fact that during the period when the organization enjoyed political support, and even after it was over, the SADC succeeded in building a systematic and regular interaction dynamic among a multiplicity of defense policy practitioners, the other relevant means for security community building discussed by the authors. After acknowledging that collective identities are often a byproduct rather than a prerequisite for the existence of a security community, Adler (1998, 121) argued that the actions performed by those institutions affect necessary conditions for peaceful change by creating material and cognitive structures, through allowing increased exchanges between states and societies, and by fostering a sense of we-ness inherent to collective identities. Specifically, institutions provide a routine for regular face-to-face interaction between state officials to solve technical, normative and practical matters, stimulating cooperative behavior. As we mentioned above, Adler illustrated his argument by studying the OSCE, an institution that involved Western- and Eastern-bloc countries. Arguing about the way in which institutions work for the socialization and teaching of norms when actors do not share a collective identity, Adler (1998, 133) claimed that the logic of interaction taking place in OSCE activities could be explained by “we know you are not ‘us.’ Let’s pretend, however, that you are, so we may teach you to be ‘us’”. Therefore, there is great importance in getting defense officials – not only first rank ones, but also those working on medium level bureaucracy – involved in regular encounters, as we will show later.

Despite the existence of studies on particular SADC actions specifically related to defense spending and military capacities transparency, as well as other general confidence building measures, analysts have often overlooked increased face-to-face interactions between defense officials that have been built as a result of the regular activities of the SADC. Weiffen et al. (2011) have suggested the relevance of transgovernmental webs for achieving peaceful relations, but they have not made the SADC the focus of their empirical research. In contrast, Sanahuja and Verdes-Montenegro Escáñez (2014) have made a thorough analysis of the institution’s actions, but they have not stressed community and interaction elements. Battaglino (2012) has indeed identified a connection between this organism’s functions and the socialization effects of communities of practice – even using this concept – but since his work was written on the early years of the SADC’s existence,

it does not include a comprehensive account of those activities put into practice by the organism that represent the way in which it attempts to create that community. Recognizing his early understanding of the relevant link between socialization of defense officials and the construction of defense regional identity, we intend to further develop that argument, making use of information available on those SADC's actions executed since the organism's creation until the end of 2015.

In order to do this, we apply the already mentioned concept of community of practice as well as the concept of seminar diplomacy: one of the socializing practices that Adler (1998, 38) believes is worth treating separately, defined as:

All types of multilateral diplomacy (meetings of diplomats, practitioners, civil servants, academic experts, and the use of experts in diplomatic missions) aimed at promoting political dialogue and international cooperation (political, social, economic) and preventing or managing conflict by means of consensual, technical or normative knowledge.

Before proceeding to the reconstruction of actors involved in SADC activities, it is worth mentioning that this was only possible after building a database of official SADC documents and press releases that we analyze in qualitative terms. While some of the files have been made available by the SADC or individual countries, others have been the result of our personal inquiries³. As we will discuss in more detail in the closing remarks, information on the SADC is far from being complete, but we believe it is nonetheless sufficient to support our argument about the relevance of looking into the web of actors involved in the SADC and their interactions in order to understand current defense cooperation in the region.

A community of defense ministries: building a transgovernmental network

From the very outset, country members ruled out the possibility of creating a permanent and separate bureaucratic structure to deal with regional defense cooperation inside the UNASUR. Among other pitfalls, South American countries were interested in avoiding building a costly bureaucratic institution, potential quarrels about certain supranational features of a permanent forum, as well as the bureaucratization of cooperation. However, they also had a strong interest in multiplying interactions among defense ministries in order to achieve dialogue, coordination and consultation with regard to defense policy, as expressed in the SADC statute. In sum, they agreed on building a transgovernmental level for security and regional diplomatic defense relations by directly connecting defense ministries.

Correspondingly, the institutional architecture of the SADC was design in two parts. While the Council of Defense Ministers – the higher-ranked forum – is supposed to meet only twice a year, the SADC's most dynamic arrangement is the Executive Body, which consists of officials holding vice-ministerial rank. It is usually scheduled to meet before every summit of the Council of Defense Ministers, though its functioning is even more active. It is precisely this vice-ministerial

³ Access to our database can be requested by email at basededadoscds@gmail.com

level that is in charge of coordinating, communicating and keeping records of every activity organized in the context of the SADC. The country exercising the *pro tempore* presidency is in charge of general tasks. Finally, the Council of Ministers gathers to validate agreements arrived at on prior occasions. Additionally, the statute establishes that each country must designate a group of delegates to be in charge of day-to-day coordination of specific activities, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

Regular interaction among defense ministries in South America, along with the vice-ministerial level, represents a clear innovation as far as security and defense cooperation in the region is concerned. This fact is a clear sign of the political will to advance dialogue in the realm of defense inside the UNASUR. Moreover, as will be shown later, vice ministers are far from being the only defense officials regularly interacting in the SADC. Nonetheless, at this stage it is sensible to point to a weakness, a potential limitation of the cooperative effects of this transgovernmental community: heterogeneity in terms of defense ministries' institutional strength and resources, and civil control of this bureaucracy.

A thorough review of SADC meetings' minutes reveals that the majority of the members assign their vice-ministerial area to the Executive Body, even when they adopt slightly different denominations such as vice minister or undersecretary. Also, a fair number of them use the division in charge of foreign relations to deal with SADC's regular activities, areas that in practice are countries' delegations, as established in the statute. A particular case is Brazil, a country where the armed forces still predominates in the civilian ministry, created as late as in 1999. Consequently, the under deputy level is operated by the Joint Chief of the Armed Forces, and the area in charge of "American Organisms" – a division of the Strategic Affairs Office within that military controlled structure – is the one directly involved in SADC activities. Peru is another interesting case as it shows how political will to show leadership may advance institutional changes in defense ministries' structures. When in 2011 the Peruvian government was in charge of the *pro tempore* presidency of the organism, they decided to create a working group inside the ministry, which they called the Executive Office for the Pro Tempore Presidency of the SADC. Once the presidential role passed to the next country, they decided to maintain the working group and changed its name to the Executive Office of the Peruvian Delegacy for the SADC.

In essence, despite heterogeneity – *i.e.*, differences in political interests related regional defense cooperation, institutional maturity and bureaucratic complexity of defense ministries, civilian authority over the armed forces, and budget limitations related to taking part in activities organized abroad – involvement in the Executive Body has been steady with only a few exceptions. Between 2009 and 2015 its vice-ministerial officials have held fifteen meetings, both ordinary and extraordinary ones. As stated in official minutes, participation of the vice-ministerial areas has become routinized, meaning that the same instances have met regularly to manage the multiple activities included in action plans.

Some of those tasks involve the creation of working groups or consultation councils, whose member composition, regularity of meetings and permanence in time vary according to the type of

activity and other factors, such as political will⁴. Similarly, two consultation councils were established to deal with the two military production projects of the SADC: the joint building of aircraft for training pilots and the Regional System for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (VANT). It is worth noting that officials taking part in these *ad hoc* groups very often belong to areas of technical expertise related to the tasks involved, such as the military education for the Defense School Group, or the air force for the joint building of training aircraft. This means that additional areas within defense ministries, and even the armed forces, have become interconnected during SADC activities.

Virtual communication between vice-ministerial areas has also been a way of enhancing interaction since the creation of SADC. While they were not successful in devising a dedicated communication system to share official documents and communications, they adopted a much simpler mechanism: the country holding the *pro tempore* presidency is in charge of sending email “circulars” to all members, attaching meeting minutes, invitations to events, and negotiation documents. More interestingly, the SADC invested in a teleconference system, locating virtual communication equipment in each defense ministry in order to hold online meetings. While this fact might not be surprising for experts from developed countries, it is a true breakthrough in terms of South American patterns, especially regarding the defense realm, known for its sensitivity towards information sharing.

Seminar diplomacy in the SADC

After carefully following activities held by the SADC, we observe that most of them belong to a certain type of cooperation that we argue is best described by the concept of seminar diplomacy. As noted in the section addressing the theoretical discussion, this particular type of activity is of great significance as far as identity building is concerned. Since its creation, the SADC has consistently held *ad hoc* meetings called seminars, workshops or courses, which, despite their denomination, adopt the features of what Adler called seminar diplomacy: a key function of international organizations in the building of collective identification. According to the author, these types of events, where defense practitioners gather to share experiences and specific knowledge on various subjects, are very useful socialization mechanisms, especially for organisms involving countries with great heterogeneity in terms of defense policies. They serve as mechanisms for the creation and diffusion of common meanings and cooperative solutions that build mutual trust and identification.

⁴ According to our records, the following working group meetings took place between 2009 and 2015: Working Group for the design of a map and atlas on natural disaster risks (Peru, September 24th-25th, 2014; April 23rd-24th, 2015); Working Group for procedures for the setting and follow-up of confidence building measures (Ecuador, March, 4th-5th, 2013); Working Group for the construction of a methodology and a report on both defense spending and military inventories (Chile, April 23rd, 2012), the negotiation of a common conceptual framework for defense (Venezuela, May 28th-29th, 2014; October 7th-8th, 2015), cooperation for the defense of natural resources (Argentina, June 11th, 2014); Working Group in charge of the institutional design of the ESUDE (Ecuador, May 8th-9th, 2013; Brazil, September 10th-20th, 2013); Working Group for the VANT project (Brazil, November 25th-28th, 2014; August 18th-21th, 2015); Working Group to discuss a permanent advisory commission (Brazil, June, 5th-6th, 2014); Working Group for sketching a SADC regulation document (Peru, October 29th-30th, 2012), cooperation between MINUSTAH collaborators (Peru, April 29th, 2011; Paraguay, June 5th, 2012), cooperation on Cybernetic Security (Peru, May 14th-15th, 2012); Defense Industry and Technology (Ecuador, March 14th, 2012); Peace Protocol (Chile, November 4th-5th, 2010; Ecuador, July, 7th-8th, 2011); Discussion on the United States White Book on Air Mobility (Ecuador, June 3rd-4th, 2010). Some meetings are listed on general reports, but no information regarding place and date are provided by the SADC. Minutes and press releases of the corresponding events can be accessed on the database referenced in note n° 3.

Seminar diplomacy involves different kinds of meetings that share a certain dynamic. They address a specific topic of common interest to the group and often open with a general session that sets the tone of the discussion, where all attendees are invited to participate. After the opening, participants are divided into groups to deal with more specific issues; they discuss the subject and come up with a series of preliminary conclusions, puzzles and recommendations that they share with the rest of the groups in a joint session. A final consensual document is not required, but these events often result in some kind of final writing. Nonetheless, as Adler points out, the very process of discussing pressing issues is more relevant than the result, as far as the exchange on the kind of principles upon which the community should be based. The pedagogic unfolding is also a useful asset, not only for actual participants but also in terms of how they diffuse what they have learned in their own home institutions (Adler 1998, 138).

Between 2009 and 2015, the SADC has organized multiple seminars – some of them with more than one edition – on an array of subjects⁵. An event worth mentioning separately is the seminar for conceptual approaches to defense, risks and threats, organized annually, from 2010 to 2014, in Caracas⁶. While some of these events resemble diplomatic negotiation in which members systematically try to influence partners to adopt certain policies, the majority of them are more similar to what Adler describes as a learning experience, where members are more open to acquiring new understandings on defense that are closer to a regional insight, thus enhancing the building of a collective identity. Even though our research results are insufficient to evaluate the actual impact of those learning experiences on the internalization of new and more collective understandings of regional security, we are able to argue that seminar diplomacy in the SADC has, in fact, worked as a multiplier of the actors that have become involved in defense dialogue in South America, as we illustrate here with some examples.

One interesting activity is the workshop on Strategic Military Intelligence held in Buenos Aires on September 29th and 30th, 2015. Since it was an official activity and part of the organism's action plan, it could be expected that its organization had been in charge of the specific area within the Argentinean defense ministry that deals with SADC activities: the Department of International Policy. Instead, it was the National Office for Strategic Military Intelligence – a

5 We have documented the following events related to the concept of seminar diplomacy, held under the name of seminars, conferences, workshops and symposiums, dealing with the following subjects: modernization of defense ministries, defense spending (Argentina, August 27th, 2010); peacekeeping operations (Uruguay, September 1st-3rd, 2010; Argentina, August 5th-7th, 2015), cooperation in case of natural disasters (Peru, June, 8th-11th, 2010; May 24th-25th, 2012; October 23rd-24th, 2013; Colombia, April 11th, 2012), special areas monitoring (Brazil, August 15th-16th, 2013), national defense policies and strategies (Brazil, June 16th-18th, 2015), best practices in strategic defense planning (Colombia, January 24th, 2014), defense industry and technology sector (Ecuador, April 28th, 2014), cyber defense (Argentina, May 14th-16th, 2015), natural resources and defense (Venezuela, May 27th-30th, 2013; Argentina, June 9th-10th, 2014), national mobilization (Brazil, September 15th-18th, 2014), operational law, human rights and humanitarian law (Colombia, October 23rd-24th, 2014; Argentina, November 12nd-13th, 2015), women and defense (Venezuela, November 8th-9th, 2012; November 8th, 2013; Argentina, November, 2014), operational medicine, and airspace control (Argentina, 8th-10th, 2015); Military Strategic Intelligence (Argentina, September 29th-30th, 2015); and the SADC in regional cooperation (Argentina, May 26th-27th, 2011; December 11th-13th, 2012; July 13th, 2015). Minutes and press releases of the corresponding events can be accessed on the database referenced in footnote n° 3.

6 The first edition of this series of Seminar was held between May 26th and 29th, 2010. The second edition took place from September 6th to 9th, 2011. The third one, on November 1st and 2nd, 2012. Finally, the fourth edition happened between November 5th and 7th, 2013. Minutes and press releases of the corresponding events can be accessed on the database referenced in footnote n° 3.

section of the ministry – which prepared the meeting. Similarly, due to the specificity of the issue, member countries sent their correspondent officials that deal with strategic intelligence divisions.

Another noteworthy example was the symposium on “airspace control from a defense perspective as a common issue for the region”, which took place in the Patagonian city of Bariloche, Argentina, between April 8th and 10th, 2015. Similar to the workshop on Strategic Military Intelligence, another specialized agency within the Argentinean Defense Ministry was in charge of the organization of this symposium, in this case, the Secretary for Science, Technology and Defense Production, together with the Aerospace Command. Accordingly, most of the attending countries sent their airspace counterparts, be it from the defense ministry or from the air force, while some exceptional cases designated closely linked agency representatives. In every case, it was a practitioner different from those involved in regular SADC activities, widening even more the scope of defense officials taking part in regional defense dialogue.

Similarly, in September 2014, Peru organized a South American International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights course, an activity that was coordinated by a specific area of its defense institutions: the Armed Forces Center for International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights. An analogous example is the symposium on South American Challenges in Peace Operations held in August 2015 by the Argentinean Center of Joint Training for Peace Operations (CAECOPAZ). Among attendees from the rest of the member countries, the Brazilian counterpart of CAECOPAZ – the Brazilian Joint Center of Peace Operations (CCOPAB) – was listed as one of the panel participants, a further example of increasing interaction among diverse defense-related institutions from member countries as a result of SADC activities.

Some may point out that most of the issues discussed during these seminars and courses are of little importance or that they did not result in any kind of common policy or interoperability initiatives, and as a consequence would question their impact on collective identity formation. While we consider that the SADC still has to prove itself as a source of common regional policies, we believe that taking this kind of activities into consideration remains relevant in two ways: firstly, in terms of their potential to build confidence and increase transparency, and opportunities for dialogue between actors that, up until the SADC creation, did not have any similar routine interaction; secondly, and in spite of the evaluation one can make about the actual impact of defense identities, it is undeniable that seminar diplomacy is a key practice in the specificity of the SADC as a regional defense cooperation initiative, which no SADC analyst could ignore.

Certainly, the term seminar diplomacy makes many readers think of academic practices and institutions. As a matter of fact, when Adler developed the concept, he included academic experts as usual participants in this kind of diplomacy. Drawing on the cases he studied and the bibliographies that he referenced in his writings, he argued that the involvement of academic experts – both from universities and civil society organizations – increased confidence and transparency expectations among member countries due to their strengthened liberal practices. Unfortunately, as we have pointed out somewhere else (Vitelli 2015b), except for a few occasional events, the SADC has not made a special effort to involve the vast academic community of regional defense

experts, nor has it built a network with civil society organizations dealing with human rights or peace initiatives. However, it has organized its cooperative research and education system, though only for official agents, as we show in the next section.

Regional strategic thinking, teaching and learning

As stated in the statute's first specific objective, member countries have an interest in gradually agreeing on a common approach to regional defense. In other words, the SADC should serve as a forum for members to discuss matters of strategic thinking in regional terms. For this purpose, during the first council meeting in March 2009, Argentina proposed the creation of the Center for Strategic Defense Studies (CEED), a proposal that obtained consensus among the rest of the members. More recently, the SADC created its Defense School, in charge fostering cooperation in military education and civil practitioners' training in matters of regional defense.

The CEED started operations in early 2011, initially financed by the Argentinean Defense Ministry, and set its headquarters in a building called Patria Grande. This multilateral research and think-tank institution is the one permanent forum where delegates coming from most of the members work daily on regional defense subjects. Every country is invited to send up to two representatives to form the Delegates Corp, working under the advisory of the Executive Director and Subdirector. Needless to say, this constitutes a complete innovation in terms of South American dialogue and defense cooperation, and probably does not have a counterpart in other regional cooperation areas. Never before had these countries created a stable organism with permanent representation in charge of contemplating and researching public policy of any kind, much less so for a sensitive topic like defense. During its first two years, the CEED worked on two confidence and transparency building initiatives already mentioned above: the report on military spending and the inventory of military means. They also fulfilled other tasks more related to strategic thinking: research and discussion on a common defense and security conceptual framework, a comparative study on members' national defense institutions, and a prospective report on strategic natural resources.

In spite of this innovative and ambitious enterprise, it must be noted that the lack of political will and material resources have altered the ideal functioning of the CEED. While its statute establishes double permanent delegate representation, not all countries fulfill this responsibility. Some members send only one delegate, while others alternate between one exclusively dedicated representative and the involvement of their military attaché posted in Buenos Aires. Uruguay, for example, presumably due to budget restrictions, sends its delegates once a month across the La Plata River to attend meetings, while countries such as Colombia, Bolivia and Guyana have never sent any delegates. It is true that financial costs of sending a government official abroad for two years sometimes go beyond that which is possible for some countries, but in some cases a lack of politic interest might be the main reason for the absence of delegates.

In terms of the multiplication of interactions between regional defense practitioners, it is worth noting that the CEED has established partnerships with what it calls "national counterpart

centers”. It has made significant efforts to strengthen relations with national institutions of strategic studies in member countries, including setting up a remote communication device in each of them. Not surprisingly, aside from the Argentinean exception, all of those counterpart centers are military institutions, and no academic non-governmental institution has been chosen. This is important in terms of security community building since exchange with civil society institutions has been praised by Adler and Barnett as a mechanism for creating liberal security communities. On the other hand, it must be said that CEED delegates and staff often attend academic and official events organized by the Argentinean Defense Ministry and some universities. Additionally, the Executive Director, as well as national delegates, often take part in SADC activities taking place in Buenos Aires, and recently started to take part in the organism’s activities abroad, both as country representatives and as CEED members.

While the CEED is in charge of strategic thinking in the defense realm, the SADC recently created the ESUDE as a separate institution conceived to work as the core of an academic network for the existing military education institutions in each country, in order to enhance exchange opportunities. Contrasting with the CEED, ESUDE is much smaller in terms of personnel and funding, but it is just as ambitious in terms of setting up an interaction dynamic that has never existed at the regional level, aside from the tradition of some bilateral military education exchanges. In other words, the SADC did not create an academic institution, with its own faculty and courses, but a modest structure in charge of developing a regional network of military education.

Accordingly, as its executive secretary has recently put it, the role of ESUDE consists in promoting “the exchange of instructors, didactic material and research and teaching methodologies between defense schools in the region”, by assisting national teaching institutions to share their assets with the rest, “using the ESUDE as a sort of repository for common assets and manager of combined activities” (Rocha 2015b). This institutional configuration aimed to avoid potential pitfalls, such as amassing excessive financial burden on states, as well as catering for those countries concerned with the possibility of jeopardizing their national sovereignty and autonomy.

While some analysts would think that the lack of a permanent, well-funded faculty and exclusive ESUDE building are indicators of lower level cooperation, we consider that an evaluation of the collective identity formation effects of the ESUDE are better assessed by looking into the way it serves as organizing interaction at the sub-ministerial level. In terms of its functional structure, the academic network has its secretariat as the epicenter, comprised of the executive secretary and no more than a handful staffers. But what is interesting in terms of the concept of communities of practice is that it organized two other networks. The first one is the Academic Council, an advising level, made up of one official per country, serving as the link between the ESUDE and each defense ministry. Also, each country chooses a “national coordinator”, who is responsible for articulating activities with the Secretariat.

A close look at the list of Academic Council members again shows the diversity to which we referred earlier. While Argentina designated its defense ministry’s undersecretary for education, Chile chose its National Academy of Political and Strategic Studies (ANEPE) and FLACSO-Chile

directors. Not surprisingly, Brazil opted for its powerful military-controlled Escola Superior de Guerra, while Colombia chose a defense ministry official specialized in military education, working at the Strategy and Planning Division. The rest of the countries designated personnel that had already been working with SADC activities. Therefore, ESUDE constitutes another instance for the interaction of different defense practitioners, multiplying transactions and dialogue opportunities, this time in the realm of education.

Two additional activities aim to enhance cooperation in teaching and learning environments, helping practitioners to interact both virtually and face to face: the Advanced Course for South American Defense and the South American Course for Defense Education. The first one is a ten-week course taking place in Rio de Janeiro, organized by the Escola Superior de Guerra, which has been held annually since 2012. Each country is invited to send two students, or a higher number as long as it agrees to meet the extra expenses for more participants. That is, during almost three months, military and civilian personnel from the twelve countries have the chance of discussing relevant issues of regional defense cooperation, exchanging knowledge and views on their respective defense policies, and engaging in military simulation exercises.

A similar experience, although more limited in terms of face-to-face interaction, is the South American Defense Education course. It consists of a virtual graduate-level educational experience organized every year since 2012 by the Argentinean defense ministry – specifically its National Defense School, working under the defense ministry undersecretary for education. It is directed towards civilian personnel dealing with defense issues, as well as active or retired military officials selected by the defense ministry of each country. Additionally, candidates obtaining the highest grades in each delegation are invited to take part in a week-long closing activity in Buenos Aires.

Conclusion

As we have indicated throughout this article, the actual performance of the SADC created a transgovernmental interaction dynamic involving defense practitioners that is unprecedented in South American defense cooperation, with defense ministries seizing center stage and placing diplomatic authorities in the background. This network encompasses a routine of meetings, assigned tasks – some of them even jointly fulfilled – multiple face-to-face encounters, and a precarious but previously non-existent communication mechanism.

As we documented here, defense ministers were actually not the only agents taking part in SADC activities. Vice-ministerial officials, as well as practitioners working in other defense ministries' and the armed forces' subdivisions became participants in diverse activities, among which we underlined those conceptualized as seminar diplomacy. While it was never our intention to conduct a quantitative evaluation of the increase in both face-to-face meetings and quantity of agents interacting before and after the creation of the SADC, we assert that any analyst that has consistently studied South American cooperation is going to notice, in general terms, a substantial

intensification of interactions between defense authorities. Moreover, the diversity of practitioners involved and the regularity of their activities allows us to point to the emergence of a regional defense community of practice.

At this stage, however, some concerns should be raised with regards to the weaknesses of communities of practice, both as a research tool and in terms of a collective identity building strategy in South American defense cooperation. Firstly, because of a number of different reasons, defense policies are far from being a priority in most SADC member countries, leading to underdeveloped and poorly financed bureaucratic structures. Also, in some cases this involves the appointment of insufficiently qualified defense ministers and subordinates that tend to be outsiders to defense matters. Not only are they usually debutants in matters of defense policies, but they also have a tendency to be removed because of political reasons that are not related to their performance. Additionally, the fact that many officials are military personnel adds a further challenge. Unlike civilians, members of the armed forces have more limited autonomy in terms of political negotiations, being that military discipline and *habitus* – in its Bourdieuan sense – make them less inclined to put into practice flexible tit-for-tat strategies required in cooperation practice. As a result of these limitations, the scenario of varying and insufficiently trained practitioners questions the very possibility of the true consolidation of a community of practice of regional defense in South America.

Further research involving the community of practice's conceptual framework requires systematic access to official documents, such as meeting acts, thorough activity reports and interviews with delegates and other officials involved in SADC activities. This is a challenge of considerable proportions since, except for limited information provided at the CEED and the Peruvian delegation websites, the SADC has no open access to online archives. While CEED authorities were welcoming to our information inquiries, major scale research requirements would most likely go beyond their remit.

As was stated in the introduction and noted in other sections, our purpose was to stress that the SADC's actual practice set in motion a dynamic between national defense actors that has been overlooked in existing studies, and that it is better understood as a community of practice at an incipient stage instead of using the more popular concept of security communities. We argued that the latter is more suitable for describing the political dynamic taking place among the members of a region that renounce the use of force to solve disputes, rather than picturing the institutional features and interactions that serve as tools to build trust and collective identification. While we have been able to show that, since the creation of the SADC, a transgovernmental network of defense actors has become a key feature of regional defense, we acknowledge that a necessary further step would be looking into the way in which interaction taking place within that network has had considerable impacts on defense policies, suggesting the building of a South American strategic identity. Such a compelling endeavor, however, would require a large scale research effort to be conducted by more than one researcher, a collective project we very much encourage.

Finally, we return to the political variable involved in the building of security communities. On the one hand, collective identity in terms of mutual identification with the belief that in-group controversies will be peacefully dealt with is not at risk in South America, as it has a political dynamic that is much less inclined to sub-regional political initiatives like the SADC. Different foreign policy orientations and strategic relations with extra regional powers are unlikely to negatively affect already existing mechanism for political concertation and the peaceful diplomatic resolution of crises that may arise. However, a deeper understanding of collective identity in terms of a regionally agreed outlook on the role of defense for the common security interests of the region, a perspective on joint protection of border-crossing assets such as strategic natural resources, and strategies for facing potential threats as a group will require further politically supported dialogue, as well as the consolidation of the initial community of practice which we attempted to analyze in this article.

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