

# Challenges to the Brazilian Army at Amazonian borders: between *border* and *frontier*

*Desafíos del Ejército Brasileño en las fronteras amazónicas: entre border y frontier*

**Abstract:** This article discusses the challenges to the Brazilian Army at the border strip, with emphasis on the Amazon, based on an interdisciplinary theoretical-conceptual approach. Conceptually, the highlight is the distinctive nature of the two notions of border (*border* and *frontier*) and the significance of each of them in terms of defense and security. For this purpose, the paper suggests dividing national security threats into two categories: geopolitical threats and security threats. Based on this theoretical approach and considering the border territorial policies historically adopted by Brazil, the article discusses the military challenges at Amazonian borders, analyzing the main military strategies adopted for that region.

**Keywords:** Border. Frontier. Geopolitical threats. Security threats. Amazon.

**Resumen:** Este artículo discute los desafíos del Ejército Brasileño en las fronteras nacionales, centrándose en la Amazonia, en el contexto de un enfoque teórico-conceptual de carácter interdisciplinario. En términos conceptuales, se enfatiza la naturaleza distinta de las dos nociones de frontera (*border* y *frontier*) y el significado de cada una de estas nociones en términos de defensa y seguridad. Con este fin, el artículo sugiere la división de las amenazas a la seguridad nacional en dos categorías: amenazas geopolíticas y amenazas a la seguridad. Con base en este enfoque teórico y considerando las políticas fronterizas territoriales históricamente adoptadas en Brasil, el artículo discute los desafíos militares en los espacios fronterizos de la Amazonia, analizando las principales estrategias militares adoptadas para esa región.

**Palabras clave:** *Border*. *Frontier*. Amenazas geopolíticas. Amenazas a la seguridad. Amazonia.

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## 1 Introduction

Brazilian Army's presence at the border strip played a relevant role in the process of consolidation of the National State's limits. In this sense, the creation of military colonies in the mid-nineteenth century, whose purpose was border vivification, deserves special mention, blending, in General Meira Mattos' words, "the defense weapon and the hoe of man's economic attachment to the land" (MATTOS, 2011b). In that context, the concern about threats was notably geopolitical, stemming from potential external interests. The notion of boundary had a notably political-legal, limit, *border* character; and the Army's function was basically to mark national sovereignty on the boundary territories.

The huge demographic void that characterizes the Brazilian land border strip, especially from Corumbá/MT towards the north, makes another relevant notion of boundary: the *frontier*. It refers to the notion of periphery, to distant and undeveloped regions, with little State presence, and whose main military concern refers to the guarantee of the State's sovereignty, consequently, of the legitimate violence monopoly. For the Brazilian Army, these are territorial control demands with continental dimensions, colonial heritage, which gain more relevance when combined with the perception that the National State is still in formation process. In this sense, Marques (2007) highlights as one of the main features of the Brazilian military strategic culture the importance given to the presence strategy, understood as a fundamental factor for the national integration and Brazil's territorial integrity. Thus, with regard specifically to the Amazon, "military presence is seen as an effective strategy to induce settlement, inhibit the action of non-public transnational actors, and ensure public order in the region" (MARQUES, 2007, p. 89).

The notion of *frontier* became more relevant to the Brazilian Army from the last two decades of the last century due to two reasons: the geopolitical distension in the La Plata River Basin and the expansion of goods circulation and transnational offenses observed from that period. In this regard, it is necessary to emphasize the significance of Complementary Law 97 (1999), as amended by Complementary Law 117 (2004), which assigned the Army a police role at the land border strip in the fight against cross-border and environmental offenses.

This paper aims to discuss the challenges to the Brazilian Army at the border strip, marked by a complex context in which demands from the notions of *border* and *frontier* coexist. To this end, the paper is divided into five sections, in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. The first will seek to characterize the Amazon borders from two categories: *border* and *frontier*. From a more historical perspective, the second section will describe the border territorial policies adopted by Brazil. In the third, the nature of the threats will be discussed, dividing them into two categories: geopolitical and security threats. The fourth section will analyze the Brazilian military strategies for the Amazon. Finally, the sixth section will discuss the military challenges at Amazon borders: searching for sovereign development.

## 2 Amazon borders: military characteristics and implications

Amazon borders are a serious Brazilian challenge, requiring adoption of exceptional territorial policies. There are a number of factors that justify such policies, related to natural factors (climate and vegetation that make the region an environment of difficult access to land

transportation), low population density, in addition to logistical difficulties resulting from these factors, which depend almost exclusively on waterways and airways. It is a peripheral region, lacking the State presence. This situation has been aggravated by the presence of cross-border offenses between neighboring countries, and the highlight is the cocaine transportation by the rivers of the region coming from the two largest producing centers in the world (Colombia and Peru) to reach the international market via Atlantic Ocean.

## 2.1 Border or Frontier

The complexity of boundary spaces has imposed new approaches on boundary studies that, by adopting interdisciplinary perspectives, are able to overcome the limitations of traditional approaches that were often restricted to the meaning of limit, without the analytical ability to grasp the meaning of cross-border phenomena.

Analyzing the peculiarities surrounding the formation of borders in Latin America, Vargas (2017) offers an interesting distinction between two types of borders: border as the limit of the territory, and border as the place. The first refers to the most common sense and designates “the State’s territorial limits” (VARGAS, 2017, p. 36, our translation). In the second, the “border, more than just separating, also has the power to unite neighboring peoples. Beyond its characterization as a territorial limit, it can be understood as a place, a common space [...]” (VARGAS, 2017, p. 44).

Vargas presents other border concepts, as proposed by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who, in his book *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), by attributing the historical development of the United States to the existence of the so-called “free lands” to the west, suggested another connotation for the term border, which, unlike the political sense in European literature (limit that separates countries, populations or civilizations), in the United States came to designate “the dividing line between populated and free land, as well as the encounter between the civilized and the primitive” (VARGAS, 2017, p. 62, our translation).

It is in this sense that Medina García (2006, p. 14), when presenting theoretical contributions to the study of international boundaries, notes that the literature has addressed the theme in two ways: or as the limit of an exclusive territory over which a nation state exercises its sovereignty (*border*), or as a diffuse and transitional space between adjacent cultures or civilizations (*frontier*). The author draws attention to the fact that, generally, borders are both things at the same time.

Considering the peculiarities of defense and security in the Amazon, the suggestion proposed by Medina García (2006) is understood as very appropriate. To this end, and considering the use of the military, this study will seek to establish the conceptual distinction between two notions of border: *border* and *frontier*.

*Border*, the first and most recurrent, refers to the notion of limit. It corresponds to a range of contact – thus of tension, between contiguous territories – of notably political-legal character. At the level of National States, this notion corresponds to the point of separation/contact between territories over which these States exercise their sovereignty, and which is expressed by lines, whether natural or artificial. The wall that

forms the border between the US and Mexico, for example, constitutes the visible material dimension of this limit. The border thus establishes the line by which a given State's sovereign performance is defined, with a natural and strong military connotation.

The second concept, *frontier*, refers to the notion of periphery, to distant and unexplored regions. From the political point of view, it corresponds to the national territory's portions with little State presence, poorly developed, and not yet fully vivified or controlled by the central power. In this case, the main military concern refers to guaranteeing the exercise of the State's sovereignty and, consequently, of the legitimate violence monopoly in remote territories.

The distinction between the notions of *border* (limit border) and *frontier* (periphery border) is important according as diverse military concerns arise from them. While the former suggests classic-type threats (geopolitical issues), the latter refers to insurgent threats, whose roots often lie on the State's own vulnerabilities (security issues). However, they are at the root of meaning both of the National State and of the armed forces as its military instrument.

The two notions presented here coexist at Amazon borders. In this case, beyond the meaning of boundaries that divide independent National States (*border*), these spaces constitute periphery territories (*frontier*) lacking territorial control and, therefore, effective sovereignty. Such a perspective should consider the fact that, although interstate conflict has not been eliminated in Staffs' calculations, the most imminent threats in these countries do not originate from military conflicts, but rather from the inability of States to exercise full control of their territories and adopt efficient public policies to address social vulnerabilities.

### **3 Border territorial policies and military challenges**

This section will discuss the strategies of territorial control historically adopted by the country, seeking to understand how the notions discussed in the previous section have impacted the use of the armed forces in boundary regions.

Brazil has continental dimensions, inherited from the Portuguese colonial administration that, unlike the Spanish model adopted in its surroundings, controlled the country's territorial portions well, even those distant from its trade centers. Wanderley Messias da Costa points out that "while the Castilians, who since the beginning were involved with mining in the Andean Highlands and Mexico and concentrated the bulk of their occupation in those regions, the Portuguese, who began mining inland two centuries later, extended their domains (mainly with agriculture and livestock)" (COSTA, 2002, p. 30, our translation). According to Meira Mattos, Portugal has always been concerned about establishing a geopolitical strategy to ensure its territorial domain (MATTOS, 2011a). Examples of this *modus operandi* are the various forts installed upstream of the great river basins at the ends of the national territory. Such fortifications testify the ruling elites' old concern about country territorial control.

In this sense, the occupation of the Amazon is an example of applying the geopolitical foundation of territorial control. According to Bertha Becker,

Due to territorial control strategies, Portugal managed to maintain the Amazon and expand it beyond the limits of the Treaty of Tordesillas. Although economic interests prevailed, they were unsuccessful, and geopolitics was more important than economics in securing sovereignty over the Amazon [...] (BECKER, 2005, p. 71, our translation).

In the mid-nineteenth century, already as the Brazilian Empire, the country started adopting the concept of military colonies, which represented an evolution of the old concept of military surveillance and protection through the construction of forts and sconces. Meira Mattos (2011b, p. 108, our translation) recalls that “the empire, in 1840, by creating the military colonies, intended to extend them as a process of settling population at certain points of the uninhabited land border; the fort was no longer needed, but the barracks would replace it, providing a social support spot for the surrounding population.” Rodrigues and Silva (2017) note that in the 1850s alone, twenty-one military colonies were created in Brazil, distributed from Rio Grande do Sul to the province of Pará (RODRIGUES; SILVA, 2017, p. 67). By this model, the aim was to vivify the border strip<sup>1</sup> through settlement, providing settlers with various incentives, including donation of land to those interested in occupying that region. With this territorial strategy, the empire sought to “occupy its farthest frontier by blending the defense weapon and the hoe of the man’s economic attachment to the land” (MATTOSS, 2011b, p. 112-113, our translation).

For Rodrigues and Silva (2017, p. 68), the installation of these military colonies in Brazil’s limits with foreign countries signals a strategy of border occupation that aimed to prevent “the undesirable advance of our neighbors over Brazilian territory.” Under such a strategy, military presence alone would not be sufficient to protect Brazil’s extensive borders. It was necessary “an effective colonization, in which the settlers would populate, produce and defend national borders” (RODRIGUES; SILVA, 2017, p. 68, our translation). In this sense, the establishment of military colonies can be understood in the context of promoting territorial occupation as a State purpose, as an “instrument to create conditions of productivity, in a hostile and isolated environment, a movement of settlement, security and territorial defense, which required the settlers to overcome the difficulties imposed by the space” (RODRIGUES; SILVA, 2017, p. 73, our translation).

It is noteworthy that such border strategies were part of a much broader Empire policy of maintaining its own territorial unit, in which the provinces functioned as territorial circumscriptions of the general unit. Considering the contrast with the disruptive process that fragmented Hispanic America throughout the nineteenth century, Magnoli (2003, p. 8) notes that, in Brazil, imperial power emerges as a response to the threat of republican disintegration, and as an instrument of political and territorial unity. According to Magnoli (2003, p. 9, our translation), the imperial state’s border policy had as its platform the idea of an “imaginary territory” for Brazil, whose historical basis “was the border treaties signed

1 “The first time that Brazilian law recognized the legal status of the border strip was through Law No. 601 of September 18, 1850, in which Emperor Pedro II established a 10-league zone (66 km) within the empire’s borders with neighboring countries, where military colonies would be established” (MATTOSS, 2011b, p. 81-82, our translation).

between the Iberian crowns in the second half of the eighteenth century and, especially, the field reconnaissance and cartography works performed by the boundary commissions.”

In the republican period, the Brazilian State’s effort to demarcate the country’s land borders deserves mention. Created in 1927, and headed by Marshal Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon, the Border Inspection Commission had the task of carrying out, until the end of President Washington Luiz’s government, a thorough inspection of the country’s borders in order to study the conditions of their settlement and security (RODRIGUES, 2017, p. 130). The idea of bringing the State presence to the most peripheral corners of the country was at the heart of this mission. The following image represents this idea. It shows the flag hoisting ceremony by Marshal Rondon at the National Pavilion at the border strip during the border inspection campaign.

**Figure 1 – Hoisting ceremony at Frontier National Pavilion<sup>2</sup>**



Source: Arquivo Histórico do Exército (1929).

Analyzing the photographs produced by the Border Inspection Commission, Rodrigues (2017, p. 131-132) notes that the political thinking of that historical moment

<sup>2</sup> The photograph was taken at the headquarters of Fazenda São Marcos (Campo Alegre indigenous community), located in the current municipality of Boa Vista (RR), on the banks of the Uraricoera River, near the confluence with the Tacutu River. It is the Flag Day celebration. Marshall Rondon stands out, performing the hoisting at the Brazilian pavilion. On the left, there were trained staff officers, and on the right, the rest of the troop armed with rifle, saluting the Flag. In the background, several natives watched the ceremony, whose purpose was to insert in the native population the national culture through the recognition of one of the nation’s symbols, so that the celebration would remain in people’s memory, contributing to the establishment of the State domination in the region. Celebration and symbol were united for the maintenance of territorial sovereignty (Description kindly performed by Prof. Fernando da Silva Rodrigues).

had in the Army its main instrument for maintaining established order and expanding progress, conditions understood as essential for establishing sovereignty in border areas.

It is necessary to emphasize that all these State's actions, either through the creation of Military Colonies, or by the appointment of inspection commissions, had remarkably geopolitical character of establishing the territorial domain in remote areas. So far, concerns referred essentially to external threats. This idea can be observed, for example, in the purposes described in Decree No. 45,479 of February 26, 1959, which approved the Regulation of the Border Military Colonies in the Amazon:

Art. 2 The purposes of the Border Military Colonies are mainly:

- a) **to nationalize the country's borders**, particularly those not marked by natural obstacles;
- (b) to establish and set up nuclei of the national population at border areas, **located in front of the prosperous zones or localities of the neighboring country**, as well as in those where there are communication routes or facilities (navigable rivers, roads or fields) which give free access to the national territory;
- c) to promote the development of the population at border zones or localities where there is mining, pastoral or agricultural industry **controlled by foreigners from neighboring countries** (BRASIL, 1959, emphasis added).

In this context, the concern about threats was notably state-based, and the neighbor was an almost exclusive reference. It was a matter of maintaining the territory in the face of potential external interests. Art. 3 of the aforementioned document corroborates this idea by stating that one of the attributions of the Border Military Colonies would be to “ensure the presence of the Brazilian pavilion at extreme points of our Amazonian space, unequivocally stating land tenure and our sovereignty in those regions” (BRASIL, 1959, our translation). As clearly stated, the main function of these military colonies would be to populate (vivify) the borders, expecting that they would become settlements, as provided for in Article 88 of that document: “Border Military Colonies that reach development up to a civil community status will be emancipated” (BRASIL, 1959, our translation). The fact is that many military colonies became embryos of settlement, becoming villages and then cities (FRANCHI, 2013, p. 126). The policy of creating new military colonies remained in the Republic and lasted until 1967, the year in which the *Tabatinga* Military Colony was recreated (FRANCHI, 2013, p. 135).

In the following section, the military strategies adopted by the Brazilian Army for the Amazonian border strip will be analyzed. First, however, it is necessary to briefly discuss the main threats in that region.

#### 4 The nature of threats and military concerns

For analysis purposes, military concerns will be divided into geopolitical and security dimensions. The first is related to Westphalian sovereignty and the primary function of any armed force: to guarantee National State's territorial integrity. In the

specific case of the Amazon, it refers to the control and sovereign management of its natural resources in the face of the great powers' potential greed. The second dimension relates to domestic sovereignty and the threat of emergence, in that space, of "gray zones" where the State would have difficulty effectively enforcing the legitimate violence monopoly, opening room for the proliferation of offenses of all kinds and, which is more serious, for the emergence of parallel powers in the social fabric. Next, the military challenges at border areas in the face of each of these dimensions will be analyzed.

#### 4.1 Geopolitical dimension of military threats and challenges

Notwithstanding the urgency of security concerns in the region, as it will be seen later, the geopolitical dimension of the threats in the Amazon is the armed forces' main cause of existence: to maintain the States' independence and territorial integrity. In this sense, the notion of *border* as discussed in the previous section cannot be disregarded. These are a set of military concerns that refer to the classical perspective of international relations in which National States fight for resources to maximize their gains, what have historically led to wars.

In the specific case of the Amazon, however, two peculiarities should be highlighted. The first, which potentizes this type of concern, refers to the abundance of natural resources present in the region (water, diversity of flora and fauna, rare minerals, etc.), giving its territory a strategic character. The second peculiarity, for geographical (immensity) and historical reasons (these are former colonies, whose borders have been drawn in a friendly manner), relates to the fact that neighbors do not perceive themselves as mutual threat.

Consistent with the historically adopted territorial *modus operandi*, there is a much greater concern among the Brazilian military about international greed for the Amazon. The Brazilian military has been much more careful about maintaining independent sovereignty in the region. The recent denunciation by the Brazilian military<sup>3</sup> of the project to create an international ecological corridor in the region, connecting the ecosystems of the Andes, the Amazon and the Atlantic Ocean, known as the "Triple Corridor A" and which has the Colombian Government's support, illustrates well this case.

In August 2019, two events contributed to raising this debate to an issue of existential risk to Brazil. The first was the publication of Stephen Walt's article "Who Will Invade Brazil to Save the Amazon?"<sup>4</sup> on *Foreign Policy* magazine. On the occasion, Walt presents a theoretical essay on the relevance of international intervention to prevent environmental disasters, using the Brazilian Amazon as a case study. The central discussion addresses the States' ability to remain independent in the face of international

3 On September 19, 2018, then Brazilian Army Commander General Villas Boas posted to his Twitter account: "My mission as an Army Commander, concerned about national interests, is to indicate the risks of this proposal to the country. We need to discuss it deeply with society. Our society!" (VILLAS BOAS, 2018, our translation).

4 The article was published in August 5. The next day, the magazine changed the title to "Who will save the Amazon (and how)?"



environmental pressure. The author's conclusion is worrying: lacking credible deterrence, Brazil would be vulnerable to such pressures (WALT, 2019).

The second event refers to the inclusion of the theme "burning in the Amazon" at the G7 meeting, held from August 24 to 26, 2019, in the city of Biarritz, France. At the time, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, even suggested the possibility of assigning the Amazon an *international status* if any sovereign State made decisions that opposed the interest of the entire planet.

The risk of internationalization of the Amazon has been the "flagship" of external threats for decades. Sharing management is not allowed except with the "joint owners," as proposed in the early 1980s by General Meira Mattos in "A Pan-Amazonian Geopolitics." The pan-Amazonian perspective underpins the creation of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT)<sup>5</sup> in 1978, uniting Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela around a common agenda for the region. This was the vision of Brazilian foreign policy, for which the creation of a regional instrument, such as the ACT, was the best antidote to curb the "internationalization maneuver," as it reserved to the Amazonian states exclusive responsibility for the fate of the region (RICUPERO, 1984, p. 186). Faced with these threats, the solution found would be cooperation between the countries of the region.

#### 4.2 Security dimension of military threats and challenges

The security dimension in the Amazon refers to the notion of *frontier*, and it is related to the challenge of maintaining domestic sovereignty over the vast Amazon territory. It concerns the risk of territorial fragmentation, a reality historically more present in the region since the 1980s, with the aggravation of internal conflicts in Colombia. In that country, the increase in violence from different armed groups (guerrilla tactics, self-defense, drug dealers, etc.), combined with State fragility and a high degree of social corruption, led to the loss of control of territorial portions, leading to what Martín Moreno (2017), pp. 98-9) calls a kind of tacit renunciation of the Colombian state's exercise of arms monopoly in some territories of national geography.

In this context, the most urgent threats do not refer to border issues (geopolitical), but to issues at the borders (criminal). These concerns come less specifically from military threats and more from problems arising from the very fragility of the law and the high degree of social violence in the region. Such vulnerabilities have, notably, originated from the lack of State presence and/or functional (providing basic services to the population) and territorial degradation of their public function (exercising the law), combined with the very common cross-border criminality in that place. The notion of "brown areas" seems to apply very well to the border reality in the Amazon. Studying the border between Colombia and Brazil, Trejos Rosero (2015, p. 40) defines "brown areas" as spaces in which non-state actors, linked to local and international

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5 In 1998, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) was created, giving international organization legal personality to the ACT. ACTO currently has an agenda focused on the development and protection of the Amazon region, whose main means are to build rapprochement between national actors, development agencies, social movements, scientific communities, productive sectors and the societies of these countries. Although it is divided into three dimensions of action – political-diplomatic; strategic; and technical –, the organization has not having a line of action in the security area in the agenda of the last decades (ORGANIZACIÓN DEL TRATADO DE AMAZÓNICA COOPERACIÓN, 2017).

illegal practices and networks, accumulate so many resources and so much influence that they supplant the fragile State institutions. According to him, these “brown areas” end up as “armed territorialities,” understood as spaces in which institutional power is not sovereign and where social sectors openly express the desire not to submit to State order, resisting its control, leaving latent the possibility of facing it with weapons (TREJOS ROSERO, 2015, p. 44).

Recognizing the presence of “brown areas” in the national territory means to admit the fact that the State does not always have the logistical conditions, resources or sufficient competence to exercise monopoly of the legitimate use of violence (RUEDA, 2017, p. 48); and that, in more serious cases, the State absence has provided conditions for the appearance and consolidation of parallel powers, which, based on the use of violence, eventually establish their own social and economic orders (TREJOS ROSERO; LUQUETTA CEDIEL, 2014, p. 34).

Under these conditions, the geopolitical concept of exclusive territory is questioned, according to which the National State would exercise full sovereignty, and it is evidenced a deep tension marked by the State’s challenge to maintain its precepts of sovereignty and legitimate violence monopoly; faced with territorial fragmentation dynamics in which diverse actors – in many cases supported by resources of illicit activities – establish parallel ways of territorial power and control (RUEDA, 2017, p. 50-51).

From the military perspective, the possibility of the emergence of parallel powers, constituting “armed territorialities,” constitutes one of the greatest threats to States sovereignty. It is noteworthy that the idea of sovereignty here should refer less to its Westphalian sense, related to the States’ autonomy capacity to make decisions without interference from third parties, and more to the idea of domestic sovereignty, which refers to the exercise of State’s authority within its own territory, including effective border control (KRASNER, 1999).

The corollary resulting from this equation seems to challenge the realistic logic of John Herz’s “Security Dilemma,” suggesting its reversal: the threat would be the weak neighbor, unable to control its own territory, not the strong neighbor (VILLA; MEDEIROS FILHO, 2007, p. 8). That is, in this case, the threats would originate not from power policies adopted by States, but from their inability to adopt public policies to address their social vulnerabilities.

Regardless of the origin, motivations and trajectory of these armed groups (insurgents or criminals), the most damaging fact for the State is that they eventually acquire a political role in society by regulating the social order of peripheral and marginalized communities (RAMIREZ; DUNCAN, 2014, pp. 164). In practice, the political capacity of these groups is based on their imposition as *de facto* authority in state-side territories (RAMIREZ; DUNCAN, 2014, p. 189). In this context, the notions of sovereignty and “territorial integrity” are re-signified as, unlike the classical inter-state geopolitical perspective, the contenders no longer necessarily want to “appropriate” these territories but to maintain socioeconomic control of these areas.

## 5 Brazilian military strategy for the Amazon

Despite the historical concern about the defense of the Amazon, this region became a priority for the Brazilian military only from the last two decades of the twentieth

century. Until then, attention was focused on the southern arc of the Brazilian border, in a genuinely geopolitical dimension, where, in that context, Argentina was a potential threat.

From the point of view of regional geopolitics, it is noteworthy that, despite the intrastate challenges (consolidation of integration and national cohesion), throughout most of the twentieth century the vital challenge for Brazil was the “neutralization” of its main rival: Argentina. Writing in the early 1930s, Mario Travassos, a pioneer of geopolitics among the Brazilian military, was troubled by the advance of Argentine transport communications over a considerable part of South American territory. Given this scenario, Travassos proposed the projection of Brazil towards the west of the subcontinent, seeking mainly to control Bolivia’s Andean highlands, considered by him the South American heartland, represented by the triangle Cochabamba (Andine), Sucre (Platine) and Santa Cruz (Amazonian) (TRAVASSOS, 1938, p. 142).

With regard to extra-regional threats, Travassos was concerned about the “Yankee” influence, as he referred to the US, especially given the vulnerabilities in the northwest corner of the subcontinent (Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador). For him, “The geographical instability of the northwest corner of the continent, however, precisely because it is at one end of the continental mass, is easy prey for extra-continental influences” (TRAVASSOS, 1938, p. 52, our translation). In his view, “The Panama Canal and the Antilles Sea – the incubator of the Yankee influence – expresses well the character of the pressures they exert on this end of the continent” (TRAVASSOS, 1938, p. 52, our translation).

Using the division of the Border Strip into three major Arcs (North, Central and South), proposed by the Ministry of National Integration (Figure 2), it is possible to say that until the 1980s the strategic border priority in Brazil corresponded to the Southern Arc, especially due to geopolitical disputes with Argentina. From that decade, the Amazon gradually gained relevance.

Figure 2 – Border strip arcs



Source: Adapted from Brasil (2005b, p. 53).

In this context, Paulo Kuhlmann (2007) notes that in the mid-1980s, under the administration of the Army Minister General Leônidas Pires Gonçalves (1985-1990), the Army underwent a major restructuring process, which included the creation of the Army Strategic Planning System (*Sistema de Planejamento Estratégico do Exército* – SIPLEx), in 1985; a new military operations management body, the Ground Operations Command (*Comando de Operações Terrestres* – COTER) in 1990; in addition, the ground force started being reorganized, which would lead, throughout the 1990s, to the change of brigades from south central region to the Amazon, such as the transfer, in 1993, of the 16<sup>th</sup> Motorized Infantry Brigade from Santo Ângelo- RS to Tefé-AM (currently 16th Jungle Infantry Brigade) and, in 1998, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Infantry Brigade, from Niterói-RJ to São Gabriel da Cachoeira-AM (current 2<sup>nd</sup> Jungle Infantry Brigade). Kuhlmann describes the process of shifting attention from south to north as follows:

If the idea of sovereignty is that of State presence, border vivification and provision of basic services, it has been established in the Amazon region, together with the *Calha Norte* Project, which began as a government project in the 1980s. In this region, the missions cover the fullest possible range for the military forces: nation building, through the vivification of borders, with the idea of colonization and nationalization of the indigenous people, police-type actions to contain offenses of all kinds (smuggling, drug dealing, among others), border policing, conventional combat against a similar enemy, and irregular combat (resistance strategy) against a far superior enemy. Since the 1990s this region has definitively assumed the status of priority strategic area for foreign defense (KUHLMANN, 2007, p. 159-158, our translation).

The reasons why the Amazon region became a strategic priority, therefore, came from two main issues – each related to a notion of *border* (*border*; *frontier*), described in the previous section. With regard to the notion of *border*, concerns were related to the increasing international pressure on the Amazonian countries – covered by an ecological (environmental) narrative, but perceived by the military as a form of greed for the natural resources of that region.

Regarding the notion of *frontier*, the concern arose from the presence of armed groups near the border, especially with Colombia, and the possibility of their coming to Brazil. For the Brazilian military, concern about the security dimension at border areas is relatively recent. One of the inflection points in the change of military perception of the threat complexion in the region was the 1991 attack to the Brazilian Army Detachment on the Traíra River, allegedly performed by Colombian guerrillas. This concern became even more relevant from signs of guerrilla groups approaching drug dealers.

In this context, the first major strategy was the *Calha Norte* Project (*Projeto Calha Norte* – PCN), launched in 1985, which, divided into a civilian and a military dimension, aimed at enhancing bilateral relations, intensifying the military presence, improving the definition of landmarks and road and energy infrastructures, besides offering more basic

social resources in the area (DINIZ, 1994, p. 5). This initiative led to an increased military presence in the Amazon. The transfer of military units from south-central Brazil to this region demonstrates this strategic change.

More recently, the importance of this region has been made explicit in the National Defense Policy as follows:

The Brazilian Amazon, with its great potential for mineral wealth and biodiversity, **is the focus of international attention.** Ensuring the State presence and the vivification of the border strip are hindered by the low population density and long distances associated with the precariousness of the land transportation system, which conditions the use of waterways and air transportation as the main access alternatives. These characteristics facilitate the practice of **transnational offenses and related crimes**, as well as the presence of groups with objectives contrary to national interests (BRASIL, 2005a, p. 4, emphasis added, our translation).

It is interesting to note that in the above excerpt, the two notions of border are present: *border* and *frontier*. In this context, the National Defense Strategy (NDE) suggests the use of the presence strategy<sup>6</sup> through the “increase of the participation of governmental, military and civilian bodies, in the plan of vivification and development of the Amazonian border strip, by using the presence strategy” (BRASIL, 2008, p. 4, our translation 9). In the specific case of the Amazon, “the presence strategy implies, besides becoming present (mobility), being present (vivification), with the involvement of governmental bodies, both civil and military” (BRASIL, 2015, p. 4, our translation).

In the next section, the presence strategy will be addressed to discuss the idea of a “sovereign developing country” and how it impacts the strategic culture of the Brazilian military.

## 6 Military challenges at Amazon borders: searching for sovereign development

According to Mohamed Ayoob (1995), in addition to specific defense issues, developing countries include in their security agenda a set of challenges related to their state-building process. Ayoob (1995, p. 9) states that, unlike the classic model of international security, security/insecurity issues in developing countries are defined in relation to vulnerabilities that threaten or have the potential to threaten the very State structures. Thus, the ruling elites’ main concerns refer to issues related to State structures and the government’s regime, involving challenges related to the legitimacy of institutions and regimes, and the lack of social cohesion (AYOUB, 1995, p. 28).

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<sup>6</sup> The presence strategy has been contemplated in the different defense documents. According to the 2007 Military Defense Doctrine, this strategy “is characterized by the military presence in the national territory and its extensions, in order to fulfill the constitutional destination and subsidiary attributions. It is enabled not only by the careful articulation of the military organizations in the territory, but also by the ability to move quickly to any region of the country, when necessary” (BRASIL, 2007, p. 36, our translation). It “supposes both the physical presence and the ability to be present in any part of the national territory by the rapid deployment of troops, characterizing the so-called strategic mobility” (BRASIL, 2015, p. 4, our translation).

State weaknesses<sup>7</sup> observed in countries in the region would be related to the serious challenges they face to enforce the law in portions of their own territories, and they would stem from the slow historical process of development, marked by the socioeconomic and institutional shortcomings typical of States in formation process. These are therefore challenges related to National State building processes.<sup>8</sup>

Faced with such challenges to national armies, the military is imbued with the “republican” mission of contributing to national development that involves the consolidation of State’s internal sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is an ideational element organic to its institutional culture, shared by the military of both countries, and based on the feeling of incompleteness of the National State – still in the process of consolidation.

Army’s *Manual de Campanha: Estratégia* (Campaign Manual: Strategy) defines the “presence strategy” as “military presence throughout the national territory, in order to guarantee the constituted powers, law and order, ensure national sovereignty and integration, and contribute effectively to the national development” (BRASIL, 2001, p. 3-8, our translation). The expression “national development” in the Army document reveals, once again, an ideational element that is organic to its institutional culture and expressed through a kind of “republican mission” arising from the processes of National State building.

The Army’s own Staff recognizes presence strategy as a kind of “geopolitical task,” suggesting that:

Regarding the national territory, the Presence Strategy should be maintained, as it is a fundamental vector of support for the Brazilian State in the historical task of occupying, integrating, protecting and developing the Brazilian territory. We are aware that the Army, in addition to being often the only state presence in remote areas, is an important support tool for other sectors of society. Moreover, the Presence enables identification with local populations, influencing national will and helping constitute the national relevance sentiment of the Brazilian State [...] (BRASIL, 2010, p. 26, our translation).

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7 The discussion of the subject inevitably leads to the idea of “failed states,” which is very much in vogue in post-Cold War international literature, and which refers to States that are not able to perform key functions such as the provision of basic services, linked to security, a monopoly of the legitimate use of force, border control and maintenance of the rule of law (BLANCO, 2014, p. 293-294). Such a view has been applied to countries that face or have faced strong civil wars capable of shaking state structures. In this sense, applying the concept of “failed state” to the case studied here is not appropriate.

8 Here it is necessary a brief justification for the use of the expression. It has been common in the literature to use separately the expressions ‘State Building’ and ‘Nation Building,’ with distinct connotations. In addition, these expressions have been commonly used in post-conflict context. According to Blanco (2014, p. 301-303), while the idea of State Building refers to (re) construction/ strengthening of State institutions, the idea of Nation Building refers to (re) creation or (re) construction processes of a cultural or political identity. These expressions have been used in the center-periphery sense to refer to countries that have undergone relatively recent processes of decolonization or serious conflict and that have compromised the ability of the state to perform its functions autonomously, suggesting external intervention and, consequently, the idea of State reconstruction. It is considered that, with such a connotation, these concepts do not apply to the case studied here.

## 6.1 Presence strategy and National State building

The presence strategy is directly related to the need for territorial control related to National State building processes. The use of the military in development and security-related activities reveals how much the frontier notion impacts the defense policies of countries in the region. In this context, armies are seen not only as an instrument of the State in remote areas, but as the State itself, often permanently responsible for conducting regional development public policies (health, education, engineering works, etc.), and, in many cases, for public safety.

Being present is not the only challenge, but also being an element of consolidation of a National State still in formation. In this regard, the words of the head of the Joint Chief of Staff of the Colombian Military Forces, General Juan Carlos Salazer, published in the prologue to the book *El control territorial en el siglo XXI: fundamentos teóricos* (MARTÍN MORENO, 2017), illustrate this challenge well:

[...] The Colombian State is a historical instance in the process of consolidation, and also the Colombian territory, because, given its characteristics, it is not yet fully contained by the benefactor presence of State institutions. Great challenge to the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where, for this reason, the role of the Military Forces is of considerable importance, since their presence and performance are an essential element for both Territorial Control and institutional presence. (SALAZER, 2017 apud MARTÍN MORENO, 2017, p. 13, our translation)

Also in this regard, it is worth mentioning the words of General Eduardo Dias da Costa Villas Boas, Commander of the Brazilian Army, during the Public Hearing held by the Committee on Foreign Relations and National Defense of the Chamber of Deputies on 07/05/2017. According to him,

[...] while we have to be an Army with those characteristics I referred to, a modern Army with external projection capabilities, we have to remain a colonizing Army. This is reality! (VILLAS BOAS, 2017, n.p., our translation)

Once again, in the statements above, the feeling of incompleteness of State effectiveness – mentioned earlier – and the military central concern about the presence and territorial control are made evident. Such a sentiment is a military culture striking feature of the countries of the region.

## 6.2 Neighborhood and cross-border cooperation

Shared concerns about the presence of illegal armed groups near the border between countries in the region ultimately contribute to stimulating, among the military

of the region, the shared perception that territorial control at the *frontier* would be threatened by “common enemies.”

In this process, the contacts between the military of both armies and the mutual perception adopted gain relevance. Contrary to what the classic literature of International Relations suggests, in the *frontier* studied here, the military tends to see in their counterpart not a threat (although, speaking of sovereign States, the stock of distrust will always be a reality), but rather a security factor, as they adopt the perception that neighbors share similar (transnational offenses) issues.

Indeed, the channels of dialogue established between the military of the region are fundamental to building a sense of neighborhood,<sup>9</sup> and they are made real through the numerous initiatives of agreements signed at bilateral conferences, exchange of military personnel, and operations performed in that region.

In such a context, it seems feasible to expand military cooperation between countries, especially in relation to territorial control elements from a frontier perspective. In this sense, the expansion of the Integrated Border Monitoring System (*Sistema Integrado de Monitoramento de Fronteiras* – SISFRON) can be an excellent opportunity for cross-border cooperation. However, it may be more difficult to establish cooperative outcomes with respect to geopolitical threats, since it involves the participation of extra-regional powers.

## 7 Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze the military challenges at the border strip, with emphasis on the Amazon. To this end, the threats present in the region were divided into two categories: geopolitical and security threats. In the end, it is observed that the coexistence of these two types of threats makes the analysis of security and defense complex in the sense that both threaten national sovereignty, although one – *geopolitical* – endangers external sovereignty; while the other – security – endangers domestic sovereignty.

The military presence in this border space has special significance, going far beyond classical geopolitical concerns. In this sense, it is not just a State’s spearhead in remote areas, but it assumes, often permanently – and this becomes more evident in the Brazilian case – State responsibilities, such as the management of regional development in different areas: health, education, engineering works, etc. In the midst of a historic process of National State building, the armed forces of the region still maintain missions beyond what is generally understood as the scope of defense.

Therefore, it is concluded that a trace of the strategic culture is expressed in the perception of these countries’ military that the most urgent threats in that area are related to the notion of *frontier*. They refer to the risk of territorial fragmentation and the emergence of parallel powers that threaten domestic sovereignty. Thus, one notices that the notion of *frontier* supplants that of *border*.

<sup>9</sup> According to Galvão (2017, p. 120-121, our translation), “the neighborhood manifests itself in the continuity of the political-diplomatic consolidation through the conclusion of agreements; conducting official visits; in the attribution of mutual relevance; identifying opportunities and possibilities for local partnerships.”



The mutual perception of sharing common threats contributes to generating among the military, on both sides of the border, an identity element based on the feeling of neighborhood. Under this perception, the neighboring country's military presence is not seen as a threat – which would suggest a realistic analysis of International Relations, but as a security factor.

On the other hand, one cannot neglect the meaning of the notion of *border* for these same military. One of the traits of Brazilian strategic culture reveals how much the Brazilian military cares about the idea of strategic autonomy in relation to the Amazon, incisively rejecting any proposal for sharing international management of that region that goes beyond the presence of the “joint owners.”

Finally, it is possible to expand military cooperation between the Amazonian countries, especially in relation to territorial control elements from a *frontier* perspective. However, it may be more difficult to establish cooperative outcomes with regard to the *border* dimension, simply because it involves the participation of extra-regional powers.

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