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Ecuadorian Military Culture

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Background

The Ecuadorian Armed Forces are shaped by nearly two centuries of state building, recurring political instability, inter-state conflict with Peru, and a democratic transition that left the military as a de facto arbiter of last resort. This memo situates the current security environment and U.S. interests within that cultural context, then proposes engagements aligned with the institution's foundational values and strategic priorities.

The dominant normative framework of the Ecuadorian officer corps is best characterized as “politicized professionalism”: a formal acceptance of constitutional authority combined with a durable guardian or tutelary self-conception. The armed forces view themselves as the “strong arm and backbone of the state,” responsible not only for external defense but for ensuring governability, security, and democracy. This self-image, sustained by the institution's role as state builder, political arbiter, and combatant in the 1995 Alto Cenepa War, commands high public legitimacy and shapes how the armed forces respond to civilian oversight, foreign partnerships, and internal security challenges.

I. Cultural and Institutional Context

Foundational Norms and Values

The officer corps espouses honor, discipline, loyalty, and institutional cohesion as its core values. Three norms are operationally dominant: (1) a self-conception as the country's moral authority, in contrast with chaotic civilian politics; (2) a positioning above rather than merely apart from partisan politics—officers see themselves as servants of the patria, not of any government; and (3) a strong preference for institutional cohesion that militates against

factional alignment. These norms produce a recurring arbiter role rather than a coup-prone or fully subordinate institution.

Historical Legacies and Turning Points

Key formative events include: the 1925 July Revolution, the first institutional intervention for state modernization; the reformist military governments of 1963-1966 and 1972-1979 (*dictablandas* relatively free of Southern Cone-style repression); three presidential removals between 1997 and 2005 in which the high command played a role as arbiter; the 1995 Alto Cenepa War against Peru, the institution's greatest source of institutional pride; and the Rafael Correa presidency (2007-2017), which attempted unsuccessfully to politicize the armed forces and dismantle their economic portfolio. The January 2024 declaration of an “internal armed conflict” by President Daniel Noboa (2023-present) marks the most recent and consequential turning point, granting the military wartime legal authorities domestically for the first time in the democratic era.

Civil-Military Relations and Oversight

Post-transition civil-military relations have been characterized by high military autonomy within a formally democratic framework. The 1998 Constitution designated the armed forces as “guarantors of democracy,” a formulation that legitimated political intervention. Civilian oversight strengthened under Correa (all ten defense ministers were civilians) but was accompanied by politicization attempts the military resisted. The 2018 *Libro Blanco*, issued under Lenín Moreno (2017-2021), re-emphasized constitutional subordination and aligned with the 2008 Constitution's civilian control provisions.

Under Noboa, the military's expanded internal security mandate has again tested the boundaries of civilian control, as documented human rights abuses—most notably the December 2024 disappearance and killing of four children by military officers—illustrate.

Institutional Pressures and Internal Fault Lines

Key fault lines include: inter-branch rivalry among the Army, Navy, and Air Force (the Army dominates in political weight and budget); class and ethnic stratification between a predominantly white/mestizo highland officer corps and a more indigenous and working-class enlisted force; a generational divide between officers who served in the 1995 Cenepa War and a younger cohort whose formative experience is internal counter-narcotics policing; and fiscal pressure stemming from the partial dismantlement of the military's off-budget corporate portfolio under the 2008 Constitution, offset by indirect control transferred to the Social Security Institute of the Armed Forces (ISSFA).

These norms were forged in a context of periodic political crisis and external interstate conflict. The declaration of an internal armed conflict in January 2024 represents a structural shift in operational context that the institution's cultural framework was not designed for. As a result, these dominant norms are now being tested. The moral authority norm is challenged by documented human rights abuses committed during domestic operations; the above-politics norm is challenged by the inherently politicized nature of designating domestic criminal organizations as terrorist enemies of the state; and the cohesion norm is challenged by the operational and reputational pressures of sustained domestic deployment across diverse and contested terrain. How the institution navigates these tensions will define Ecuadorian military culture for the next generation of officers and shape the conditions for effective U.S. partnership.

II. Security Environment and Strategic Pressures

Transnational / Nontraditional Threats

Ecuador's security environment has deteriorated sharply since 2020 under the combined pressures

of narcotrafficking, organized crime spillover from Colombia, and prison violence. The Noboa government's January 2024 designation of 22 criminal organizations as terrorist groups and the formal declaration of an internal armed conflict represent a qualitative escalation in the military's domestic role. The Colombian border and coastal regions remain the most acute operational zones. The military has also absorbed internal policing responsibilities previously assigned to a police force widely regarded as infiltrated by criminal organizations.

Extra-Hemisphere Influence / Arms Diplomacy

Ecuador's defense relationships have historically been anchored in the U.S. bilateral partnership, severed by Correa (who expelled U.S. forces from the Manta Forward Operating Location in 2009) and partially restored under Moreno's 2018 cooperation agreement. Chinese economic penetration of Ecuador's extractive sector creates potential vectors of influence, though the armed forces have not historically pursued Chinese defense partnerships. Russian influence is limited. The institution's strong preference for institutional autonomy makes it resistant to dependency on any single external patron.

Defense Capabilities and Gaps

The Ecuadorian Armed Forces field an active force of approximately 40,000 personnel across three branches. Key capability gaps include degraded external defense posture along the northern border, as the army has consciously redirected resources toward internal policing; limited cyber and ISR capabilities; logistics constraints in remote Amazonian and coastal operating environments; and reduced interoperability with U.S. forces during the 2010s (although this is now changing). The institution's historically strong officer training culture—noted even in declassified 1973 U.S. intelligence assessments—remains an asset.

Regional and Strategic Implications

Ecuador's deteriorating internal security environment, combined with the military's expanded domestic mandate, creates both risks and opportunities for U.S. engagement. The risk is that human rights concerns, which are already documented under the internal armed conflict framework, complicate security cooperation.

The opportunity is that the institution's historical preference for U.S. partnership over alternatives, its high public legitimacy, and its organizational capacity make it a viable partner for counter-narcotics, border security, and rule-of-law programming. Regional implications include the potential for criminal network consolidation in Ecuador serving as a transit hub affecting neighboring Colombia, Peru, and Brazil.

III. Key Findings and Strategic Inference

Finding 1: Politicized professionalism is durable but under stress. The armed forces' guardian self-conception has historically coexisted with democratic norms through the arbiter role—intervening to resolve crises rather than govern. The internal armed conflict declaration and documented human rights abuses suggest this equilibrium is under strain. The moral authority norm, which underwrites the institution's public legitimacy and resistance to politicization, is the most vulnerable element of the current cultural framework, partially due to recent corruption scandals. Moreover, documented human rights abuses threaten the moral authority norm that is the foundation of the military's public legitimacy and its most important asset for U.S. partnership. Preserving that norm through accountability mechanisms and rule-of-law reinforcement is a prerequisite for pursuing counter-transnational organized crime (TOC) objectives.

Finding 2: Institutional cohesion is the military's most durable strategic asset and its most important self-interest. The officer corps' preference for cohesion over factional alignment explains both its resistance to Correa's politicization and its repeated choice of the arbiter role over the protagonist role. U.S. engagement strategies that threaten perceived institutional autonomy—or that appear to favor one internal faction—are likely to be resisted. Strategies that reinforce professional identity and institutional capacity are more likely to succeed.

Finding 3: The generational transition in military identity is consequential. The cohort of officers whose formative experience is internal policing and counter-narcotics rather than the Cenepa War is now entering senior ranks. This transition may gradually shift the institution's self-conception from external defender and state builder toward domestic security actor, with implications for civil-military relations, human rights risk, and partnership priorities. Critically, the Cenepa War provided the institution with a unifying source of pride and external-threat identity that anchored its above-politics norm. Without that anchor, the younger cohort's professional identity is being formed in the context of domestic operations against criminal organizations—a mission that blurs the line between military and police functions, creates greater exposure to corruption and criminality, and generates human rights risks. The U.S. has a direct interest in shaping this identity formation through PME investment and joint professional development before the cultural drift becomes irreversible.

IV. Recommendations: Opportunities for Engagement

Recommendation 1: Reinvest in professional military education (PME) exchange programs focused on rule-of-law and human rights in internal security operations. The Ecuadorian Armed Forces have a historically strong officer training culture and value professional education. As the institution deepens its internal security role under the internal armed conflict framework, documented human rights risks are growing. Expanding PME partnerships through IMET and WHINSEC—specifically programs addressing the legal framework governing domestic military operations under international humanitarian law, accountability mechanisms for use-of-force incidents, and civil-military coordination with the *Fiscalia* and judiciary—would build institutional capacity while reinforcing the moral authority norm that undergirds domestic legitimacy and U.S. partnership viability. Protecting eroding public legitimacy through rule-of-law investment is necessary to fight TOC.

Recommendation 2: Pursue targeted counter-narcotics and border security cooperation that emphasizes institutional capacity.

The Moreno-era restoration of the bilateral defense relationship created an opening that the Noboa government has signaled interest in deepening. Given the armed forces' strong preference for institutional autonomy, engagement strategies should prioritize joint training, intelligence-sharing frameworks, and logistics support over arms sales or arrangements that create dependency. Documented cases of Ecuadorian Navy officials selling weapons and intelligence to criminal groups, cocaine discovered in Ecuadorian Navy vehicles and on military bases, and the broader pattern of criminal organization penetration of port security represent an acute vulnerability that SOUTHCOM is well-positioned to address. Some possible mechanisms include expanded coordination with Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) for maritime domain awareness in Ecuador's exclusive economic zone; Foreign Military Financing (FMF) targeted at coastal surveillance and interdiction capabilities; and bilateral vetting programs to identify and remove criminally compromised personnel. The last point would directly address criminal infiltration, which is the single greatest internal threat to the Ecuadorian military's organizational integrity.

Recommendation 3: Deepen northern border security cooperation to address TOC spillover from Colombia.

The Colombian border—particularly Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas provinces—is the primary operational theater for Ecuador's internal armed conflict and the main vector for narcotrafficking, arms flows, and irregular armed group activity. Rebuilding conventional border defense capacity alongside counter-TOC capabilities addresses both the operational gap and the institutional identity problem. Recommended mechanisms include Special Forces exchange programs focused on counter-narcotics and irregular warfare, and intelligence-sharing frameworks coordinated through the U.S. Embassy Bogotá-Quito corridor.

Recommendation 4: Leverage the armed forces' civic action role as a partner capacity and legitimacy investment. Ecuador's military has a century-long record of civic action, infrastructure development, and disaster response that commands broad public legitimacy. Programming that leverages this role—humanitarian assistance, disaster relief prepositioning, rural infrastructure cooperation—aligns with the institution's nation-builder self-conception and generates goodwill across civilian institutions and the public. Framed through SOUTHCOM's partner capacity priority, this track serves two strategic functions. First, it builds the organizational interoperability and logistics capacity that make Ecuador a more effective operational partner. Second, it reinforces the public legitimacy.

Author

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