

May 2026

Nicaraguan Military Culture

Orlando J. Pérez, Ph.D., University of North Texas at Dallas, and Randy Pestana,
Florida International University

Introduction

Nicaragua’s military institution today exists primarily to preserve the Ortega-Murillo dynasty. The Ejército de Nicaragua (EN) emerged from the Sandinista insurgency that toppled the Somoza dynasty in 1979. However, following a decade-long experiment with democratic professionalism between 1990 and 2006, the EN been systematically re-politicized since Ortega’s return to the presidency in 2007.

Once viewed as a comparatively professional and institutional force within Nicaragua’s authoritarian system, the EN has increasingly failed to resist efforts by the Ortega-Murillo regime to subordinate the military to the political survival of the ruling family. In doing so, the institution has steadily eroded the apolitical identity and institutional autonomy it once sought to project domestically and internationally.

I. Cultural and Institutional Context

EN norms derive from the FSLN’s anti-imperialist mythology built around Augusto César Sandino. The 2024–2025 constitutional reforms and the revised Military Code of March 2025 formalized the EN’s subordination to the Ortega-Murillo co-presidency, lifted longstanding restrictions on military intervention in matters of internal order, and added the Sandinista party flag to the list of patriotic symbols. Officers are evaluated for political loyalty as much as professional competence. The military budget grew from roughly \$42 million in 2008 to approximately \$115 million in 2025, and the regime has purchased institutional fidelity through property distributions to senior officers. The EN’s self-image remains that of a

“popular and patriotic” force; its operational reality is an institution whose upper leadership is structurally dependent on the survival of a single political family.

Historical Legacies & Turning Points

Five episodes are particularly central to the EN’s institutional memory:

- The Somocista Guardia Nacional (1927–1979): A U.S.-created instrument of repression against which the FSLN defined itself.
- The 1979 Revolution and Contra war: foundational anti-imperialist identity and deep suspicion of Washington.
- The Chamorro transition (1990–1997): genuine professionalization and depoliticization; civil-military experts viewed the EN as a regional model.
- Ortega’s return in 2007 and the 2014 military code reforms: re-politicization and removal of civilian oversight constraints.
- The April 2018 crisis: the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua’s 2025 findings document EN participation in the killings and named General Julio César Avilés as responsible for crimes against humanity.

Civil-Military Relations, Oversight & Institutional Pressures

Civil-military relations in Nicaragua operate as dynastic capture. Article 92 authorizes executive deployment of the military against internal disorder without legislative oversight. Rosario Murillo, elevated to co-president under the reformed Article 133, has exercised direct authority over EN senior personnel. General Avilés has served as commander-in-chief of the Army since 2010 and can remain until 2031 under extended-term provisions. Several institutional pressures and fault lines further shape the EN’s internal dynamics:

- **The *tapón institucional* (institutional bottleneck):** Since 2007, Ortega has promoted 43 officers to general de brigada, creating a gerontocracy that blocks promotion pathways for colonels trained during the 1990s professionalization period. A professional officer stratum exists below the loyalist crust.
- **Budget expansion as a loyalty mechanism:** Increased military funding and material patronage, including property distributions and privileged economic benefits for senior officers, have strengthened regime compliance and deepened the dependence of senior leadership on the continuity of the Ortega-Murillo system.
- **Paramilitary integration and blurred security roles:** The January 2025 constitutional reforms formally incorporated the *Fuerzas Militares de Reserva Patriótica* into the EN's legal structure, constitutionalizing paramilitary forces documented as participants in the 2018 killings. This blurs the line between national defense and regime coercion.

The regime's control over these mechanisms is direct and personalized. All promotions to general rank are issued by Ortega through presidential decree rather than through independent military channels or the Ministry of Defense. The Directorate of Information for Defense (DID), the EN's political intelligence organ, sits on the National Intelligence Commission alongside the police, the Ministry of Interior, and the Financial Analysis Unit, channeling surveillance data to the co-presidency. The July 2024 removal of DID chief Brigadier General Balladares Sandoval, by Murillo's direct order transmitted through Avilés, illustrates how that co-presidential authority penetrates the EN's own intelligence structure.

Security Sector Architecture

Nicaragua's security sector comprises distinct institutional actors whose roles and relationships to the regime differ in ways that matter for policy analysis. The EN General Staff and senior

officer corps are structurally integrated with the regime. The professional officer corps below the general-rank *tapón* occupies a more ambiguous position: its compliance is conditioned by career immobility as much as ideological commitment. The National Police is a separate institution reporting directly to the co-presidency serving as the primary instrument of repression in 2018, with the EN providing weapons and logistical coordination. The Directorate of Military Intelligence and Counterintelligence (DICIM) handles both internal and external surveillance, coordinating across state security agencies and monitoring retired military figures identified as disloyal. The constitutionalized *Fuerzas Militares de Reserva Patriótica*, incorporated under Article 92-ter, are formally within EN legal structure but emerged from FSLN-linked paramilitary networks.

II. Security Environment & Strategic Pressures

Internal Security Dynamics & Illicit Economies

Nicaragua operates as a major cocaine transit corridor, with the regime pursuing a strategy of managed permissiveness that maintains relatively low levels of visible violence while facilitating narcotics flows. The regime failed to prosecute a single trafficker over two consecutive years, further underscoring its permissive posture toward organized crime. Gold accounts for roughly 30 percent of Nicaragua's export earnings, making the April 2026 Treasury sanctions on the gold sector significant in constraining the revenue streams that sustain EN patronage networks.

Russia & Strategic Dependency

Russia's relationship with the EN operates at two distinct levels. On hardware: deliveries of Mi-17 helicopters and other Soviet-era equipment continue but provide political alignment, not qualitative modernization; Russia's wartime costs constrain new supply. On intelligence-political dependency: the Mokorón military base (Unit 502) houses a Russian-run signals intelligence facility; SORM-3 surveillance technology is embedded throughout the security apparatus; and a Russian Interior Ministry Training Center has operated in Managua since 2017, sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury in May 2024.

Regional and Strategic Implications

From a U.S. and regional defense perspective, Nicaragua presents less of a conventional military threat than a growing intelligence, surveillance, and authoritarian influence concern within Central America. The combination of entrenched authoritarian control, integrated Russian intelligence infrastructure, politicized security institutions, and expanding paramilitary structures creates a security environment increasingly centered on regime durability rather than national defense or regional interoperability.

III. Key Findings & Strategic Inference

Finding 1: The EN's institutional character is contested. The military's senior leadership is now structurally tied to regime survival, yet elements of the professionalized officer corps developed during the post-1990 democratic transition likely persist beneath the surface. This distinction matters for long-term U.S. policy and future engagement considerations.

Finding 2: Succession scenarios are multiple and consequential. Potential succession scenarios—including dynastic continuity, elite fragmentation, negotiated transition, or internal regime crisis—would produce markedly different outcomes for the military's cohesion, political role, and institutional orientation.

Finding 3: Russian dependency has two layers with different policy implications. Nicaragua's dependence on Moscow operates at two distinct levels: conventional military support and deeper intelligence-surveillance integration. The latter likely represents the more strategically significant challenge for the United States and regional partners.

Finding 4: The bilateral military relationship with the United States remains effectively frozen. Expanding authoritarian consolidation, internal repression, and Russian security integration have sharply reduced opportunities for meaningful military-to-military engagement while increasing pressure for additional U.S. sanctions and regional diplomatic isolation.

IV. Recommendations: Opportunities for Engagement

The following recommendations are for USSOUTHCOM and the broader U.S. interagency, calibrated to conditions in which formal military-to-military engagement is currently suspended.

- **Recommendation 1: Develop a conditional transition engagement framework.** The United States should establish a framework outlining conditions for future military-to-military engagement following meaningful political transition or institutional reform within the Ejército de Nicaragua (EN). Such a framework should identify potential pathways for re-engagement, institutional assistance, professional military education, counternarcotics cooperation, and democratic civil-military reform while maintaining clear benchmarks tied to depoliticization and institutional autonomy.
- **Recommendation 2: Preserve limited engagement in areas of mutual regional and humanitarian interest.** Nicaragua's vulnerability to natural disasters creates the one domain where limited technical interaction with EN personnel may remain appropriate. Disaster response and humanitarian coordination preserve communication channels and goodwill without implying normalization, provided no sanctioned individuals are involved.
- **Recommendation 3: Increase pressure on Russian intelligence and surveillance infrastructure.** U.S. policy should prioritize targeting the Russian intelligence, surveillance, and political security architecture embedded within Nicaragua. This includes expanded sanctions, counterintelligence coordination, and diplomatic pressure focused on Russian-linked ISR facilities, surveillance systems, and security cooperation agreements. Any future normalization or expansion of military engagement with Nicaragua should be explicitly conditioned on the rollback or removal of Russian intelligence and surveillance capabilities operating in the country.

- **Recommendation 4: Target paramilitary and regime-coercive structures aggressively.** The United States and regional partners should expand sanctions and accountability measures targeting paramilitary organizations, reserve forces, intelligence-linked actors, and individuals implicated in human rights abuses and political repression following the 2018 crisis. The growing institutionalization of regime-aligned paramilitary structures poses a direct threat to democratic transition, civil-military normalization, and long-term regional stability. Distinguishing between the formal military institution and regime-directed coercive networks will remain important for any future transition framework.
- **Recommendation 5: Sustain targeted economic and financial pressure on regime support networks.** U.S. sanctions and financial measures should continue focusing on individuals, entities, and economic sectors that directly sustain regime patronage and military loyalty structures, particularly revenue streams tied to the gold sector and regime-connected enterprises. Pressure should remain calibrated to constrain regime durability and external influence while minimizing humanitarian spillover effects on the Nicaraguan population.

Authors

Orlando J. Pérez, Ph.D., is Professor of Political Science at the University of North Texas at Dallas. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh and has spent three decades researching civil-military relations, democratization, and U.S.–Latin American relations, with a focus on Central America and Panama. He is the author or editor of eight books, including *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Conflict Societies* (Routledge, 2015) and *Making Police Reform Matter in Latin America* (Lynne Rienner, 2023).

Randy Pestana serves as Director of National Security Policy and Strategic Engagement at Florida International University's Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, where he leads strategic initiatives and partnerships across the U.S. national security enterprise. His expertise includes U.S. foreign policy, civil-military relations, and security cooperation, with experience at the Pentagon driving defense strategy, coordinating interagency efforts, and engaging international partners.

Disclaimer

This publication is part of the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (JGI) at FIU's Policy Innovation Series edited by JGI. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of the Florida International University, the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, or any affiliated institutions.