

Interview – Christoph Harig

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Christoph Harig is a Research Fellow at Helmut Schmidt University/University of the Federal Armed Forces Hamburg, Germany. He holds a PhD in Security Studies from King's College London. Christoph's research interests in international relations and security studies include regional powers, civil-military relations, and military sociology. His most recent article, Re-Importing the 'Robust Turn' in UN Peacekeeping: Internal Public Security Missions of Brazil's Military, debates the potential domestic consequences of participating in UN peacekeeping operations, focusing on the Brazilian contribution to MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

In the early stages of developing a PhD project on the Brazilian armed forces in public security, I realised how some of their internal deployments were framed as 'peacekeeping at home'. High-profile visitors such as the United Kingdom's Prince Harry were paraded through neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro that were occupied by the 'Pacification Force'. Troops and visitors were wearing light blue caps that could easily be mistaken for the attire usually worn by UN peacekeepers. At the same time, Brazil tried to portray itself as a troop contributor that used its military's domestic experience for developing innovative peacekeeping tactics in Haiti. All of this made me think about the eventual reciprocity between UN peacekeeping and the use of soldiers in Brazil.

There is great military sociology literature on peacekeepers' limitations in law enforcement missions, but this strand of research almost exclusively covers countries that don't have to bear the brunt of the 'robust turn' in peacekeeping. After all, UN peacekeeping has fundamentally changed: troops are nowadays almost exclusively being provided by the Global South and peace-enforcement mandates increasingly allow the use of force. I therefore wondered how contemporary peacekeepers transfer their experience to internal police roles. At that time, some scholars had already provided thought-provoking research on unintended consequences of UN peacekeeping. For instance, Arturo Sotomayor's book questioned the 'myth' that participating in UN peacekeeping would improve civilian control of militaries in democratising countries. Particularly important for gaining a grasp of how soldiers' experience can affect their subsequent behaviour was Chiara Ruffa's work on military culture. In order to pursue my research, I obviously needed access to troops. Thanks to contacts of my very supportive PhD supervisor at King's College London's Brazil Institute, Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho, I was actually able to conduct research at military bases. There is now a nascent strand of research looking into possible repercussions of peacekeeping for contemporary troop contributors, represented by Maggie Dwyer, Philip Cunliffe, Nina Wilén and several others. I am quite excited about contributing to the further development of this research area.

How have Brazil's civil-military relations changed since its participation in MINUSTAH began in 2004?

European or North-American standards of apolitical professional armed forces cannot help us understand civil-military relations in Brazil. To put it bluntly, many countries pursue the idea that civilian influence would be beneficial for the armed forces (for instance in professional military education) – in Brazil, there is a widespread sense that the

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military's influence would be beneficial for society and politics. The military has played a significant role throughout Brazil's history, frequently intervened in politics and has a deeply entrenched self-understanding as guardian of the nation.

Since 2004, the military has gained prominence in both international and domestic aspects. President Lula understood to use the military as a foreign policy tool, and the armed forces were happy to gain institutional prestige and deployment experience for their troops in MINUSTAH. As I have argued with Kai-Michael Kenkel in an article in *International Affairs*, the coercive nature of MINUSTAH has led to different preferences regarding the future of Brazil's peacekeeping engagement: many diplomats would have preferred a return to traditional policies of humanitarian assistance and non-violent conflict resolutions; the military embraced its leading role in the 'robust turn' in UN peacekeeping and was keen on further deployments in stabilisation missions. Brazil had already promised a sizeable contribution to the UN 'stabilisation' mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) when the Temer government cited budgetary issues as the reason for finally not sending any troops. Leaving a discussion of the merit of this justification aside, it is clear that tensions between diplomats' and officers' preferences might well resurface as soon as the country has to decide about engaging in another UN stabilisation operation.

With regard to internal prominence, it is evident that the military has increasingly been used for political purposes in recent years. It is important to distinguish this process from the military's previous political interventionism: what we are seeing in Brazil is a democratically controlled (re)militarisation of civilian spheres – which eventually ended up increasing the military's political influence. The most problematic development concerning the military's internal role is the growing involvement in public security. Short-term 'Guaranteeing Law and Order' (GLO) operations had existed before, but the Lula government opened the Pandora's box by authorising long-term and large-scale GLO operations in the state of Rio de Janeiro – for the political purpose of showing the World that Brazil was serious about securing mega-events such as the Football World Cup or the Olympic Games. Politicians' demands for internal military deployments have only grown ever since. This culminated in the federal intervention in Rio in 2018, in which the Temer government put a reluctant army general in charge of the state's public security. The growing role in public security and particularly the federal intervention has created unease among officers and divided their opinions on how much the military should become involved in political affairs.

The trajectories of former army commander Villas Bôas and current vice-president General Mourão illustrate this tension. Villas Bôas vocally criticised the military's growing role in public security and warned that the armed forces should not become involved in the country's political polarisation. He clung on to his office despite a severe illness, apparently because he feared his potential successors could take a different stance on the military's political involvement. Yet while constantly insisting on the army's alleged non-partisan nature, he frequently commented on political affairs and increasingly became an important political actor himself.

In 2017, General Mourão sparked controversy. He spoke about the possibility of a military intervention if the political system would not get rid of corrupt persons. Then defence secretary Jungmann remained quiet as he did not want to provoke a conflict with the military. He then left it to army commander Villas Bôas to decide about a possible dismissal. Villas Bôas did not want to turn Mourão into a martyr of interventionists – and decided not to punish him. Instead, Villas Bôas publicly claimed that Mourão would from now on refrain from further political comments. Yet Mourão, who is now frequently described as the 'adult in the room' in Bolsonaro's government, soon defied the army commander's authority and publicly criticised president Temer.

When finally retiring from active duty in early 2018, Mourão demanded that corrupt politicians like president Temer should be purged from public life. This only increased his standing among military interventionists. In order to appease these radical voices within and outside of the army ahead of the Supreme Court's ruling on Lula's prison sentence in April 2018, Villas Bôas tweeted that the military would repudiate immunity. Due to his vague formulations, some interpreted his tweet as a thinly veiled threat of military intervention. Villas Bôas clearly overstepped his responsibilities by commenting on judicial decisions, but he was navigating a difficult balance: he later acknowledged that he probably would not have been able to keep control of the tense situation in the army without making this statement. While Villas Bôas often made a mockery of the military's 'non-partisan' nature he used to propagate, he deserves credit for probably preventing a deteriorating situation in the barracks. This whole episode underlines that

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the fate of Brazil's democracy still depends to a considerable extent on the military's actions. You don't have to apply European or North-American standards of civil-military relations to see this as a major issue.

What are your expectations for the use of soldiers in internal public security missions by the Bolsonaro administration? (Do you expect an increase in GLO (Guaranteeing Law and Order) missions' scope and number? What about its rules of engagement?)

I think it is probably too early to tell whether the scope and number of GLO missions will actually rise under the new government. One of Bolsonaro's demands in the election campaign was that public security agents should not be punished for their actions. He might thus be fairly reluctant to authorise GLO missions as long as Congress does not change the law regarding possible killings of civilians. Previously, Bolsonaro had rejected the federal intervention in Rio because soldiers would have to fear prosecution if they killed criminals. The current proposals of justice secretary Sergio Moro, however, seem to pave the way for legislation that satisfies Bolsonaro's demands.

These demands are in line with those of many officers and soldiers. As I have discussed in my recent article in *International Peacekeeping*, they have complained about the relative lack of operational manoeuvre in GLO operations. In order to defeat armed actors in urban environments, they argue that the legal framework needs to allow the use of lethal force against suspected criminals – just as the rules of engagement in MINUSTAH did, particularly in the early years of the mission. There obviously is a trade-off between protecting innocents and achieving tactical success against opponents: actions of Brazil's military in Haiti did cost many civilians' lives, but it appears that many soldiers and officers would accept the risk of 'collateral damage' in their own country.

Adding to this, there are several generals in Bolsonaro's government who are rather hawkish when it comes to the use of force in internal operations. The Head of the Institutional Security Office, General Heleno, argued in 2018 that the federal intervention in Rio needed rules of engagement like in MINUSTAH. This would have included the execution of suspects who carry guns. General Santos Cruz – who after being force commander in MINUSTAH and the UN Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) served as public security secretary under president Temer at the beginning of the federal intervention – reportedly also wanted the military to act more forcefully. In alliance with governors who ran on the promise of iron-fisted security-policies, particularly Rio's governor Witzel, those generals would probably be in favour of GLO operations in which the military seeks to engage in combat against gangs.

Still, the army is aware of the dangers of a more confrontational approach for its own troops – three soldiers were fatally wounded on a single day in Rio in August 2018. It is plausible that active-duty generals fear casualties or are worried that the so-called 'collateral damage' could lead to a public-relations disaster. Depending on the opinion in the respective high commands, it is therefore conceivable that they could advocate against the military's involvement in such missions. Given the well-established contacts between active-duty generals and reserve generals in government, reluctant military commanders could quite successfully influence the government's decision – perhaps more so than during previous presidencies. What seems to be certain is that Bolsonaro would not be able to ignore the military's objections in the way Temer did with the federal intervention in Rio. The significant presence of reserve officers in government might thus paradoxically help reduce the military's involvement in public security. This would support arguments in the civil-military relations literature which hold that generals are sometimes more opposed to military deployments than civilian administrations. The reason given for this is a lack of understanding possibilities and limitations of military missions among politicians – a problem that certainly doesn't exist in Bolsonaro's cabinet.

Whether the military will be involved or not, I think it is fair to say that public security approaches are going to become more confrontational under Bolsonaro. The MINUSTAH-based model of fighting gangs – for instance by using snipers or shooting suspects – might well be implemented by state police forces, which can be expected to become even more lethal than they already are.

A survey carried out in June 2018 by Datafolha showed that while most Brazilians don't trust political parties, the national congress, or the presidency (only 32%, 33% and 36% of Brazilians respectively), they value positively and place a great amount of confidence into the Armed Forces (78%). Did this lack of trust play a role in last year's general elections? Do you see this trend continuing?

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Matias Spektor correctly argued that Bolsonaro made use of this general discontent by tapping into the still existing confidence into the military (as well as the church and the family). Some active-duty officers I've spoken to during fieldwork criticised Bolsonaro for having been a bad officer and for using the military's image for his own political purposes, and this was well before he decided to embark on a presidential campaign.

Armed forces enjoy high levels of confidence in most countries of the world, which per se is not worrying. The problem in Brazil is that trust in most other institutions seems to be eroding. Judging by the beginning of Bolsonaro's presidency – for instance, his family's supposed involvement with militia members, Sergio Moro's selective silence on corruption allegations – I would suggest that he will probably not be able to increase these already low levels of trust in political institutions.

As leftist parties so far failed to provide a coherent opposition to the Bolsonaro government, many opponents of the government are placing their faith in the military. They are widely seen as a last resort against factions in government whose worldview is shaped by YouTube-philosopher Olavo de Carvalho. Reports that the generals are trying to block controversial foreign policy decisions, such as the move of the Brazilian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, are well received by many commentators. Standards and expectations have sunk so low that vice-president Mourão – who fairly recently proposed military interventionism, defied the army commander's authority and praised a torturer as a personal hero – can easily portray himself as a reasonable statesman.

Yet, it would be naïve to ignore the considerable risk this entails. As previously discussed, there already is a widespread perception of the military as the saviour that is supposed to rescue Brazil in times of extreme crisis. This historically grown paternalistic relationship that ultimately led to the high levels of political interventionism – in which allegedly competent armed forces save the nation from incompetent and corrupt civilian politicians' actions – will only become further entrenched by current developments.

At least 8 members of the Brazilian Armed Forces, including ex-MINUSTAH commanders such as General Augusto Heleno, have high-level positions in Bolsonaro's administration – the largest number since the military regime. Do you expect to see a more active role for the Armed Forces in Brazilian politics in the future? Can you already identify a clear political agenda pursued by the Armed Forces?

In spite of the significant involvement of reserve generals in government, I still think it remains important to distinguish between the military as an institution and individual off-duty members of the military. I do not see that the military as an institution necessarily has an interest in a greater political role and the accompanying exposure to public attention. The reform of the pensions and benefits system is a case in point: the armed forces have rather successfully lobbied against changes to their pensions system in previous governments. But with their visible participation in Bolsonaro's administration, they are coming under more intense scrutiny than ever before since the return to democracy. Public discontent with an eventual preferential treatment of the armed forces might thus grow louder than if the military had stayed below the radar.

Whether more hesitant active-duty personnel like it or not, the enormous presence of reserve generals in government irrevocably connects the armed forces to the Bolsonaro administration. Some reserve officers have joined out of true allegiance, some perhaps out of a sense of duty. Others might have reservations about Bolsonaro but joined because they want to prevent worse things from happening. Many active-duty officers and generals also do not conceal their satisfaction with the election of a president whom they consider as ideologically close to themselves. The nomination of an active-duty general as government spokesperson is particularly problematic, as it further conflates politics and armed forces. Actions of the government will thus be seen as at least partly driven by the military. For the armed forces, this comes with opportunities as well as risks: close ties between active-duty officers and the generals in government might facilitate a privileged treatment and an effective representation of their interests, but the military's image will also become tainted by scandals or failures of the government.

That said, I don't think that the generals in government necessarily have a coherent political agenda. They share common values but do not necessarily agree on all issues or represent the military's corporate interests. The ambitious vice-president Mourão is the best example: he seems willing to let go of the traditional protectionist

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positions of the military in order to pursue a much more market-friendly economic policy.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently developing a comparative project on repercussions of UN peacekeeping on internal troop deployments in states of the Global South. This builds on my previous research on Brazil and aims at a more comprehensive overview of conditions under which armed forces re-import lessons from UN peacekeeping. I am also using my research of the past few years for a couple of papers on military learning and civil-military relations.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

As an early career researcher in Germany (where academic work is highly precarious) I am probably not in a position to give much advice on advancing someone's career prospects. Aside from that, I think it's important to pursue one's own ideas when you are really convinced of them. Rather than following one of the ever-changing trends in social sciences, it's worthwhile to carve out your own niche.