

# THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF CHILE<sup>1</sup>

## *La cultura estratégica de Chile*

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*Andrzej Dembiec was a valued friend and colleague.  
We worked together often during the Cold War  
to improve understanding between East and West  
and we worked together in a wide variety of venues  
to enhance the understanding of Latin America.  
I shall miss him*

**ABSTRACT:** This article describes a major shift in Chile's self-identity after the transition to democracy after the Pinochet dictatorship in 1989. Democratic Chile made a virtue of its democratic stability and its autonomy in international affairs, first, by executing a trade policy that minimized its dependence in the world market; and, second, by looking beyond its immediate borders to seek national security as a defender of democratic values in a larger global community.

**Keywords:** national security, War of the Pacific, soft power, democratic values.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo describe un cambio importante en la auto-identidad de Chile después de la transición a la democracia tras la dictadura de Pinochet en 1989. El Chile democrático hizo una virtud de su estabilidad y autonomía en los asuntos internacionales, en primer lugar, mediante la ejecución de una política comercial que minimiza su dependencia en el mercado mundial, y, en segundo lugar, mirando más allá de sus fronteras inmediatas para buscar la seguridad nacional como un defensor de los valores democráticos en una comunidad global más amplia.

**Palabras clave:** seguridad nacional, Guerra del Pacífico, el poder blando, valores democráticos.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The principal significance of the Chilean case in the multi-country study of strategic culture that FIU/ARC has undertaken over the past year is that strategic culture can change. Chile may be the only case studied in which significant change has occurred. A nation is not necessarily the prisoner of its history, its political culture, or its geography.

As I shall explain in detail in the course of this paper, the change has occurred over the past twenty years and has been propelled and facilitated by a combination of

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an historic consensus among members of the country's leadership during the transition to democracy with exogenous factors to which that leadership was particularly sensitive which appeared to hold out the promise of significant advantage to be gained by the changes they proposed.

In the course of the twenty years since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, that combination of factors led to a series of policy decisions by a succession of democratically elected governments which gradually has changed Chilean strategic doctrine. Given that the concept of strategic culture insists on the dimension of time, we must admit that it is still too soon to state with confidence that there is a new strategic culture in Chile. However, it is my view that the net result of the many decisions taken over the past twenty years is a new national consensus which, if it lasts, can be called a new strategic culture. Those decisions have framed what in Spanish is referred to as *políticas de estado* (state or national policies) – that is, policies that are supported by a broad consensus among political groups and social classes and that are used to define the nation's role in world affairs. Those decisions cover foreign policy, strategic policy, trade policy, civilian control over the military and an explicit embrace of internationally recognized values that make up the essence of Soft Power.

The exogenous factors to which I have referred, are the nature of the globalized international system that has emerged in the aftermath of the cold war, the dominant value system explicitly shared by the principal multi-national organizations in that system and the nations with pretensions to lead that system.

## II. HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

In the beginning, Chile was a long way from the center of activity in South America. Even in the pre-Columbian period, the people who lived in what today we call Chile were peripheral to the centers of population and economic activity. Peripheral continued to be the best description of Chile's place in the Spanish imperial system. In the Hapsburg period, Chile was a distant appendage of the Viceroyalty in Lima. Even under the Bourbon reforms, when Chile was connected to Argentina and made their own viceroyalty, the Andes Mountain effectively kept Chile on the margin. Geography, it seems was to become destiny.

Chile, today, is still very narrow. Long, but very narrow. To the north is a vast expanse of desert, difficult to cross even today, although modern modes of transportation make the crossing easier. Political difficulties now outweigh transportation as the primary obstacle. The Andes mark the nation's eastern edge from the desert to the fjord-like lakes of the deep south. Crossing the mountains is still not easy, although much easier than it was for San Martín, who took the trouble to cross into Chile in order to have a better chance of achieving his military objective of seizing the vice-regal capital of Lima. Today, in contrast to the northern frontier, political barriers to crossing the mountains have disappeared, while the physical barriers remain formidable. Except by airplane, crossing the Andes remains an adventure. To the west,

of course, is the Pacific Ocean, which has played a major role in the nation's political culture. And, sadly, we must add to our discussion, the fragile nature of Chile's geography. Massive earthquakes have taken their toll on those who live there from time out of mind and as recently as February 2010.

### III. THE ORIGINS OF STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE WAR OF THE PACIFIC

Compared to the rest of South America, there was remarkable elite cohesion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Under the leadership of Diego Portales, Chile achieved a level of state capacity and public order superior to its neighbors. This created the foundation of a realist approach to foreign policy and an appreciation of power and the conditions in which it might be used to protect national interests. By the end of the century, when mining and agricultural exports had stimulated an economic boom. The leaders in Chile began to think that their relative stability and state capacity warranted a more aggressive approach to their neighbors on the north, Peru and Bolivia.

The result of this more aggressive approach led to a war of conquest in which Chile took from both Peru and Bolivia huge chunks of territory that contained valuable mineral resources, nitrate and, today, copper. The strategy used in this war and in the settlement forced from the defeated neighbors was the use of power in the name of defense of national interests and the careful use of a balance of power foreign policy to make sure that they would not be opposed in their conquest and that they would be allowed to keep the territory they won<sup>2</sup>.

For more than a century, the strategic culture forged in the war would hold. It is based on a realist approach to world affairs and takes as its principal objective the preservation of the territorial gains of the War of the Pacific. Chile would maintain its military strength and take as its principal threats an attack from the north by either one or by both of the losers in the war. All of Chile's diplomacy was directed as fending off attempts by Peru and Bolivia to regain all or part of the territory ceded to Chile at the end of the war. Chile would not become involved in conflicts outside of this sub-region and Chile would avoid any action or gesture in international organizations that might undermine or question the legitimacy of their conquests. To guarantee the strength of their armed forces, a portion of the income (royalties) from the sale of the nation's most important export, copper, would be left in the hands of the military, so that they could maintain their level of strength for years to come. On the nation's eastern flank, Chile maintained a high level of military preparedness and used its relative stability to penetrate into Argentine Patagonia to extent its influence and prevent any threat to its security from the east. The strength of the military, therefore, became part of the nation's strategic culture as it was portrayed as an indispensable element in protecting the nation's security from hostile neighbors.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the war and the strategic culture that emerges, see Robert N. Burr, *By Reason or Force*.

## IV. ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

While the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet made a great deal of its allegiance to the nation's strategic culture, the government inadvertently laid the groundwork for a remarkable change in strategic culture by driving into exile a generation of academics and politicians. A cohort of Chileans made their way to the United States and Europe to do graduate work and nearly a dozen actually did their PhD in U.S. universities in social sciences and international relations. This *diaspora* had two results that would lead to the changes in strategic culture. The first was that an entire generation lived for years outside their country and learned how others viewed the world. Today, Chile is unique in Latin America in the ability of its elites to understand the world around them. The second was that several of the exiled graduate students seized upon relatively new work in the field of international relations by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane to apply to their sense of what Chile could do in international affairs. Briefly, these scholars began to apply the concepts of soft power and strategic interdependence to their study of Chile's foreign policy.

Just one example will make the point. Heraldo Muñoz, finishing his dissertation at the University of Denver, wrote an article in which he argued, using Keohane that no nation however small or isolated, was without power. Therefore, he argued, any nation might think in terms of its potential leverage in a dyadic relationship. Then, turning to Nye, he argued that when Chile returned to democracy after the dictator had been removed, somehow, Chile's influence in world affairs would come not from the defensive strategic posture it had assumed after the war of the Pacific; rather, it would come from its democracy, its respect for human rights, and its firm adherence to the rule of law. Thus Muñoz, and others, such as Alberto van Klaveren, Augusto Varas, José Miguel Insulza, Manfred Wilhelmy, Carlos Portales and others who wrote about international affairs during the 1980s and, after the transition to democracy, continued to write in the 1990s, created what we might call the Chilean School of International Relations. It represents the conscious, deliberate adaptation of external knowledge to the study of foreign policy in a Latin American nation. And, when they take positions in the new government, it becomes the deliberate adoption of very specific ways of thinking to the formulation and execution of Chilean foreign policy and strategic doctrine.

The gradual changes in strategic culture come through a series of policy decisions in the course of the twenty years since the return of democracy. Trade Policy was made State Policy and therefore, part of strategic culture. To maximize Chile's autonomy and reduce its dependence, trade would be divided among the major regions of the world. By the end of the century, Chile managed to divide its trade among Asia, Europe and America almost in equal thirds. Foreign investment was welcomed but through capital and exchange controls, the worst excesses of capital flight and rapacious investment were avoided.

The new civilian government worked to take control over the military, despite Pinochet's resistance, and tried to bring the military to understand that the nation's role

in world affairs, based on soft power, required a compliant military that would be willing to serve in UN peacekeeping and demonstrate that it no longer saw its neighbors as a threat to their national security.

Throughout the 1990s, the Chilean governments worked to eliminate the boundary disputes with Argentina. By 2003, the last of twenty-five disputes had been resolved. The neighbors to the north proved to be more difficult. It was not until the Lagos administration, with Michelle Bachelet as Minister of Defense, that the civilians considered that they had won control over the military and that they could convince the military that success in international affairs required a democratic Chile to heal the open wounds in relations with Bolivia and Peru. With military approval, Lagos opened a dialogue with the President of Bolivia to find a solution to Bolivia's demand for an opening to the sea. The talks broke down two years later when Evo Morales became president of Bolivia and refused to discuss the matter with his Chilean counterpart. The talks have been suspended; but channels of communication remain open.

The bilateral relationship with Peru remains complicated, mainly because the Peruvians insist on using relations with Chile as a domestic political piñata. Chile consistently has referred all disputes, however unreasonable they may appear, to international arbitration. There is every reason to believe that if Chile holds firm to this position, as soon as Peru returns to political stability, the bilateral relationship will improve.

## V. A NEW STRATEGIC CULTURE

It is not too much to suggest that the cumulative result of these decisions within the context of a coherent, consistent foreign policy over the past twenty years is the formation of a new strategic culture.

That culture departs from the old or traditional culture. It seeks to maximize national autonomy in the international system and the empowerment of the nation through a combination of balanced trade, a mixed economy, and a broadly based commitment to the dominant values of democratic government, the rule of law and the defense of human rights. The nation's stability and the orderly transfer of power from one administration to the next are major factors in Chile's ability to exercise influence in the international community.

Three examples will suffice. First, was Chile's bold move to create the peacekeeping operation in Haiti as a Latin American operation, MINUSTAH. It is a unique and remarkable move and getting the Chilean armed forces to serve is a crucial feature of the initiative. Such service would have been inconceivable ten years earlier. Second, at the final session of the so-called Doha round of talks to reform the World Trade Organization, Chile joined Brazil to draft the closing declaration that summarized the outcome of the Doha Round. That Brazil played such a role is not surprising. But Chile? Only the extraordinary legitimacy in world affairs that the democratic governments had established put its representative in a position to play such a prominent role. Third, Jose Miguel Insulza was elected secretary general of the

OAS, despite his career as a socialist who, while in exile, was outspoken in his criticism of the United States. Chilean legitimacy made his candidacy unstoppable. Insulza adds credibility to the Chilean overtures to Bolivia which have been put on hold by the Morales government.

It is too early to tell if the new, conservative government in Chile continues the successful foreign policy of its predecessors, just as the Concentracion governments continued the successful macroeconomic policies they inherited from the dictatorship. I believe there will be continuity and that the new strategic culture will become stronger and more consolidated.