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Governing Through Cocaine: The García Meza Regime and the inter-American Cold War (1980-1)

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ABSTRACT

On 17 July 1980, General Luis García Meza's coup inaugurated Bolivia's last National Security regime. Though conventionally situated within the broader cycle of Southern Cone authoritarianism, the Bolivian case diverged in several respects: the participation of drug traffickers in the coup and the post-coup order; its installation with Argentine operational support; and prompt US opposition, which moved to isolate it diplomatically. Drawing on US, Argentine, and Bolivian sources—including federal court records, diplomatic cables, and intelligence reporting—this article argues that the regime emerged from a reconfiguration of the inter-American Cold War, in which the fragmentation of the hemispheric anti-communist order created conditions for new political alliances, external intervention, and regime financing. In Bolivia, this took the form of a structural fusion between the state apparatus and the cocaine economy, sustained by Argentine support that extended beyond counterinsurgency expertise to active financial and operational participation. The regime's entanglement with narcotrafficking, however, proved a diplomatic liability that made it difficult to accommodate even for an incoming Reagan administration otherwise critical of Carter's human rights agenda. Bolivia thus reveals how this fragmentation altered counterrevolutionary politics, as regional security projects increasingly operated through channels that bypassed established patterns of hemispheric alignment.

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Introduction

On 17 July 1980, Bolivian military units and paramilitary forces carried out the coup that inaugurated the last National Security regime established in South America during the Cold War. The dictatorship that brought General Luis García Meza Tejada to power is conventionally situated within the broader cycle of authoritarian regimes that reshaped the Southern Cone from the mid-1960s onward. That cycle was ideologically underpinned by the National Security Doctrine (NSD), elaborated within hemispheric military institutions and diffused through interstate channels of doctrine and training, which recast domestic political conflict as a theater of global confrontation, construing social mobilization and reformist politics as expressions of communist subversion requiring permanent military vigilance.¹ The regimes it produced—in Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay – shared a common counterrevolutionary logic and an

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expanding architecture of interstate repressive coordination.² Yet the 1980 Bolivian case³ diverged in important ways from the patterns usually associated with regional military rule, and not just due to its brevity. More than its regional counterparts, the García Meza regime fused systematic state repression with the direct participation of narcotrafficking actors, whose role extended beyond informal financing and became a structurally important component of the coalition that sustained both the coup and the post-coup order. The regime was also installed with the operational support of the Argentine military dictatorship, but without the backing of Washington, which rapidly moved to isolate it diplomatically. In each of these respects, the Bolivian experience complicates established interpretations of Southern Cone authoritarianism and of Cold War alignments in the Americas.

These peculiarities have not, however, generated sustained historical inquiry. Scholars have rarely examined the García Meza dictatorship on its own terms: in most accounts it appears less as a primary object of analysis than as a secondary episode within broader narratives of Southern Cone authoritarianism, Argentine regional policy, or the Andean cocaine economy.⁴ As a result, some of the regime's most distinctive characteristics remain better established in their broad outlines than in their internal mechanics—a gap that reflects, at least in part, the scarcity of primary documentation available to researchers. Argentine involvement in the coup is widely acknowledged, yet the institutional channels through which it operated and the relationship between official policy and the autonomy of military and intelligence actors remain insufficiently understood.⁵ A similar problem affects the literature on narcotrafficking and the regime. While the links between García Meza's regime and cocaine trafficking are well established in the literature, no study has yet adequately reconstructed the institutional architecture and day-to-day workings of its state-narco system.⁶

These questions intersect directly with recent historiographical debates on Latin America's Cold War. Recent scholarship has increasingly moved beyond intervention-centred narratives to emphasize the interaction of local, regional, and global dynamics. Gilbert M. Joseph, Daniela Spenser and others have called for bringing Latin America 'in from the Cold' by examining the region not merely as a peripheral theater of superpower confrontation but as a historical space shaped by the entanglement among domestic conflicts, regional projects, and transnational political networks.⁷ Hal Brands has shown the extent to which political escalation often emerged from conflicts internal to Latin American societies, with Washington and Moscow frequently reacting to processes already unfolding on the ground.⁸ Vanni Pettinà has in turn demonstrated how the bipolar confrontation superimposed itself on pre-existing processes of social and economic transformation in the region, structurally revitalizing conservative actors and dismantling the developmentalist coalitions that had formed in the preceding decades.⁹ In a related vein, William Booth has offered a multi-layered model of Latin America's Cold War that foregrounds the way in which the Cold War folded pre-existing conflicts—over land, labor, sovereignty, and citizenship—into the totalizing banner of anti-communism.¹⁰ From a hemispheric perspective, Tanya Harmer's concept of an 'Inter-American Cold War' provides one of the most influential formulations of this regional approach. Harmer emphasizes the hemisphere as a political space shaped by interactions among regional states, revolutionary movements, and counterrevolutionary forces. Her work shows that the Cold War in the Americas was not merely imposed from outside but was also produced through conflicts among Latin American actors themselves.¹¹

This article argues that the García Meza dictatorship emerged from a broader reconfiguration of the inter-American Cold War during the late Seventies, in which the fragmentation of the hemispheric anti-communist order—produced by growing tensions between military regimes and the Carter administration and by regional rivalries such as the Beagle Channel crisis¹²—created the conditions for new forms of political alliance, external intervention, and regime financing. In Bolivia, this process took the distinctive form of a structural fusion between the armed forces and the cocaine economy, sustained by direct Argentine support and rooted, from its inception, in open confrontation with Washington. The article also contributes to the

historiography of Argentina's regional intervention during the final years of the Carter administration, showing that Buenos Aires's role in Bolivia went beyond the transfer of counterinsurgency expertise to active participation—financial as well as operational—in building and sustaining the new regime, including through the placement of agents within its security apparatus.

Reconstructing these dynamics draws on a multi-layered body of evidence produced for different institutional purposes. The judicial record of the US federal proceedings against Bolivian Minister of Interior Luis Arce Gómez—including trial transcripts, witness testimonies, and associated legal documentation—is central for reconstructing the relationship between state actors and narcotrafficking networks, particularly because activities of this kind rarely generated stable administrative documentation. Its evidentiary value is assessed through systematic cross-checking with contemporaneous US diplomatic and intelligence reporting, as well as with Argentine and Bolivian military, governmental, and security documents. The triangulation of these heterogeneous sources allows for a more comprehensive reconstruction of the regime's regional and criminal dimensions.

The article proceeds in four sections addressing the origins of the coup, the state-narco nexus, Argentine involvement, and the regime's relationship with the United States across the Carter–Reagan transition.

A coup in the making: military factionalism, organized crime, and transnational support

The coup d'état of 17 July 1980 did not erupt as an improvised act of praetorian opportunism. It was the culmination of a protracted institutional crisis and a coordinated destabilization strategy that drew together the most reactionary sectors of the Bolivian Armed Forces, the Argentine military, segments of the domestic entrepreneurial elite, and transnational cocaine-trafficking networks.

The institutional fragility that preceded the coup stemmed from the rapid succession of failed military governments following the deposition of Hugo Banzer Suárez in 1978.¹³ After General Pereda Asbún refused elections and was overthrown, General Padilla Arancibia convened a vote in July 1979. Producing no majority, Congress appointed Walter Guevara Arze as interim president, only for him to be toppled in November by Colonel Alberto Natusch Busch. Roughly thirty political organizations opposed the coup, but it was the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) that translated dissent into organized resistance, establishing the Comité Democrático Antifascista (CDA). The unity of leftist parties, labor unions, and social movements generated enough force to bring down the regime within two weeks,¹⁴ paving the way to the interim presidency of Lidia Gueiler Tejada.¹⁵

Gueiler's presidency was troubled from the start. Bolivia entered this period already burdened by the external indebtedness and capital flight accumulated over the preceding decade; in December 1979, the new government devalued the peso and froze wages under an IMF-backed program.¹⁶ These measures triggered waves of strikes and blockades led by the COB, generating a political and social crisis alongside the economic one.¹⁷ In addition, Gueiler faced a second front within the military itself, whose command remained deeply distrustful of the electoral process. As early as January 1980, intelligence reports indicated that General Luis García Meza—commander of the Colegio Militar—had forced her to revise her high command appointments.¹⁸ By April 18, Gueiler had been obliged to formally confirm García Meza as Army Commander, a move CIA analysts described as an 'appeasement' that elevated the 'principal coup plotter' to the position from which he would later strike.¹⁹ Argentine Embassy cable traffic from early 1980 confirms this dynamic: key command positions had been delivered to officers loyal to García Meza, displacing those who had opposed the November 1979 coup.²⁰

The strategic orientation of this military faction combined ideological and corporate concerns. Ideologically, it drew on the NSD, framing Bolivia as a potential corridor for left-wing subversion in the event of an electoral victory by the coalition Unidad Democrática y Popular (UDP). This logic was articulated publicly in the joint communique of 24 April 1980, signed by the heads of all branches of the armed forces, which proclaimed that the military would intervene 'as often as necessary to save the country from disaster, from extremist domination and from the submission to foreign ideologies.'²¹ Alongside ideological motives, the military's calculations were driven by corporate self-interest. They feared that the transfer of power to an elected, constitutionally legitimate government would not only seal their personal and institutional fate, but would also terminate the financial windfall they were extracting from the state, most visibly through the unauthorized sale of new coca-production licenses beyond the legal quota.²²

It is within this context that the alliance between sectors of the armed forces and narcotrafficking networks consolidated into a structured partnership. At its center stood Colonel Luis Arce Gómez, head of Army intelligence (G-2) and a relative of cocaine entrepreneur Roberto Suárez Gómez.²³ Arce Gómez functioned as the key intermediary between military command structures and trafficking networks, providing protection and coordination while channeling financial flows into the emerging coup coalition.²⁴ Judicial testimony from US federal proceedings confirms that by March–April 1980 he was already receiving couriers coordinating the expansion of narcotics operations, which generated capital used to finance coup preparations—including the securing of officer loyalty, acquisition of vehicles and communications equipment, and funding of parallel paramilitary structures.²⁵ Narcotrafficking thus functioned not as a contingent source of funding but as one of the structural components of the seizure of power.

This internal configuration was reinforced by a transnational dimension. The Argentine military regime provided operational support through its intelligence apparatus and extended political backing for the coup project—motivated by the prospect of Bolivian cocaine revenues and the opportunity to extend counter-insurgency operations in the region.²⁶ Bolivian commanders explicitly acknowledged the necessity of this support, with General Reyes Villa recognizing in April 1980 that any intervention would require Argentine assistance 'of every kind.'²⁷ By early June, US diplomats were receiving reports that senior Bolivian officers claimed assurances of financial support from the Argentine army, and Gueiler's Foreign Minister, Gastón Araoz Levy, told Ambassador Marvin Weissman that he was 'absolutely certain that the Argentines are deeply involved in the planning of all aspects of the coup.'²⁸ In parallel, evidence surfaced of an emerging transnational paramilitary presence, including Argentine and other Latin American right-wing operatives, whose activities intersected with already established networks, including the one gathered around the former SS officer Klaus Barbie, an adviser to the Bolivian military.²⁹

From February 1980 onward, these converging networks were associated with a wave of destabilizing violence targeting journalists, clergy, and political leaders. Among the most significant episodes were the bombing of the weekly *Aquí*, the assassination of Luis Espinal on 22 March 1980,³⁰ the crash of a flight on 2 June that killed several UDP leaders under widely suspected circumstances,³¹ and the grenade attack on a La Paz electoral rally on 27 June.³² These acts contributed to a climate of generalized insecurity publicly attributed to political polarization but closely intertwined with the coordinated destabilization preceding the coup.

The resounding UDP victory on 29 June 1980—which made the congressional ratification of Hernán Siles Zuazo on 6 August a foregone conclusion—compressed the window available to the conspirators and triggered the final operational phase. Between 9 and 16 July, US Embassy cables register a clear acceleration: key military units were reinforced, institutionalist commanders reassigned, and external support from Argentina consolidated.³³ By 11 July, the Army was securing control of ammunition supplies, including deliveries from Buenos Aires. In the final days, García Meza and senior officers accompanied President Gueiler to Sucre for the 16 July celebrations, falsely assuring her that no crisis was imminent.³⁴ The operation was launched on the

morning of 17 July, with coordinated units seizing central La Paz while paramilitary squads organized by Arce Gómez struck opposition sites.³⁵

The resulting dictatorial regime followed the pattern of the national security dictatorships prevalent across the continent—fervent anti-communism, suppression of democracy, and maintenance of social control through state terrorism and torture.³⁶ The Bolivian case, however, added a distinctive dimension that will be examined in the following section: the rapid construction of a structured, internally coherent system for the extraction, management, and redistribution of cocaine-generated resources.

Cocaine as governance: the Para-fiscal system

In the weeks immediately following the military overthrow of 17 July 1980 that installed General García Meza in the presidency and Colonel Luis Arce Gómez at the Ministry of the Interior, the Bolivian state apparatus was restructured into an instrument for the systematic extraction, protection, and consolidation of revenues from the cocaine export economy—a quasi-fiscal system in which the Ministry of the Interior functioned as the taxing authority.

At the apex of this system stood a formalized mechanism of ministerial credentials. The Ministry of the Interior issued memoranda on official letterhead designating selected individuals as his personal ‘representatives’ or ‘coordinators’ in defined territorial jurisdictions. These documents functioned as instruments of sovereign delegation within the illicit economy. Alejandro Pacheco Sotomayor—a major drug trafficker—testified that he received such a memorandum in August 1980, signed and sealed by Arce Gómez, authorizing him to collect cocaine revenues in the La Paz region.³⁷

Similar credentials had been issued to traffickers Herlan Echeverría and José Nelo Callau. Pacheco recalled comparing his memorandum with Echeverría’s during a meeting in Santa Cruz, noting that the latter’s document granted significantly broader authority, describing it as a ‘legal sized paper’ that effectively granted him ‘carte blanche even to kill.’³⁸ Callau, for his part, presented himself at the residence of the major trafficker Sonya Sanjinez de Atala in Santa Cruz, stating that he had been ‘named a representative for Luis Arce Gomez’ and that he had received instructions ‘to speak with the people that were into the narcotics trafficking or who would want to go into working with cocaine, to pay protection.’³⁹ The document he produced identified him as ‘a special representative in Santa Cruz of the Minister of the Interior’, thereby transforming what had begun as a verbal claim into a formally accredited extension of ministerial authority.⁴⁰ Callau used his memorandum in Panama, Cartagena, Bogotá, and Cali to formalize protection arrangements with Colombian traffickers.⁴¹ The revenue-sharing split was simple: 80% for the Minister and 20% for the agents.⁴² The portability of these credentials—their use across national borders as guarantees of state-backed protection—underscores their function as instruments of political authority embedded in transnational trafficking circuits, effectively guaranteeing free transit for illicit shipments. What the evidence points to, in sum, is a delegated structure of governance in which the Ministry of the Interior acted as the central node of authorization, and accredited agents exercised both fiscal and coercive functions within their assigned regions.

This combination of formal documentation, territorial delegation, and revenue-sharing arrangements points to something more structured than episodic corruption: it reflects a structured reconfiguration of state authority, centered on the Ministry of the Interior, into a mechanism for organizing, taxing, and regulating the cocaine economy. The Ministry of the Interior functioned as the coordinating center of a hierarchically ordered protection system in which access to trafficking circuits depended on formal accreditation and compliance with centrally imposed tariffs. In this sense, the regime did not simply tolerate narcotics activity but integrated it into its governing practices, converting political authority into an instrument for the extraction and redistribution of illicit revenue. This interpretation aligns with US intelligence assessments, which identified Luis Arce Gómez as emblematic of a system in which state officials ‘not only ran [their]

own cocaine network but also forced other traffickers to hand over a share of their profits,⁴³ thereby underscoring the systemic—rather than incidental—nature of the protection economy.

The protection system operated through a differentiated tariff regime calibrated to the scale, function, and capitalization of each operator within the cocaine economy. Testimony consistently identifies three overlapping layers of extraction: fixed monthly payments, per-kilogram levies, and lump-sum transactions tied to state-controlled cocaine.

At the upper tier, operators controlling laboratories and aircraft were assessed monthly payments of up to \$100,000, while exporters using aircraft were charged approximately \$1,000 per kilogram and intermediaries assembling shipments paid around \$500 per kilogram.⁴⁴ These rates were presented as a standing schedule communicated by Callau and confirmed directly by Arce Gómez in a meeting in Santa Cruz on September 23, 1980. The order of magnitude of the lump-sum figure is consistent with CIA reporting, according to which, one week after the coup, drug traffickers in Santa Cruz reportedly delivered García Meza \$100 million. The report also states that ‘the regime is likely to continue to look to them for supplementary financing in return for letting them operate freely.’⁴⁵

At the regional level, fixed payments complemented per-unit taxation. José Tito Camacho, identified as the ‘narcotics head’ of Santa Cruz, collected \$20,000 monthly from the traffickers in exchange for ensuring that suitcases of cocaine passed through Trompillo International Airport without inspection. These sums were physically aggregated at Camacho’s residence and periodically collected in person by Arce Gómez during visits to the region.⁴⁶

Parallel collection circuits operated simultaneously. Pacheco testified to regular transfers of approximately \$100,000 per month from the trafficker Hugo Chávez to Arce Gómez in La Paz,⁴⁷ while Echeverría described collecting \$50,000 from traffickers and remitting the majority share to the Minister in accordance with their agreed 80/20 split.⁴⁸ Additional flows moved through international channels, including Miami-based circuits linked to Roberto Suárez’s network, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars in back-payments delivered through intermediaries.⁴⁹

A third layer of extraction derived from state-controlled cocaine. Material seized by law enforcement was not destroyed but monetized through controlled re-entry into the market. Seized cocaine was stored in bank vaults at the Central Bank (Banco Central) and the State Bank (Banco del Estado) and later reintroduced into the market to finance the regime.⁵⁰ Sonya Atala testified that cocaine originating from official seizures was delivered to her in packages labeled with case numbers, weights, and purity reports, and sold at a fixed rate of approximately \$10,000 per kilogram of pure product.⁵¹ Arce Gómez and the Santa Cruz prosecutor, Juan Carlos Camacho, personally ordered the release of these shipments to chosen traffickers. Documents and testimony describe the delivery of burlap sacks marked with the ‘Banco del Estado’ logo containing cocaine base or paste, often stored in humid conditions requiring further refinement.⁵²

Beneath the fiscal architecture operated an enforcement apparatus centered on the Servicio Especial de Seguridad (SES), formally attached to the Ministry of the Interior and described as responsible for arrests, torture, and targeted violence. DEA agent Gary Wheeler characterized the same body as a ‘hit-type squad’ conducting ‘terrorist-type activities’ designed to instill fear and enforce compliance.⁵³ This paramilitary body, officially instituted in October 1980⁵⁴ for state security, in effect acted as the armed wing of the cocaine racket. SES cells were tasked with collecting the ‘protection tax,’ providing security for protected traffickers’ laboratories, and conducting punitive raids against those who did not pay contributions to the Ministry. The function of these punitive raids was redistribution. Seized cocaine was systematically redirected to compliant operators, sometimes delivered directly to intermediaries for resale.⁵⁵

Operationally, the SES functioned as a constellation of decentralized cells linked to regime patrons. Atala described multiple armed groups under the authority of figures such as Callau, Echeverría, and Camacho, as well as a central command structure.⁵⁶ Other documents corroborate the paramilitary formation in substantial detail and supply the organizational history that judicial records do not address. A memorandum sent by Walter Guevara Arze—former Bolivian

interim president and founder of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement—to Vice President George H.W. Bush suggests that Arce Gómez began to organize the same force of paramilitaries before the coup of 17 July 1980. According to the same source, this force made its public appearance on the day of the coup itself, when it was deployed to kidnap the socialist leader Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz at the premises of the COB. The memorandum further characterizes the paramilitary formation as ‘imported from Argentina’, and specifies that these groups performed the ‘dirty work’—raids on private premises, assassinations, torture – that regular military officers preferred not to carry out directly, while nonetheless authorizing and concealing such operations.⁵⁷

Airport infrastructure was equally central. Trompillo International Airport functioned as a key node, with designated personnel ensuring that shipments and cash passed without inspection. Serrano testified to personally facilitating the movement of large sums of drug proceeds through the airport, while direct intervention by Arce Gómez could guarantee clearance when required. Regime agents, coordinated by Echeverría, ensured that drug-laden aircraft took off and that suitcases containing dollar proceeds entered the country without customs inspections.⁵⁸

Immigration services were manipulated to resolve documentation issues for international traffickers. An emblematic case involved trafficker Bobi Suarez, whose passport had been mistakenly stamped with the arrival date of a plane that was later seized. Acting on instructions from the regime, Herlan Echeverría took the document to the Department of Immigration to have it ‘fixed’ with a new stamp, allowing the trafficker to leave Bolivia on a commercial flight without raising suspicion.⁵⁹ Beyond immigration, the judicial system was also instrumentalized to serve the criminal network, operating through an explicit bribery mechanism for the release of detainees. An episode involved pilot Ramón Sánchez. Following his arrest in July 1980, Prosecutor Camacho initially demanded \$100,000 for the release of both the man and his aircraft. The transaction was eventually finalized with a \$30,000 bribe paid directly to the prosecutor to halt all legal proceedings.⁶⁰

The protection system was fully embedded within state resources and infrastructure. Official vehicles, facilities, and personnel were routinely used to facilitate trafficking activities. State-linked traffickers used vehicles assigned to narcotics enforcement units—such as Ford Broncos belonging to the narcotics police and the army—to escort coca-base shipments along the Lake Titicaca corridor to urban storage sites, where the material was processed in private residences. These vehicles enjoyed institutional cover that prevented searches by regular patrols.⁶¹ This circumstance is confirmed by a CIA intelligence assessment, according to which ‘Army troops ran cocaine laboratories and Navy personnel transported coca along Bolivia’s rivers, while Air Force transports reportedly flew coca to processing plants in the Beni Department.’⁶²

Clandestine infrastructure complemented these official channels. The ranch ‘La Perseverancia,’ located northeast of Santa Cruz, was equipped with a laboratory and an airstrip, and functioned as a logistical hub for large-scale export operations linking Bolivian production to markets in Colombia and the United States. Records describe coordinated flights, refueling operations, and shipments of hundreds of kilograms of cocaine.⁶³

Cocaine proceeds were a principal revenue stream sustaining the regime. They enriched its leadership, offset the collapse of international financial support, and became embedded in the broader political economy through which the dictatorship operated. Yet their significance extended beyond Bolivia. As literature has shown, funds provided by the García Meza regime also contributed to financing Argentine paramilitary operations in Central America, extending the phenomenon to a hemispheric scale.⁶⁴

Loans, arms, and intelligence: the role of Argentina

The Argentine-Bolivian relationship that took shape around the events of July 1980 was more than a conventional bilateral alignment between neighboring military governments. What the documentary record discloses is a sustained, institutionalized transfer of political

technologies—doctrinal frameworks, interrogation techniques, financial resources, and personnel—from the Argentine military apparatus to the García Meza regime. It operated alongside a transnational network of European far-right operatives whose presence in Bolivia predated the coup but was substantially reorganized in its wake.

The Argentine junta did not treat the impending inauguration of Hernán Siles Zuazo—winner of Bolivia's June 1980 presidential election—as an internal matter of constitutional succession. Rather, it interpreted a prospective Siles government as an ideological breach in the anti-communist stronghold that Southern Cone military regimes had been consolidating since the mid-1970s, a development that, in their view, required preemptive regional action. This logic emerges with unusual clarity in a US Embassy cable from Buenos Aires, reporting President Jorge Rafael Videla's remarks at a press conference in Córdoba on August 6, 1980, where he justified Argentine sympathy for the coup by stating: 'It is enough to say what was the risk: we do not want in South America what Cuba is in Central America.'⁶⁵ The significance of this formulation lay less in its rhetorical force than in the strategic reframing it implied. Bolivian sovereignty is effectively displaced by a hemispheric-strategic rationality: the outcome of an internationally observed electoral process is absorbed into the grammar of regional anti-communism, within which a center-left government on Argentina's northern border is rendered functionally equivalent to a Soviet-aligned revolutionary state. At the same time, Cuba is reconfigured as a transferable threat template—a move characteristic of the NSD as interpreted by Argentine military thinking after the mid-1970s. Within this framework, political opposition is no longer territorially contained but recast as a transnational adversary, thereby normalizing the possibility of action beyond national borders.

Subsequent Argentine statements rendered the underlying logic even more explicit. General Omar Graffigna—an Air Force brigadier and pillar of the Argentine junta—informed the US Chargé d'Affaires, as recorded in a cable, that Buenos Aires considered Siles Zuazo no moderate but an 'avowed Marxist' whose presidency would have engendered another Cuba 'or worse.'⁶⁶ The analytical weight of the phrase 'or worse' lies precisely in its indeterminacy: it signals that the Bolivian electoral outcome had been subsumed into a classificatory framework in which political distinctions were overridden by strategic imperatives. US officials, on the other hand, were fully aware of the disconnect between this characterization and the available evidence. Another telegram from US Embassy in Buenos Aires stated plainly that 'President-elect Siles is not a Marxist but of the center-left,' and that his government 'would have contributed to the consolidation of the democratic process within Bolivia.'⁶⁷ The divergence between these positions thus reflects incompatible interpretive frameworks: the Argentine reading operated through a logic that required Siles to be construed as a systemic threat, irrespective of his actual political program, in order to justify the range of responses under consideration.

The internal dimension of this construction is captured in another cable, which reports a unanimous consensus within the Argentine high command that 'a Siles Zuazo government would have been seriously prejudicial to vital national interests' of Argentina, citing in particular the concern that 'a Bolivia governed by a leftist government might become a safe haven for Montonero guerrillas.'⁶⁸ This passage repays closer attention on two counts. The first concerns the language of 'vital national interests'. The classification of a neighboring state's elected government in these terms—a formulation generally reserved for matters warranting military defense—marks the conceptual shift through which intervention is recast as anticipatory self-defense rather than a violation of sovereignty. Within this framework, the Bolivian democratic process appeared not merely as an ideological concern but as a concrete threat to territorial security, a reading that, regardless of its effective grounding, provided the strategic and political rationale for Argentine involvement. The second concerns the specific threat represented by the Montoneros, invoked to substantiate that claim. By 1980, the guerrilla group had been largely dismantled, rendering the prospect of a Bolivian sanctuary more a rhetorical construction than an operationally credible scenario.⁶⁹ Its deployment in internal deliberations suggests that the threat functioned less as evidence than as legitimation. Taken together, these statements—from Videla's

public remarks to the supposed Montonero threat—reflect not competing intelligence assessments but a coherent interpretive framework: one in which ideological frontiers had taken precedence over territorial ones, and intervention had ceased to be an exceptional breach to become instead a functional instrument of continental defense against subversion.

It is precisely this interpretive framework that finds institutional expression in the broader architecture of regional coordination. The Fourth Congress of the Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation (CAL), convened in Buenos Aires in September 1980, gave institutional form to these regional ambitions. It brought together a message from Videla and the participation of Bolivian General Staff adviser Lt. Col. Luis Cañedo Reyes. In that setting, Cañedo Reyes ‘reiterated his chief’s [García Meza] threat to withdraw Bolivia from the Andean Pact and to align it with some sort of Southern Cone anti-communist coalition’. He framed this project as one that ‘flows from Argentine President Videla’s August 19 speech in Rio calling for [an] ideological front of countries in the region struggling to contain political terrorism’. The assembled delegates also condemned what they termed Carter-communism, meaning the Carter administration’s human rights policy, as ‘a political instrument used only against regimes resisting internal communist subversion.’⁷⁰ This formulation is analytically significant not merely as polemic. By recasting human rights discourse itself as an instrument of subversion, the CAL declaration supplied a doctrinal justification for the repressive configurations being institutionalized across the Southern Cone. At the same time, it positioned the García Meza regime as a fully integrated component of a self-defined regional counter-order. This reading also aligns with a broader body of scholarship that has interpreted Argentine policy in this period as an attempt to project itself as a regional guarantor of anti-communist order, partly in response to the perceived retreat of the United States under the Carter administration’s human rights agenda. In this perspective, Buenos Aires did not limit its ambitions to the Southern Cone but sought to extend its influence toward Central America, positioning itself as an alternative pole of coordination within the hemispheric counterinsurgency framework.⁷¹

Ideological motives did not exhaust Argentine calculations. Cooperation within Operation Condor had not prevented Buenos Aires and Santiago from coming to the brink of war over the Beagle Channel in December 1978, and in mid-1980 the papal mediation was still unresolved.⁷² As Pablo Lacoste and Diego Jiménez Cabrera have shown, Argentina had drawn Bolivia into its sphere of influence as a means of pressure on Chile: La Paz broke off relations with Santiago in March 1978, and in October a joint presidential declaration reaffirmed Argentine support for Bolivia’s claim to sovereign access to the Pacific.⁷³ The sources examined here do not explicitly link Argentine support for the coup to the Beagle dispute. A regime dependent on Buenos Aires on Chile’s northern border was nonetheless consistent with that strategy, at a time when officials in the region feared that the dispute could set off a chain reaction of border issues involving Bolivia.⁷⁴

The financial dimension is addressed most directly in already cited CIA analysis of August 23, 1980, which identifies Argentine aid as one of the three pillars sustaining the regime’s survival alongside repression and narcotics financing, and records that Buenos Aires had extended a short-term loan of \$60 million, ‘and probably was prepared to offer more.’⁷⁵ This assessment is consistent with a State Department policy review of the same period, which noted that ‘only Argentina seems prepared to help a financially troubled Bolivia,’—a fragility rooted in the previously described structural crisis—and that even such aid might be conditioned upon limited improvements in the regime’s conduct.⁷⁶ Beyond the financial credit, Argentine support also took the form of direct commodity transfers. An Argentine Embassy note documents that Buenos Aires concluded a food aid agreement under which an initial donation of 7,000 tons of wheat was subsequently raised to 10,000 tons at Bolivia’s request, with transport costs from Argentina to Santa Cruz de la Sierra borne entirely by the Argentine government at a rate of ten rail cars per day. The note further records that Bolivian authorities were expected to seek additional wheat donations and favorable purchase conditions, and that the president of the Association of Flour Millers had traveled to

Buenos Aires to negotiate the purchase of a further 75,000 tons from the Argentine Grain Board.⁷⁷ The political significance attributed to this transfer by the Argentine Embassy is explicit in the document itself: the supply of flour and bread was characterized as a matter of considerable domestic political importance for the regime, which had publicly committed to normalizing the provision of basic foodstuffs. The wheat donation thus served simultaneously as a stabilization instrument—shoring up the regime's capacity to manage civilian consumption—and as a signal of Argentine commitment at a moment when, as the US State Department noted, Buenos Aires remained the only government prepared to extend material assistance to an internationally isolated Bolivia. Alongside the sale of wheat, there was a significant increase in the volume of Bolivian gas purchased by Argentina at prices favorable to the García Meza regime.⁷⁸

In the logistical domain, the US Embassy in La Paz reported that plans for the coup had included 'military cargo flights to Argentina for the purpose of supplies, i.e. dry rations, weapons and ammunition,' and that such flights had, by the time of reporting, already taken place.⁷⁹ This supply dimension preceded the coup itself and formed part of the pre-coup advisory and planning activity that the same cable attributed to the Argentine army and its intelligence apparatus. A parallel arms supply channel, operating through non-official intermediaries, is documented in a CIA report concerning Djethart Jan Hendrik Cyriel Sassen—a Dutch national, former SS officer, and Buenos Aires-based arms dealer—who provided 200 FAL rifles to Bolivian cocaine magnate Roberto Suárez Gómez, cousin of coup co-organizer and future Interior Minister Luis Arce Gómez, for use during the coup. The same report identifies Sassen as being in contact with Mario Mingolla, a SIDE official based in Buenos Aires—a detail that plausibly situates the transaction within the Argentine state intelligence network rather than treating it as a purely private commercial operation.⁸⁰ It is not possible to establish the precise nature of this connection. Nevertheless, the overlap between a private arms network operating in Buenos Aires and a state intelligence official is difficult to read as entirely coincidental, particularly given the broader pattern of Argentine involvement.

The earliest direct evidence of physical Argentine penetration appears in a cable transmitted from La Paz on July 23, 1980. The US Embassy in La Paz reported: 'The Argentines are up to their necks in this coup; perhaps not the government per se, but certainly the Argentine army and its intelligence apparatus.' It added two concrete observations: 'persons actively involved in the detention and interrogation of prisoners are speaking with obvious Argentine accents,' and the Embassy's military attaché had 'run into the notorious Argentine Lt. Colonel Durán shortly after the coup took place last Thursday inside the Miraflores barracks where political prisoners were already being brought in. Durán is generally known as the adviser to the Bolivian Army G-2.'⁸¹ This element becomes far more significant given that Durán Sáenz was a key Army officer in the repressive apparatus around the clandestine detention center 'El Vesubio,' in Buenos Aires. He also served as head of the Information Collection Center (Central de Reunión de Información, CRI) in 1976-1977 while holding a position in Brigade X's Intelligence Division. These elements linked him directly to military security agencies, interrogation, and operational coordination.⁸²

Durán Sáenz was not an isolated presence. A cable transmitted from La Paz the following day, July 24, provides the earliest disaggregated picture of Argentine advisory deployment. Drawing on a police source, it reports that an advisory team of sixteen members had arrived from Santa Cruz within the previous two days, assigned to the following support functions: logistical, military armaments, military maintenance, psychological operations, and radio communications.⁸³

Broader estimates of the overall scale of Argentine involvement varied, but the documentary record consistently points to extensive pre-coup contact between Argentine military and intelligence elements and their Bolivian counterparts, including advocacy of a coup and reports of Argentine personnel participating in detention and interrogation operations. In Washington, Secretary of State Muskie judged the evidence sufficient to postpone a planned visit to Buenos Aires by Assistant Secretary William Bowdler: though 'not conclusive,' it pointed 'to involvement by at least some elements of the Argentine military.'⁸⁴ What these sources establish in aggregate

is not a precise count but a structural pattern: Argentine penetration was extensive, pre-meditated, and operationally embedded at multiple levels.⁸⁵ Nor was that pattern monolithic: it mobilized at least two institutional actors with different functions and different degrees of proximity to formal political authority—the civil SIDE and the military Batallón 601.

As recorded in the Defense Intelligence Agency summary of October 24, 1980, SIDE—‘the principal intelligence organization of the Argentine government with ties to both military and police security components’—conducted a seven-day anti-subversive intelligence course for fourteen Bolivian officials, including the deputy director of the National Investigations Directorate and several military officers. Instruction emphasized psychological pressure and ‘physical measures, emphasizing those leaving no marks.’ On two occasions, detainees were reportedly used for demonstration purposes. Argentine personnel operated in civilian attire using SIDE credentials, a choice that ‘suggests awareness of a continuing need to retain plausible denial of official military involvement.’⁸⁶ SIDE thus offered a formalized channel for the transfer of interrogation doctrine under civilian cover compatible with diplomatic denial—a semi-official training and liaison function whose very design reflected the legal indefensibility of what was being transferred.

On the other hand, Batallón 601’s involvement presents the most acute evidentiary difficulties of the entire reconstruction. The participation of the unit in the Bolivian operation is treated as established in both the scholarly—mostly from political science—and investigative literature on the period. Yet the primary source record is thinner than the confidence of the secondary literature might suggest. The only document that explicitly names the 601 in connection with Bolivia is a memorandum dated August 18, 1980, drafted by Embassy Buenos Aires officer Townsend B. Friedman—and even this does not document specific operations.⁸⁷ The available evidence nevertheless allows the identification of a different dimension of the unit’s involvement: the mechanism through which Argentine influence became embedded within the new Bolivian regime. Rather than relying exclusively on advisory or training missions, Batallón 601 appears to have operated by placing non-Argentine personnel already integrated into its own operational structure in key positions within the García Meza regime. As reconstructed elsewhere, several such operatives subsequently served in structures associated with the SES, where they performed repressive, drug-trafficking control, logistical, and liaison functions. This pattern suggests that Argentine involvement extended beyond the transfer of expertise or temporary assistance. By embedding personnel within the regime’s coercive institutions, Buenos Aires created durable channels through which established operational practices and coordination could be maintained without requiring direct control over the Bolivian security apparatus.⁸⁸

Overall, the reconstruction advanced in this section, while inevitably partial, points to a relationship of structured dependence rather than direct Argentine control over the García Meza regime. Under these conditions, financial support, logistical assistance, and intelligence-linked personnel provided Buenos Aires with meaningful leverage over the regime’s conduct.⁸⁹

Isolation and radicalization: washington and the García Meza regime

From the outset, the García Meza regime confronted Washington with a combination that made it uniquely difficult to accommodate: systematic human rights abuses compounded by the overt incorporation of narco trafficking into state structures. The latter dimension resisted the strategic calculus through which ideological sympathy and security interests had elsewhere been weighed against human rights concerns. It transformed the regime into a diplomatically untenable partner even for those within the incoming Reagan administration otherwise critical of Carter’s human rights emphasis.⁹⁰

The measures Washington brought to bear against the García Meza regime were not improvised in the aftermath of the July 17 coup. Rather, they had been assembled under the Carter administration and were subsequently renewed—with greater energy and a broader multilateral scope—by Reagan. The package consisted of seven interlocking elements: withdrawal of the American ambassador and

sharp reduction of Embassy staff in La Paz; elimination of the security assistance program and removal of the Military Assistance Group; significant curtailment of development assistance; closure of the DEA office in La Paz; two OAS resolutions adopted jointly with the Andean Pact condemning conditions in Bolivia; an active diplomatic campaign to dissuade European and Latin American democracies from restoring normal relations; and avoiding policy level contacts with representatives of the Bolivian government.⁹¹ Ambassador Weissman had been recalled to Washington on July 18, 1980, the day after the coup; Muskie had proposed the recall to forestall Weissman's expulsion, which the military had already sought in June.⁹² The closure of the DEA office followed weeks later, driven by what Special Agent Wheeler later described in federal court testimony as 'the narcotics trafficking that was going on with the Government and supposed Government involvement,' a level of institutional complicity that rendered meaningful law enforcement cooperation structurally untenable.⁹³

The multilateral dimension proved equally consequential. Through sustained diplomatic pressure, the United States contributed to the World Bank's decision to postpone virtually all new projects in Bolivia and to the IMF's deferral of a Bolivian request for an emergency standby loan—decisions in which American influence was acknowledged by US officials themselves.⁹⁴ Washington also sought to discourage Buenos Aires from continuing its financial patronage.⁹⁵ This diplomatic cordon was reinforced through deliberate deference to the Andean Pact countries: the United States publicly committed not to normalize relations with La Paz before its regional partners, thereby limiting García Meza's ability to play neighboring governments against one another. Policy-level contacts were systematically avoided, while informal channels conveyed four non-negotiable conditions: an end to gross human rights abuses; a drastic reduction in drug trafficking; a roadmap to democratic restoration; and the adoption of a credible economic program.⁹⁶

These measures did not create the dynamics they sought to contain. The regime's anti-communist rhetoric, its sovereign posture vis-à-vis external criticism, and its embedded relationship with the cocaine trade were all present from the outset of the July 17 coup. In an official communique issued on July 21 in response to the State Department's call for a return to civilian rule, the Bolivian government rejected the demand as an 'inadmissible interference in the internal affairs of the country,' asserting Bolivia's right as a 'free, sovereign and independent nation' to determine its own system of government, while presenting the military takeover as a necessary response to 'communist infiltration.'⁹⁷ This framing was reiterated in subsequent public statements, which combined anti-communist justification with an explicitly anti-colonialist rhetoric that cast external pressure as a threat to national sovereignty.⁹⁸ What US pressure appears to have contributed to, however, was the radicalization of the regime's anti-American rhetoric and its increasingly explicit use of narcotics operations as a form of counter-pressure.⁹⁹

Evidence of this shift emerges with particular clarity from federal court records. In late September and early October 1980—roughly ten weeks after the coup, by which time the suspension of aid, the recall of the ambassador, and the closure of the DEA office were already in effect—Arce Gómez articulated to cocaine traffickers a direct link between US pressure and the expansion of narcotics operations. In a late September meeting with a DEA cooperant, the Minister of Interior cast protection payments as funds 'for the government, which was experiencing a "financial crisis,"' adding that 'the United States had cut off aid and recalled the ambassador,' and concluding: 'we are going to infest the gringos with cocaine.'¹⁰⁰ In conversations with Sonya Atala in late September 1980, he returned to the same line of argument, stating that the government 'was going through some problems because the United States did not want to recognize that Government and they had withdrawn their financial aid,' and adding—in a statement admitted over defense objection—that 'since the United States was not willing to give their Government recognition, then they were going to flood the United States with drugs.'¹⁰¹ Walter Atala later recalled a meeting in La Paz in early October that introduced an explicitly electoral dimension: if Reagan won in November, Bolivia expected recognition; if Carter were reelected, 'we have no choice. Let the gringos take care of our border, because we're loading it with cocaine. We will cover the borders with cocaine.'¹⁰²

Taken together, these statements do not in themselves establish a fully coherent state policy. They do, however, strongly suggest that regime insiders framed the expansion of cocaine flows as a form of political retaliation, explicitly linked—at least at the level of discourse and operational justification—to US pressure.

The regime's confrontation with Washington did not remain confined to rhetoric or covert practices. On the night of August 4, 1980, three US Embassy employees were detained by Bolivian security forces, taken to the Ministry of Interior, and subjected to extended interrogation. A formal protest note transmitted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Arce Gómez on August 22, 1980, conveys the account of US Consul James L. Halmo in detail: the three were interrogated separately, coerced into signing statements in Spanish they could not understand, beaten repeatedly, had blood drawn against their will, and had personal effects and cash confiscated and never returned. One of them reported that a masked interrogator held a pistol to his head and simulated Russian roulette, striking him with a rifle butt when he refused to sign a confession.¹⁰³ The significance of this episode lies not only in its violence but in its political register. The detention was carried out by the ministry responsible for internal security against personnel entitled to diplomatic protection under international law, at a moment when bilateral relations were already severely strained. Few comparable incidents involving accredited US personnel can be readily documented in Latin America in the preceding decade, underscoring the extent to which the García Meza government was prepared to test—and, where necessary, override—established diplomatic constraints.

The transition from the Carter to the Reagan administration introduced a period of uncertainty into the bilateral relationship that the Bolivian government actively sought to exploit. Given Reagan's publicly stated hostility to Carter's human rights policy, there was a reasonable expectation in La Paz that the new Republican administration might soften its position toward Bolivia. These expectations were not merely passive. Alongside public appeals for recognition, the regime undertook more structured efforts to reframe its image in Washington, including the hiring in late 1980 of Armao and Company, a New York-based lobbying firm. In a letter to National Security Advisor Richard Allen dated March 26, 1981, Robert Armao reported that he had 'bluntly advised General Meza' to take immediate steps to address human rights violations, overhaul his cabinet, and publicly outline measures to combat drug trafficking. According to Armao, some of these recommendations had been implemented—including the release of political prisoners and the re-invitation of DEA officials—and the Bolivian government had sought to establish contact with Secretary of State Alexander Haig, although its ambassador 'was not permitted to present his credentials'.¹⁰⁴

These initiatives unfolded against a backdrop of uncertainty within the new administration, where policy toward Bolivia did not initially command full consensus. The evolution of the administration's position can be traced through a sequence of internal documents produced between late January and late March 1981. The baseline was established by a State Department policy paper, which formally presented four options but in practice treated only two as viable: Option 1, the continuation of Carter-era isolation—no ambassador, no military assistance, no DEA office, and no policy-level contacts—and Option 2, the discreet re-establishment of conditional contacts. The State Department recommended Option 1, predicting that the regime would collapse within a year through an internal coup led by moderate 'institutionalist' officers.¹⁰⁵ This assessment was reinforced by Chargé Watson's Embassy cable of 30 January 1981, which argued that the new administration held 'maximum leverage' at that precise moment and warned that any premature normalization would undermine U.S. credibility with the moderate military and civilian forces who constituted Bolivia's 'real future'.¹⁰⁶

This emerging consensus was immediately challenged from within the NSC. In his memorandum of 9 February 1981 to Richard Allen, Fontaine rejected the State Department's position on four grounds: the Carter policy had demonstrably failed; reliance on a coup was inherently risky; the paper was overly optimistic about democratic prospects; and it risked saddling the

Reagan administration with what he termed ‘the baggage of failure.’ Fontaine instead recommended a version of Option 2 based on private diplomacy. Allen’s handwritten annotation on the memorandum made clear that this alternative had traction: ‘I agree with these recommendations. Now, how do we get them into the menu of options to be reviewed at NSC level?’¹⁰⁷ Dissenting views were not confined to the NSC. An informal letter from Stephen Dachi—United States International Communication Agency official—to Fontaine, dated 4 February 1981, described the Interagency Group meeting as a ‘fiasco’ and similarly advocated the appointment of a special emissary tasked with delivering a clear conditional message.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, a parallel military channel offered a partially distinct perspective. The memorandum for the record of a meeting between Bolivian Navy Vice Admiral Barroso and US Army official Schweitzer indicates that the Department of Defense was more receptive to the regime’s anti-communist framing, while remaining firm that narcotics constituted the single non-negotiable condition for any improvement in relations.¹⁰⁹

Although no formal decision is recorded in the file, the United States ultimately chose not to relax its policy of isolation. This outcome was shaped not only by internal bureaucratic dynamics, but also by external pressures. A CBS 60min segment broadcasted on March 1, 1981, made the regime’s links to narcotics trafficking a matter of public record, notoriously labeling Luis Arce Gómez the ‘Minister of Cocaine.’ An internal NSC document explicitly flagged this ‘spate of publicity’ as a political liability: any move toward normalization risked congressional backlash, and could be read as tolerance for a government whose senior officials were openly implicated in the cocaine trade.¹¹⁰

The dictatorship of García Meza proved to be short-lived. Internal frictions within the military establishment, compounded by intense pressure from the US and massive domestic protests, forced García Meza to resign on August 4, 1981. He subsequently sought asylum in Brazil, transferring power to General Celso Torrelio Villa. This act set the stage for the process that would ultimately lead to the definitive democratic transition of 1982.¹¹¹

Conclusions

This article has argued that the García Meza dictatorship can only be fully understood by analyzing together three historical processes that became mutually reinforcing during the final years of the Carter administration: the incorporation of cocaine trafficking into the structures of state power, Argentina’s attempt to reshape the regional anti-communist order, and the shifting relationship between Bolivia and the United States during the Carter-Reagan transition. Rather than representing parallel developments, these processes transformed one another, producing a historically specific configuration in which illicit economies, regional counter-revolutionary cooperation, and Cold War politics became structurally intertwined.

Concerning the relationship between cocaine trafficking and state power, the available evidence does not permit precise quantification of the regime’s total narcotics revenues, nor does it clarify the degree of participation across different sectors of the armed forces. Yet the reconstruction advanced in this article establishes that narcotrafficking was not a collateral feature of the regime, tolerated by sectors of the military in exchange for financial support. It was a constitutive element of the coup coalition and, subsequently, a central mechanism through which the post-coup order reproduced itself. The political science literature on state-narco relations in Bolivia had long argued for this kind of fusion; the judicial and archival record examined here provides the evidentiary basis that literature lacked. More broadly, the Bolivian case advances beyond historiographical approaches—exemplified in different ways by the corruption literature and by Paul Gootenberg’s transnational history of the Andean cocaine trade¹¹²—that have examined political power and illicit economies primarily as interconnected but analytically distinct phenomena. Under García Meza, the two became mutually constitutive from the outset. Cocaine

revenues did not simply finance the dictatorship; they also underpinned the regional alliances and coercive institutions through which it sought to survive.

The Argentine dimension illuminates a second process through which the García Meza regime transformed the late inter-American Cold War. Videla's government did not merely provide diplomatic backing or military assistance: through financial support, intelligence cooperation, and the embedding of personnel within the Bolivian security apparatus, it established over the regime a relationship of structured dependence rather than direct control. Yet the significance of this intervention extended beyond the regime's immediate consolidation. As this article has shown, cocaine revenues that financed the coup coalition and its coercive apparatus also flowed into the Argentine paramilitary operations then underway in Central America, extending the reach of Bolivia's narco-economy to a hemispheric scale. The Bolivian case therefore suggests that the transformation of anti-communist cooperation in Latin America during the late 1970s cannot be understood solely in terms of increasing regional initiative. It also entailed a shift in how anti-communist projects were sustained, as they became increasingly dependent on forms of financing and institutional cooperation that differed fundamentally from those that had underpinned hemispheric anti-communism during the previous decade.

The regime's relationship with the United States traces the consequences of this shift. The policy of diplomatic isolation initiated under Carter and maintained—despite the initial preferences of influential actors within the Reagan administration—demonstrates that narcotics trafficking had by this point acquired sufficient political and institutional weight to function as a non-negotiable constraint even within an administration ideologically predisposed toward anti-communist solidarity. More fundamentally, the Bolivian case illustrates how the fusion of anti-communist state-building with the cocaine economy altered the terms on which Cold War alliances could be sustained. The deterioration of relations with Washington was therefore not simply the product of human rights abuses or ideological disagreement. It reflected the emergence of a regime whose anti-communist project had become increasingly perceived in Washington as a direct threat to US national security.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the fragmentation of the inter-American Cold War after 1977 cannot be understood solely in terms of declining US influence or increasing Latin American autonomy. The Bolivian case points instead to a broader reconfiguration of the conditions under which counter-revolutionary politics was conducted. As traditional sources of external support became more uncertain, regional security projects increasingly relied upon alternative forms of finance, transnational intelligence cooperation, and embedded paramilitary networks. Seen from this perspective, Bolivia ceases to appear merely as a brief and exceptional 'narco-dictatorship.' Instead, it reveals how the fragmentation of the hemispheric anti-communist order transformed the material foundations of Cold War politics itself.

Notes

1. The scholarship on the National Security Doctrine is extensive. Among the most significant contributions: Joseph Comblin, *El poder militar en América Latina* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1978); Manuel Antonio Garretón, 'De la seguridad nacional a la nueva institucionalidad. Notas sobre la trayectoria ideológica del nuevo Estado autoritario,' *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 40, no. 4 (1978): 1259–1282; Alain Rouquié, *El Estado Militar en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1984); David Pion-Berlin, 'Latin American National Security Doctrines: Hard and Softline Themes,' *Armed Forces & Society* 15, no. 3 (1989): 411–429. For a historiographical overview see Laura Yanina Sala, 'La Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional en América Latina. Un repaso por los estudios clásicos y sus críticos,' *e-I@tina. Revista electrónica de estudios latinoamericanos* 20, no. 80 (2022).
2. On transnational repression, see Francesca Lessa, *The Condor Trials: Transnational Repression and Human Rights in South America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).
3. The Bolivian DSN is generally associated with Hugo Banzer's long dictatorship (1971–1978). After overthrowing the government of Juan José Torres, the administration dismantled democratic structures by banning political parties, suspending labor unions, and suppressing civil liberties. Under the framework of Operation Condor, the regime systematically engaged in state-sponsored violence, resulting in arbitrary detentions, torture, and

- forced disappearances of political dissidents. See James Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins: Political Struggle in Bolivia 1952–1982* (London: Verso Editions, 1984), 201–248.
4. Isaac Sandoval Rodríguez, *El proyecto político militar, 1971–1982: el estado de la seguridad nacional en Bolivia* (Santa Cruz de la Sierra: Universidad Boliviana Gabriel René Moreno, 1987); Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins*, 292–344; James M. Malloy and Eduardo Gamarra, *Revolution and Reaction: Bolivia, 1964–1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988); Clare Hargreaves, *Snowfields: The War on Cocaine in the Andes* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Allan Gillies, 'State-Narco Networks and the "War on Drugs" in Post-Transition Bolivia, with Special Reference to 1989–1993' (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2016), 117–122.
 5. Magdalena Lisińska, *Argentine foreign policy during the military dictatorship, 1976–1983: between a nationalist and pragmatic approach*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the anti-communist crusade in Central America, 1977–1984* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997).
 6. Allan Gillies, 'Theorising state–narco relations in Bolivia's nascent democracy (1982–1993): governance, order and political transition', *Third World Quarterly* 39 no. 4, (2018): 727–746; Roberto Laserna, *El fracaso del prohibicionismo: estudios socioeconómicos para una historia de las políticas antidrogas en Bolivia* (La Paz: Fundación Vicente Pazos Kanki, 2011); Eduardo Gamarra, 'Transnational Criminal Organizations in Bolivia', in Tom Farer (ed.), *Transnational crime in the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Federico Aguiló, *Narcotráfico y violencia* (Cochabamba: CEDIB-IESE, 1992).
 7. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (eds.), *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
 8. Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
 9. Vanni Pettinà, *Historia mínima de la Guerra Fría en América Latina* (México: El Colegio de México, 2018).
 10. William A. Booth, 'Rethinking Latin America's Cold War', *The Historical Journal* 64, no. 4 (2021): 1128–1150.
 11. Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
 12. See Jon M. Church, 'La crisis del Canal del Beagle', *Estudios Internacionales* 41, no. 161 (September–December 2008): 7–33; Luis Alberto Tapia, *Esta noche: la guerra* (Viña del Mar: Universidad Marítima de Chile, 1997); Pettinà, *Historia mínima de la Guerra Fría en América Latina*.
 13. James Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins: Political Struggle in Bolivia 1952–1982* (London: Verso Editions, 1984), pp. 201–248.
 14. Magdalena Cajías, 'La implantación del poder militar y el retorno de la democracia (1964–1982)', in *Bolivia, su historia, tomo VI: Constitución, desarrollo y crisis del estado de 1952* (La Paz: Coordinadora de Historia, 2014), 163–164.
 15. Stephen Zunes, 'The Role of Civil Resistance in Bolivia's 1977–1982 Pro-Democracy Struggle', *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018), 55–56.
 16. Juan Antonio Morales and Jeffrey D. Sachs, 'Bolivia's Economic Crisis', in Jeffrey D. Sachs (ed.), *Developing Country Debt and Economic Performance*, vol. 2: *The Country Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
 17. Cajías, 'La implantación del poder militar', 162–165.
 18. CIA, 'National Intelligence Daily', 7 Jan. 1980, p. 10 [Washington, DC, CIA Electronic Reading Room], available at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82T00466R000100010019-6.pdf>, accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
 19. CIA, National Intelligence Daily, 'Bolivia: Preserving Stability', 14 Apr. 1980, available at https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000312376.pdf, accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
 20. ERAB [Embajada de la República Argentina en Bolivia], 'Nota sobre situación política interna', 16 Jan. 1980, p. 2, AMRECIC [Buenos Aires, Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto], Bolivia-notas de la embajada 1980, box AH/0211.
 21. ERAB, 'Cable La Paz n° 422', 25 Apr. 1980, AMRECIC, Colección Forti (Digital), available at <https://desclasificacion.cancilleria.gob.ar/archivos/documentos/FORTI/BOLIVIA/1980/cr422.pdf>, accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
 22. DOS [United States Department of State], 'Coups Plotting', 10 July 1980 [La Paz, US Embassy], Document No. C09000086, DOS FOIA Virtual Reading Room (FVRD), [<https://foia.state.gov/searchapp/search.aspx>], accessed 23 April 2026. Due to the technical structure of the State Department Virtual Reading Room, stable direct URLs for individual documents are not provided. The record is identified via its unique Document Number. This document also confirms what the academic literature on state–narco relations has already argued, although that literature has rarely drawn on primary sources. See Gillies, 'Theorising state–narco relations'; Laserna, *El fracaso del prohibicionismo*; Gamarra, 'Transnational Criminal Organizations in Bolivia', .
 23. Roberto Suárez Gómez (1932–2000), widely known as Bolivia's 'King of Cocaine', was one of the largest producers and exporters of Andean coca paste and cocaine during the 1970s and 1980s. Born into a wealthy ranching family in the Beni region, he built a vast trafficking enterprise that supplied major Colombian organizations. See Gamarra, 'Transnational Criminal Organizations in Bolivia', 177–178.
 24. The structural roots of Bolivia's narco–military entanglement reach back to the 1950s, when international trafficking organizations began establishing working relationships with members of the Bolivian police and security services. Under the MNR governments (1956–1964), these linkages extended to elected officials; under the military governments that followed, and particularly under Banzer (1971–1978), the rapid expansion of cocaine demand deepened these arrangements, drawing drug rents into the regime's patronage networks as trafficking clans sought accommodation with the state rather than conflict with it. See Laserna, *El fracaso del prohibicionismo*, 60–67.

25. Testimony of Alejandro Pacheco Sotomayor, *United States of America v. Luis Arce Gómez*, [United States District Court, Southern District of Florida, Criminal case no. 83-0358-CR-Gonzalez] 11 Dec. 1990, pp. 18-27 [Atlanta, National Archives], box 3, vol. 2; Presentence Report, *USA v. Arce Gómez*, 1 Jun. 1987, p. 1, box 1, vol. 8.
26. Armony, *Argentina, the United States*, 33.
27. ERAB, 'Cable La Paz nº 409', 24 Apr. 1980, AMRECIC, Colección Forti (Digital), available at <https://desclasificacion.cancilleria.gob.ar/archivos/documentos/FORTI/BOLIVIA/1980/cr409.pdf>, accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
28. Telegram 4532 from Buenos Aires, 3 Jun. 1980, and telegram 4728 from La Paz, 8 Jun. 1980, quoted in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, vol. XXIV, South America; Latin America Region, (FRUS), doc. 157, note 3, and doc. 155, note 4. The Argentine Army Chief of Staff, General José Antonio Vaquero, denied the reports (doc. 157, note 3).
29. Vito Ruggiero, *Il sogno anticomunista. Neofascisti italiani in America Latina (1977-1982)* (Rome: RomaTre-Press, 2023), 141-150, available at <https://romatrepress.uniroma3.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/isan-viru.pdf>, accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
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Data availability statement

The research materials supporting the findings of this study consist of archival materials and published sources that are cited in the endnotes.