

## Flourishing forces: Chile maintains a competent combat capability

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**While austerity budgets have slowed the pace of modernisation for many forces in Latin America, Chile's military is continuing to reap the rewards of a long modernisation programme that has made it one of the region's best-equipped forces. *Jose Higuera reports***

Chile's well-equipped armed forces defend a territory that has a population of 17.9 million in an area of 765.1 km<sup>2</sup> with 7,801 km of borders, a coastline spanning 6,435 km, and a distance of 4,329 km from north to south. The country also comprises several islands and has claims to a section of Antarctica. Although most of the country's border disputes have been resolved, there are still issues with Peru and Argentina and frictions with landlocked Bolivia.

Although during a national emergency or state of war the president becomes commander-in-chief, the regular administration of defence and military matters is handled by the minister of national defence and the undersecretaries of defence and the armed forces. They are responsible for policy and administration respectively and replaced previous service undersecretaries in 2010.



*Atop their Mowag Piranha 6x6 APC, Chilean soldiers operating with UN peacekeeping forces take part in a military parade in Santiago on 19 September 2013. Chilean forces have been participating in UN peacekeeping missions since the end of the Cold War. (Claudio Santana/AFP/Getty Images)*

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A new Joint Staff, the Estado Mayor Conjunto (EMCO), is tasked with planning and advising roles and also controls joint operational deployments, as well as the north and south regional joint

commands. The EMCO is led by a three-star general officer, but the possibility of making it a four-star position and a primus inter pares with service heads is being considered.

Chile's defence spending in 2016 was USD4.571 billion, which represents 7.3% of total fiscal spending and is equivalent to 1.94% of GDP. Funding for personnel, including salaries and pensions, as well as operations, is provided through the Fiscal Budget that is approved by Congress every year. Military equipment procurement is funded by the Copper Law, with 10% of the yearly revenues from the Codelco state-owned mining consortium allocated for this purpose and a minimum amount legally fixed at USD291 million per year. Since 2012 unspent Copper Law funds are held in a Strategic Contingency Fund, which is currently worth USD5 billion and is only available for military procurement.

## **Personnel**

The combined Chilean armed forces number 81,000 personnel, comprising 68,000 regular troops and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and 13,000 conscripts. The service obligation for conscripts is 12 months in the army and air force, and 22 months for the navy. Since 2005 the conscript force has been mostly made up of volunteers, with any shortfall covered by lottery calls. There is a 40,000-strong reserve of draftees that recently completed national service as well as retired regulars.

A short service system was created in 2008 as the first step towards the option of a shorter military career, but reforms to facilitate faster promotion to prioritise performance and qualifications over seniority are still pending. As a result staff retention is low and the main intended beneficiary of these reforms, the army, is currently understaffed. Despite wage increases and bonuses, the air force is also short of pilots because of migration to the commercial sector. However, keeping younger retired combat pilots proficient by allocating them regular flying time as reservists has been resisted inside the service.

## **Peacekeeping and international operations**

Chile has been participating in international peacekeeping operations since 1935, when observers were sent to oversee the ceasefire between Bolivia and Paraguay during the Chaco War. Since the end of the Cold War the country has participated in United Nations (UN) missions to Cambodia, East Timor, and Iraq. A joint training centre for international peacekeeping operations was opened in Santiago in 2002, underscoring Chile's commitment to overseas aid missions.

In early 2004 Chile joined the US-led Multinational Interim Force-Haiti (MIF-Haiti) mission, contributing an army battalion to the effort to prevent violence. When authority was transferred to the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in June 2004, Chile contributed with the second national component after Brazil, comprising a joint army and marine mechanised battalion, a detachment of air force helicopters, a tri-service medical unit, and a combined Chilean-Ecuadorian engineer company. The deployment of Chilean forces to Haiti continued for 13 years, ending in 2017.

Since 2002 a Chilean Army/Marines joint platoon has served with the Argentine component of the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP). Chilean military personnel are also deployed with the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) in Palestine (Israel), the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP), and the Althea mission of the European Operational Force (EUFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 2016 military observers were sent to the Central African Republic as part of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSCA) and there are plans for Chile to contribute helicopter, medical, and engineer

detachments to the mission. Observers were also sent to Colombia in 2016 to monitor the ceasefire agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas, while a larger team is overseeing the disarming and demobilisation of the FARC.

In 2006 Chile and Argentina activated the binational Cruz del Sur (Southern Cross) international peacekeeping force, with command and headquarters rotating every year between the two countries. Its land component comprises army and marine mechanised infantry battalions from each country alongside a combined field support battalion. Army and air force helicopters make up the air component, while the naval contribution is one vessel and a naval helicopter.

Since 1994 the Chilean Navy has participated in the large US-sponsored, multinational, biannual 'Rim of the Pacific' ('RIMPAC') exercise. A Chilean officer commanded part of the 2012 iteration of the exercise and a team of 50 Chilean Navy personnel led by a flag officer is planning and will command the next 'RIMPAC' this year.

The Chilean Navy also took the lead in 2003, alongside the US Navy and Panamanian security forces, to start Exercise 'PANAMAX' focused on the combined defence of the Panama Channel Zone, where the country continues to deploy elements from all three services.

## **Army**

The 43,000-strong Chilean Army has up to now been led by General Humberto Oviedo, but he handed over command to General Ricardo Martínez on 9 March. As part of a force development plan known as 'Ejército 2026', a subsidiary plan named 'Orca 2015–2018' has led to a number of units being transformed from battalions and regiments to self-contained reinforced regiments and brigades. This has included reorganising staff and supporting components, as well as changing denominations and roles according to the areas where units are based and their expected operational theatres. Many of these units have fewer personnel than the minimum requirement, which is being addressed by merging units, and a number of facilities are being closed down.

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