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# Voluntary Military Service as a Key Strategy to Strengthen National Security

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the Voluntary Military Service (SMV) in Peru and its potential as a strategy to strengthen national security. Reforms are proposed that promote its reevaluation and strengthening. This study reviews historical, political and sociological aspects through a qualitative methodology and a critical evaluation of the academic literature, examining the factors that have shaped the development of this service. It is suggested to integrate the SMV as a requirement to join the Peruvian National Police (PNP) to improve the preparation and discipline of police officers and encourage greater civic engagement among young people. In addition, the need for political will to overcome the limitations that have weakened the Armed Forces is highlighted. Finally, a strategic proposal aimed at strengthening the country's security and sovereignty is presented, emphasizing a comprehensive approach in the implementation of these reforms.

**Keywords:** *Voluntary Military Service, National Security, Armed Forces of Peru, National Police of Peru, Transnational Organized Crime, Political Will, Political Reforms, Institutional Strengthening.*

## Introduction

Military service has historically been a centerpiece in building and preserving national security globally. From the works of Niccolo Machiavelli, particularly in *The Prince* and *On the Art of War*, where the importance of citizen armies for the stability of states is discussed, to the formation of modern states, soldiers have played a fundamental role in the defense of independence, sovereignty, stability, and internal security.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Peru, this institution has not only fulfilled territorial defense; it has also contributed to forming values and promoting social mobility among citizens.<sup>2</sup>

As the twenty-first century faces contemporary threats and various global crises—such as migration, the COVID-19 emergency, Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), and natural disasters—a more strategic approach is needed to harness the potential of the SMV in national security and, therefore, in citizen security.

During the 1990s, the shift from Compulsory Military Service (SMO) to an SMV in Peru responded to a specific political and military context characterized by the defeat of terrorist organizations such as the Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path (PCP-SL) and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), as well as by the signing of the peace agreement with Ecuador.<sup>3</sup> However, this transition resulted in a significant decrease in the capabilities of the Armed Forces and greater vulnerability to the so-called "new threats". According to Eduardo, this resolution was accompanied by a lack of investment in infrastructure and stigmatization of military personnel, seriously affecting their morale and capacity to respond.<sup>4</sup>

The SMV in Peru, initially conceived as a more flexible and modern alternative, has faced multiple obstacles that hinder its consolidation as a solid strategy for national security. Castro points out that one of the main problems is the limited economic incentive offered to young people who opt for this option;<sup>5</sup> This is reflected in the low economic allocations received, discouraging their participation and not adequately recognizing the value of the service provided to the nation. This factor and the lack of social recognition towards the soldier have led to the SMV being seen as a burden rather than an opportunity.

The weakening of military service has had a significant impact. Low economic allowances and a lack of job opportunities have further reduced youth motivation to enlist.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there is a growing disconnect between young Peruvians and the tutelary institutions of the State, aggravated by disintegrating discourses and a lack of a citizen approach that values service to the country.<sup>7</sup> The lack of a comprehensive policy connecting military service with future career opportunities restricts its effectiveness as an engine of social development.

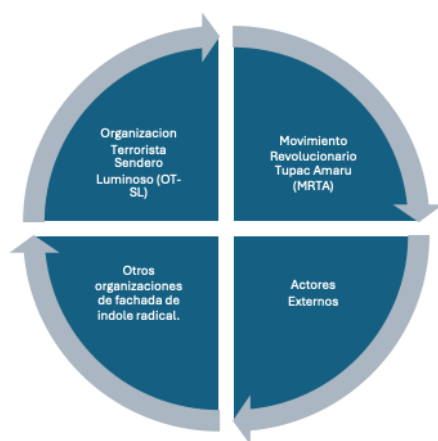
In this context, it is essential to rethink the role of the SMV. Establishing it as a requirement to enter the PNP would not only help cover the police deficit; It would also raise the profile of candidates by entering better prepared physically and morally. At the national strategic level, this integration would contribute both to citizen security and to the strengthening of national defense.<sup>8</sup> This restructuring must be accompanied by a strong political will that prioritizes security as a national matter.

### Transition from Obligation to Volunteering

The change from the SMO to the SMV in Peru was a strategic decision that, although well-intentioned, generated significant gaps in national security. During the government of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), in a context where terrorist organizations had been defeated and peace agreements were signed, it was considered unnecessary to maintain the Armed Forces with troops conscripted on a compulsory basis. However, Manrique argues that this measure did not adequately consider the long-term implications, such as the decrease in the number of military personnel and the lack of adequate replacement in critical areas, such as border surveillance, support for Disaster Risk Management (DRM), and the new threats that the country

would have to face.<sup>9</sup> The transition to the SMV responded more to a short-term political decision than to strategic planning; therefore, in the long term, it affected the capacity of the Armed Forces to respond to current contemporary threats.

Instead of accompanying this change with solid incentives that would ensure the attraction of new volunteers, a limited economic scheme was maintained, where the allocations were insufficient to attract young people motivated by a true sense of personal and professional development.<sup>10</sup> Unlike other states that offer compensation according to the sacrifice involved in military service, in Peru this aspect was devalued, making it even more difficult for new recruits to integrate.



**Figure 1.** Major military threats on the internal and external fronts (1980-1999)

A critical aspect that accompanied this transition was the stigmatization of the Armed Forces, exacerbated by judicial proceedings against commanders who participated in the fight against terrorism. Although it was necessary to clarify responsibilities and do justice, this judicialization contributed to the creation of a narrative of distrust towards the military apparatus, affecting the morale of soldiers and the public perception of their role in national security.<sup>11</sup> This negative opinion, coupled with the low pay and precarious conditions faced by many volunteers, has discouraged young people from joining the SMV.<sup>12</sup> The policies implemented failed to generate adequate incentives, and voluntary enlistment has remained at low levels, thus weakening the country's military response capacity.

The key question lies in why, despite signs of fragility in the system, effective reforms to strengthen the SMV have not been implemented. The inaction of political decision-makers reveals a lack of knowledge or a short-term vision of national security, disconnected from comprehensive strategic planning.<sup>13</sup> This neglect has allowed threats to the country's stability to continue to increase without adequate intervention, leaving Peru in a vulnerable and disadvantaged position.<sup>14</sup> Correcting this situation requires not only a thoughtful review of the past, but an urgent rethinking

of current policies so that the SMV is consolidated as a robust pillar of national security.

### Gender changes in the European Youth

Young Peruvians have profoundly transformed their perception of military service. In philosophical terms, the values that were once at the core of civic identity—such as duty to the state and commitment to community—are in decline, replaced by a more individualistic view that prioritizes personal rights over collective responsibilities. Philosophers such as Bauman, in his theory of "liquid modernity", explain how traditional structures, including national identity, are crumbling in favour of more flexible and fragmented relationships.<sup>15</sup> This is reflected in the attitude of young people towards military service, where the idea of sacrifice for the common good has lost weight in a society oriented towards immediate personal success and consumption.

From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu describes how economic, cultural, and social capitals have shaped the lives of individuals according to their socioeconomic environments.<sup>16</sup> In Peru, military service is not perceived as a path to social mobility; this is because the share capital associated with belonging to the Armed Forces has decreased compared to other personal development options —such as higher education or working in the private sector— Contreras.<sup>17</sup> This trend is reinforced by an education system that does not actively promote civic values and patriotism; instead of instilling a strong sense of belonging to a national community, it fosters criticism of tutelary institutions of the State such as the Armed Forces, which further disassociates young people from the concept of service to the homeland.

The contrast with past generations is evidenced by observing that while military service previously represented an opportunity to internalize discipline, form strong individuals, and develop a robust sense of national identity; today it is perceived as a limited and unattractive option.<sup>18</sup> The lack of opportunities for professional development – coupled with precarious conditions in their facilities located in vulnerable areas – reinforces this disconnect. Unlike other countries where the SMV continues to be a means to climb socially; in Peru it has lost that transformative character due to absent policies that modernize it and adapt it to contemporary needs.<sup>19</sup> Instead of functioning as a nationally emblematic institution or as an engine for social mobility; it has been left behind as a non-competitive option for young Peruvians.

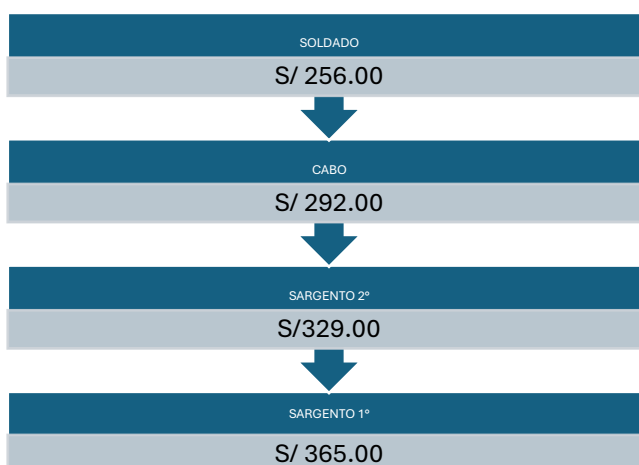
In this sense, the current position on the SMV reflects both an identity and institutional crisis. According to Gil and Rubio, influenced by globalization and new ideological narratives; Younger generations have less attachment to traditional values such as honor or patriotism.<sup>20</sup> They tend to value more opportunities that offer immediate rewards — such as better wages or studying abroad. Fernández argues that in order to reverse this trend, it is essential to reformulate the SMV as an instrument not only

for national security, but also for personal and professional development;<sup>21</sup> which would require greater educational investment along with technical training and job options aligned with youth expectations regarding development and state security.

### Weakening of Military Service

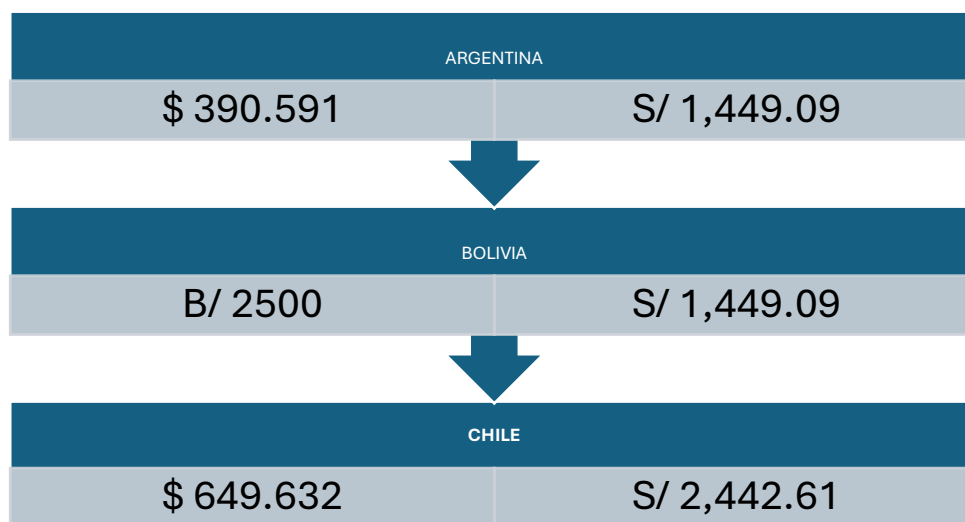
The neglect of military service in Peru responds directly to political decisions influenced by an ideological agenda that, far from prioritizing national security, sought to erode the bases of the Armed Forces, a fundamental pillar of any country. During the last quarter of a century, political sectors associated with ideologies militarily defeated in the 90s—especially those that sympathized with radical causes—began a smear campaign against the country's tutelary institutions.<sup>22</sup> This strategy aimed to delegitimize the Armed Forces and undermine its influence, appealing to the narrative about human rights violations that occurred during the fight against terrorism, with the purpose of consolidating a Gramscian strategy and perpetuating a political agenda aimed at institutional weakening.

The effects of this policy of dismantling were clearly manifested in the allocation of insufficient budgets, the lack of adequate equipment and the very poor conditions in which both the barracks and the military personnel were maintained for many years. Volunteer soldiers were relegated to receiving symbolic compensations, completely disproportionate to their commitment to the defense of the country; meanwhile, military installations deteriorated with no signs of improvement or a significant increase in the resources allocated to their maintenance.<sup>23</sup> The lack of investment in military equipment and development opportunities for soldiers reflects a clear negligence in political planning and vision, revealing a disregard for defense and national security.



**Figure 2.** Current financial allowance for Armed Forces Voluntary Military Service troops of Peru

This weakening was exacerbated by policies that not only neglected the need to strengthen the Armed Forces, but they maintained a deficient economic structure for the soldiers. The low economic allocations and the lack of material and social incentives for those who serve the homeland reflect a lack of political commitment to guarantee a safe and secure environment Armed Forces that are in a position to preserve and protect national interests.<sup>24</sup> This discourages young people from enlisting, directly affecting both the quantity and quality of recruits. Although other countries with similar economies invest in solid incentives for their military, Peru has maintained an economic scheme that discourages recruitment and reflects an undervaluation of those who are willing to serve.



**Figure 3.** Economic allowance of troop personnel (soldier and/or similar) in other countries of the region and its equivalent in national currency

No country that aspires to stability, progress and sustainable development underestimates its Armed Forces, which represent the main reactive mechanism against internal and external threats.<sup>25</sup> However, in the case of Peru, deliberate political decisions have generated a process of weakening that has exposed national security.<sup>26</sup> While other states strengthen their military apparatus to face the challenges and threats of the 21st century, Peru has chosen to marginalize them, putting at risk its capacity to respond to internal and external crises. This lack of strategic vision is deeply worrying, given that the Armed Forces not only protect the territory; They are also essential for stability and internal order, particularly in the current scenario of growing insecurity.<sup>27</sup>

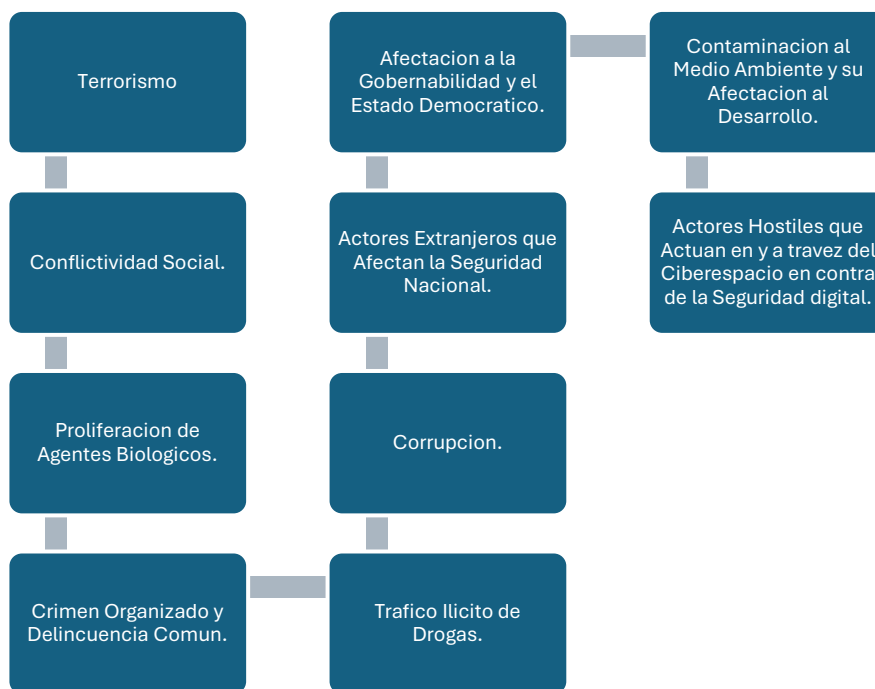


Figure 4. Contemporary Threats to National Security

The deterioration of the SMV reflects the result of a lack of political intention and will that prioritizes the well-being and security of the country. While these sectors continue to promote agendas aimed at restricting the power of the Armed Forces, the capacity of the State to respond to the multiple contemporary threats and emerging global crises is at stake. In a context where security threats are increasingly sophisticated, weakening the Armed Forces constitutes a strategic error with possible serious consequences for the country.<sup>28</sup> It is imperative to urgently rethink these policies, valuing the vital role played by the military in the security, defense and development of the country; recognizing that no national project can be built at the expense of weakening the institutions that protect it.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 5.** *Emerging global crises*

### **Proposal for Synergy between Forces: SMV as a Requirement for the Police Career**

The establishment of the SMV as a prerequisite for joining the PNP is proposed as a key strategy to strengthen citizen and national security. Given the growing rise of the COT and the need to strengthen security institutions, the incorporation of personnel with military training would improve the operational capabilities of the PNP. This initiative depends entirely on the political will to make feasible and implement strategies that prioritize the strengthening of these institutions. Ayvar and Díaz stress that a strong nation needs Armed Forces, solid and respected;<sup>30</sup> in this context, in Peru, the lack of political will to strengthen the Armed Forces and the police forces has contributed to the weakening of the forces of order, which are the reactive entity when the nation is at risk from any threat. Therefore, institutionally, this measure would offer the country a better prepared police force.

From a sociological perspective, the individual benefits of this proposal are evident. Upon completing military service, PNP aspirants not only prepare morally and physically; they also acquire discipline and civic values that would enhance their performance in public service. It is essential to create a new frame of reference that motivates them to consider military service as a path to personal growth, contributing not only to the defense of the country, but also to their own progress and that of their families by guaranteeing economic and social stability, through a secure and paid career.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the process of social mobility depends on access to institutional opportunities; this would make it easier for young people – especially those from

vulnerable sectors – to improve their socioeconomic situation through military service and their subsequent career in the PNP.

However, for this proposal to be viable, it is essential to increase economic incentives (tips), as current compensations are not sufficient to encourage young people to enlist in the military ranks.<sup>32</sup> It is necessary to offer a fair remuneration that recognizes the sacrifice and dedication of the soldiers; this would provide not only a personal and family benefit, but would also promote greater professionalization within the Armed Forces.<sup>33</sup>

The proposal to make military service a requirement for entry into the PNP offers a pragmatic solution that could generate benefits for multiple actors: young volunteers, their families, security institutions, and society as a whole. This would allow for police officers who are better prepared to deal with threats related to citizen security. Álvarez argues that the institutions in charge of guaranteeing internal security are essential to stabilize the State and protect its citizens;<sup>34</sup> therefore, a PNP composed of troops with military training would strengthen the bond between the State and citizens by generating a more reliable and secure environment. Consequently, revitalizing the SMV and implementing it as a requirement to join the PNP should not be seen as an isolated solution, but as an integral part that demands decisive active participation on the part of political leaders.



**Figure 6.** *Institutions and institutions strengthened by the proposal*

### Breaking Biases: The Need for Political Intention and Will

The lack of intention and political will in Peru to strengthen the Armed Forces. The National Security Strategy (NSS) has weakened key institutions and eroded the legitimate monopoly of violence, a fundamental principle in the theory of the state. According to Zapata and Laura, the decisions of political leaders, often guided by partisan interests or political ideologies, have undermined the state's ability to confront internal and external threats, weakening its structure.<sup>35</sup> Eduardo states that the State must be able to define the state of emergency and act firmly to preserve its sovereignty;<sup>36</sup> however, in Peru, this capacity has been compromised by the lack of strategic vision and the submission of the Armed Forces to short-term agendas. Instead of acting with pragmatism and *realpolitik*, as Kissinger puts it, political decisions have led to a reduction in resources that directly affects the morale of the security forces.<sup>37</sup>

National security cannot be a priority subordinated to ideological passions. According to Portilla, the right to security is indispensable for the development of the State;<sup>38</sup> its weakening opens the door to non-state actors such as the COT, seriously compromising national stability. Governors, decision-makers and political leaders who ignore this premise generate vulnerable conditions; this has been evident in Peru with the decrease in the operational capacity of law enforcement and a lack of personnel to guarantee citizen security. Likewise, Durand argues that the sovereignty of the State lies in its ability to guarantee peace and order;<sup>39</sup> This function has been seriously affected by shortcomings in clear political implementation and erroneous prioritization towards short-term political agendas over national interests.

Political pragmatism is decisive in reversing this trend. Leaders who prioritize security as the central axis of state development could restore to law enforcement its capacity to respond to contemporary threats and emerging global crises. Ponce warns that a State without strong institutions is doomed to chaos;<sup>40</sup> this lesson cannot be ignored by Peru. To do this, a more focused approach on political reality is needed where stability depends exclusively on solid prepared institutions.

### Conclusion

An in-depth analysis of the SMV in Peru reveals that its transformation and strengthening are fundamental strategic issues for national security. The political decisions taken in recent decades have blurred the relevance of military service, depriving the country of an organized reserve well prepared to face various threats. This weakening is not simply the result of circumstantial changes; It is due to deliberate policies promoted by certain political and ideological sectors that, after their defeat in the 1990s, began a sustained campaign to discredit the forces that confronted them. The erosion of institutional defense capacities in any nation represents a sign of vulnerability; therefore, Peru cannot afford to maintain this situation if it wishes to ensure its long-term stability.

In societies with a solid development, the Armed Forces are recognized for their ability to defend sovereignty and are provided with the resources and respect necessary to operate effectively. However, this aspect has been largely ignored by political decision-makers, who prioritize ideological interests over national interests. In this sense, national and citizen security cannot be subjected to party dialectics or political passions. Therefore, applying a strategy of realpolitik requires pragmatism and a clear vision of the future that overcomes biases and solves the structural problems that affect the nation.

The proposal to incorporate military service as a requirement to apply for the PNP would not only have an immediate impact on the improvement of police officers; it would also represent a forward-looking solution that would strengthen cohesion between State institutions and citizens. This measure would provide the country with people better prepared to face the challenges of internal security. In addition, it would raise the morale and motivation of young Peruvians by providing them with a clear trajectory of personal and professional development, achieving a beneficial convergence for both the individual and the collective.

Ultimately, all this effort must be backed by a clear political intention. Without the firm and determined will of the country's leaders, the proposal to revitalize the SMV and link it with the PNP will remain an empty aspiration. Peru needs decision-makers who understand the value of the Armed Forces and its fundamental role in the stability and development of the country. True progress is not only measured in economic or social terms; it is also assessed in terms of a State's ability to ensure the security and well-being of its citizens. In this sense, the revaluation of the SMV as a priority national security strategy is an imperative that, if not addressed, will continue to expose the country to vulnerabilities that can be avoided with a strategic, critical and sustainable approach.

### **About the author:**

Manolo Eduardo Villagra is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Peruvian Army and has a solid academic background. He holds a Master's degree in Military Sciences with a specialization in Strategic Planning and Decision Making, as well as a Master's degree in Management and Technological Innovation and a Master's degree in Educational Sciences. He also holds a degree in Military Sciences and a degree in Administration. His training is complemented with postgraduate studies in National Security and Defense (CAEN), Leadership and Strategic Planning (ESGE EPG), and Military History and Strategic Thinking (ESGE EPG).

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