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The Other Challenges for the Government: National Security and Defense

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On June 1st, President José Antonio Kast presented his first State of the Nation Address to the National Congress. The speech aligned with the urgencies that determined the electoral outcome: public security, economic recovery, and attention to the most immediate social demands concentrated almost the entirety of its content. A Head of State assuming office amidst a triple emergency—as he defined it—must necessarily prioritize what most burdens the majority of Chileans.

However, precisely because the State of the Nation Address cannot cover everything, it becomes timely to identify those areas that, without dominating headlines, condition the state's capacity to protect its citizens in the medium and long term: national security and defense. Both matters require decisions that extend beyond political contingencies and, if the administration does not address them with a strategic vision from the outset, it will struggle to correct its course midway through the term. This article aims to contribute, through informed reflection and public policy analysis, to outlining an agenda in these matters for the next years. To this end, the text compiles ideas and initiatives that AthenaLab has advanced over recent years, which prove highly relevant for Chile.

THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM: A NONEXISTENT NATIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

The first step to seriously confront the state's security challenges involves naming the problem with precision, without euphemisms. Chile faces not merely a delinquency or public order issue, but a threat to its national security. This distinction matters because it dictates the scale of the required response. Transnational organized crime, border porosity, the presence of trafficking networks, and the institutional weakness accumulated over years do not constitute phenomena that sectorial initiatives, such as increasing police presence in neighborhoods or reforming the Penal Code, can resolve alone. They demand an articulated response from the state as a whole, directed from the highest level of the executive branch.

To achieve this, as AthenaLab has insisted, creating an eminently political and civilian national security architecture, capable of integrating and coordinating all relevant actors and instruments at the state level, proves indispensable. Today, Chile lacks an organization with those characteristics and attributions. Such a system —with a National Security Council— would enable the continuous monitoring of the risks and threats the country faces, as well as the anticipation of scenarios instead of reacting once problems have materialized. Upon that foundation, the state could design and implement a long-term national security strategy that coherently manages all elements of national power.

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

No national security architecture can function without a modern and robust intelligence system to sustain it. This perhaps represents the area where Chile lags the most. State intelligence efforts currently remain dispersed among different institutions, lacking effective articulation mechanisms or timely integration of available information. The result proves predictable: late diagnoses, reactive responses, and an inability to anticipate threats that, in hindsight, appeared evident.

The recently enacted law 21.821 aiming to modernize national intelligence opens new opportunities. Nevertheless, building that system demands more than legal modifications. It requires incorporating cutting-edge technology, recruiting the best available specialists, and operating under unequivocal civilian guidance and control. An efficient intelligence system that support national security does not threaten public liberties; conversely, it acts as a condition to protect them. Countries that have successfully confronted transnational organized crime have not done so solely with more police resources, but with better information, processed on time and placed at the service of decision-makers.

SPECIALIZED HUMAN CAPITAL

A solid institutional architecture and a functional intelligence system prove necessary but insufficient if the human capital capable of sustaining them does not exist. Today, Chile presents a severe deficit of professionals specialized in national security, defense, and public security. High-level advisory roles frequently fall upon individuals who, despite their dedication, have not received the specific training these matters demand. The consequences remain visible: diagnoses that miss the scale of the problem and solutions that fail to match its complexity.

Reversing this situation requires a deliberate and sustained public policy. This implies—through agreements, exchanges, internships, or other means—financing the training of professionals in the best institutions worldwide, generating incentives for national academia to multiply its programs and research in these areas, and promoting the existence of think tanks capable of producing applied and relevant knowledge. Certainly, the state needs the best available experts, both to advise government decisions and to assume leadership positions in the security field. While observers acknowledge that this investment does not yield immediate results, none of the other reforms will consolidate without it.

UPDATING DEFENSE WITHOUT DENATURING ITS ESSENCE

The Chilean Armed Forces enjoy well-deserved recognition, both domestically and internationally, as President Kast himself acknowledged in his speech. Their professionalism and institutional tradition represent assets the country cannot afford to deteriorate.

However, the growing demand for non-traditional roles—prolonged deployments in the northern and southern macro-zones, support for border control, and participation in public order tasks—has subjected the institutions to sustained pressure which, if the state does not provide corresponding resources and recognition, will ultimately erode exactly what makes their contribution valuable.

Within this context, optimizing the joint command of the Armed Forces will emerge as one of the most relevant tasks for the current administration. The Joint General Staff and existing joint commands must gain relevance and freedom of action, acknowledging the geographic and strategic particularities of the country's northern, central, and southern zones. A more robust joint command does not weaken the institutions; rather, it makes them more effective as part of a coherent defense system. Significant ground has already been covered upon which to build.

Concurrently, reviewing available strategic capabilities proves imperative. Significant areas of obsolescence and interoperability issues exist among the forces, limiting the effectiveness of the whole. It remains impossible to achieve more with the same or less. This does not equate to advocating irresponsible spending on weapons systems, but rather identifying, with technical criteria and under strict civilian control, the indispensable means for the Armed Forces to fulfill their missions, prioritizing everything linked to the surveillance and protection of the country's land, maritime, and air borders.

Furthermore, the defense sector holds the obligation to reinforce and explore additional operational dimensions concerning cyberspace, artificial intelligence, outer space, and the subsea domain, among others. Recent conflict experiences demonstrate that this reality will only intensify in the future.

THE MILITARY CAREER AND ACTIVE-DUTY PERSONNEL

No defense system can sustain itself without individuals who freely choose to dedicate their lives to it. Chile faces a progressive loss of talent within its armed institutions which, certainly, has not received the attention it deserves. Restoring the appeal of the military career across all ranks demands more than declarations of support: it requires better professional development opportunities, effective technology integration in operational functions, merit recognition, and conditions that allow uniformed personnel to fulfill their missions with the dignity inherent to those who serve the state.

In this same sphere, the President delivered a clear message by expressing his support for police operations, a backing that authorities must extend to the military forces currently deployed and those that will deploy for internal security roles. This neither equates to impunity nor implies questioning the judicial system's functionality. Rather, it seeks to guarantee the necessary command backing to ensure that state representatives performing security functions do not find themselves in a state of institutional abandonment, as has occurred in the past. A uniformed service member who hesitates before acting, fearing the judicial consequences of exercising their duty, lacks the conditions to protect anyone.

Finally, compulsory military service deserves a profound review and modernization that transforms it into a truly formative experience. With more than a century of history in the Republic, this institution represents a concrete opportunity for young Chilean men and women to acquire technical skills, strengthen their civic values, and contribute to the country during a decisive period of their development. Harnessing that potential requires investing in the experience, rather than administering it with the same criteria applied for decades. Admittedly, various administrations have undertaken efforts to improve conditions, however, they have not addressed the problem structurally, opting instead to increase benefits.

DEFENSE INDUSTRY AND INNOVATION

In a world where conflict has become a constant and reliance on external suppliers can transform into a critical vulnerability, Chile must advance toward a minimum level of strategic independence regarding defense. That entails recovering and fostering a national defense industry that allows the country to act with freedom of action when facing scenarios of uncertainty. Existing state-owned enterprises—FAMAE, ASMAR, and ENAER—provide a starting point, but an insufficient one.

Chile possesses the talent and technological capabilities to aspire to a relevant position in applied defense innovation. Achieving this requires a national strategy that generates incentives for research and development in this area, actively involves the private sector as well as the academia, and establishes a public-private relationship comparable to those existing in the world's most advanced democracies. A plan with these characteristics would not only strengthen the country's strategic autonomy but would also create skilled employment, drive innovation, and potentially yield positive effects across other spheres of national development. In short, it constitutes an investment fully justified by both security and economic policy reasons.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

President Kast has four years at his disposal to leave a lasting mark on Chile's national security and defense institutional framework. The urgencies of the present remain real and leaders cannot ignore them; however, experience shows that governments that only manage the urgent ultimately leave the conditions that generate the next crisis intact. The matters exposed in these paragraphs do not compete with the priorities declared in the State of the Nation Address, but rather complement them and provide them with a more solid foundation.

A coherent national security architecture, a properly articulated intelligence system, the development of specialized human capital, the modernization of the Armed Forces, and the boost to a national defense industry do not constitute long-term aspirations that officials can indefinitely postpone; rather, they serve as conditions to ensure the public security policies announced today can sustain themselves over time. Chile needs this, and this government bears the opportunity and the responsibility to begin building it.

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