No Safe Haven: Operation Condor and Transnational Repression in South America

Francesca Lessa
UCL Institute of the Americas, UK

AND

Lorena Balardini
University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Transnational repression, i.e., the deliberate targeting of refugees and dissidents by states across borders, is a relatively understudied subject in international relations. This article analyzes why states act together to persecute political opponents abroad and explains variations in such practices. It proposes a theory of cooperation in transnational repression and uses the case study of Operation Condor in the 1970s to test it. Through Operation Condor, South American authoritarian states willingly forewent key aspects of their sovereignty to establish a sophisticated system of cooperation to target dissidents abroad. This scheme was a critical extension of these countries' domestic-level policies of repression against political opposition and enabled them to target politically active refugees wherever they were located. Exiles were perceived as constituting an existential threat to these autocracies' survival, given their ability to potentially undermine both their internal and external regime security, which therefore warranted their elimination. We draw on an interdisciplinary methodology, which combines archival research, interviews, trial observation, and the analysis of legal verdicts, alongside conclusions derived from our novel dataset, the Database on South America's Transnational Human Rights Violations (1969–1981).

La represión transnacional, es decir, la persecución intencional de refugiados y disidentes por parte de los Estados más allá de sus fronteras es un tema relativamente poco estudiado dentro del campo de las relaciones internacionales. Este artículo analiza por qué los Estados actúan de manera conjunta para perseguir a los opositores políticos en el extranjero y explica cómo estas prácticas varían. El artículo propone una teoría de la cooperación en el marco de la represión transnacional, y utiliza el estudio de caso del Plan Cóndor, que tuvo lugar en la década de 1970, con el fin de ponerla a prueba. A través del Plan Cóndor, los Estados autoritarios sudamericanos renunciaron voluntariamente a ciertos aspectos clave de su soberanía para establecer un sistema sofisticado de cooperación con el fin de perseguir a los disidentes en el extranjero. Este plan fue una extensión crítica de las políticas represivas de estos países contra la oposición política a nivel nacional y les permitió rastrear a los refugiados políticamente activos sin importar su paradero. Las dictaduras consideraban que los exiliados constituían una amenaza existencial para su supervivencia, dada su capacidad potencial de socavar la seguridad tanto interna como externa del régimen, lo que justificaba su eliminación. Elaboramos una metodología interdisciplinaria, que combina la investigación archivística, entrevistas en profundidad, la observación de audiencias de juicios y el análisis de resoluciones judiciales, junto con las conclusiones derivadas de nuestra novedosa Base de Datos sobre Violaciones Transnacionales de Derechos Humanos en América del Sur (1969–1981).

La répression transnationale, c.-à-d. des États qui ciblent intentionnellement des réfugiés par-delà les frontières, est un sujet relativement sous-étudié en relations internationales. Cet article analyse les raisons qui poussent des États à collaborer pour persécuter des opposants politiques à l'étranger et explique les variations observées au sein de ces pratiques. Il propose une théorie de coopération en répression transnationale et utilise l'étude de cas de l'opération Condor dans les années 1970 pour la tester. Par le biais de l'opération Condor, des États autoritaires d'Amérique du Sud ont volontairement renoncé à des aspects clés de leur souveraineté pour établir un système sophistiqué de coopération visant à cibler les dissidents à l'étranger. Ce procédé constituait une prolongation importante des politiques nationales de ces pays contre l'opposition politique et leur a permis de cibler des réfugiés actifs sur le plan politique où qu'ils se trouvent. Les personnes exilées étaient perçues comme des menaces existentielles à la survie de ces autocraties, à cause de leur capacité à compromettre la sécurité intérieure et extérieure du régime. Il fallait donc les éliminer. Nous nous fondons sur une méthodologie interdisciplinaire, qui combine des recherches archivistiques, des entretiens, des observations de procès et l'analyse de décisions de justice, ainsi que des conclusions issues d'un ensemble de données inédit sur les droits de l'Homme transnationaux en Amérique du Sud (Database on South America's Transnational Human Rights Violations [1969–1981]).

Francesca Lessa is an Associate Professor in International Relations of the Americas at the Institute of the Americas, University College London (UCL). Her latest book, *The Condor Trials: Transnational Repression and Human Rights in South America* (Yale University Press, 2022), won the 2023 Juan E. Méndez Book Award for Human Rights in Latin America.

Lorena Balardini is an Associate Lecturer in Social Sciences' Methodology at the University of Buenos Aires. She is also consultant on databases implementation for the World Bank, in the framework of the advisory service "Information Management System for Gender Based Violence Response in Chile".

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Introduction

"They will kill me, I am a refugee," pleaded Belarusian opposition journalist Roman Protasevich on May 23, 2021, to a flight attendant, as his diverted Ryanair plane began emergency landing procedures toward Minsk airport. Belarusian authorities forced the aircraft, on which Protasevich and his Russian girlfriend Sofia Sapega were traveling from Athens to Vilnius, to change its flight path due to an alleged bomb threat. After being arrested in Minsk, Protasevich and Sapega were charged with helping to coordinate opposition protests; in May 2022, Sapega was sentenced to six years in prison for inciting social hatred, while Protasevich was initially condemned to eight years in May 2023, but pardoned later that month.

Far from being an isolated case, this episode is part of a larger pattern of instances of transnational repression against exiles that includes the attempted murder of former Russian military intelligence agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in the United Kingdom, the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey (both in 2018), and the disappearance of Thai pro-democracy activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit in Cambodia in 2020.

Despite international law protections safeguarding the right to seek and enjoy asylum in place since the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees not only continue to be denied safe haven in the twenty-first century but are also actively persecuted and increasingly murdered or disappeared (Moss 2016). In its 2023 report, Freedom House recorded "854 direct, physical incidents of transnational repression committed by 38 governments in 91 countries around the world since 2014"; the top five most active are: China, Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and Tajikistan (Gorokhovskaia, Schenkkan, and Vaughan 2023, 1). In 2022, Freedom House affirmed that transnational repression was "a direct threat to fundamental freedoms, state sovereignty, and democracy, and a disturbing physical manifestation of global authoritarianism" (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022, 2).

Better comprehending transnational repression, an under-researched subject in International Relations (IR), and its various manifestations has acquired pressing urgency. Until recently, the so-called "territorial trap" largely defined IR scholarship (Agnew 1994) and this prevalent state-centric approach limited our analytical understanding of numerous phenomena, including transnational repression. It particularly resulted in an "'extraterritorial gap': an inability to perceive and analyze extraterritorial state power in general, and extraterritorial authoritarian power in particular" (Dalmasso et al. 2018, 95).

Our article builds on the work of scholars who have called for transcending this restrictive framework. In this respect, Gerasimos Tsourapas noted the "growing need to understand how, when, and why governments take repressive action against their citizens beyond national borders," and the lack of an appropriate comparative framework for examining the actions of global autocracies (Tsourapas 2021, 618). Most of the scholarship, according to Tsourapas, fails to "theorize on specific policies toward citizens beyond the territorial boundaries of the authoritarian nation-state" (Tsourapas 2021, 619).

Equally, the traditional vertical view of human rights, whereby these are primarily guaranteed within a state's territory in a top-down relationship, still predominates. Increasingly, a more comprehensive approach that "includes both vertical (domestic) and diagonal (extraterritorial) obligations" has emerged (Heupel 2018, 545), alongside states' gradual recognition of the extraterritorial reach of their human rights obligations (Bhuta 2016; Altwicker 2018). This far-reaching approach better reflects contemporary world politics, which are increasingly defined by new trends, including the emergence of borderless threats from non-state actors (whose lethal power is as great as those of states), and repressive practices, such as clandestine renditions and the extensive curtailing of individual freedoms (Schenkkan et al. 2020).

Similarly to IR, the transitional justice literature remains restricted to a specific set of actors and crimes (Nagy 2008): it also adopts the prevailing intra-state framing, thereby centering on atrocities committed inside individual states and perpetrated by local actors, and ignores cross-border human rights abuses (Ross and Sriram 2013). Questioning "the immutability of the nation state as a primary means of reflecting on and organizing transitional justice approaches" is now imperative (Hazan 2017, 1).

This article contributes to the existing literature on transnational repression by tackling the following research question: *Why* do states cooperate in persecuting political opponents beyond borders? Since data collection on transnational repression is notoriously difficult (Tsourapas 2021; Dukalskis et al. 2022), we rely on the historical case study of a cooperative network that operated in 1970s South America, known as "Operation Condor," on which substantial empirical data exists. Condor was possibly the most advanced, institutionalized, and centralized manifestation of transnational repression to have occurred in recent decades and unfolded through systematic operations throughout South America and beyond, which affected over 800 refugees. Through Operation Condor, South American authoritarian states willingly forewent key aspects of their sovereignty and territorial integrity to establish a sophisticated network to collaborate in transnational repression; in this way, they critically extended their domestic-level repressive policies and silenced dissidents abroad who represented an existential threat in the eyes of these autocratic regimes.

The passing of time and the availability of information on Operation Condor facilitated data collection and the construction of a unique dataset that we called South America's Transnational Human Rights Violations (hereafter THRV). The THRV, compiled between 2017 and 2021, encompasses 805 victims of transnational repression in South America between 1969 and 1981. This database—developed from a methodical and careful reviewing of the existing available information on South America's transnational repression in general and Operation Condor in particular—relies on seven sources of data compiled by both state and non-state actors in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Italy, Paraguay, and Uruguay, including verdicts by criminal tribunals, reports by state-sponsored truth commissions and investigations led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and official factsheets on victims. The starting point for each recorded case was the date the victim was initially abducted or murdered; information was then recorded on up to seventeen additional variables, including nationality, affiliation, places of detention, and clandestine renditions (for further details on the THRV please refer to the Supplementary Information).

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Beyond the THRV, our analysis hinges on an interdisciplinary methodology and the triangulation of four sets of primary sources: participant observation conducted at the Condor trials held in Argentina and Italy, totaling eighty-five hearings; interviews with 105 judicial professionals, victims and family members, human rights activists, document analysts and archivists, historians, and journalists; the analysis of over 3,000 archival records from the United States, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay; and the study of thirty legal documents from criminal proceedings in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Italy.

This article advances IR theory in two respects. First, it transcends the territorial trap, by outlining how state actions and power operate on the transnational sphere, through cooperating with other states. Cooperation in transnational repression illustrates how states purposely jointly targeted their citizens abroad and violated their human rights well beyond the confines of their territorial borders. Second, our proposed explanatory framework illuminates two crucial new angles regarding security: first, while survival is traditionally associated with protecting a state from potential hazards coming from other states and/or non-state armed actors (i.e., rebel groups), non-armed actors such as politically active refugees have equally been perceived as also constituting existential threats to regime security; second, in responding to such menaces, autocracies take action to pursue security and guarantee their survival in power by not only tackling domestic opposition but also external threats coming from organized exiles abroad. This permits a consideration of security that comprises states, but also individuals, including victims of the most atrocious state-sponsored human rights violations.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it discusses the concept of transnational repression and how we contribute to scholarship in this area. Second, it outlines a new explanatory framework for cooperation in transnational repression and variation in these practices. We argue that states are likely to collaborate when these three factors are met: a threat to state survival and regime security is located outside the national territory (*demand*); states share similar ideologies and forms of government (*supply 1*); and one or more countries lead integration efforts (*supply 2*). Third, it provides a brief historical and political background on South America in the 1970s, alongside the defining features of transnational repression in this region. Fourth, it tests our proposed theory through the historical case study of transnational repression in South America (1969–1981). Finally, it concludes by relating our findings from the experience of South America to other research on contemporary transnational repression dynamics.

No Safe Haven

Transnational repression, sometimes also referred to as extraterritorial authoritarian rule, counter-exile strategies, or transnational authoritarianism (Dukalskis 2021), is not a new practice (Furstenberg, Lemon, and Heathershaw 2021; Moss 2022). From Mussolini's regime that pursued antifascist Italians abroad in the 1920s and Leon Trotsky's murder in Mexico City in 1940 ordered by Stalin (Shain 2005), to the clandestine rendition of human rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul from Abu Dhabi to her native Saudi Arabia in 2018, transnational repression is an enduring feature of world politics and a tool that autocracies have successfully used for decades to control dissent abroad.

A burgeoning literature has lately scrutinized this phenomenon, with several definitions being proposed. For Moss (2022, 23), transnational repression "refers to how regimes exert authoritarian forms of control and repress dissent in their diasporas." Similarly, transnational repression has been considered a process whereby "governments reach across national borders to silence dissent among diaspora and exile communities" (Schenkkan and Linzer 2021, 3). These definitions emphasize how "the state tries to extend its coercive reach beyond its borders to control dissidents abroad" (Dukalskis 2021, 67). Thus, transnational repression's two defining features are: (1) that states' actions transcend national borders; and (2) that these actions are aimed at silencing dissidents in exile. In its essence, transnational repression, therefore, constitutes an extension of the "domestic pursuit of regime security" that unfolds within the territory of another state (Furstenberg, Lemon, and Heathershaw 2021, 361).

In the 1980s, Argentine political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell notably distinguished between "vertical" and "horizontal" voices of opposition: the first referred to the citizens' ability to express disagreement from the bottom up toward the government, while the second to the possibility of articulating difference collectively without fearing sanctions (O'Donnell 1986). Under authoritarian rule, both vertical and horizontal voices are silenced, and a "geographical relocation of political life" unfolds, given that "the only viable space for opposition politics may be outside the territory and jurisdiction" of autocratic states (Betts and Jones 2017, 1).

When dissidents successfully exit their origin country, they regain both their vertical and horizontal voices in the perceived security of their safe haven abroad. Paradoxically, however, the transnational political mobilization that some exiled activists frequently engage in, together with the ability to express dissent once again, turns them into privileged targets of transnational repression. Their autocratic origin countries will endeavor to silence them once more, so that "messages critical of the dictatorship do not reach their intended audiences and do not damage the regime's internal or external security" (Dukalskis 2021, 67). Responding to the activism of exiles and concerns that "the only viable source of threat" comes from abroad, autocracies "mobilize extra-territorially to strengthen their hold on power or to weaken opposition" (Betts and Jones 2017, 2).

However, a clear obstacle stands in their way: national sovereignty. While authoritarian regimes can easily repress opposition within their borders, extending their reach abroad to eliminate critical voices in exile is complex: these targets are located outside the borders of origin countries and unilateral action would likely trigger conflict and constitute a violation of sovereignty. Origin states then have to rely on the potential cooperation with and/or cooptation of the host countries (Shain 2005; Tsourapas 2021) or submit requests via Interpol to have specific individuals extradited (Dukalskis 2021). Traditionally, states also resorted to networks of spies and/or surveillance activities by military attachés within embassies or other agents to monitor dissidents abroad. The availability of new technologies, such as spyware, has dramatically increased the ability of autocracies to engage in transnational repression (Moss 2022). This has led to the emergence of the term "digital transnational repression" to capture the novel connotations of this phenomenon (Anstis and Barnett 2022; Michaelsen and Thumfart 2023). Notably, in fact, authoritarian regimes seek to control their national territories and "*any spaces, both physical and virtual*, where their political opponents and co-ethnic diaspora are found" (Furstenberg, Lemon, and Heathershaw 2021, 361; emphasis added).

Transnational Repression: Where Does the Literature Stand?

The transnational repression scholarship is interdisciplinary and spans across IR, migration, human rights, and political science. Two main trends have defined it so far. First, numerous authors have outlined the various strategies that autocratic states have adopted to undermine and potentially eliminate opponents abroad (Collyer and King 2015; Moss 2016; Glasius 2018; Schenkkan and Linzer 2021). A pioneering early study was by Shain (2005, 146), who distinguished a range of symbolic and coercive measures employed at home and abroad "to discredit political exiles as illegitimate and destroy them as a political force." At the domestic level, these included propaganda campaigns, confiscation of exiles' property, the persecution of their families and friends, and isolation from supporters and loyalists. Abroad, they comprised both legal and diplomatic—as well as illegal and violent—means, including the withdrawal of consular assistance and citizenship, the use of spies and infiltrated agents within exile groups, agreements with host governments to disrupt exile antigovernment activities, and kidnapping and assassination of key figures. More recently, Tsourapas (2021, 623-9) distinguishes six strategies of transnational repression, namely: surveillance, threats, coerced return, enforced disappearances, coercion-by-proxy, and lethal retribution.

Second, several authors have focused their analysis on a specific region and/or developed datasets to approach this complex phenomenon. Leading authors have probed transnational repression dynamics through the Central Asian Political Exiles Database (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017); the Authoritarian Actions Abroad Database (Dukalskis 2021); Freedom House's Transnational Repression Database (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022); and the Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset, regarding China's repression of the Turkic minority (Lemon, Jardine, and Hall 2023).

So far, scholarly efforts have mainly unpacked the dynamics and stages in persecution that define this multifaceted phenomenon and the reasons why individual states would engage in transnational repression to eliminate existential threats. This article builds on Olar (2019) who developed a theory of diffusion of repression between autocratic regimes. Since autocracies often share the common strategic objective of surviving in power, this article proposes a theory of cooperation in transnational repression. Although most of the literature has focused on unilateral instances of transnational repression, we know this phenomenon takes various forms in practice. We can thus picture transnational repression practices as existing along a continuum, whereby unilateral action by states is just one type of *modus operandi*; cooperative action represents an additional modality through which states have undertaken transnational repression and we focus on this.

Therefore, this article's original contribution is to develop a novel theoretical framework that explains, first, why states cooperate in persecuting dissidents abroad and, second, variations in the occurrence of such practices. This framework fills an important gap in our understanding of transnational repression, and it is a timely contribution. Over the past decade, dictatorships have been on the rise: the V-Dem Institute's 2024 report concluded that the share of the world population living in autocracies has increased from 48 percent in 2013 to 71 percent in 2023, totaling 5.7 billion people (Nord et al. 2024, 6). This increasing spread of autocratic forms of government is conducive to cooperation among these like-minded regimes. Indeed, Freedom House's 2022 report noted that authoritarian governments are increasingly cooperating in targeting exiles: in 74 percent of transnational repression incidents in 2021, both the origin and host countries were rated as "not free," indicating how such regimes acted "together to threaten, detain, and repatriate activists" (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022, 2). Autocratic governments support each other's efforts to silence dissent abroad because they share an illiberal set of values and an interest "in enforcing the norm that dissent is unwelcome wherever it occurs" (Ibid., 7). Understanding the reasons why states cooperate in transnational repression becomes fundamental.

Theorizing State Cooperation in Transnational Repression

Traditionally, neoliberal institutionalism is one of the dominant theories to explain cooperation in IR. According to it, institutions and rules are particularly instrumental since they facilitate "mutually beneficial cooperation—within and among states" (Keohane 2012, 125–6). In this light, cooperation among states helps mitigate the effects of anarchy and, in moving away from their typical "autonomous self-interested behavior," states "construct international institutions to deal with a host of concerns" (Stein 2008, 209). Similarly, the concept of regimes as "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations" captures how certain forms of cooperation are long-lasting, transcending specific agreements and short-term self-interest (Krasner 1982, 186–7). Thus, regimes and institutions can potentially generate enduring bonds between states, helping them move away from self-interest, lessen uncertainty in their relations, facilitate information sharing, and stabilize expectations in their behavior (Kehoane 1988). These insights partially explain why states would cooperate in transnational repression: autonomous self-interested action in this regard would result in heightened potential for inter-state conflict because of the infringements on national sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, a more fine-tuned framework is required if we wish to capture the nuances and complexities of why states collaborate in transnational repression and its variation over time. Our framework refines existing explanations and zooms in on the factors behind successful cooperation. We emphasize the key role of specific actors in leading and sustaining these collaborative processes, and the reasons why states decide to trade elements of their national sovereignty for a common objective, i.e., the elimination of the existential threat by exiles.

The Cooperative Transnational Repression Framework

Our proposed explanatory framework elucidates the incentives behind states' decisions to collaborate in the silencing of dissidents abroad, which constitute acts that violate international and human rights law, and potentially amount to crimes against humanity too. As Robert Keohane (1988, 381) remarkably asserted, "international cooperation is not necessarily benign from an ethical standpoint." Our framework also helps show how collaboration is not linear but changes over time depending on the different combinations of factors; this recognition permits an understanding of why states collaborate at some points in time and not others.

Our starting point is the work by Mattli (1999) and his analysis of demand and supply side conditions for successful regional integration processes. Regarding the demand

side, the availability of new technologies is likely to augment the scope of markets beyond the boundaries of individual states, and actors—likely to gain from having access to these wider markets—will endeavor to change an existing governance structure to achieve these gains. Supply-side relates instead to the conditions under which political leaders make the decision to integrate; this usually unfolds in times of economic and/or political difficulties when political leaders may be more willing to accept demands for regional rules, regulations, and policies to secure their own survival in power. Relatedly, a second supply condition relates to the role of a specific country, or more than one, which is willing to lead the integration process.

This distinction between demand and supply side conditions can be adapted to explain arrangements of cooperative transnational repression. According to Mattli (1999, 8), regional integration "is the process of providing common rules, regulations, and policies to a region"; thus, when states act together to persecute dissidents abroad, they undergo processes whereby they develop common rules, practices, and institutions to engage in transnational repression more effectively together.

In this light, we contend that states' cooperative efforts in transnational repression are likely to be successful when the following three supply and demand side factors are met. First, on the demand side, states likely collaborate when they face an existential threat to their survival and security, which is located outside the national territory. The existing literature on transnational repression has undoubtedly shown how politically active diasporas and dissidents are perceived to represent a clear peril to the very existence of the regimes in power in origin countries (Betts and Jones 2017; Olar 2019; Dukalskis 2021). Since unilateral action by origin states against dissidents in exile could potentially amount to a violation of the territorial integrity of the host states and their monopoly on the use of force, cooperation among states might instead constitute a more successful way forward.

Second, on the supply side, cooperation likely ensues when there is a pre-existing propensity among states to collaborate, what we call "existing common ground," and, furthermore, one or more countries are willing to shoulder the costs of the collaborative project of transnational repression. States are more likely to sign up for such collaborative projects if they have common features and preconditions that can increase their willingness to act together; these include having similar forms of government (likely to be autocracies or dictatorships) and sharing a common ideological underpinning, often illiberal ideologies based on the lack of respect for human rights and the desire to silence all forms of dissent. In this regard, scholars have pointed out that, beyond functional needs, it is essential to also consider the political, historical, and social context in which institutions emerge (Ekelund 2014). Further, the existence of an undisputed country leader, or more than one, serving "as focal point in the coordination" and "acting as regional 'paymaster'" (Mattli 1999, 3) is an additional important condition behind successful collaboration among like-minded states to embark on cooperative transnational repression. The key role of countries leading regional integration projects, such as Brazil and Argentina in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), and France and Germany in the European Union, has been extensively recognized in the literature (Malamud 2005; Krapohl, Meissner, and Muntschick 2014; Schramm and Krotz 2023).

We summarize the key tenets of our theory in table 1. Owing to the varying combinations of the demand and supply factors, we can make the following predictions about what we might observe in states' willingness to cooperate in transnational repression.

Accordingly, states are most likely to cooperate when all the three factors are met; they are least likely to collaborate when none of the factors are met; and there are varying degrees of possibilities for cooperation when some of the factors are met. These four scenarios enable us to account for the reasons why states might be willing to act together at some junctures and less so in others.

Our framework also incorporates the variables that Shain (2005, 161) identified as useful to systematically analyzing the likelihood of a regime's use of counter-exile measures, namely: (1) the home regime's perception of the exiles' threat; (2) the regime's available options and skills for suppressing the exiles' threat through coercion; and (3) the regime's cost–benefit calculation of such coercive activities. The first matches our demand side variable, while the other two relate to the supply side of our framework.

Our framework provides innovative insights into why states cooperate in transnational repression. Neoliberal institutionalism keeps the spotlight on territorial states: it conceptualizes processes of cooperation and integration in terms of states' needs to mitigate the negative consequences of anarchy by removing uncertainty and insecurity that emerge from other states' actions. What the analysis of cooperative transnational repression indicates is that existential threats to a state's survival not only come from the traditional security dilemma and the rising power of other states but also from non-state actors, including non-armed groups such as refugees and exiles. The questioning voices of these dissidents are perceived as constituting direct threats to both the internal and external security of a state, with the potential to put in question the very survival of the governing regime.

Transnational Repression in South America in the 1970s

Before testing our framework through the Operation Condor case study, it is essential to concisely describe the political and historical context in which transnational repression unfolded in South America in the 1970s and the defining features of this phenomenon.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, civic-military dictatorships in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay—inspired by the US-sponsored National Security Doctrine (hereafter NSD) and the French School of Counterinsurgency, and operating in the geopolitical context of the global Cold War with US backing—violently repressed all forms of political opposition, whether peaceful or armed. State agents belonging to these countries' security forces systematically violated the rights of fellow citizens, and perpetrated over 90,000 arbitrary detentions, between 16,000 and 36,000 disappearances and executions, countless instances of sexual violence and torture, and stole hundreds of newborns and children (an estimated 500 in Argentina alone) (Crenzel 2011).

In parallel to state-level political repression, another, more sinister, phenomenon was unfolding: dissidents in exile were being systematically persecuted and kidnapped in the countries where they had taken sanctuary. Since the mid-1960s, asylum-seekers, who had fled political repression in their origin countries, had been moving across South America in search of safety (Marchesi 2018), but the security forces continuously monitored and tracked their movements and activities throughout the region and beyond (Aldrighi and Waksman 2015). As the 1970s pro-

Table 1. Demand and supply side factors for cooperative transnational repression.

		Demand	
		No	*Yes*
Supply	No	• No threat from dissidents abroad • High cost of transnational repression • No existing common ground • *Likelihood of cooperative transnational repression:* Low	• Threat from dissidents abroad • High cost of transnational repression • No existing common ground • *Likelihood of cooperative transnational repression:* Medium
	Yes	• No threat from dissidents abroad • Leading country bears cost of transnational repression • Existing common ground • *Likelihood of cooperative transnational repression:* Medium	• Threat from dissidents abroad • Leading country bears cost of transnational repression • Existing common ground • *Likelihood of cooperative transnational repression:* High

gressed, such collaborative practices of transnational repression deepened further. In the apparent safety of exile, often in Argentina, international task forces, composed of military and police officers from both origin and host countries, together hunted down sought refugees and assassinated hundreds of them (McSherry 2005).

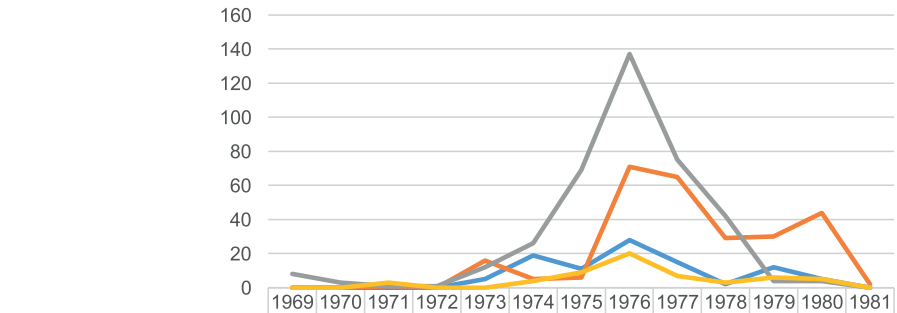
In late November 1975, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay then formalized this incipient collaboration in transnational repression by establishing a sophisticated, institutionalized, and coordinated scheme to jointly harass political exiles, which they called the "Condor System." Better known in English as Operation Condor, it was a secret transnational network of intelligence exchange and joint operations through which South American criminal states purposely targeted and eliminated left-wing political opponents in exile (Dinges 2004). Under Condor's aegis, a borderless area of terror and impunity was effectively established in South America. Brazil joined Condor in 1976; Ecuador and Peru in 1978. These states pulled together their resources to more efficiently pursue exiled political activists beyond borders and with unprecedented levels of cruelty.[1] These practices were complemented by absolute impunity, since just a handful of state agents were at the time investigated for the atrocities they committed, whether in their own country or where the crimes were perpetrated (Lessa 2022).

In this way, South American dictatorships effectively suspended traditional international norms regarding the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees (Sentence 2016) and weakened classical IR principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and territorial integrity. Over time, transnational repression in South America became a joint effort that was institutionalized, resulting in the formal establishment of a secret scheme that facilitated cooperation in silencing dissent abroad, i.e., Operation Condor, which comprised at its height in 1978 eight South American states.

[1]Interview with Pablo Ouviña and Mercedes Moguilansky, public prosecutors, Buenos Aires, September 26, 2013.

Through our THRV and its data on 805 victims of transnational repression in South America, we can illustrate the evolution of such practices throughout the decade: they began slowly in 1969, progressively increased throughout the early 1970s, witnessed a clear peak between late 1975 and late 1978–coinciding with the Operation Condor period –, before they started to gradually decrease in the late 1970s (see figure 1).

Transnational repression in South America had four features. First, it targeted victims from seven countries, namely Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay; three nationalities stand out as mostly persecuted: Uruguayans (384 victims, 47.7 percent), Argentines (191, 23.7 percent) and Chileans (115, 14.3 percent). Second, it harassed victims across thirteen countries in Latin America, Europe, and North America, thereby illustrating the vast geographical reach of transnational repression at that time. Almost 68 percent of victims were initially kidnapped in Argentina, where thousands of exiles had congregated in search of safe haven since the country was the last democracy left in the region by the early 1970s. Third, victims were clearly pursued because of their activism: most were militants of political groups (320 victims, 39.8 percent), followed by members of revolutionary organizations (290 victims, 36.1 percent), and individuals with refugee status recognised by the United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees (UNHCR) (37 victims, 4.6 percent); just 101 individuals (12.5 percent) did not have any affiliation and were generally relatives (children and/or parents) abducted together with the intended victim(s). Fourth, transnational repression comprised multiple and interconnected human rights abuses, which usually began with the illegal abduction of the victim(s), followed by interrogations under torture in secret prisons before they were either liberated, disappeared, or murdered. Almost half of the victims, 382 (47.5 percent) survived torture and arbitrary detention, whilst 367 (45.4 percent) were either disappeared or executed; a quarter (204 individuals) were also the victims of clandestine renditions back to their origin countries.



	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981
Extrajudicial Executions	0	0	0	0	5	19	11	28	15	2	12	5	0
Disappearences	0	0	1	0	16	5	6	71	65	29	30	44	2
Survivors	8	3	1	1	12	26	69	137	75	42	4	4	0
Other	0	0	3	0	0	4	9	20	7	3	6	5	0

Figure 1. Victim status by year of crime

Existing scholarship on Condor has mostly focused on revealing the *modus operandi* of this secret sophisticated network and examining in depth a few emblematic cases of illustrious victims, such as the murder of Chilean exiled former ambassador Orlando Letelier and his colleague at the Institute for Policy Studies, Ronni Moffitt, in September 1976 in Washington (Dinges and Landau 1980; Martorell 1999; Carrió 2005). But, so far, there have not been any attempts to think theoretically about the reasons why South American countries established this collaborative system and extrapolate lessons that may be beneficial in better understanding cooperation in transnational repression overall. We aim to fill this gap.

Explaining South America's Operation Condor

After providing this brief overview of transnational repression in South America, we turn to test the expectations produced by our cooperative transnational repression framework through our case study and dataset. Our framework helps us better understand what we observe in the extent of states' cooperation in transnational repression in South America between 1969 and 1981, its phases over time, and specifically, the onset and downfall of Operation Condor, as summarized in table 2.

Since the late 1960s and intensifying further throughout the 1970s, several South American countries gradually developed common rules, practices, and institutions to engage in transnational repression more effectively across their region by acting together. This culminated during Operation Condor, between early 1976 and late 1978, when we see the highest levels of cooperation in transnational repression. We now discuss each phase of South America's transnational repression in turn.

Unilateral Action (1969–1973)

During the first period, neither demand nor supply factors were met, and there was a low likelihood of cooperation in transnational repression in South America; unilateral action mostly predominated as the *modus operandi*. On the demand side, although refugees were already moving across the region—at that time mostly escaping from Brazil and settling in Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina—they were not yet perceived as an existential threat at a regional level. On the supply side, neither factor was fully met: the NSD had been spreading across the region, but democracy still prevailed as a form of government—with some exceptions. In this context, Brazil was the only country under dictatorship (since 1964) interested in pursuing exiles beyond borders and acted unilaterally—mostly through the Center of Foreign Information (CIEX from its Portuguese acronym), established in 1966, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. CIEX agents infiltrated refugee groups, mainly in Montevideo, Santiago, and Buenos Aires, permanently spied on people of interest, such as deposed president João Goulart, and exchanged information with local intelligence bodies (Penna Filho 2009). In a handful of cases, Brazil cooperated on an ad hoc basis with host countries, to detain specific individuals of interest, such as in the abduction of Jefferson Cardim, his son, and his nephew in Buenos Aires in December 1970 (CNV 2014). The THRV recorded fifty victims in this phase, with 44 percent being Brazilians and 34 percent Uruguayans, whilst most of the crimes, 42 percent, were committed in Chile. At this time, there was no payoff in cooperating in transnational repression for other South American rulers, since Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Argentina were not yet interested in the persecution of dissidents abroad. This began to change with the additional military coups that took place in Bolivia in 1971, as well as in Uruguay and Chile in 1973 (June and September, respectively), resulting in a broader set of countries sharing the same objective of eliminating exiles beyond borders by the mid-1970s. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 coup, the Chilean junta specifically singled out the large community of South American exiles as representing a threat to national security (Bonnefoy 2016). Hundreds of foreigners were subsequently held in the National Stadium in Santiago, where they were interrogated by Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan agents who had traveled there for this purpose (AI 1974).[2]

Incipient Collaboration (1974–1975)

In the second period, two of the three factors of our framework were present, leading to a medium level of cooperation in transnational repression. This was a period of budding

[2]On the presence of other foreign agents in Chile, see US Department of Defense, Intelligence Information Report, "Close liaison with Chilean Army to Investigate Uruguayans in Chile," September 24, 1973.

Table 2. Prospects for cooperation in transnational repression in South America.

		Demand	
		No	*Yes*
Supply	No	Low *Unilateral action (1969–73)*	Medium *Incipient collaboration (1974–75)*
	Yes	Medium *Declining cooperation (1979–81)*	High ***Operation Condor (1976–78)***

collaboration, whereby countries started to see the benefits of acting together to silence dissidents abroad. The THRV registered 149 victims, with 56 percent from Uruguay and 24 percent from Chile, and most of the crimes, 89 percent, were perpetrated in Argentina. By early 1974, the demand side condition was met: thousands of political opponents to South America's authoritarian regimes had by then exited origin countries—most recently from Chile and Uruguay—owing to the brutal persecution endured, and relocated to neighboring countries, mostly in Argentina, where around 100,000 refugees had settled.[3] During exile, dissidents remained politically active and, consequently, any type of mobilization they conducted, whether peaceful or armed, represented an existential threat to the regimes back home.[4] Two examples illustrate this point. First, in mid-February 1974, the creation of the Revolutionary Coordinating Junta (JCR from its Spanish acronym) was officially announced in Buenos Aires (Declaration 1974; Dinges 2004). The JCR, which had been in the making since late 1972, brought together four guerrilla groups: Chile's Revolutionary Left Movement, Argentina's People's Revolutionary Army, Bolivia's National Liberation Army, and Uruguay's National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros (Slatman 2011). Soon after this announcement, South American security forces began to articulate the need to collaborate in countering the emerging threat from this coordination between the continent's revolutionary groups, as evidenced by numerous declassified South American and US government documents from 1975.[5] The JCR's threat became, at that juncture, a convenient strategic excuse for justifying the deepening of incipient practices of collaboration.[6] Second, South American exiles were especially vociferous in calling international attention to the atrocities of their respective dictatorial governments and in pushing for change from abroad. In March 1974, Uruguayan Senator Zelmar Michelini delivered a powerful testimony to the Russell Tribunal II in Rome, which was probing the atrocities committed across Latin America, and revealed the destruction of democratic institutions and the violent crushing of political and social opposition in Uruguay, with the routine use of torture and executions.[7] In July 1975, Uruguayan exiles also founded in Buenos Aires the Party for the Victory of the People (PVP from its Spanish acronym), to catalyze resistance against the Uruguayan dictatorship from Argentina and generate mobilizations inside Uruguay to promote the fall of the regime and the return of democracy (Resolution 1975). Because of their actions, both Michelini and hundreds of PVP members would be targeted in 1976.

On the supply side, only the second factor was met. Although more countries were under dictatorship by early 1974 than in the previous phase, Argentina remained a democracy and this was significant since thousands of exiles were sheltering there at the time. In this phase, Chile was the country that took on the burden to push for integration to go ahead and was the driving force that organized Operation Condor's founding meeting, thereby catalyzing further the burgeoning collaboration in place among the region's police forces since early 1974.[8] Indeed, the powerful head of the Directorate of National Intelligence (DINA from its Spanish acronym), Colonel Manuel Contreras (Pinochet's right-hand man) sent one of his most trusted men, Colonel Mario Jahn Barrera, to hand-deliver invitations to neighboring countries to participate in the First Working Meeting on National Intelligence to be held in Santiago between November 25 and December 1, 1975.[9] The DINA would cover all expenses for up to three delegates per country. The rationale for the gathering was that countries "that were being attacked politically-economically and militarily (inside and outside their borders) were fighting back alone or at best through bilateral arrangements or simple 'gentlemen's agreements.'"[10] In the invitation, therefore, Contreras expressed his hope that the meeting would form the basis "for excellent coordination and an improved action in the benefit of the national security of our respective countries."[11] On November 28, 1975, high-ranking intelligence officers from Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay signed Condor's founding agreement—named as such to honor

[3]Amnesty International, "A Report on the Situation of Refugees in Argentina," NS 193/76, September 6, 1976.

[4]Interview with Carlos Osorio, National Security Archive NGO, Washington DC, April 16, 2018.

[5]See, for instance, documents R00143F0011 to R00143F23 of the Paraguayan Archive of Terror, and declassified US documents such as the Confidential Memorandum of the Department of State, "Ninety-first Meeting of the Working Group/Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism," September 5, 1975. Interview with John Dinges, investigative journalist, Washington DC, April 11, 2018.

[6]Interview with Francisco Martorell, investigative journalist, Santiago, November 28, 2016.

[7]Interview with Felipe Michelini, former MP, Montevideo, August 4, 2016.

[8]"Historia de la Triple A: Aniquilar a los asilados," *El Auténtico*, December 10, 1975. The document was sent to the authors by Roger Rodríguez on October 5, 2015.

[9]Police declaration by Mario Ernesto Jahn Barrera, Chilean Lawsuit 2182–98, "Operation Condor," volume 10, August 26, 2003, pp. 2277–78.

[10]Archives of Terror (Paraguay), Document R00143F0014, October 1975.

[11]Ibid., Document R00143F0011, October 1975.

the host country, Chile, and its national bird, the Condor.[12] The accord would become effective on January 30, 1976, after ratification by each of the five countries. Chile had been a pioneer of transnational repression since the early days of the dictatorship: indeed, DINA's Exterior Department had been created soon after the coup, in late 1973, specifically to monitor, detain, and murder Chilean dissidents abroad.[13]

Operation Condor (1976–1978)

During the third period, all three factors of our framework were met, generating the highest level of cooperation in transnational repression. This coincided with the Operation Condor period, when the largest number of victims (61 percent) recorded in the THRV was targeted, 494 out of 805; 57 percent were Uruguayans, 15 percent Argentines, and 15 percent Chileans, and 62 percent were pursued in Argentina.

At this juncture, joint practices of transnational repression became institutionalized, formalized, and sophisticated. Inspired by Interpol, Operation Condor relied on three key institutional pillars: (1) a data bank located in Santiago, which centralized all intelligence information on sought political opponents and groups; (2) a dedicated encrypted communications channel (*Condortel*) that enabled member countries to rapidly exchange intelligence and operational information on targets and joint operations to be conducted; and (3) an operative axis (*Condoreje*), which also included a forward command and coordinating office located in Buenos Aires, manned and staffed by officers from Condor member states, to oversee operational activities on the ground.[14] Further, the *Teseo* unit—a distinct but connected initiative to Condor—was an additional top-secret operation of hunting squads, composed of specially trained Argentine, Chilean, and Uruguayan agents, tasked with assassinating targets outside South America, mainly in Europe.[15]

On the demand side, mobilization by both peaceful and armed dissidents abroad continued to embody two interrelated existential threats for South American dictatorships. First, these politically active individuals and groups had run exceptional international campaigns that named and shamed the military regimes, effectively discrediting their public images given the human rights violations they were perpetrating (Markarian 2005). This eventually led to the United States cutting down or reducing significantly crucial military assistance to some of them, including Uruguay in 1976 (Snyder 2021) and Argentina in 1977. Second, some exiled political leaders constituted credible democratic alternatives to the dictatorships in power and were actively attempting to bring an end to military rule in their respective countries, such as Uruguayan Senator Michelini (Trobo 2005; Ruiz 2006),[16] former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier, and former Bolivian President Juan José Torres (Sivak 1997). They therefore represented a direct threat in the eyes of the governing generals and were all murdered between May and September 1976. Moreover, South American generals were concerned about the strength of dissidents in exile beyond South America—hence the creation of the *Teseo* squads. As Condor expert John Dinges (2021, 433) has noted, in late 1976, the strategic objective was overpowering the ever more successful campaigns in Europe that were discrediting the military governments: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay—the Condor member states behind *Teseo*—were alarmed that exiles were "winning the propaganda war in Europe." They thus chose three prominent figures in exile in Paris for elimination in December 1976–Isabel Allende, the daughter of Chile's former president; Rodolfo Mattarollo, an Argentine human rights lawyer who led two organizations created by exiles (the Argentine Commission of Human Rights, CADHU, and the Argentine Center of Information and Solidarity, CAIS); and Enrique Erro, a former Uruguayan left-wing senator who had already survived imprisonment in Argentina in 1975. They were all playing key roles in the rising human rights campaigns in Europe against South America's regimes, and their deaths were meant to be "spectacular and to serve as warning for other activists" (Ibid.). Overall, 21 operations were launched between 1975 and 1980 against 45 targets in Europe, Mexico, and the United States, and resulted in five individuals assassinated and two wounded (Ibid., 18).

On the supply side, both conditions were in place. First, with the military coup by the junta led by Jorge R. Videla on March 24, 1976, Argentina joined neighboring countries that had already been under dictatorship for some time. At this juncture, there was fertile common ground between these military regimes that all shared the same ideological underpinnings of the NSD and autocratic forms of government. In particular, the NSD overwhelmingly focused on the achievement of national security by states above all other goals and, particularly, to the detriment of individual freedoms: it was, accordingly, an "authoritarian" doctrine (Pion-Berlin 1989, 413). Second, in addition to Chile whose leaders, Contreras and Pinochet, had been the masterminds behind the creation of Operation Condor in late 1975, Argentina acquired a leading role too in shouldering the costs of the regional collaboration and working for its expansion. In mid-1976, Argentine leaders were especially concerned with the large presence of foreigners on their territory. During a June 1976 meeting in Santiago, Argentine Foreign Minister Admiral César Augusto Guzzetti expressed his concern to US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that almost half a million foreigners had entered Argentina as asylum-seekers, especially from Chile, affirming that up to 10,000 could be involved in "illegal activities."[17] Remarkably, Guzzetti openly indicated that there were ongoing collaborations to tackle the problem of terrorism that affected the whole of the Southern Cone, stating: "to combat it, we are encouraging joint efforts to integrate with our neighbors … All of them: Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Brazil."[18]

The deadliest years of transnational repression in South America coincided with Operation Condor and were 1976 and 1977; at this juncture, Argentina effectively turned into a "*trampa mortal* (death trap)"[19] for exiles who had been sheltering there for years, even decades for some of them. At this time, Argentina held the rotating presidency of the Condor organization, and the Directors of the State Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE from its Spanish acronym), General Otto Paladino and General Carlos Laidlaw, were successively

[12] "Operation Condor Founding Act," Minutes of the Conclusions of the First InterAmerican Meeting on National Intelligence, Secret, November 28, 1975, consulted at National Security Archive.

[13] Report by Chile's Investigations Police on the DINA Exterior, Chilean Lawsuit 2182–98, "Operation Condor," volume 10, September 1, 2003, pp. 2223–24.

[14] CIA, Intelligence Information Cable No. 992369, July 28, 1976.

[15] CIA, Intelligence Information Cable 187182, February 16, 1977, and Intelligence Information Cable 413973, October 7, 1977.

[16] Interview with Margarita Michelini, survivor of Operation Condor, Buenos Aires, September 12, 2017.

[17] State Department, Memorandum of Conversation, June 6, 1976, p. 7, consulted at the National Security Archive.

[18] Ibid., p. 8.

[19] Interview with Sara Méndez, survivor of Operation Condor, Montevideo, October 8, 2013.

the chiefs for Operation Condor in 1976 and 1977. This position served to manage and coordinate Condor matters and mediate major meetings.[20] Further, the Condor forward command and operating coordinating office were strategically located in Buenos Aires, where the majority of sought targets lived by early 1976.[21] Besides, the *Teseo* operations center was also located in Buenos Aires, within the complex that housed the 601 Intelligence Battalion of the Argentine Army.[22] Finally, Argentina led expansion efforts of the Condor organization: in late 1977, the SIDE invited both Peru and Ecuador to join.[23] The objective of this enlargement was "to strengthen the system and give it the potential of a large intelligence community encompassing hemispheric and global questions."[24] By early 1978, both Peru and Ecuador were effective members.[25]

Operation Condor successfully allowed South American autocracies to, on the one hand, minimize the costs of repression by acting together and, on the other, maximize their geographical reach to eliminate the common existential threat they confronted once and for all. Accordingly, South American rulers willingly established this new governance structure—Condor—whose primary objective was cooperation in the furthering of transnational repression across the region: these regimes deliberately pulled together their resources to increase the lethal power and reach of their terror mechanisms, thereby snatching asylum-seekers in each other's territories outside all margins of the law in parallel to the persecution already unleashed at home. These regimes utilized existing structures and institutions for repression at the national level to further cooperative persecution at the regional level. Victims were in fact imprisoned in the same secret torture centers used for domestic repression and some of these, such as *Automotores Orletti* in Buenos Aires and *La Casona* in Montevideo, were specifically dedicated to housing abducted refugees or those who had been forcefully returned from abroad through clandestine renditions. Special branches of the same institutional actors that participated in domestic-level repression (mainly the police and armed forces) were dedicated to transnational repression operations (unilateral, bilateral, or cooperative), such as the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Argentine Federal Police, Uruguay's Defense Information Service, and Chile's DINA Exterior Department, in collaboration with the diplomatic corps and border agencies.

Declining Cooperation (1979–1981)

In the final period, both demand and supply side conditions weakened substantially or disappeared entirely, and the Condor organization effectively stopped operating as such. On the demand side, the successful combined policies of domestic repression and Operation Condor, which had crushed opposition within and beyond borders and removed these existential threats to South America's dictatorships, meant that there was no longer a substantial need for the autocracies to cooperate to crush dissidents abroad. On the supply side, the undisputed paymasters of the cooperation, Chile at first and Argentina afterward, who together had been the beating heart of Condor between 1975 and 1978, fell out due to the Beagle Channel dispute. [26] The two countries were on the brink of war in late December 1978, and this was averted only through the mediation of Pope John Paul II. The return of traditional territorial concerns resulted in the generals prioritizing national sovereignty once more over cooperation in transnational repression.

In this phase, our dataset records 112 victims, 93 percent of whom were Argentines and with 81 percent of the crimes carried out in Argentina and/or in border areas. At the time, Argentina continued to carry out cross-border repressive actions, often on a bilateral basis and relied on the existing channels and mechanisms that had been set up during the Condor period to exchange information about sought targets with neighboring countries, especially Paraguay, [27] conduct joint operations, and illegally repatriate detained activists. Argentina was keen to eliminate members of the *Montoneros* guerrilla who were traveling back to the country to participate in the so-called *Contraofensiva* campaign between 1979 and 1980.[28] In late 1978, the exiled *Montoneros* leadership decided to launch a series of political and military actions to undermine the Argentine dictatorship (Confino 2021). The *Contraofensiva* represented an existential threat to the Argentine regime.

Approximately 450 militants participated in the campaign: half were in Argentina and the other half would return from exile. Key hot spots where returning militants were captured were the tripartite border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay; the border crossings in Mendoza between Argentina and Chile; and the one between Paso de los Libres (Argentina) and Uruguaiana (Brazil). A secret detention center, known as *La Polaca*, operated in a ranch just 15 km away from Paso de los Libres and this is where activists seized at the border crossing were initially interrogated and tortured, before being transferred to Buenos Aires (Mariano 2006). Emblematic joint operations were also carried out in 1980: in March, two *Montoneros* militants were kidnapped in Rio de Janeiro's international airport, whilst in June three others were abducted in Lima; they were all renditioned back to Argentina where they disappeared.[29]

We summarize the key points from our analysis of the four periods in table 3.

Conclusion

By closely exploring the four phases of transnational repression in 1970s South America, this article has shed light on why states cooperate to persecute dissidents beyond borders. Through our cooperative transnational repression framework, we first outlined the factors that elucidate the likelihood of cooperation in transnational repression, namely: the presence of a threat to states' survival and regime security located outside the national territory (*demand*); the existence of common ground among states that share similar ideologies and forms of government (*supply 1*) and the leadership role by one or more countries in catalyzing collaboration efforts (*supply 2*). Through the historical case study

[20] CIA, Intelligence Information Cable 170209, February 2, 1977.

[21] CIA, Intelligence Information Cable 992369, July 28, 1976.

[22] CIA, Intelligence Information Cable 413973, October 7, 1977.

[23] CIA, Memorandum for The Honorable Zbigniew Brzezinki, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, "Transmittal of Intelligence Items," September 10, 1977.

[24] CIA, Memorandum for The Honorable Cyrus R. Vance, The Secretary of States, "Transmittal of Intelligence Items," December 2, 1977.

[25] CIA, Weekly Situation Report on International Terrorism, "Ecuador Joins CONDOR," March 1, 1978.

[26] Interview with Melisa Slatman, historian, University of Buenos Aires, September 16, 2013.

[27] Archives of Terror, R00143F0880, "Entry of Argentine terrorists to Argentina via Paraguay," July 10, 1980.

[28] Interviews with *contraofensiva* militants in Buenos Aires in 2018: Gustavo Molfino (July 10) and Edgardo Binstock (July 11).

[29] Interview with Binstock and Molfino. Molfino survived being abducted in Lima, but his mother—Noemí Gianetti a member of the Mothers of May Square—was kidnapped alongside two other *Montoneros* militants.

Table 3. Key demand and supply factors in South America (1969–1981).

Period	*Demand factor*	*Supply factor(s)*	*Level of cooperative transnational repression*
1969–73	Weak existential threat by exiles	Spread of NSD but most countries are democratic Brazil primarily interested in seeking exiles	Low 50 victims *Unilateral action*
1974–75	Strong existential threat by exiles	Shared ideology of NSD and military rule but Argentina, where most exiles are sheltering, is still "formally" under democracy Chile spurs integration in 1975	Medium 149 victims *Incipient collaboration*
1976–78	Strong existential threat by exiles	Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay simultaneously under military rule Argentina holds presidency of Operation Condor in 1976 and 1977	High 494 victims *Operation Condor*
1979–81	Weak existential threat by exiles	Limited incentives for cooperation due to the return of traditional territorially based conflicts and the success of repression Argentina interested in apprehending returning exiles	Medium 112 victims *Declining cooperation*

of transnational repression in South America between 1969 and 1981, we then tested our theory and demonstrated variation in its *modus operandi* over time, illustrating why South American criminal states established a sophisticated scheme of cooperation to further transnational repression on a regional level, i.e., Operation Condor.

Condor constituted the peak of cooperative efforts in transnational repression in South America and, through this regional cooperative arrangement, the military regimes of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay successfully pursued politically active refugees in a joint endeavor underpinned by the shared ideological backdrop of the NSD. In the geopolitical context of the Cold War, South America's generals, under the leadership of Chile first and Argentina subsequently, willingly "traded" elements of their sovereignty to set up this new governance framework (Condor), which allowed them to tackle the existential threat to their own survival that dissidents abroad represented. We also revealed how the practices of transnational repression in South America were not linear, but shifted over time, from initial unilateral action by Brazil between 1969 and 1973 to incipient collaboration under Chile's leadership between 1974 and 1975, to peak through the multilateral Condor organization that hinged on Argentina's leadership between 1976 and 1978; once Condor collapsed, Argentina acted on a bilateral basis and benefitted from the arrangements put in place during Condor to pursue militants abroad between 1979 and 1981.

Our analysis comprised multiple scales of security. It showed, on the one hand, at the macro level, the variety of threats that states face in the international sphere and that can emerge from both state and non-state actors, including mobilized diasporas. On the other, we focused on the micro-scale, i.e., the security of individual refugees: these exiles not only had to flee their country of origin because of political persecution endured there but continued to be at risk of suffering serious human rights violations, including illegal abductions, torture, clandestine renditions, assassinations, and disappearances, in the host countries where they thought they were safe.

Our proposed cooperative transnational repression framework is likely to be applicable to other contexts beyond the historical case study analyzed in this article. In particular, the three factors that we have identified as driving the likelihood of cooperation among states in transnational repression travel to the contemporary period and to other regions beyond South America. Prominent scholars and practitioners have frequently noted the propensity for collaboration in transnational repression. In 2022, Edward Lemon—a professor and expert on Central Asia—asserted how "authoritarian regimes rarely act alone" and often count on bilateral cooperation with local governments and authoritarian regional organizations, which "are built around the codification of authoritarian norms" to "bypass human rights, facilitate swift extraditions, and bolster regime protections" (RadioFreeAsia 2022).

Likewise, in its 2022 report, Freedom House determined that authoritarian regimes were cooperating in threatening, detaining, and repatriating exiles in most contemporary instances of transnational repression recorded in its database. In March 2023, the Transnational Repression Policy Act—introduced in the US Senate—noted how "many acts of transnational repression are undertaken through the cooperation of, or cooperation with, authorities in the host country" (Senate 2023, 4).

While accurate testing of our theory would require access to the data by Freedom House and/or other similar datasets on contemporary transnational repression, we can

nonetheless identify some patterns that point to the applicability of our framework. Recent incidents of transnational repression indicate the occurrence of cooperative practices—often alongside regional clusters: at least one between Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, and another between Russia, Belarus, and Central Asian countries.

In May 2023, after the fatal shooting in Thailand of Bounsuan Kitiyano, a 56-year-old Lao human rights defender and a UNCHR refugee, a group of well-established international human rights NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Front Line Defenders, issued a public statement denouncing the transnational repression of human rights defenders between Thailand and Laos (HRW 2023). Independent experts of the UN Human Rights Council had already expressed a similar concern in 2020 (UNHCHR 2020). Relatedly, Cambodia and Thailand have also closely collaborated since 2014 to persecute, arbitrarily arrest, and forcibly repatriate exiled activists—including people under the protection of UNHCR (HRW 2021).

Similar practices can be witnessed between Russia and Belarus; Turkey, China, and Turkmenistan; and Russia and Central Asian countries (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022, 7). In particular, substantial evidence exists that member states, especially Russia, China, and Uzbekistan, have repeatedly used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to pursue political opponents abroad and persecute them as criminals (RadioFreeAsia 2022). The SCO has often been employed as a forum to garner support to repress human rights globally and preserve "the authoritarian status quo in Central Asia" (FIDH 2012; Hayoun 2015; Ambrosio 2016).

Our framework contributes to explaining the occurrence of cooperation in transnational repression in the above regional clusters. We can appreciate how human rights defenders, journalists, and other activists who are located outside the national territory of the above-mentioned countries are perceived as constituting an existential threat to the very survival and security of these autocratic regimes (*demand*). Moreover, all these states possess existing common ground in terms of similar ideologies and forms of government (*supply 1*): they are all autocracies and dictatorships that share an illiberal set of values, deny basic rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, and wish to silence dissent wherever it occurs, acting in complete disregard of international law, including the protection of refugees. In some cases, we can also point to one or more countries that are leading and sustaining over time cooperative efforts (*supply 2*), such as Russia, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Thailand.

Finally, we have identified three areas in future research on cooperative transnational repression. First, it is important to probe the shortcomings and potentially reform existing mechanisms that might facilitate cooperative transnational repression, such as Interpol and the abuse of extradition requests, which autocracies regularly use (Gorokhovskaia and Linzer 2022) and result in the deportation of refugees who are at risk of torture or death in origin countries. This is one of the commitments included in the 2023 "Declaration of Principles to Combat Transnational Repression."[30] Second, it is fundamental to investigate the role of regional institutions, such as the SCO since, through its cooperation framework, the latter has been used as a vehicle for human rights violations against refugees (FIDH 2012). Finally, we call on scholars to test further our proposed theoretical framework through case studies and data available on contemporary transnational repression, so that it can be refined further to reflect novel trends, most prominently the increasing use of digital transnational repression tools.

[30]The Declaration has so far been endorsed by Australia, Germany, Chile, Estonia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic, and the United States.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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