

Interview – Julia Borba Gonçalves

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Julia Borba Gonçalves is a PhD candidate at the University of Brasilia (UnB) and works as a Research Assistant at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA). Her areas of expertise include regionalism, Brazilian foreign policy, Brazil-Chile bilateral relations, and paradiplomacy. Julia received two awards from the International Network for Government Science Advice for her contributions to the IR field. She has published in journals indexed in Web of Science, Scopus, and Qualis A (Brazilian journal ranking system). She holds a master's degree in International Relations from the Interinstitutional Graduate Program in International Relations "San Tiago Dantas" and a bachelor's degree in international relations from the State University of São Paulo (UNESP), where she was a recipient of the Technological Development and Innovation Scholarships (PIBITI). Julia's professional experience includes research and providing scientific advice at the Department of International Studies (Dinte) of the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA).

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

My advisor significantly influenced my academic journey during my master's in International Relations. He played a crucial role in shaping my intellectual development because he encouraged me to delve into the study of the Pacific Alliance and adopt the constructivist approach in my research, with a particular emphasis on the concept of normative persuasion. This concept holds immense potential for analyzing foreign policy—especially Brazil's foreign policy. My doctoral advisor has also played an essential role in my professional development by encouraging me to delve deeper into my research interests.

In addition to my advisor's mentorship, I actively engage in various research groups, including the Regionalism Observatory, the Foreign Policy and Regionalism Research Network, and the Colombian International Relations Network (REDINTERCOL). These forums have served as fundamental spaces for discussing and disseminating my research agenda. Furthermore, my experience at the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), particularly within the Department of International Studies, has significantly impacted my academic development. IPEA is a federal public foundation of Brazil committed to conducting research that directly informs public policy formulation. Working at this institution has improved my research approach and ability to influence public policy decisions. The valuable knowledge I gain here guides my research approach as I pursue my doctorate.

In your 2020 article for E-International Relations, you argued that South American regional integration was at a standstill due to political disputes, COVID-19 restrictions, and historical and geographical divisions within the region. What is your assessment of the current state of these integration processes three years later?

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on these integration processes. For instance, as I argue in a peer-reviewed article coauthored with Pedro Silva Barros and Sofía Escobar Samurio, the pandemic has exacerbated existing

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trends in South America, such as the decline of economic interdependence within the region and the consequent increase in trade between South American countries and extra-regional partners. Notably, the pandemic emerged just as the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR) took shape institutionally. Several countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru, had decided to depart from the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) amidst the early rise of PROSUR, leaving a void regarding a strong South American platform for health cooperation and other issues. In contrast, other regional organizations such as the European Union, the African Union, and the Central American Integration System coordinated joint actions in response to the pandemic, maintaining discussions on various aspects of the regional agenda, including the pandemic's effects.

In addition, the pandemic significantly contributed to a delay in developing PROSUR's Thematic Areas. The Thematic Areas refer to institutionalized spaces where countries discuss infrastructure, energy, health, and other subjects within the region. PROSUR introduced this initiative in 2019 to establish an agile, adaptable, and institutionally streamlined mechanism for integration and cooperation. However, due to the pandemic, it wasn't until July 2020 that PROSUR members established the Thematic Areas and their coordination subgroups. The presidential elections in Chile in 2021 and Colombia in 2022 prompted these nations to withdraw from PROSUR, weakening the organization. The election of Lula da Silva in Brazil in October 2022 further exacerbated this issue, ultimately leading to the end of PROSUR.

The Foreign Relations Report of the Brazilian Transitional Cabinet, published in December 2022, underscored Brazil's commitment to revitalizing UNASUR. This objective has been actively pursued by Brazilian diplomacy since January 2023. However, the revitalization process has encountered hurdles. Not all nations agree regarding the revival of UNASUR, leading to an ongoing debate about its structure—whether it should mirror the UNASUR of 2008 or adopt a new configuration. The success of UNASUR's revival is also contingent on recent electoral outcomes and the stance of new governments towards the organization. This includes countries such as Paraguay (April 2023), Ecuador (October 2023), and Argentina (November 2023). The ability of Brazilian diplomacy to spearhead and lead the charge in revitalizing UNASUR is also a crucial factor.

Some of your most recent publications have delved into significant bi-oceanic infrastructure projects and their potential role in fostering regional integration and cooperation in South America. Could you provide insights into these projects and their impact on the region?

Since 2019, I have researched Bi-Oceanic corridors and their impact on regional integration. My research mainly focuses on the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor in South America. This project aims to enhance physical and logistical infrastructure integration among Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay to achieve national, regional, and global ambitions. At a national level, the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor encompasses peripheral subregions, such as the Central-Western region of Brazil, the Western region of Paraguay, the Northwestern region of Argentina, and the northern region of Chile. The Bi-Oceanic Road infrastructure aims to reduce the gaps between each participating country's national capitals and distant regions. At a regional level, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay conceived the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor project to promote regional integration at different scales, addressing the economic needs of the Central-West South American Integration Zone (ZICOSUR), the physical integration within Mercosur, and the rapprochement between Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance. Lastly, at a global level, the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor enhances the international insertion of the participating countries toward Asian Pacific and Atlantic markets. In the latter case, Brazilian ports will play an important role in connecting Chile, the Paraguayan Chaco, and Northern Argentina to the Atlantic economies.

It is important to note that paradiplomacy has played a crucial role in bolstering the resilience of the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor. We saw the fragmentation of UNASUR and its councils, including the infrastructure and planning council. The Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor has continued to organize high-level meetings and make progress in critical areas due to the active participation of sub-national governments. IPEA and the Catholic University of the North (Antofagasta, Chile) conducted a study to identify the network of actors that supports this infrastructure project and make proposals to improve the governance of this corridor. I highly recommend reading this study.

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Brazil is at the core of any effort to make regional integration work in South America. How do you assess Lula da Silva’s foreign policy in the context of revitalizing Brazil’s role on the global and regional stage after Jair Bolsonaro’s government?

The new government’s slogan, “Union and Reconstruction,” embodies the goal of preventing the division in Brazilian society that was evident in previous years, particularly during the 2022 elections. Lula da Silva also aims to rebuild domestic policies in health, education, public security, and others while restoring foreign policy and its international prestige after Bolsonaro’s government. At the regional level, Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil left UNASUR, CELAC, and generated tensions with its neighbors, especially Venezuela and Argentina. What has Lula da Silva done during his first months in office? He has revitalized diplomatic relations with his neighboring countries and returned Brazil to CELAC and UNASUR. In other words, Lula rebuilt what had been undone by Bolsonaro. Lula’s Brazil was also invited to participate in the negotiation meeting between the Venezuelan government and the opposition to hold new and free elections, which led the US to ease some of its sanctions against Venezuela.

Unlike the previous government, Brazil is very active in defending environmental issues and multilateralism. The Amazon Dialogues (dialogue with civil society groups), the Amazon Summit (South America-wide dialogue), and COP-30 (global dialogue) demonstrate how invested Brazil is in advancing its foreign policy agenda at various levels. Lula has reaffirmed the importance that Global South countries play in reforming multilateralism. Another aspect of Lula’s foreign policy is his willingness to take part in peace negotiations, as we have seen in the war between Russia and Ukraine and, recently, Hamas’ terrorist attacks on Israel and Israel’s condemnable aggression against Gaza.

What are you currently working on?

I continue researching the Bio-Oceanic Road Corridor and am working on a bilateral study on Brazil and Chile. In my Ph.D., I am studying Brazil-Chile, Brazil-Colombia, and Brazil-Peru relations in South American regionalism (2000-2008), trying to understand how Brazil, which is the regional power in South America, negotiates the accession of these countries to comprehensive initiatives such as UNASUR. I start my research from the perspective that the Bogotá-Lima-Santiago axis is relevant to understanding how South American regionalism has been built over the last decades.

In my article “The Pacific Alliance and its Influence on South American Regionalism,” published in the Latin American Policy journal, I demonstrate that Chile, Colombia, and Peru played an active role in shaping the institutional structure of PROSUR, mirroring the characteristics of the Pacific Alliance. Looking back in time, we can observe that these countries promoted PROSUR in 2019 (as a counter to UNASUR), the Pacific Alliance in 2011 (when UNASUR was taking shape institutionally), and the Pacific Arc Forum in 2007 (when South American countries were still discussing what UNASUR would be). Currently, the debates on the challenges regarding the costs and the “ideologization” of regional integration are evidence of the legacy of PROSUR to regionalism.

In the literature on South American regionalism, some studies have focused on understanding the Brasilia-Buenos Aires-Caracas axis in regionalism. What I am doing in my research is examining the other axis, the Bogotá-Lima-Santiago axis, and how these countries contribute to the construction of regionalism. An intriguing topic for investigation is the coexistence and overlap between these axes. I am particularly interested in understanding Brazilian foreign policy, as Brazil is the most enthusiastic actor in promoting comprehensive South American projects in the region. Given the similarities between PROSUR, the Pacific Alliance, and the Pacific Arc Forum, and their impact on South American regionalism, I aim to understand how Brazil negotiated its accession to UNASUR with Chile, Colombia, and Peru.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

I strongly encourage my colleagues, who are also at the outset of their academic careers, to cultivate their expertise in scientific advisory. I am particularly passionate about fostering connections between academia and the public policy domain, as I firmly believe in the value of evidence-based policies. Proficiency in navigating databases, employing analytical techniques, crafting communications for decision-makers, and understanding “timing” and

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“sensitivity” in politics, among other skills, greatly enhances the capabilities of a scientific researcher.