

Latin American Regionalism Under the New Right

Written by Bárbara C. Neves and Karen Honório

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BÁRBARA C. NEVES AND KAREN HONÓRIO, SEP 27 2019

Collapsing. This is the first image that may come to the mind of those who nowadays observe the regional integration institutions that have been consolidated in Latin America since 2003. The rise of political forces aligned to the right and center right-wing of the region's governments by *Coup d'état* or democratic elections during the last few years denoted a marked disruption of the organisms and the regional agenda from the decade before. Such an agenda was composed of social, political, and development issues and by the establishment of governance spaces which were intended to maintain regional autonomy concerning extra-regional actors. The emptying of institutions such as the South-American Nations Union (*UNASUR*, in Spanish) and the emergence of others like the Lima Group (2017) and the Forum for South-American Progress (*PROSUR*, in Spanish), demonstrate that, instead of what it may look like, regional integration is not disappearing, but being realigned to the aims and political and ideological positions of the new governments. The substitution of the regional organisms following changes in the political spectrum of each period in Latin America can be understood, from a historical perspective, as a permanent characteristic of its regional processes. Another important element that helps to understand the paths of Latin America's regionalisms, within this historical perspective, relates to the proximity or estrangement from the Pan-American integration model, namely, the North-American influence in its agenda and its institutionalization. In this sense, the proximity or estrangement from the Pan-American regionalisms can be observed by two main paths: those that aim to strengthen Latin-American autonomy by setting aside and reducing the United States of America's (USA) influence within the region; and others that aim to bring the Latin-American countries closer to the global hegemon (Bianculli 2016).

The current changes in regionalism are determined by the political and ideological juncture of the governments in power and its respective proximity or estrangement to North-American regional policy. It is also necessary to consider that the current scenario is characterized by changes within the political spectrum of the majority of the regional governments that have elected right-wing and center right-wing presidents. Also, the effects of the so-called "new emergent bipolarity" regarding the disputes between the USA and China in Latin America, arise two questions: how can we characterize the current paths of regional integration in Latin America? And, which questions are central to understanding the scenario that is presented to us? In this article, we aim to answer these questions starting with a short and initial discussion of important concepts for understanding Latin-American regionalisms and, then, be able to characterize the current regionalism transition in the continent. We also aim to point out which projects are being substituted and which are emerging, directing the questions that we consider relevant to think the region and the current changes and the possible creation of a new regional scenario.

Change as a Permanent Factor

As a space for joint action, in its historical aspect, regionalism in Latin America has never experienced a unified and common interested regional integration project. The first intent of an approximation and expansion of the commercial relations among the countries within the continent was the creation of the Latin-American Free Trade Area Association (LAFTA) in 1960. Despite the achieved advancements, the defense of national autonomy by member countries and the perception of asymmetric costs and gains among them resulted in the first regional fragmentation.

The difference in the economic capacity, interests, and objectives among the countries made Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru leave LAFTA and later create the Andean Pact in 1969. The estrangement that led these countries to search for different regional commitments reflected two opposed development projects. The first one

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was based on the aim to boost national development, expanding the market through the improvement of intra-regional economic relations. The other commitment was intended to be more flexible, representing those countries that had a bigger market, economic capacity, and were dependent on the North-American market for their exports, like Brazil and Mexico.

Because of the incapacity of making common efforts converge, the region was fragmented in its subcontinents (Central America, Caribbean, and South-America), not even being able to forge agreement within these conformations. In South-America, this fragmentation was even more latent. Because of the inability of building a solid regional institution based on a common regional project and the maintenance of the State as the main decision-maker many mechanisms were created that would overlap in its functions, causing what has been called by Detlef Nolte as “overlapping regionalism”. On one side, the overlap of regional efforts stems from the different levels of importance given by countries to their regional surroundings. On the other side, as highlighted by Nolte and Comini (2016), the search by countries like Brazil to expand their space for governance and influence within the region reinforces the regional institutional overlap, also generating possible divergences inside and among institutions.

The institutional and regional mechanisms overlap in South America has deepened since the middle of the 2000s. Those years represented a new moment for the Latin-American integration initiatives resulting from the emergence of left-wing governments in the region. This period was represented by the creation of sub-regional initiatives engaging diverse areas of cooperation, UNASUR is the most notable example of this multithemed regionalism. The mechanism gathered twelve South-American Councils[1] in its structure, each one responsible to develop regional governance for each theme-areas. Security, infrastructure, education, culture, health, and social participation were themes incorporated into the regional integration agenda in this period. The emergence of many initiatives represented the variety of disputed projects within the region. Its heterogeneity and diversity were also one of the main factors for the expansion of the regional institutional overlap.

Another characteristic of this moment was a strong anti-hegemonic ethos with different levels of membership (Lima 2013). As an example of this ethos, we can point out the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the people of the Americas[2] (ALBA, in Spanish), in 2004 under the leadership of Venezuela. It represented a counter-purpose in an anti-imperialism basis to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA, in Spanish) led by the USA. Although a consensus about the categorization of this moment for Latin-American regionalism by its researchers does not exist, it was nominated in different ways as: **structural** (Lima and Coutinho 2007), **strategic** (Briceño-Ruiz 2007), **post-liberal** (Veiga and Rios 2007, Sanahuja 2009) and **post-hegemonic** (Tussie and Riggiozzi 2015). On the whole, this **adjudicated regionalism** (Perrota and Porcelli 2016) reflected a period of intense protagonism by the region's governments in the intent of turning the subcontinent a pole of power within global geopolitics. The main result of this period's regionalism was to institutionalize in the international arena the idea of South-America, a concept that substituted the idea of a Latin-America in the majority of regional countries' foreign policies.

The creation of a space marked by a plural regionalism results in greater vulnerabilities in this space when facing changes in the political and economic national forces, or even when facing an expansion of external agents' interests and actions in the continent. In the long run, the trajectories of Latin and South-American regionalisms are based on the absence of a consensual project intended for the long term and its internalization by member countries. This scenario ends up characterizing the constant instability of Latin-American regionalism. Therefore, the joint projects and the cooperation among neighboring countries reflects the elected governments' political goals.

The Region Moving Towards the Right

In the current juncture, the change and instability factors that explain the deadlocks within the regional mechanisms, especially the South-American ones, bears on the deepening of regional governments' political and ideological split. With the election of right-wing political forces in countries like Argentina and Brazil, in a process that was initiated in 2012 with the *Coup d'état* of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, in addition to the Venezuelan crisis since the death of Hugo Chavez, the agenda and the meaning of regional institutions created during the decade before are now viewed by the new governments as symbols that must be surpassed.

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In these terms, there is a marked political intention from governments in distinguishing the ideological differences between these two regional moments. The *modus operandi* of this strategy is based on the dissent, emptying, and estrangement of the post-liberal regionalism, a movement that resists among the few left-wing governments within the region, like Bolivia. In the regional political field, this breakdown can be observed in the creation of the Lima Group in August 2017, by Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. The central purpose of the Lima Group is to increase pressure for the resolution of the Venezuelan crisis through criticism and opposition to Nicolás Maduro's government. The countries that compose the group promoted the substitution of UNASUR as a regional governance institution.

On April 15th, 2019, Brazil, under the presidency of Jair Messias Bolsonaro denounced the Constitutive Treaty of UNASUR, formalizing the request to leave the institution. The released note by the Brazilian Foreign Affairs Ministry informed that the country together with Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guiana, Paraguay, and Peru created the Forum for the South-American Progress (*PROSUR*) intended to substitute UNASUR in March of the same year. UNASUR was already showing evidence of its weakening as a regional governance space in this new political context when in March 2018 Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru jointly decided to suspend its participation in the institution because of the crisis surrounding the choice of the General Secretary. The Argentinean candidate, supported by these countries, had been blocked by Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Suriname.

Another characteristic from this period is the return of the regionalism agenda from the 1990's decade, with a greater focus on economic liberalization and the expansion of trade relations, as seen in the South-American Common Market (*MERCOSUR*) and European Union agreement. Within this context, the return of the preferential relations with the USA is also vital to comprehend the current Latin-American regionalism. The alignment of these right-wing governments and the convergence with Donald Trump's hemispheric policy put aside regional integration plans in these countries' foreign policies. Contrary to what is happening to the autonomous regional governance spaces, the organizations that are symbols of the North-American order in Latin America, as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance^[3] (*TIAR*, in Spanish), are being reactivated and strengthened as decision spheres for Latin-American countries.

Besides, these governments are also reinforcing their cooperation agenda with the USA in diverse themes, but mostly those in the military, defense, and security areas. As indicative of this alignment, we can observe the transformation of Colombia in a NATO's global partner in 2018, as well as the North-American government's declaration of its intention to make Brazil a major non-NATO ally. The Brazilian government is still negotiating the possibility of a free trade agreement with the USA and its entry in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The tendency observed until now in the right-wing governments within the region is of the subordination of its regionalism agenda and the option for bilateral relations with the USA.

The most pressing adverse effect of an autonomous regional governance gap (Toklatián 2019), which characterizes the current moment, is the Latin-American countries **vulnerability** regarding not only the USA interests but those from other international powers, like China and Russia. As an example, the Venezuelan crisis can be understood as a consequence of this vulnerable condition of the region. The fragmentation of the regional initiatives represents nowadays its incapacity in dealing with this crisis from within South America, having many external actors and interests involved in the various institutional spaces searching for a solution.

The relation between China and South America has become closer since the middle of the 2000s, initially mostly stimulated by the commodities boom and by the formation of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, and China – South Africa joined in 2011). Since 2008, China also started to invest massively in the Latin-American countries, buying public debt securities and financing infrastructure projects (Oliveira Cruz 2017). After 2014, with the political and economic crisis, there was a third moment of deepening of relations between China and the South-American countries by infrastructure investment agreements, signed with the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Argentina. The Chinese strategy for recovering the Maritime Silk Route and Belt, a project that involves the development of wide economic corridors of infrastructure through the construction of roads, railways, harbors, and airports (Dirmoser 2017), puts Latin America and the Caribbean as a natural extension of its route.

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The Asian country's cooperation level with the Latin-American and Caribbean States Community (*CELAC*, in Spanish) has grown progressively through the establishment of a bilateral summit focused on Chinese funding to regional infrastructure projects (Actis and Creus 2018). Studying Chinese relations with the continent has become crucial for understanding the future of Latin America's regionalism. Many authors have already pointed out the Chinese problematic in the region for reproducing a center-periphery relationship in its commercial relations, which creates new dependent relations between the Latin-American countries and the Asian giant (Chiliatto-Leite 2017). Besides, this growing relationship between China and the Latin-American States tends to occupy the existing autonomy void within regional institutions. Without a common project that remains during government changes or economic and political crisis, this proximity may represent a new regional project that does not represent Latin-American interests but reflects a project that benefits its drivers, in this case, China.

Power Does Not Survive Emptiness

An agreed-upon understanding of the Latin America regionalism debate, regardless of the historic period or theoretical perspective, is the fact that regional mechanisms will be evaluated by the contribution that they give or not to consolidate cooperation among countries in relevant interregional issues and global challenges. The importance of regionalism could be measured by the level of governance that it has forged in each period. Latin American regional institutions, formal and ad-hoc ones, should be considered by their capacity on generating power resources to the region in the international system.

A collective-engaged region has more chances to impose its interests and projects when facing extra-regional threats. Toklatián (2019) points out that nowadays Latin America is a drifting region in the global arena. The author still emphasizes that this particular condition is highly dangerous for Latin American countries. The systematic destruction and decomposition of the regional governance structure achieved in the last decade not only substitutes the kind and content of previous regionalism but also removes the region as a pole of power in world politics. This self-oriented invisibility dynamic could increase the vulnerability of the region's countries to external forces of all types.

The autonomy void present in the current forms of regionalism in Latin America and the re-activation of the American-oriented institutions, such as the OAS and the TIAR, put the region's societies in a position of dependency to non-national projects to regional outcomes. The foreseeable scenario leads us to believe that the future of the regional integration in Latin America under right-wing governments will be conditioned by the USA-China disputes in the region. Maybe we are witnessing a brand-new kind of adjudicate regionalism emerging, a **supporting or coadjutant regionalism**.

Notes

[1] The 12 South-American Councils existing in UNASUR regard to the following themes: 1) Culture; 2) Regional Security; 3) Energy; 4) Drugs; 5) Infrastructure; 6) Finance and Economy; 7) Social Development; 8) Health; 9) Citizen Security and justice; 10) Education; 11) Elections and 12) Science and technology.

[2] The ALBA's countries members are: Bolivia, Ecuador, Antigua and Barbuda, San Vincent and the Grenadines, Dominica, and Cuba.

[3] Signed in 1947, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (*TIAR*, in Spanish) envisaged mutual defense as a mechanism for maintaining peace and security within the hemisphere. Invoked a few times during the Cold War and de-legitimized many times, mainly by the USA, on September 11th, 2001 the TIAR was reactivated by the United States and Colombia, having the support of nine more Latin-American countries, to propose a military intervention in Venezuela. In an article published by The Washington Post, it was pointed out that the Colombian attitude was due to the approach between the Venezuelan government and the Colombian *guerilla* forces.

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About the author:

Bárbara C. Neves is a PhD Student and also obtained her M.A. at the Interinstitutional Graduate Program in International Relations “San Tiago Dantas” (UNESP, UNICAMP, PUC-SP) with a CAPES Scholarship. The author graduated in International Relations by the “Universidade Estadual Paulista” – Franca, São Paulo, Brazil, accomplishing an academic exchange at the “Instituto Politécnico Nacional”, Mexico City – Mexico with a Santander Universities Scholarship. Neves is a researcher at the New Research Technologies Laboratory in International

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Relations (LANTRI), the Research Network in Regionalism and Integration (REPRI), and at the Regionalism Observatory (ODR), being interested in the following research themes: regionalism; south-american regionalism; infrastructural integration; Brazilian foreign policy and regional institutions.

Karen Honório is a professor in International Relations Bachelor's and Contemporary International Relations Graduate Program at Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (Federal University for Latin American Integration - UNILA). She obtained a Phd and MA in International Relations at the Interinstitutional Graduate Program in International Relations "San Tiago Dantas" (UNESP, UNICAMP, PUC-SP) with researches related to the Brazilian Foreign Policy for South America during Lula's governments and the infrastructure dimension dynamics in the subcontinent. She co-lead a research group in Latin American Foreign Policy Analysis (Núcleo de Pesquisa em Política Externa Latino-Americana-NUPELA). For further information access her lattes CV.