

The Rise of Paradiplomacy in International Relations

Written by Mariano Alvarez

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MARIANO ALVAREZ, MAR 17 2020

In 2019 we commemorated the centenary of what is considered the beginning of international relations as a discipline. The study of foreign affairs had to overcome numerous barriers, both methodological and doctrinal, to be recognized as a field of study. Since then, different theoretical debates have diversified the approaches and expanded the analytical points of view. However, the consideration of the international actor as equivalent to the subject of international law has been a constant (Alvarez, et al., 2019). In this understanding, only states, international organizations and certain exceptions fit within the analysis of international relations. When this was disputed, during the debate on transnationalism, a group of international scholars advocated for the incorporation of transnational corporations and the various state powers (such as ministries or secretariats of state) into the study of foreign affairs, but the sub-state component was not considered (see Russell (2006)). When the non-central governments finally entered international debates, it was to discuss the legality and relevance of their participation in international relations and not to study how or why they did so.

This began to change in the mid-1980's, especially with the publication of the autumn issue of *Publius* magazine (vol. 14 issue 4). In it, the focus was placed on the internationalization of non-central governments (particularly intermediate ones) in federal States. Thereafter, studies on the phenomenon (frequently called paradiplomacy) began to expand, with key publications such as "Federalism and International Relations: The Role of Subnational Units" (Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990), "Paradiplomacy in Action: The Foreign Relations of Subnational Governments" (Aldecoa & Keating, 1999) and "La Política Internacional Subnacional en América Latina" (Maira, 2010), among others. The dissemination of studies on paradiplomacy led to large terminological and theoretical debates, which authors such as Kuznetsov (2014) and Schiavon (2019) have tried to solve recently. However, the place of studies on paradiplomacy remains unclear within the discipline of international relations.

The Importance of Incorporating Paradiplomacy into International Relations

In the field of international relations, the prevailing theories still keep the subject of international law as the principal actor and the object of analysis. The rise of paradiplomatic activity, which has been recognized and normalized (Cornago, 2010), should not be seen as a displacement of the state but as its complement (Wolff, 2007). It is indisputable that negotiations and treaty drafting, as well as the coordination of actions, continue to be carried out through the ministries of foreign affairs; and while state leaders are increasingly directly involved in the international arena, they continue to do so from the perspective of the central government of the country, without threatening the uniqueness of the State voice. Therefore, the state, as an actor and subject of analysis, will continue to be essential in order to understand the international arena (Sarquís, 2016). However, neglecting paradiplomatic participation hinders a more complex analysis of international reality.

For instance, when the central government decided to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change, twelve state governors (both Democrats and Republicans) created the United States Climate Alliance (currently endorsed by 30 governors), because they refused to abandon the Paris' principles. In addition, nearly 400 mayors endorsed the agreement on their own, including those from the ten most populated cities in the United States (Díaz Abraham, 2019). If the analysis of the international impact of the Paris Agreement only considers states' behavior, it cannot explain the results achieved in the United States.

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The Challenges Posed by Paradiplomacy

This growing activity of non-central governments implies two major challenges. The first is the articulation of paradiplomatic activity with foreign policy. The external action of states or provinces is a very sensitive issue for the central governments, either because they perceive paradiplomacy as a challenge to their sovereignty, or because the multiplicity of voices emanating from the same country to the international arena makes it difficult to present a coherent national foreign policy (Lecours, 2002). In other words, the doctrines of national interest, sovereignty and territorial integrity, at least in the past, have predisposed the central governments against paradiplomacy, even though it neither jeopardizes the territory nor the borders of the country.

Unlike what happens in Europe, this challenge has a unique characteristic in the Americas. The territorial extension of these countries generates situations in which the cities and intermediate governments, located in border areas, have more frequent and deeper contacts with their foreign counterparts than with their own national capitals (Oddone, 2018). This, in turn, has aroused suspicion about the possible effects that this link could have on the bilateral relationship at the central level.

However, even if the paradiplomatic activity continues to expand, both in scope and in depth of topics, the central government will remain the main actor in international relations. That quality is, at least in the foreseeable future, undisputed (Thürer, 2003). Nevertheless, this does not imply that the central government can continue acting without paying attention to the new international actors; on the contrary, it must know how to transform itself into the module that articulates the pressure between the subnational and the supranational levels.

The second challenge rests with the paradiplomatic actors themselves, who need to prepare and plan their international actions. Paradiplomacy is not about governors who, in a personal capacity, make phone calls or visits abroad. If that was the case, it would be the same as the international activity of famous personalities. On the contrary, paradiplomacy involves an actor that is like the States, meaning that their authorities are elected by and, consequently, representatives of their citizens.

Acting internationally, as a governmental entity, involves considering many non-traditional variables to non-central governments. First, there are international commitments that, although assumed by states, must also be respected by their constituent parts. Likewise, every action implies the expenditure of resources, which by definition are limited. If non-central governments are called to be the new actors in the international arena and to strengthen the cross-border linkage, it is necessary that they correctly plan each paradiplomatic action, establishing clear goals and processes to achieve them. Otherwise, actions can prove fruitless and discouraging.

An example of the above is the paradiplomatic behavior motivated by what Duchacek (1984) called *me-tooism*, that is, mere imitation. Certain non-central governments began establishing contacts of paradiplomatic nature exclusively to emulate the success that others had achieved using similar techniques. In this imitation there was no critical judgment of the procedures or the possible consequences of the actions, the activity was emulated hoping to achieve the same results. For instance, in the 1980's many non-central governments rushed to open representative offices abroad, without first having developed an insertion program or without having clear goals as to why the legation was being established. This was done, to a large extent, because they were trying to imitate the international success that the Canadian province of Quebec had had by promoting its interests abroad (especially in France) and placing itself as an international actor. However, by the beginning of the 2000's it was clear that the costs of establishing and maintaining offices without a specific purpose greatly exceeded its benefits, which is why a period of closing of representations took place (Keating, 1999). While non-central governments currently consider more cautiously the requirements and benefits of opening a representative office, this does not mean that imitation has ceased to be an engine of paradiplomatic behavior.

Without a real capacity to generate public policies based on a solid theoretical analysis, non-central governments find it more reasonable to implement those actions that other similar entities have carried out with relative success. But the imitation, especially when it occurs without reflection or an assertive analysis of its costs and benefits, can lead to large paradiplomatic fiascos, as was the case of the representative offices.

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Working Towards a Solution: An Epistemological Community

The two challenges paradiplomacy is currently facing share the same problem for policy makers and their advisors: the absence of a solid academic corpus that allows general explanations of the motivations and objectives of paradiplomatic action. Currently, there is no solid theory, backed by quantitative or qualitative data, that gives an account of how or why non-central governments decide to participate in the international arena, or how the State could better articulate their interests.

The debate in international affairs seemed to be split into two worlds: that of the states (field of analysis of political science and international relations) and that of non-governmental actors (where studies have been rather of an economist nature and limited to the national territory). Paradiplomacy generated a break in that debate, since it introduced a third world in which non-central governments are genuine international actors, which cannot be understood using only instruments of the economy nor the international relations theory (Lecours, 2002). The classic model of international analysis lacks tools to understand the political and constitutional conditions of non-central governments in international relations and does not see the choice of mechanisms, limitations and the relationship of non-central governments with the State (Durazo Herrmann, 2003). Therefore, new analytical corpus cannot be generated from a single discipline but must integrate several of them into an international perspective built from the local.

Studies on the emergence of new international actors are fundamental, since without them it is difficult to give a complete picture of the international situation (Kuznetsov, 2014). More than 35 years have passed since the first studies of paradiplomacy appeared and, although some scholars have analyzed the internationalization of the non-central government using comparative politics or international relations' theories, the vast majority of these studies are still taking place only in federal countries and on specific cases, without actually being integrated into either discipline (Lecours, 2002).

The foregoing has generated a great diffusion of works on paradiplomacy, but without an agreed theory or methodology, which allows comparative studies or the generalization of hypotheses. In short, a conceptual framework that allows a better understanding of paradiplomacy is still lacking (Criekemans, 2007). Even in the United States, where in the last sixty years governors have gained power in foreign policy, there is no strong theory among academics (McMillan, 2008).

This lack of general explanations regarding the phenomenon is mainly because researchers have produced many descriptive works but little theoretical analysis on paradiplomacy (Kuznetsov, 2014). Also, the version of the state defined by territory, sovereignty and people was never a true reflection of reality and less so now (Thürer, 2003). Consequently, the current theoretical approach is insufficient to study non-central governments in international relations. New theories, philosophies and concepts are necessary. In order to achieve this, a new academic corpus is needed, and new venues in which scholars can interact and debate about paradiplomacy must be created.

This is not to say that no progress has been made. However, it has been fragmented, both by country and by discipline. The scholars studying paradiplomacy, until recent years, did not participate in an epistemic community capable of generating methodological synergies, promoting transversal debates and proposing policies based on experiences shared by governments in more than one country.

Performing the necessary studies for the creation of new theories is not a simple task largely because the statistical information of the foreign policy of non-central governments rarely exists. Although certain recent projects are generating comparable empirical data, not having a theory about what circumstances are the drivers of paradiplomatic actions, implies that, instead of collecting data linked to specific variables, it is linked to performance categories, on which there is not a clear consensus (Bursens & Deforche, 2010). For example, during the 1980's many studies on paradiplomacy sought to analyze its impact on federalism. Instead, modern studies have turned their focus towards the border, which ceased to be perceived only as a dividing line and became a social, economic, political and cultural phenomenon (Kuznetsov, 2014). With this, the border replaced part of the interest in federalism, changing the categories of action to focus on cross-border cooperation (Bursens & Deforche, 2010), but nothing

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implies that there will be no other change in the coming years.

To overcome the challenges, policy advisors and policy makers are key actors, but if they do not have relevant information and an appropriate approach to paradiplomacy and its link with the state, there is a real and growing risk that the central government will not articulate correctly the interests of their substate units. Consequently, they will act in an uncoordinated manner, which could generate inconsistencies in the foreign policy of the countries and, more seriously for non-central governments, the inefficient allocation of resources.

This is where the epistemological community on paradiplomacy has a role to play. Politicians and their advisors need to be persuaded of the importance of paradiplomacy and, once they have, they will require the right information to make appropriated decisions. An epistemological community is “a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain [paradiplomacy in this case] and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue” (Haas, 1992, p. 2) that exchange knowledge, work in common projects and in the development of theories based on the work of their members. By doing so, the epistemological community can better promote the inclusion of substate interest in the arena of international relations.

In December 2019, during a congress in Córdoba (Argentina), a meeting took place to create the *Red de Expertos en Paradiplomacia e Internacionalización Territorial* (REPIT). The network brought together academics, experts and practitioners linked to paradiplomacy around the world. But this is clearly only the first step towards the consolidation of the epistemological community.

Finally, while members of the epistemological community must promote the inclusion of paradiplomacy in the academic world, scholars from disciplines such as international relations, political science, economics and sociology must also start including paradiplomacy into their own studies. The question to be addressed is no longer if non-central governments should get involved in foreign affairs, but why they do so and how can we help them plan their paradiplomacy and articulate it into the national foreign policy.

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About the author:

Mariano Alvarez holds a PhD from the University of Leiden (Netherlands), a MA in International Studies from the University of Chile, and a BA in international Relations from the Catholic University of Argentina. He is Associate Researcher of the Instituto de Estudios Internacionales at the University Arturo Prat (Chile), executive board member of the Red de Expertos en Paradiplomacia e Internacionalización Territorial (REPIT) and consultant for different

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international organizations. His most recent publications are “Gobernanza y desempeño exportador de los servicios modernos en América Latina y la India” (2020), “La creciente importancia de la paradiplomacia en América Latina: motivos para su abordaje académico y su vinculación con las fronteras” (2019), and “América Latina Global. Estudios regionales sobre paradiplomacia” (2019).