

# The Motivations for Latin American Regionalism: Analysing the Argentina Perspective

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In the liberal international order, the rise of the non-western world and creation of space for alternative ideas has resulted in a paradigm shift marked by co-operation and collaboration. Political power has begun migrating from the West to the East and the non-Western world has been transformed from being passive receiver of ideas into their active creator (Acharya 2016). The part played by regional powers and the emerging global players in the creation and conservation of international and regional orders has gained significance. In the hemispheric context, the extent and the ways in which the preponderant role of the United States becomes a determinant for the prospects for cooperation remains an important consideration in the Americas. The traditional theoretical approaches to regional cooperation, which focus, on the role of international institutions, the inter-state power asymmetries, globalization and domestic politics are not sufficient to explain the unsteady forms of conflict and cooperation in regionalism.

Regionalism is best described “as an associative process that occurs in spatially delimited areas of the international system, called ‘macro regions’ or international regions. While the element of geographical contiguity or proximity is a crucial variable, this can be understood in a flexible way (Briceño-Ruiz 2018). The ‘Americas’ is regarded as a region which is identified by a spatially demarcated area of the Western Hemisphere, dominated by the USA since the end of the 19th century and later encapsulated within institutional framework of the Organization of American States (OAS) since 1948.

There are variants of regionalism encountered in the world: structuralist regionalism emerged in the 1950s and survived till the 1970s; 1980s and 1990s marked by open regionalism and post-liberal regionalism during the next decade. Alternatively, other categories of regionalism old and new emerged in the mid-eighties triggered by the political changes witnessed in East Europe and those caused by the end of the Cold War. A “new wave” marked by new patterns of regionalisation coexisting with pre-existent forms became the new trend (Hettne 2005).

## Understanding Regional co-operation

The theoretical understanding of regionalism is important to explain the evolution of waves of regionalism throughout the globe. The origin, the mandate and efficacy can be gauged once the basis of formulation can be dissected at length. There are four contending approaches to explaining regionalism:

### *Neo-liberal Institutionalism*

In order to tackle various functional needs and address the problems that could no longer be solved effectively at the nation-state level, Governments had to create international or supranational institutions (Deutsch et al. 1957; Haas 1958; Mitrany 1975). With the establishment of a cooperative agreement, according to this theory, integration became self-sustaining, through “spill-over” mechanisms (Haas 1958). Due to success and integration in one area, there was a natural functional and political spill-over which increased the demands for integration in other areas eventually leading to deepened and self-perpetuating integration.

### *Realism/ Neorealism*

The emphasis of this approach is that regionalism is a defensive response by the weaker states, ultimately “aimed at challenging the dominance of great powers and/or socializing them through norm-setting” (Acharya 2007:642). These arguments are consistent with realist-based external balancing hypotheses, according to which interstate cooperation must be understood as a defensive response to threatening external developments. From this perspective, the purpose of the small or relatively weak states may be to create a regional trade bloc for intensification of their market and bargaining potential and thus increasing their impact within the international system.

Some scholars concurring with this approach explain regionalism as a defensive response to the economic and competitive pressures posed by global economic interdependence and by the spread of neoliberal policies in the 1990s. In a few cases, regional integration may be perceived as an intermediate step towards the ultimate goal of full participation in the global economy. This is possible through attempts to enhance competitiveness within a protected market before being ready to face global competition. Alternatively, regionalism among developing countries has been interpreted as a strategy to improve their market access in a context of “dysfunctional” multilateralism or to provide these marginalized states with a viable alternative to the multilateral level (Phillips 2003; Tussie 2009). There exists a two-way relationship between globalisation and regionalisation because globalisation gives impetus to regionalism and the latter through enabling the insertion of the weaker countries into the world economy, further endorses globalisation. The realist and neorealist arguments focusing on interstate power asymmetries; the role of interdependence and institutions; and the “new regionalism” can explain globalization and regionalism

### *Domestic political economy approach*

The domestic-political-economy explanations of regionalism emphasize the ways in which domestic interests and political institutions interact to shape national preferences and choices regarding regional trade cooperation. One set of arguments focuses on the demands of societal actors. Preferential trade agreements have domestic distributional implications. They, therefore, create winners and losers, who may become supporters and/or opponents of these policies. Consumers, exporters, and other firms that can exploit economies of scale and production sharing across borders when gaining access to an enlarged regional market are expected to benefit from and hence to support regional trade agreements (Solingen 1998; Milner 1995; Manger 2009).

## Latin American Attempts at Regionalism

The shared experiences of dependency, low share in world trade and imbalance in exports and imports created economic problems for many of the Latin American countries. In Latin America, regionalism progressed along waves- the first wave of the 1950s corresponded with protectionist industrialising regionalism; the second wave with mercantilist regionalism of the 1980s; the third wave of regionalism under the aegis of GATT/WTO; and the latest spate of regionalism is in tune with forces of globalisation. The attempts at regionalisation are in sharp contrast to the inward-looking economic policies of all the countries. Regional initiatives in Latin America became a trend due to several economic setbacks starting with the Mexican debt crisis of 1982. Interestingly, the influence of the United States which had so far precluded any attempts towards the rising clout of Latin America became one of the factors for the fruition of regional associations within the region. The evolution of regionalism makes an interesting analysis of the changing priorities or even ideological rigidities.

*Latin America Free Trade Association (LAFTA)* created through the 1960 Treaty of Montevideo was the first regional attempt towards economic integration under a liberal free trade framework. The fact that it involved countries of all sizes with diverse levels of development and political interests meant industrialised countries like Argentina, Mexico and Brazil had joined with an interest in securing a wider market for their products, while smaller and underdeveloped countries intended to create industrial development. This imbalance in expectations from collectivisation resulted in disadvantages to the less industrialized countries of the region because the intended benefits failed to accrue equitably to all the partner countries. The market forces allocated resources to the countries with higher levels of industrial development resulting in the less industrialised countries in the area mired in an unsustainable situation. Against the effects of disparity exhibited by LAFTA, the reaction of small countries led to the appearance of sub-regional agreements in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Latin American Integration Association / *Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración* / *Associação Latino-Americana de Integração* (LAIA / ALADI) replaced LAFTA in 1980 through the signing of the Montevideo Treaty. It included Cuba apart from the original members which are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Several countries and organizations retain observer status and any of the Latin American States may apply for accession. Since the early 1980s and within the LAIA framework, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay had signed a number of bilateral agreements basically structured to obtain tariff preferences.

The *Andean Pact* is a trade bloc of four countries - Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay are associate members while Panama, Mexico, and Spain are Observers. Although formed in 1969, CAN became operational in the nineties with the establishment of a Free Trade Area in 1993 and a Customs Union in February 1995. Internal problems in these countries in the last few years have slowed down the integration process.

One of the most important initiatives has been the formation of the *Mercado Comun del Sur (MERCOSUR)* by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Deterioration of relations between two continental giants Brazil and Argentina was instrumental in damaging the prospects of collaboration, the rivalry that gained prominence in the 1980s. However, a decrease in political tensions encouraged economic facilitated cooperation between the two. The setbacks in Brazil's nuclear programmes reduced fears in Argentina resulting in attempts to form free trade areas at the sub-regional level. The push for cooperation between Brazil and Argentina came through the bilateral Argentine-Brazilian Economic Integration and Cooperation Program (PICE) in 1986. A change in regimes in the two countries- Carlos Menem in Argentina and Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil at the helm- resulted in the creation of a common market and customs Union (CU). When Paraguay and Uruguay joined the pact, the four countries agreed upon in 1991 to sign the Treaty of Asuncion. Since then, the tariff rates have been drastically reduced, and the amount of international trade, both intra-regional and extra-regional, have increased dramatically. Several protocols with lists of negotiated products were to receive preferential treatment and the agreement would also include industry cooperation programs specifically in the capital goods industry. MERCOSUR is largely based on the principles of democracy and economic development, on the core values of a human-faced integration in terms of migration, labour, cultural and social matters.

The idea of the *Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)* envisioned by President Bush when the negotiations began in 1998 could have had the potential of becoming the largest experiment in the New Regionalism approach to economic integration. It could build upon the Enterprise of the Americas Initiative (EAI) with nearly 34 members, however, it could not take off by the given deadline of 2005. The diversity of size of the economy of the constituent units, the concerns of the working class and additional complexity of another supra-national entity became the stumbling blocks.

Another milestone in regional integration was the *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—CELAC)*, designed to find Latin American solutions to Latin American problems in December 2011. Biased by 'return of the state' ethos and an integration model based on anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism and specific ideals of social welfare and mutual economic aid. CELAC was a multilateral Latin American and Caribbean regional scheme emerging from the Latin American and Caribbean Summit (CALCS) and the meetings of the Rio Group and has been a platform for dialogue and cooperation among all Latin American and Caribbean countries. Pure economic integration has not been the objective of CELAC, and therefore, it cannot be regarded as a complement to the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA; ALADI in Spanish and Portuguese). The chief aims are political cooperation, security, and the defence of human rights. Furthermore, there has been an anticipated apprehension of attempts to reconcile CELAC's functions with those of the OAS.

***PROSUR(Foro para el Progreso del América del Sur) or Forum for the Progress of South America*** originated with the initiatives of the heads of Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and other Latin American states to replace UNASUR, which was founded by late Hugo Chavez as an attempt to limit US influence. PROSUR would function "without ideology and bureaucracy, but with a total commitment to freedom, democracy and human rights," said Chilean President Sebastian Pinera at the inaugural meet in May 2019. The alliance for a



change would not profess economic alliance but in it the states would rather discuss issues pertaining to infrastructure, energy, security, health, defence, crime and response to natural disasters.

### **Phases of Regionalism in the Southern Cone**

The theoretical frameworks described in the previous section need to be relied upon to unveil the erratic patterns of conflict and cooperation characterizing the evolution of regionalism in the Southern Cone region of Latin America of which Argentina is a sizeable component. In line with neoclassical realist explanations in International Relations (IR), the approach developed here emphasizes the complex ways in which systemic incentives and domestic political factors have interacted to shape regional policy choices and outcomes. While external vulnerability and overlapping power asymmetries have provided strong and consistent incentives for regional cooperation in the Southern Cone, the impact of these systemic forces has been crucially mediated by domestic political dynamics. The middle-power set new standards of theoretical thought in international relations. These standards stem from the necessity, ever more widely recognized, to take into account the lack of unequivocal relationships between the units of the international system. States and the structural attributes of the international system are mutually constitutive entities

The origins of regional trade cooperation in the Southern Cone can be traced back to the Argentine-Brazilian rapprochement initiated in the late 1970s. In 1991, the two partners invited smaller neighbours Uruguay and Paraguay to join them in the creation of MERCOSUR. The Treaty of Asunción, which formally gave birth to the South American trade bloc. we can identify four different phases in the regional cooperation in the Southern Cone. The first phase, between 1991 and 1994, was characterized by growing trade interdependence, few significant unilateral violations, and very low levels of diplomatic tension among partners. In the second period, 1995 to 1998, trade interdependence was still growing but at a slower rate, and there was a decline in compliance, as evidenced by an increasing number of unilateral measures by both partners. In addition, some of these measures resulted in severe disputes, as evidenced by the significant increase in the crisis indicator (see Table 2.2). In contrast, the third phase was characterized by a marked deterioration in all indicators: an erosion of regional trade interdependence and a significant increase in the number of unilateral measures, which, in turn, resulted in recurrent and higher levels of bilateral tension. Finally, after 2003 cooperation improved, as is shown by all of the indicators. During this period, trade interdependence recovered within the bloc, and, despite the increase in negotiated trade restrictions, the overall number and scale of controversies remained modest. A slightly more conflictive phase, coinciding with the deterioration in international economic conditions in 2008–9, proved short-lived, with more recent reports highlighting an “easing of tensions and the creation of a more positive atmosphere between partners” (IDB 2010).

### **Argentina's Alacrity to Regionalism**

After 2003, Argentina went through significant changes in its foreign policy strategies, specifically in the field of regional integration. These principles were based on the prioritization of the political link within the Southern Cone and with Latin-American countries as a primary platform. They included the defence of democracy and human rights, the respect of sovereignty and self-determination. These principles were

supplemented by multilateral action in the global scene, keeping pacifist positions in matter of defence and appealing to common interests with other countries of the region in commercial issues. This was the essence of what local policy-makers called the Argentinean project of regional integration, and what was also dubbed as the ideology of regionalism, that had been consolidated as important pillars of political strategies used by both Nestor Kirchner's and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's administrations.

Argentina is part of OAS, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Latin American Integration Association and of MERCOSUR (*Mercado Común del Sur*), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, member of the PROSUR started in Santiago, Chile, in March 2019, observer member of the Pacific Alliance (*Alianza del Pacífico*) in 2016., *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas* (Union of South American Nations—UNASUR), and *Iniciativa para la Integración de la Infraestructura Regional Suramericana* (Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America—IIRSA).

Since Argentina, was at a significantly higher degree of industrial development, the deepening of the integration process would have resulted in reaping the benefits of a larger market and large catchment area of the labour force. To understand Argentina's motivation towards regionalism comprehensively, the evolution of the process under various Presidencies needs to be examined. Their policies were marked by the abandonment of import-substitution and the adoption of a development strategy based on the gains from a free market economy. A survey of the integration efforts would be critical in understanding the continuity and change.

#### *Under Carlos Menem*

During the inauguration, Carlos Menem had announced policies to promote international cooperation as well as a free and open economy. He was the key player in the materialising of MERCOSUR. Much to everyone's surprise, the Peronist President, Menem, showed a remarkable willingness to jettison the old trappings of inward-looking and state-directed economics (*dirigisme*) in favour of international integration. He tinkered with several economic teams until he found in Domingo Cavallo, his finance minister, the man for the job. However, during the latter part of his tenure, his government came under pressure and began implementing policies and shaping institutions in a way such that it insulated itself from external influences. Even with an inward-looking development model, the outcome was an "Argentine miracle" which was an amalgamation of modern economic policies with traditional populist politics, efficiency, and *caudillismo*. Argentina began to tread on the narrow path between being a good neighbour to its MERCOSUR partners and being a reliable ally of the United States. Under President Menem, the country doggedly pursued a policy of convergence with Washington and the outcome was a de-emphasis on the process of regional integration compared to a hemispheric one.

### *Nestor Kirchner's Presidency*

In 2003, Nestor Kirchner had claimed that Argentina's regional integration must help it to enhance its stake in the world, to gain more weight in multilateral decision-making, serving its interests in terms of sustainable development, achievement of social equity in the country and a fairer distribution of income. His Chancellor, Rafael Bielsa maintained the need of having a "truly united Latin America and not fragmented, to negotiate and discuss friendly with developed countries, without forgetting our unit behind some transcendent values with which we are not neutral" (2003).

The essence of the Argentine variant of regional integration, and what is called the ideology of regionalism, had been consolidated as an important pillar of political strategies by both Nestor Kirchner's and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's administrations. 2010 was the year of the Bicentennial of the first Argentinian National Government, and it represented a remarkable moment in the history of integration because Nestor Kirchner, former president and husband of the latter President Cristina Fernandez, was elected as General Secretary of the Union of South American Nations -UNASUR.

### *Cristina Kirchner at the helm*

Taking over the mantle from her deceased husband, in 2010 Cristina Kirchner asserted that regional forums were a primary platform for the regionalist ideology that had functioned as a basis for legitimisation towards endorsing principles held to be necessary for an international insertion of the country. From that point, Argentinian diplomacy has shown the need to uphold multilateralism and to blindly respect the international law in the treatment of the international agenda. This meant an institutional legitimisation of prevailing international organizations bodies and agencies, in those areas exposed as central. The central areas were: the defence of democracy and human rights, the fight against international terrorism, the respect for sovereignty and self-determination (with both national and regional autonomy) and peace maintenance. These events did not alter Argentina's participation in international summits. Out of ten of them, interestingly, five summits that Argentina attended were regional and the other half were from outside the region. Argentina subscribed to twenty multilateral treaties, and one hundred and twenty-nine bilateral treaties with countries.

Essentially, in relation to bilateral relationships, the diplomatic and political link after 2003 had been mainly focused within South America, especially with Brazil, Venezuela, and with different intensity, Chile. Understandably, this was due to the combination of two components: the ideological proximity with other presidents (Lula, Hugo Chávez and Ricardo Lagos-Michelle Bachelet). The relation between ideological and economic factor was not so intense with those countries which only met one of these characteristics, for example with the progressive presidents of Ecuador, Paraguay, or Uruguay, or economies of Colombia and Mexico gravitating around the United States.

### *Tenure of Mauricio Macri*

When Mauricio Macri took over the Presidency in 2015, he laid stress on the importance of having a new vision of regionalism. His pro-activeness could be witnessed in the regional political field and 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 was to increase pressure for the resolution of the Venezuelan crisis through criticism and opposition to Nicolás Maduro's government. The countries that composed the group promoted the substitution of UNASUR as a regional governance institution. With that reality, Argentine agenda for MERCOSUR included negotiations with the EU, convergence with the Pacific Alliance, and links with new markets in Asia and Africa. The June 28, 2019 deal between the European Union and MERCOSUR was a breakthrough. Furthermore, an EU-MERCOSUR agreement could generate regulatory certainty and reinforce new investments. President Macri called it the most important agreement ever signed in their history.

#### *Ushering in the Presidency of Alberto Fernandez*

When he assumed power, he had emphasised on the critical need for multilateralism for Latin America and the Caribbean to handle new challenges. How his emphasis on bolstering and expanding MERCOSUR will unfold will remain to be seen. On 15 April 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 would create the Forum for the South-American Progress (PROSUR) intended to substitute UNASUR in March 2019. UNASUR has already been showing evidence of its weakening as a regional governance space in this new political context and the ultimate demise came in March 2018 with Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru jointly deciding to suspend participation in the institution because of the crisis surrounding the choice of the General Secretary.

#### **The Trend**

The emptying of institutions such as UNASUR and the emergence of new ones like the Lima Group (2017) and the Forum for South-American Progress (PROSUR), demonstrates that regional integration is not endangered, but being realigned to the aims and political and ideological positions of the new governments. The changing nature of the regional organisations following changes in the political spectrum in Latin America can be understood, from a historical, political, sociological and, importantly, economic perspective, as permanent characteristics of LAC's regional processes. Another important element that helps in understanding 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 US 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' influence within the region; and others that aim to bring the Latin-American countries closer to the global hegemon.

Finally, the regional fragmentation among political and economic models, along with different interests of regionalism and global insertion, exposed the most probable tensions in relations with the Brazilian



government. Fernández's requests for the release from prison of Brazil's former President Lula da Silva (2003-2010), whom he visited in prison, led to openly hostile mentions by the new incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro, who had even gone to the extent of earlier threatening to review Brazil's permanence in Mercosur if Fernández and Kirchner won the elections. Certainly, while the context imperatives of these frictions cannot be ruled out, Fernández's first visit to López Obrador in Mexico could mean a rearrangement of proximity among leaders of the region's other large economies.

### Challenges to Regionalism

There is a plethora of challenges to regionalism significant among which could be the liberal international order. Regionalism and globalism could be both opposing and complementary phenomenon (Hettne 2005). While the neoliberals consider regionalism as a new kind of protectionism and the next best option to be adopted in case of failure of globalism, the IPE approach conceives of regionalism as being complementary to globalization and not opposing it.

Latin American response should be towards greater regional integration as a way of energising the economies for preparing them for more efficient integration into the global economy. This would be a way of coming out of the current protectionist tendencies of the developed world and facilitate deep regional integration that facilitates free movement of goods, services, labour and capital in the region. This would be an effective method to mitigate the adverse effects of the low dynamism of global trade. By increasing the regional productive efficiency, the region would become most productive and competitive area for global insertion. Two groups of countries have already opted for an aggressive strategy of this nature- Central American Common Market and Pacific Alliance. The steps significantly include mobility of goods services capital and people in order to ensure commercial and financial integration. This could be possible through dismantling of trade barriers, harmonization of rules and creation of regional value chain. Banking and insurance market and stock market needs to be ambitiously integrated to reduce the risk of capital flows and the uncertainty created by reduced role of several global banks. The members of Mercosur are beginning to rethink their regional integration strategy particularly in the case of the new Argentine government. There is a possibility that these changes may lead to convergence between Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance.

### Summing Up

As Pía Riggiozzi of the University of Southampton and Diana Tussie of Argentina's *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (Latin American School of Social Sciences—FLACSO), show in *The Rise of Post-Hegemonic Regionalism: The Case of Latin America*, today regional integration processes look like nothing anybody could have imagined earlier. Especially in South America, regionalism "cannot be seen any longer as a slow movement of blind following and adjustment to Anglo-American free-trade doctrines". (Riggiozzi and Tussie 2012). Rather, changing domestic realities and policy choices have helped bring about the end of the US-led hemispheric leadership in the region and the emergence of alternative institutional structures and cooperation projects. The persistence of such efforts towards regionalism over the years is explained by Latin American countries' desire to transcend their assumed subordination and limited bargaining capacity.

The prominent themes in the coming years in the Latin American integration process will be shaped by their relationship not only with the US but also China. The future of regional groupings may even depend on the relationship between the major powers within Latin America. Since some of the countries will have new governments starting in 2020, changes in government are likely to have a major impact since these would be governments with distinct ideological profiles and economic models. A strong interdependence between the countries in place of individual action can be the way forward to retaining Latin American distinctiveness.

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