

PEACE AND SECURITY

# CRITICAL JUNCTURE, POWER TRANSITION AND LATIN AMERICAN VACUUM

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Latin America is ill-equipped as a whole in facing the tide of current systemic transformations after a long and gradual process of loss of international gravitation.



The region is divided and fragmented, lacking a common voice, articulated functional mechanisms or leaders that may head collective action.



The causes of the «Latin American vacuum» are rooted, mainly, in dynamics operating within the region, exacerbated by the pandemic.



The escape routes from the abyss and the reinstatement of constructive impulses will arise from the region itself.



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# 1

## THE HORIZON AS A CHALLENGE

The international scenario for the 2021-2022 biennium is taking shape as one of the most turbulent since the end of the Cold War. The aftermath of the health emergency and the downfall of the global economy into poverty, inequality, unemployment, starvation, displacement, social unrest and political instability are powerfully felt in all the corners around the world, and particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, the escalating rivalry between the United States of America and China following the pandemic, and with its geopolitical consequences, has generated increasing pressures on the already eroded global multilateral level. For a long period of time, we have been witnessing a complex process of redistribution of power, with the current descent of the US, the accelerated ascent of China as a great new power, the reemergence of an assertive and disturbing Russia and an astray Europe. But since 2020 we face something much more complex.

What are we talking about? We are witnessing a critical juncture in the midst of a power transition that is shaking the foundations of the liberal world order in all spheres. A critical juncture in the sense of a historic context that comes after a global collapse of the social order equilibrium. In this case, political leaders are faced with the need to choose among various options of equilibrium reconstruction, or to adapt to new circumstances. Besides, they are faced with a systemic power transition, given that there is a dispute between a declining and an ascending power, for the relative distribution of material resources, influence and prestige, which brings conflict as an inherent component.

All critical junctures force action and all power transitions are, by definition, conflictive. A new *bipolarism* is thus approaching of a very different nature to the *bipolarity* of the Cold War in, at least, four fundamental aspects: the high level of interdependence and interconnection at a global level; the low polarity without a rigid block structure (so far); the lax and/or diffuse logics of dominant leaders; and, finally, the presence of various types of regionalism and levels of regionalization. Within this framework, the global leadership capabilities of political institutions are yet to be outlined, to manage the current critical juncture and its multiple dimensions

regarding issues of health, economics, society, politics and security<sup>1</sup>.

A series of interconnected processes explain the current complexity. The great economic recession burst out in 2008, in spite of the promises made by the G-20, once it reached an agreement for an effective regulation of financial capital. An asymmetric globalization has been taking roots, bringing with it profound inequality added to a sense of precariousness resulting from the dismantling of the Welfare State. We are witnessing a persistent retraction of liberal democracy while we are unable to anticipate to which hybrid or authoritarian heights the latest democratic wave may rise, or which are the conditions needed for fractured, raddled or mobilized societies to survive.

This is the context in which the COVID-19 flared up, a pandemic that confirms the human disappointment with current affairs, but that does not necessarily entail that, for the moment and in the future, inclusive social pacts will be forged, with thriving States and a global system with a capacity to respond. We are bearing witness to one of those moments in which long and short cycles in history are related with unexpected events and thus disrupt everything, confronting peripheral regions such as Latin America with the urgent dilemma to rethink collectively its intra- and extra-regional relations, or rather to follow an «every man for himself» logic and to navigate with no safe havens.

The peculiarity of the current scenario in Latin America is that the region is ill-equipped as a whole in facing this tide of systemic transformations after a long and gradual process of loss of international gravitation. The region is divided and fragmented, lacking a common voice, articulated functional mechanisms or leaders that may head collective action. This was not the case in previous historical contexts, such as the crisis of 1929, the post-World War II period, or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; three turning points when the region showed

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1 Bruce Jones and Susana Malcorra: *Competing for Order: Confronting the Long Crisis of Multilateralism*, University School of Global and Public Affairs, Brookings, 2020.

its response capacity and foresight. The present time is different, given the convergence of factors that have led to what we here call the Latin American vacuum, to refer to a situation of deliberate absence of regional collective action which, if not reversed, might lead to the forfeiture of its role as an actor in the global system and its downgrading to a mere geographic expression.

The process giving way to this condition is the main topic of this article, which serves a dual purpose: (a) to provide analytical thinking to help understand the current context of political impotence in Latin America and the Caribbean vis-à-vis the critical global scenario and the ongoing transition of world power, and (b) to identify and characterize

the peculiarities of the simultaneous crisis in Latin American regionalism and Inter-American multilateralism. The key argument is that the causes for the Latin American vacuum are rooted, mainly, in dynamics that operate within the region, currently exacerbated by the pandemic. This line of interpretation does not intend to disregard the incidence of external factors, particularly the damage inflicted by the symbioses and visible effects of the prominence of the US, intensified during Donald Trump's administration. Rather, it aims at highlighting that the escape routes from the abyss and the reinstatement of constructive impulses will arise from the region itself. Even more, they will take some time and will require an effort beyond the sole restoration of past formulas.

## 2

## OF REGIONS AND REGIONALISMS: ECONOMIC CONFIGURATIONS AND COMMON POLITICAL FABRICS

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by an expansive wave of regionalism with a global projection which remained active for the following fifteen years. Within this framework, during the 2011-2018 period, the number of regional trade agreements jumped from 445 to 669; that is, an increase of around 50%<sup>2</sup>. These figures include a significant increase of customs unions and economic integration agreements of a plurilateral nature, rather than bilateral. In this wave, colossal novel multi-regional configurations could be observed, such as the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP), signed in 2016, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), adopted in November, 2020 by the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia. An identical type of trend can be perceived regarding regional organizations with wider agendas that have expanded their projections, whether in volume, by increasing simultaneous memberships from States or through interregional bridges for dialogue and collaboration<sup>3</sup>. In the latter case, in Latin America and the Caribbean reside multilateral bi-regional initiatives, such as the free trade agreement, yet unfulfilled, between the European Union and the Common Market of the Southern Cone (Mercosur), based on the Framework Agreement of 1999, and bilateral agreements such as the China-CELAC Forum (2014).

Meanwhile, the trends mentioned above have not been homogeneous, linear or equally resistant to changes caused by international crises. When comparing realities in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, there are undeniable contrasts when it comes to the assortment and the volume of political and institutional resources upon which they are anchored, as well as their performance in regional governance. It is likewise important to highlight the contrasts in

terms of alignment and degrees of exposure or vulnerability vis-à-vis major global trends, most recently the US-China tension. The various degrees of exposure gain visibility in the contexts of severe crises and/or conflicts, where the tendency towards fragmentation and rivalries are exacerbated by a wide spectrum of motivations, be they ideological, religious, sovereignist, nationalist or separatist. In this type of distinction, the contrasts between North and South stand out in contemporary regionalisms. On the one hand, the European process belongs to a different sort of collective construction when comparing degrees of geostrategic autonomy and the steps climbed towards sustainability in the peace and security/economic integration equation. On the other hand, the regions that constitute the global South, do show differences in regards to strategic importance in the playing field of international politics. The realities resulting from intra-regional political polarizations and fragmentations may both deepen strategic irrelevance, as well as give way to some importance. Examples of such trends are the role of the Middle East area, the source of 78.4% of the vetoes within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) or of Africa as the region that concentrates 64.2% of the agenda of the Council.

The regional and interregional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have also brought to light the peculiarities of the various regionalisms. We can observe responses that range from those generating more regionalism—such as in parts of Asia and Africa—and others that must seek the strengthening bonds and commitments to expand regional coordination and cooperation. In institutional terms, the EU, the ASEAN and the African Union (AU) have sought to bolster and expand coordinated agendas to deal with the current sanitary mishaps, addressing health as a regional public good. Latin America, however, has shown its back to regionalism dominating trends around the world<sup>4</sup>.

2 Kevin Parthenay: *A Political Sociology of Regionalisms: Perspectives for a Comparison*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019.

3 Diana Panke and Soren Stapel: «Exploring Overlapping Regionalism» in *Journal of International Relations and Development* N° 21, 11/2016.

4 Frederic Kliem: «Regionalism and COVID-19: How EU-ASEAN Inter-Regionalism Can Strengthen Pandemic Management», policy report, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2020.

## 3

## LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century displayed what some called a «new» Latin America, with greater growth, democratic stability and international autonomy. The most important feature was the significant increase of prices of commodities exports (agricultural, mining and energy) that enabled high growth rates and the chance to expand government assets, previously curtailed by previous pro-market policies. It was also possible, particularly in South America, to regain a historic aspiration to express a political voice of its own together with an intra-regional coordinated agenda. A collective voice was secured regarding key issues—such as infrastructure, energy and defense policies—and the promotion of diversified foreign relations and extra-regional alliances. During a first stage (2005–2015), the economic ascent of China combined with and the reduced political attention from the US, as a result of other strategic priorities, added favorably to stimulate these changes.

In spite of such a favorable context, the social, political and economic matrix of the countries in the region did not change significantly. Poverty was reduced through inclusive policies, but the fragility of low-class sectors forced to live with persisting degrees of inequality of rights and living conditions did not improve. The role of the State was regained, but not necessarily so its ability to provide public goods in a sustainable way. The growth rates were notable, but there was no substantial improvement in the areas of technological competitiveness, scientific innovation or diversification of the production structure. Electoral democracies continued functioning without major institutional advances in political representation systems, Rule of Law and civil liberties, so as to avoid political faux-pas and malpractices conditioning the quality of democratic governability. Among various obstructions, we can highlight the judicialization of politics and the worsening of public security conditions, with its foul ramifications in the State apparatus.

Then, the aforementioned deficits became more perceptible, with the attrition that distanced left-wing and center-left governments from the transformative expectations of preceding years. The political response came in the years 2014–2019, when new governments took office

in various countries of the region. Recently inaugurated administrations sought to discard the previous tendencies and defended the application of liberal economic recipes accompanied by foreign policies that made explicit ideological affinities with the US. A comparable political fatigue afflicted right-wing and center-right governments that had upheld open regionalism alternatives, such as the Pacific Alliance (PA). These trends were reflected in a generalized process of deterioration of the organizations that had generated an expectation of renewed regionalism. Besides, these organizations were increasingly damaged by the internalization of policies that encouraged intra-Latin American divisionism, based mostly on short-term domestic policies. A blend of stagnation, fragility and decadence washed over, with varying degrees of intensity, the Mercosur, the Andean Community (CAN), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). From April, 2018 up to the beginnings of 2019, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru abandoned the UNASUR, and Uruguay followed suit in March 2020<sup>5</sup>. In turn, in March, 2019, the Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (PROSUR) was created, with the participation of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Guyana. This initiative, for the time being, has had ephemeral and inconsequential results.

An additional key factor in the process of regional vacuum, has been the absence of strong and assertive regional leaders with long-term projections and persuasive skills. In the case of Brazil, the disengagement from regional multilateralism has been deliberate and resounding, while in Mexico minimalist and bashful initiatives were projected during its *pro tempore* Presidency of CELAC. In spite of managing to keep the engine turning in matters of

5 Natalia Saltalamacchia Ziccardi: «La Celac y su vinculación con actores extrarregionales» en Wolf Grabendorff y Andrés Serbin (eds.): *Los actores globales y el (re)descubrimiento de América Latina*, Icaria, Barcelona, 2020.

technical cooperation, the issues that fundamentally divide the region were not addressed<sup>6</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the situation in Venezuela has been the epicenter of the crisis in Latin American regionalism. The regional agenda has been affected by the cross-border effects of the internal economic and social situation, the increasing ideological polarization and its political channeling in the escalation of discrepancies between the US and the Venezuelan regime. From a domestic perspective, we have been observing a continuous movement of political isolation of the administration of Nicolás Maduro, with a strong economic and social impact. Over the last couple of years, the economic crisis and the exacerbated humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, resulting from poverty, unemployment, depreciation of the local currency, lack of investment and other related issues, have led to negative economic growth and a deterioration of social indicators in this country<sup>7</sup>. More than five million Venezuelans have emigrated and are still leaving, in a process that has impacted neighboring countries in various ways. At the same time, there is a growing internationalization of the Venezuelan crisis, within the framework of a closed strategic situation between the interest of the US and its regional allies in not permitting the political presence of great and intermediate powers in the region, and the forging of alliances on the part of the Maduro regime with countries such as China, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Meanwhile, this internationalization has not reversed the situation of a disruptive *impasse* to restore the presence of the region on the global political chessboard<sup>8</sup>.

In close proximity and connection with the Venezuelan crisis, we observe the continuous degradation of the post-conflict scenario in Colombia caused by the 2016 Peace Agreement drawbacks. Both Venezuela and Colombia stand out in South America for causing constant flows of human displacement and, as a result, the unsafety and misfortune for millions of migrants, with a direct impact on the security conditions in vast areas of the Andean sub-region<sup>9</sup>.

A comparable humanitarian scourge is ravaging the length and breadth of the Mesoamerican and North American

territory, although it unfortunately does not arouse the same international or regional, or even sub-regional, attention and concern. Caravans of migrants creeping towards the US are expelled by the severe circumstances of crime and violence, economic precariousness, environmental deterioration and natural disasters at home. This situation has worsened as a result of the closure of the Mexican and Central American borders unilaterally imposed by the Trump administration. In fact, a legacy of bilateral migration agreements imposed by the US, along with the freezing of asylum and refugee policies, has become a time bomb.

In Latin America and the Caribbean there is a close link between intra-regional fragmentation and international fragility, that has worsened rapidly since 2018. The loss of international gravity was already visible beforehand with all kinds of indicators. A close look at the regional trajectory regarding convergent voting within the UN framework, participation in global exports, private economic expansion, investment in science and technology, inequality rates, military attributes and the comparative ranking of soft power; all together reveals the decline of Latin America in contrast with other regions. Weakening and fragmentation have derived in greater external dependence, both whether upon a declining power as the US or a rising power like China. In Mexico and Central America, even left-wing and center governments have chosen to align with the US as a pragmatic response of appeasement or adaptation to deal with the unilateralism and the divide-and-conquer philosophy of the former Trump administration. The strategic corollary is the slide towards forms of acquiescence instead of choices driven by autonomous motivations, which affects, with varying modalities and intensities, the various axes of sub-regional articulation within Latin America (Mesoamerica, Central America, the Caribbean, the Andean world, the Southern Cone, South America, and the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Latin America).

This has been the regional scenario in which COVID-19 emerges. The pandemic expands and takes over in a context of disillusionment generated by the economic slowdown, the political upheaval, the social discontent and the diplomatic disintegration, coupled with intra-regional political polarization. The health crisis has led to the worst economic crisis in Latin American history, which will lead to a ten-year setback in per capita income. In addition to these indicators, unemployment is expected to increase by 5.4% as a consequence of the economic crunch, which will also trigger an increase in the number of people living in poverty<sup>10</sup>. It is also relevant to underline the effects of

6 G. González González: «¿Qué se espera del rol del México en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU?» in *Nueva Sociedad*, digital edition, 2020, <[www.nuso.org](http://www.nuso.org)>; M. Hirst and Tadeu Morato Maciel: «O tripé da política externa brasileira no governo Bolsonaro» in *Boletim OPISA* N° 3, 7-9/2020.

7 C. Romero: «Venezuela: un país bloqueado» in *América Latina. El año político 2019*, Les Études du CERI N° 245-246, 1/2020.

8 M. Hirst, C. Luján, C. Romero and J.G. Tokatlian: «La internacionalización de la crisis en Venezuela», Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Buenos Aires, 7/2020, available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/nuso/16444.pdf>.

9 Sandra Borda: «Colombia y la crisis venezolana: una estrategia fallida» in *Nueva Sociedad* N° 287, 5-6/2020, available at: <[www.nuso.org](http://www.nuso.org)>.

10 Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC): «Political and Social Compacts for Equality and Sustainable Development in Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-COVID-19 recovery», Special Report COVID-19 N° 8, 15/10/2020.

the pandemic on the interaction between Latin America and the rest of the world. While world trade fell by 17% between January and May 2020, Latin America was the developing region most affected by this contraction, with exports falling by 26.1% and imports by 27.4%<sup>11</sup>. The heterogeneity of national responses to the pandemic and the inadequacy of such responses in face of the severe health, economic and social crisis in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean mean that, in 2021, the problems associated with the pandemic will continue to be a pending and priority agenda in the region.

Recent academic literature has been addressing the setbacks that led to the critical moment that Latin American multilateralism and its connection with the crisis of post-liberal regionalism and the previous process of intermittent stagnation of open regionalism. The prevailing perception is that this reality finds its main explanation in a process of fatigue stimulated to a great extent—but not exclusively—by internal contexts marked by ideological polarization and political fragmentation, with a disarticulating impact on the different integration and cooperation schemes in the region<sup>12</sup>. Major political causes are consensually pointed out, such as: the erosive power of the Venezuelan impasse, the impact of Brazil's isolationism and its responsibility for the disappearance

of UNASUR and, finally, the withdrawal of Mexico, with the consequent retraction of the Central American and AP cooperation mechanisms; in the extra-regional realm, reflections focus on the impact of US-China rivalry and of the reduced and/or ambivalent European presence. While this literature is valuable and relevant for understanding the state of the situation, as a whole it leads to the conclusion that Latin American regionalism has lost its capacity to materialize. Far from questioning this idea, we would like to add elements of complexity.

From an ontological perspective, regionalism in Latin America and the Caribbean has been associated with two routes that historically maintained their parallelism with various degrees of tension, autonomy and/or dialogue. The coexistence between two senses of collective—Latin American-Caribbean unity and an inter-American community—has been more a factor of division and dispersion than one of union and reciprocal strengthening. Unarguably, the most acute expression of the tension between the two trajectories occurred with the ALBA-OAS confrontation in the years 2016-2019<sup>13</sup>. During 2020, the culmination of a simultaneous and equally damaging disintegration took place. The sequence of recent events in the Inter-American system has been eloquent in this regard.

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11 ECLAC: «The Effects of COVID-19 on International Trade and Logistics», Special Report COVID-19 N° 6, 6/8/2020

12 Alberto van Klaveren: «Regionalism in Latin America: Navigating in the Fog», Working Paper Series N° 25, SECO/WTI Academic Cooperation Project, 2018; Federico Merke: «Lo que sabemos, lo que creemos saber y lo que no sabemos sobre América Latina» en *Pensamiento Propio* N° 45, 2018; W. Grabendorff and A. Serbin (eds.): *Los actores globales y el (re)descubrimiento de América Latina*, cit.; José Antonio Sanahuja: «La crisis de integración y el regionalismo en América Latina: giro liberal-conservador y contestación normativa» en Manuela Mesa (coord.): *Ascenso del nacionalismo y el autoritarismo en el sistema internacional. Anuario CEIPAZ 2018-2019*, CEIPAZ, Madrid, 2020.

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13 Gerardo Caetano, Camilo López Burian and C. Luján: «Liderazgos y regionalismos en las relaciones internacionales latinoamericanas» en *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals* N° 121, 2019.

## 4

## THE ACCELERATED DEGRADATION OF THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM

The inter-American system, understood as the set of instruments and institutions that have shaped relations between the US and Latin America for more than seven decades, is in a critical state after a long history of ups and downs. During the Cold War, the system functioned in accordance to asymmetric security logics, which reflected US preeminence in the region and prevented a comprehensive and effective multilateralism that would address Latin American priorities. Later, the post-Cold War period opened new horizons with the reconfiguration of agendas, which included free trade, the defense of democracy, the protection of human rights and cooperative security. This process was locked-in with the adoption of the Santiago Commitment to Democracy and the Renewal of the Inter-American System and the Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001. The period of conceptual, normative and institutional review and innovation, which lasted from 1990 to 2004, was interrupted by the effects of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and the switch of Washington's priorities to issues of security and terrorism. Since then, began a period of institutional irrelevance and political zigzagging added to the White House's indifference. Meanwhile, Latin American multilateralism, dissociated from US interference, advances its way, though with little institutional density and even sparser regional coverage<sup>14</sup>. In this same context, a growing tension gains momentum fueled by the increasing divergence between liberal, developmentalist and autonomous, visions of regionalism, the inter-American system, and particularly the OAS.

The latest attempt to reconfigure relations between Washington and Latin America came from Trump government and had the support of a significant number of Latin American governments to meet the exclusive objectives, interests and preferences of the most conservative sectors in Washington. This effort takes place in accordance with the logic of the US first policy, supported by the interests of segments of the US-based Latin American diasporas, particularly the Cuban, Colombian and Venezuelan, mostly anchored in the state of Florida.

The positive results were favored by the unique synergy established between the White House and the Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, with the active adherence of some of the countries in the region. Following, an alliance was formed to create the Lima Group in 2017, with the purpose of strengthening positions and actions to deal with the Venezuelan crisis. This situation led to a steep deterioration of inter-American institutions in four key areas: the defense of democracy, within the OAS; the provision of collective security, within the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR); the protection of human rights, within the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR); and financial assistance, within the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

Over the past four years, the OAS General Secretariat has interpreted the task of defending democracy as that of promoting a change of regime in Venezuela. In fact, Almagro himself disrupted the organization when, in February, 2019, he actively harassed the government of Nicolás Maduro to support the failed attempt to force humanitarian aid into Venezuela. The same protagonist was sought in communication with the presidents of the Lima Group, senior White House officials and representatives of the Venezuelan opposition. Venezuela's exit from the OAS occurred in 2019, at the same time that the organization recognized Juan Guaidó as «president-in-charge» of the country.

Later, the OAS acted as a catalyst for the process of institutional disruption in Bolivia in 2019, legitimized by the interpretation of the electoral results by its own auditing team, even though this interpretation was not validated by other international players or by technical and academic electoral experts. A rapid articulation, for destabilizing purposes, of internal political sectors with the Armed Forces pressured President Evo Morales to leave office, leading to a one-year authoritarian interregnum in Bolivia. In September, 2020, new elections resulted in the categorical triumph of Luis Arce Catacora and the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). On this occasion, the presence of the UN and the EU was crucial to dissociate the practice of international electoral observation from the sloppy performance of the OAS a year before.

14 J.G. Tokatlian: «El descalabro del sistema interamericano» in *Nueva Sociedad*, digital edition, 9/2020, <[www.nuso.org](http://www.nuso.org)>

As regards the TIAR, its invocation in September, 2019, at the request of Colombia, to deal with the situation in Venezuela, placed the region in «high world politics» as it had not been since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. A twofold threat to world security was denounced in South America; following the premises of the US-led «war on terrorism» and the «war on drugs». The use of this resource bolstered the synergy generated between the OAS and the Southern Command in their shared efforts to identify Venezuela as a regional menace. The effort to securitize the Venezuelan crisis has been deepened by the active military collaboration between Colombia and Brazil with the Southern Command.

In the case of the IACHR, the events point to an assault that calls into question a challenging institutional construction, led by solid principles of autonomy, rigor and independence. After overcoming its financial mishaps in 2016, the IACHR entered a period of tensions caused by different reasons. Since Trump's inauguration, human rights have lost priority in the US foreign and domestic policy agendas given the advance and assertiveness of conservative evangelical groups organized against abortion and LGBTI+ rights. The US refused to attend IACHR hearings on immigration in early 2017, withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, and year after year reduced budget allocations for the promotion of democracy and human rights. In 2019, the US reduced its contribution to the IACHR, misguidedly and unjustifiably accusing it of promoting the legalization of abortion, and in 2020, it imposed sanctions against the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, for «illegitimate attempts to subject Americans to its jurisdiction.» The US decisions were joined by others governments from Latin America. In April of 2019, and in the only significant declaration, five countries -Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay- demanded that the IACHR, after hinting at its interference in internal affairs, respect «the legitimate space of autonomy of the United States.» The questioning of the IACHR also came from Latin American governments and leftist sectors upset by the Commission's resolutions against «iron fist» policies on the part of governments as dissimilar as those of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Chile and Ecuador on the face of mobilizations and social protests in 2019 and 2020.

Against this complex backdrop, in 2020 yet another rift developed between the OAS Secretary General and the IACHR that put the latter's autonomy at risk. Almagro's

refusal to accept the unanimous decision of the seven commissioners to renew the mandate of its executive secretary, Paulo Abrão, exposed, within the organization's most prestigious body, the polarization that characterizes inter-American fissures.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the crisis generated at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) as a result of the election for a new president in October, 2020. Two events converged here. One: the Trump administration decided to take control of the bank, which the US helped to create and finance, in order to condition the provision of loans and limit China's expansion in Latin America, especially in the field of infrastructure, energy and technology projects. Two: Latin America showed once again its dysfunctional fracture, reflecting accumulated political divisions, as a result of lacking a consensus and weighty candidacy. Indeed, when the North American candidate, Mauricio Claver-Carone, was nominated, there were notorious regional quarrels. Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay, Paraguay and Ecuador supported him automatically, which meant a rejection of the candidates put forward by Argentina and Costa Rica. In its turn, the four largest economies in the region were also cloven: Brazil and Colombia manifested in favor of the election scheduled for September, while Argentina and Mexico, with the support of Uruguay and Chile, requested to postpone the voting given the context of the pandemic. This group questioned the failure of the US to comply with the tacit political pact maintained since 1959 that the IDB Presidency would be held by a Latin American. Faced with the impossibility of stopping the divisive action of the IDB or obstructing the vote due to lack of quorum, Costa Rica and Argentina withdrew their candidacies separately, which opened up abstention as the only alternative left. The only candidate in competition, Claver-Carone, was elected with 30 votes (equivalent to 66.8% of the support), while abstention obtained 16 votes (five of them from the region: Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Peru and Trinidad and Tobago, and 11 from outside the region, essentially Europeans).

The arrival of a new Democratic government in the US in 2021 poses questions about the future functioning and efficacy of the IDB, whether in terms of the legitimacy deficit of the electoral process that gave victory to its new president or the programmatic challenges imposed by the deep economic and social crisis exacerbated by COVID-19.

## 5

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

It is to be expected that any efforts to reverse what we call the Latin American vacuum will not take place with the same pace with which this reality has surfaced. We have sought to indicate how this demolishing impulse, driven by an overload of politicization and ideological polarization, operated simultaneously in the spheres of Latin American regionalism and inter-American multilateralism. In addition to the fragmentation already mentioned, we find ourselves in a situation of reduced cooperation, given the extinction or ineffectiveness in practice of various economic integration and political coordination schemes that, at the time, contributed to giving Latin America and the Caribbean a voice in the global context.

It would seem useless to suggest the mere reconstruction and replication of past experiences. The upcoming two years will be a time of political change and social dynamism that will be reflected in the Latin American and Caribbean political playing field. The electoral calendar for 2021 indicates presidential elections in Ecuador, Peru, Honduras, Nicaragua, Chile and Costa Rica, and mid-term elections in Argentina and Mexico. In 2022, the same will occur in Colombia and Brazil. Simultaneously, in different countries such as Chile, Bolivia and Cuba, novel processes of representation, political organization and rights agenda are emerging. Even if it is true that this is a scenario which shows a democratic vigor, it is uncertain whether the turbulent and, at times, legally dubious paths that are recurrent in the political life of the region will be confronted.

In the international context, a distinction will be made between the points of equilibrium and the margins of autonomy in the face of the pressures/opportunities arising from the dual dependence on China and the US. An expanded Chinese presence in the efforts towards economic recovery in Latin America and the Caribbean is foreseeable, either through bilateral channels or through new commitments in regional multilateral spheres such as CELAC or ECLAC. A scenario of incentives to bolster the region's commitments to the liberal regulatory universe led by Washington, with the probable endorsement of the EU, is also foreseeable. There are indications that there will be an impetus towards a renewed inter-Americanism starting with Joe Biden's administration, with special attention to issues of human rights, environmental protection and migration. It cannot really be expected for this «revival» to involve reducing

the combined influence of Florida's Latino electoral base and the Southern Command<sup>15</sup>. The decision of the new administration to postpone the Hemispheric Summit to the second half of 2021 means allowing a prudent period of time to organize the agenda and prepare the ground. It will also serve to clarify the intertwining of the US-Latin America and the Caribbean channels for negotiation and dialogue and Washington's strategic expectations in the region. It is clear that there will be priorities, as already indicated with the announcement of the Alliance for Prosperity, a four-year and four billion US dollar program to address the causes of migration from Central America, which ties in with the Comprehensive Development Plan promoted by the subregion together with ECLAC.

When we observe the current regional situation in light of recent analyses and diagnoses, it is clear that many of us observe the Latin American vacuum with great uneasiness. Together with the recent contributions of authors who follow regional issues, we conclude that the critical juncture imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the gap between regionalism and regionalness.

2020 represented a turning point for Latin American and Caribbean regionalism, certainly its moment of weakest political expression at a juncture when it is much needed. We have attempted to summarize the facts and processes that led to this reality. Although pessimism of the intellect leaves little room for the optimism of the will, we consider it necessary to seek constructive horizons that will give impetus to another type of trend.

By way of conclusion, we highlight six escape routes that should guide this effort: (a) a regional intergovernmental coordination to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and its dramatic socioeconomic impacts; (b) a regional political dialogue with the Venezuelan government, the political sectors of the opposition and social organizations in that country, especially to support a peaceful, pluralistic and socially inclusive way out for Venezuelan citizens; c) the support of the peace process in Colombia, to avoid continuous slowdown and erosion that risk the future of the

<sup>15</sup> Edward Knudset: «No Going Back? A Transatlantic Cooperation Agenda under Biden», Hertie School, Jaques Delors Centre, 2020.

2016 Agreement; d) the attention to the extremely serious humanitarian situation affecting the flows of migrants, refugees and displaced persons both in Central and South America, made even more urgent today by the pandemic; e) the efforts for inter-American institutions to regain representativeness, legitimacy and functionality, so that they operate as spaces for dialogue and the pursuit of common interests and not in acquiescence to the us power project;

and f) an emphasis on the need for Latin America and the Caribbean to react to isolation and irrelevance at an international level, whether by way of mini- and multilateral initiatives, with the support of non-governmental actors and social movements. To overcome isolation and irrelevance, it is crucial that regionalism be reactivated through actions that reflect common, tangible and feasible interests with attention to the most urgent common needs.



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## CRITICAL JUNCTURE, POWER TRANSITION AND LATIN AMERICAN VACUUM



The multiple effects of the health, economic, social and political global emergency are felt with particular strength in Latin America and the Caribbean. All the while, it is possible to observe a political impotence in the region on the face of that critical juncture.

For this reason, it is important to characterize the peculiarities of the dual



crises in Latin American regionalism and Inter-American multilateralism. The causes of the «Latin American vacuum» are rooted, mainly, in dynamics operating within the region, exacerbated by the pandemic.

The demolishing impulse, driven by an overload of politicization and ideological polarization, operated simulta-



neously in the spheres of Latin American regionalism and inter-American multilateralism.

To overcome isolation and irrelevance, it is crucial that regionalism be reactivated through actions that reflect common, tangible and feasible interests with attention to the most urgent common needs.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<https://nuso.org/dialogo-y-paz/>