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Nolte, Detlef

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# From the summits to the plains: The crisis of Latin American Regionalism

## INTRODUCTION

Paraphrasing the German poet Bertolt Brecht's 1949 poem “Wahrnehmung”,<sup>1</sup> it can be said that for Latin American regionalism, the fatigue of the summits has been left behind; it must now cope with the labors of the plains. The days when Latin American presidents socialized frequently at summit meetings are long gone. In the golden age of summitry, between 2004 and 2012, four Summits of the Americas, six Latin American summits, 29 South American summits (including the Southern Common Market—Mercosur), nine Andean summits, 18 Caribbean summits, 52 Central American summits, 18 Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) summits, and eight Ibero-American Summits were held, for a total of 144 summits in 9 years (Portales, 2014, p. 56). It was the time when Chilean President Sebastián Piñera (Cooperativa, 2011) complained ironically that Latin America had so many summits it looked like a mountain range. Christopher Sabatini (2012) argued in *Foreign Policy* that, “the Western Hemisphere has a strong claim to the title of summit capital of the world,” adding that, “if the number of summits were a measure of the quality of diplomacy, Latin America would be a utopia of harmony, cooperation, and understanding.”

As the comments show, the proliferation of summits has often been ridiculed or problematized. The Secretary-General of the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), Enrique V. Iglesias (2014, p. 7), referred to the “syndrome of cumbritis” and “summit fatigue.” Latin American presidential summits were also a subject for academic debates on their merits and their dysfunctional aspects (Jarque et al., 2009; Mace et al., 2016; Ortiz, 2013). From a positive perspective, summit diplomacy created a climate of trust and facilitated political agreements, strengthened multilateralism and promoted regional integration projects (Rojas Aravena, 2009, p. 30), and was a mechanism of crisis management (Tussie, 2016).

Summit diplomacy changed long before the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Latin American presidents meet less often and in fewer forums, particularly those from South America. From 2010 to 2014, an average of 7.6 presidential summits per year were organized with the participation of South American presidents (without counting the Ibero-American summits, the European Union–Community of Latin American and Caribbean States [CELAC] summits, and the Summits of the Americas), but the number fell to 4.6 in the second half of the decade (see Table 1).

The fact that presidents meet less often, and even more, the lack of meetings, are indicators of the crisis of Latin American regionalism and of one of its basic components—regional organizations. A vivid example is the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), where the “golden age of UNASUR summitry might have been the 2008–2010 period, when a string of crisis happened in rapid succession and there was enough consensus to induce leaders to take action” (Tussie, 2016, p. 83). Eleven of 18 Unasur summits between 2008 and 2014 were

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**TABLE 1** Presidential Summits with the participation of South American presidents, 2010–2019

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
CAN	–	xx	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	x
ALBA	xx	–	x	x	xx	x	–	x	xx	x
CELAC	x	x	–	x	x	x	x	x	–	–
Mercosur	xx	xx	xxx	x	xx	xx	–	xx	xx	xx
Pacific Alliance	xx	xx	xxx	xx	xx	x	x	x	x	x
Prosur	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	x
Unasur	x	x	x	x	x	–	–	–	–	–
Total	8	8	8	6	8	5	2	5	5	6
CELAC–European Union	x	–	–	x	–	x	–	–	–	–
Ibero-American	x	x	x	x	x	–	x	–	x	–
Summits of the Americas	–	–	x	–	–	x	–	–	x	–

Source: Author's elaboration.

extraordinary summits (Dabène, 2016, pp. 43–45), related mostly to acute crises. The extraordinary summit in Bariloche in August 2009, was the only one attended by all presidents, and participation subsequently decreased (Dabène, 2016, pp. 42–45; Tussie, 2016, p. 83). The last Unasur summit took place in December 2014. There were no summits in 2015, 2016, or 2017. After Ernesto Samper's mandate as Secretary General ended in January 2017, the member countries of Unasur could not agree on a successor, so the position remained vacant. Finally, in April 2018, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru suspended their participation in Unasur. A year later, they withdrew from the moribund organization. In the case of this regional organization, the lack of interaction between the presidents resulted first in its paralysis and later in its disintegration.

Unasur is not the only organization that has been paralyzed as a result of the political polarization between the governments of the member states. Another exemplary case is the crisis in CELAC. The last presidential summit was held in January 2017, in the Dominican Republic, only 10 presidents attended (with the notable absences of the presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay, who at least sent representatives). Then, step by step, CELAC became paralyzed. As collateral damage, it was no longer possible to hold the European Union–CELAC summit planned for October 2017, due to the conflicts within CELAC. There were no presidential summits in 2018, 2019, or 2020.

The decline in presidential meetings in Latin America and the tragic fate of Unasur confirm a central feature of Latin American regionalism that is both intergovernmental and interpresidential. This combination has given impetus to regional integration, especially in times of strong presidential leadership (here the role of the pro-tempore presidencies in regional organizations is important; Morales Ruvalcaba, 2020) and political affinities among presidents (Baracaldo & Chenou, 2019). Yet, in times of polarization and lack of political consensus, these characteristics of Latin American regionalism have led to deadlocks and a lack of progress.

While presidents' and governments' policies and strategic decisions are crucial to the success and survival of regional organizations, they do not act in a vacuum. The presidents make decisions in a political–economic context that, in the case of Latin American regionalism, combines specific structural constraints on integration with positive and negative incentives from the global international political economy that define (and modify) basic parameters for the implementation of regional projects.

Presidential activism had been necessary to overcome some of the structural constraints of Latin American regionalism, as is discussed below. Meanwhile, the same structural limitations

make it difficult for Latin American regionalism to recover, especially since the challenges have increased due to the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the road through the plain will be long and rocky. The purpose of this article is to explain why this is the case and to discuss strategies to overcome the crisis.

## AN OVERCOMPLEX CRISIS CONSTELLATION

Latin American regionalism was already in crisis before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. Over the past decade, the region had suffered, as one author aptly put it, “a disinvestment of spaces for the coordination of multilateral policies” (Pauselli, 2020). The only organization that represented all Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), and the only organization that covered all South America (Unasur) were paralyzed or in a process of disintegration. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across Latin America, most regional organizations were in bad shape. Brazil has questioned its membership in Mercosur, and there is no consensus among member governments about the future course of the organization. The Pacific Alliance has stagnated as it was downgraded in Mexican foreign policy. And ALBA has lost most of its attractiveness due to the ongoing crisis in Venezuela and changes of government in member countries. In addition, the pandemic exacerbated the preexisting structural constraints of Latin American regionalism, with the result that an Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) study (2020c, p. 21) from August 2020 concluded that “the current situation is particularly inimical to initiatives to deepen regional integration”.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit a region that was already in an economic crisis. After the commodities boom ended, Latin American economies had to adjust. In the period from 2014 to 2019, the regional gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was only 0.4% (ECLAC, 2020a, p. 8), much worse than in the so-called lost decade of the 1980s. When there were signs of a recovery, the pandemic hit Latin America in full force. A massive economic downturn was one of the consequences. According to calculations by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Werner et al., 2021), Latin American GDP contracted by 7.4% in 2020 (South America –7.1%). ECLAC (2020b, pp. 10–11) forecast that the number of people living in poverty would rise to 230 million, or 37% of the population, and projected greater inequality in income distribution in the region.

The current crisis of Latin American regionalism has both a political and an economic dimension, making a way out of the crisis more difficult. While both dimensions interact, each one also has its own dynamic. It can be argued that as trade (and cross-border investment) increases, so does the political pressure from economic actors to deepen regional cooperation. A decline in regional economic exchange has the opposite effect. In addition, external economic actors intervene, since they can give priority to trade negotiations with regional blocs, or prefer bilateral agreements. The second dimension relates to the political and strategic incentives for cooperation. It can be assumed that it is easier for governments to work together when they have a political-ideological affinity. Closer cooperation is more difficult when governments are politically and ideologically far apart.

It is possible to divide the development of Latin American regionalism since 1990 into three periods, characterized by different configurations of the political and economic environment. This exercise can help to gain a better understanding of why the current regionalism crisis is so challenging. The environment in the 1990s was conducive to regional political and economic cooperation. Center-left and center-right governments shared a common economic preference under the so-called Washington Consensus on opening their economies and promoting regional integration. Intraregional trade (as a percentage of total trade) peaked in 1994, with a share of 21.9%. In addition, Latin American countries increased their cooperation on security issues, and there was broad consensus on the consolidation of

liberal democracy, which led to the promotion of democracy protection clauses in regional organizations (Heine & Weiffen, 2015).

During the first decade and at the beginning of the second decade of this century, the political environment was conducive to regional cooperation, but the economic context was less favorable. During the “pink tide” of left or center-left governments, there was much political consensus (but also some competition for leadership) that gave a new boost to the processes of regional cooperation and integration. It is reflected in new regional organizations (ALBA, Unasur, CELAC) and the repositioning of existing ones (Mercosur). High economic growth rates and declining debt increased the scope for action in foreign policy by Latin American governments. At the same time, the incentives for economic integration decreased, due to the commodities boom and a stronger outward orientation of the Latin American economies.

Developments in the first decade of the twentieth century show that a less favorable economic environment for regional integration can be overcome through positive political initiatives. The stagnation in terms of economic regionalization was offset by a stronger social focus in Mercosur and by the creation of Unasur (and later CELAC), with a political rather than economic agenda. Some authors introduced the concept of “positive integration” as a new approach to regional integration, based on political consensus building, the promotion of regional interdependencies, and increased cooperation on non-trade issues (Ayuso, 2012; Sanahuja, 2010). Unasur, through its sectoral councils, covered a wide range of areas of public policies, including defense, infrastructure, health, and education (Herrero & Tussie, 2015; Hoffmann, 2019; Palestini & Agostinis, 2018; Riggiozzi, 2014), thus promoting regional cooperation in these areas.

The heyday of political regionalism was short.<sup>2</sup> The economic and political environments for regional projects in Latin America became more adverse in the second decade of this century. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated preexisting structural constraints. Latin American regionalism is characterized by low economic regionalization, because the countries of the region have much stronger extra-regional economic links than intraregional economic ties. Between 1990 and 2014, intraregional trade (of all world regions) had a share of 45% in world trade. In contrast, intraregional trade in Latin America and the Caribbean as a percentage of total trade did not exceed the 20% threshold (Bown et al., 2017, p. 46; IMF, 2017, p. 44). The predominance of the primary sector in exports to Latin American countries has been a major obstacle to greater economic regionalization based on industrial sectors interested in creating regional value chains (Viola & Lima, 2017). Due to the commodities boom, the share of industrial products in the foreign trade of Latin American countries continued to decline.

According to ECLAC (2021, p. 114), since 2010, “Latin America and the Caribbean has been undergoing a process of trade decoupling”. In 2019, intraregional trade (exports) accounted for less than 15% of total Latin American trade. When the Covid-19 crisis hit the Latin American economies in 2020, intraregional trade (–24%) fell more sharply than extra-regional trade. The most recent ECLAC (2021, p. 78) “International Trade Outlook” calculates a regional trade share of 12%, the lowest value since the mid-1980s. For most subregional groupings, intrablock trade scores are even lower. The average for Mercosur (exports) for the 2018–2019 period was only 11.4% (Andean Community, 7.2%; Pacific Alliance, 2.8%; Central American Common Market—CACM, 23.8%) (ECLAC, 2021, p. 90) and decreased to 9% in the first five months of 2020 (ECLAC, 2020c, p. 8). It could explain why interest in completing Mercosur's customs union has declined (Bouzas, 2020). Instead, the presidents of Brazil and Uruguay are discussing the idea of making Mercosur more flexible (MercoPress, 2021) so that each member country can negotiate free-trade agreements on its own.

The negative economic incentives unfold in an increasingly difficult political environment. Since the middle of the second decade, the political and ideological polarization of interstate relations in Latin America has intensified. The growing authoritarian tendencies after

Maduro came to power in Venezuela led to an increase in conflicts in the region, especially after the turn to right-wing governments in many other Latin American countries, including Brazil. But there were also governments that supported Venezuela. The political-ideological polarization has not only hindered the development of joint regional projects but has also jeopardized the survival of existing regional organizations. With the rise of a new populist or “neo-patriotic” right (Sanahuja & López Burian, 2020), especially in Brazil (Saraiva & Silva, 2020), the constellation has become even more complicated. The liberal right had supported regional integration, with the aim of a better integration into the world economy by creating larger regional markets with stable rules for economic transactions. The Pacific Alliance is an example of this liberal and trade-oriented regionalism. In contrast, the “anti-globalist” right questions multilateral institutions and agreements. As a result, both the authoritarianism on the left and the populism on the right constrain the possibilities for regional cooperation.

In addition, China's growing economic presence in Latin America has triggered a backlash from the United States, which has tried to push back China's influence. Among other things, it has led to a politicization of U.S. trade policy in Latin America. Latin America has become another arena in the global conflict between China and the United States. In addition, President Trump's protectionist policies further intensified the “bilateralization” of relations with Latin America.

While the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences are placing an additional strain on Latin American regionalism, most of the factors that can make a region more resilient (Weiffen, 2021) are weak or absent, in particular interdependencies (regionalization), institutions, and leadership. The already light institutional structure of Latin American regionalism has been weakened even more since the first decade of the twenty-first century. While the creation of supranational institutions was a hot topic in Latin American regionalism in the 1990s, “regionalism light” became the predominant concept in the early years of the twenty-first century (Sanahuja, 2008). In the following decade, regional governance was characterized by institutions with less binding obligations. Parliaments were no longer created, which in the past had been an important element of regional integration projects. There are no technical secretariats in CELAC, ALBA or the Pacific Alliance. CELAC and Prosur are not even regional organizations, but regional forums. There has also been a proliferation of ad hoc groups—particularly in connection with the crisis in Venezuela—such as the Lima Group. As a result, the multilateral system in Latin America has become very unstable and less and less institutionalized.

Latin American regional powers no longer raise their hands to exercise leadership and promote regional projects. Mexico's political resources are centered on domestic politics and its northern neighbor. Domestic politics also dominate in Brazil. Foreign policy focuses more on partners outside the region. In the Covid-19 crisis there was no regional leadership whatsoever (individually nor jointly). Worse, what can be observed is negative leadership. Neither Brazil nor Mexico have been role models in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Mexico, while exercising the pro tempore presidency of CELAC, has at least tried to put Covid-19 on the organization's agenda, but Brazil decided to suspend its participation in CELAC.

## EXIT, VOICE, AND LOYALTY

This is not the first crisis Latin American regionalism has faced, which reveals it as remarkably resilient (Briceño-Ruiz & Rivarola Puntigliano, 2021; Rivarola Puntigliano & Briceño-Ruiz, 2013). Yet, resilience does not necessarily signal progress or learning gained from previous experiences. It can also mean inertia, or even regression. The current crisis may be more severe as it unfolds in a politically and economically unfavorable environment. Latin America is losing “political gravitation” in international politics (Actis & Malacalza,



2021, p. 118) and is in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant (Malamud & Schenoni, 2019; Schenoni & Malamud, 2021). As Tokatlian (2019) rightly points out, the combination of declining weight in international politics and the existence of regional disintegration will exacerbate Latin America's dependence, but it will be a multiple, and thus particularly conflict-prone dependency.

Since Latin American regionalism has been “emptied” and has possibly reached a “turning point” (González et al., 2021), there is clearly a need to rethink regional integration (Ominami, 2021, p. 167). Fortin et al., (2020, p. 16) suggest the creation of more-robust institutions, because “the *de minimis* approach to regional entities, with no budget and no permanent secretariat, has been a failure, and should be reconsidered.” While “regionalism light” or “super light” in its current form may no longer work, the question remains how regional institutions can be strengthened. A budget and secretariat may not be enough if there is no consensus on a common regional agenda.

In his seminal work “Exit, Voice and Loyalty,” Albert O. Hirschman (1970) sketched out two options for reacting to an organization's poor performance. If they chose the exit option, disaffected members leave the organization. In the case of voice, the dissatisfied members express their discontent and get involved in the organization to remedy deficits. Hirschman (1970) adds loyalty as a third option, which increases the cost of leaving and potentially activates voice. Latin American regionalism offers easy exit options. Exiting does not involve high costs, as the case of Unasur shows. One could also speak of a kind of “soft” exit when presidents do not attend summit meetings or when these are completely canceled. The cost for presidents who do not attend is low. From a Hirschmanian point of view, the challenge for regional organizations in Latin America is to create more loyalty and to increase the incentives for voice and the cost of exiting.

The option of resolving a conflict within a regional organization with a majority decision can make the “vote” option in regional organizations more attractive than an exit strategy. It becomes a serious option when decisions in an organization are blocked and must be made unanimously. Building loyalty is more complicated because the time factor plays an important role. When the crisis began, Unasur was still a young organization.<sup>3</sup> Other (sub)regional organizations had time to build and consolidate loyalties before facing major crises (such as the Andean Community; Prieto, 2020).

How can the exit costs be increased? One possibility is to strengthen the interdependencies between the members of a regional organization, especially the economic linkages. The author agrees with Riggiozzi and Ryan (2021) that regional policymaking should be analyzed against a variety of political logics and that economic integration should not be the only yardstick for assessing the development of regionalism. Still, as experience shows, the social and political foundations of Latin American regionalism remain weak without the material incentives and constraints of economic integration. The fact that Unasur did not have an economic mandate is quite symptomatic; exiting it did not result in any economic costs. In contrast, the Mercosur survived despite recurring crises. An exit would have resulted in economic costs for every member.

In this regard, proposals such as one by ECLAC (2021), to counteract the process of trade decoupling and to revitalize regional economic integration are a step in the right direction. Intraregional trade can help to reduce dependency on raw-material exports, since it includes more industrial products. In addition, more companies, especially small and medium-sized companies, are involved in exporting to regional markets. Therefore, ECLAC (2021) proposes to overcome the fragmentation of the regional economic space by promoting convergence and harmonizing trade rules between the different regional groupings. In view of the progress made in dismantling tariffs, emphasis should be placed on non-tariff issues such as harmonization, or mutual recognition of technical, sanitary, and phytosanitary standards. In addition, a gradual accumulation and integration of the rules of origin would be a prerequisite for

promoting intraindustry trade and the formation of regional value chains. ECLAC (2021) also advocates the convergence of trade facilitation measures, cooperation on digital issues (including digital trade), and the improvement of regional transport and logistics infrastructure.

Most of these suggestions are not new. Four years before ECLAC, the World Bank (Bown et al., 2017), the IMF (2017), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) published documents calling for greater economic integration in Latin America and the creation of a Latin America and the Caribbean free-trade area, which should go beyond reducing tariffs and instead focus on removing non-tariff barriers to trade. The IADB (Powell, 2017) highlighted that there are no fewer than 33 preferential trade agreements between the regional member states. According to recent ECLAC data (2021, p. 80), the average tariff rate for intraregional trade is currently approximately 2%. Due to trade preferences, an estimated 78% of intraregional imports from Latin America and the Caribbean are not subject to tariffs. Hence, most of the adjustment costs of regional trade liberalization have already been paid. ECLAC (2021), like the World Bank in 2017 (Bown et al., 2017), argues that it will be necessary to deepen ties between Mexico and the Mercosur. Most of the trade between Brazil and Mexico, the largest economies in Latin America, does not enjoy trade preferences.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that most of ECLAC's proposals had been tabled almost verbatim 4 years earlier suggests that limited progress has been made. It does not mean that they are wrong, but that they are difficult to implement. Efforts to consolidate a regional economy are hampered by “centrifugal forces generated by the accumulation of trade agreements with partners outside the region” (ECLAC, 2021, p. 114). Intraregional trade agreements compete with interregional free-trade agreements within the framework of “cross-regionalism” (Garzón & Nolte, 2018).

As the proposals from ECLAC (2021) and international financial institutions show, progress in economic integration in Latin America depends increasingly on the harmonization of rules and regulations between regional groupings (and individual countries). Common regulations create interdependencies beyond the economic field. Bianculli (2020, p. 3) introduces the interesting concept of “regional regulatory governance” but looks at regional trade facilitation exclusively from the perspective of the deregulation of markets. Economic deregulation is contrasted with positive regulation (integration) in other areas, but the creation of regional markets also requires common rules that do not necessarily lead to a race to the bottom.

Regional regulatory governance broadens the research perspective on Latin American regionalism. Regulations of “transnational policy fields” create regional interdependencies. Regional regulations can be promoted by regional organizations and governments, or by (networks) of non-state actors. From a Hirschmanian point of view, the exit from a dense network of regulations could be more costly than the exit from a regional organization that makes non-binding decisions. In addition, stakeholders who support certain regulations in a transnational policy field can express their voice when those regulations are challenged.

As Bianculli (2020, p. 18) admits, “regionalism in Latin America remains a strong intergovernmental endeavor, and policymaking has a strong inter- and transgovernmental nature.” Hence, regional regulatory governance does not contradict the core feature of Latin American regionalism, since it has a strong intergovernmental component. Meanwhile, it offers more flexibility for forms of cooperation that are not immediately interrupted in the event of conflicts between presidents.

Inter-presidentialism and summit diplomacy fueled Latin American regionalism even as it contributed to its crisis. As a way out of the crisis and as a step forward, the former Executive Secretary of ECLAC José Antonio Ocampo (2020) suggested in an interview with *El País* that regional integration should be depoliticized. At first glance, this proposal seems a bit naïve, because it does not take sufficient account of the fact that political polarization and incompatible ideas about the direction of regional integration have led to the current crisis of Latin



American regionalism. There is little evidence that ideological positions have converged and that Latin America is going through a process of depolarization.

Still, it can also be argued that precisely because presidential diplomacy and conflicts between the presidents have contributed to the crisis of Latin American regionalism, consideration should be given to how regional organizations can be shielded to a certain extent against the spillover of conflicts between the presidents. One possibility would be to build stronger supranational institutions. This path is unlikely for Latin America.

A strategy to shield regional substructures is more realistic. Riggiozzi and Grugel (2015, p. 796) once described Unasur as a regional governance project with “a preference within it for creating a team of professional specialists to take charge of a policy area rather than having politicians making grand (and unrealistic) statements of policy intent.” In view of the deficits of existing regional institutions, Actis and Malacalza (2021, p. 125) have recently proposed to put thematic questions before dogmatic ones, and to pursue a more technical approach to regional cooperation. Such an approach could facilitate cooperation between ideologically opposed governments in certain policy fields but excludes other policy areas such as the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy.

It makes sense to look back on the positive experiences of Unasur and ask what lessons can be learned, to find a way out of the crisis. One of the strengths of Unasur was the flexible cooperation between the member countries within the sectoral councils. They worked differently, but they contributed to the formation of transnational policy networks. Ultimately, it was a functionally differentiated cooperation. A comparison of the working of different sectoral councils shows that group cohesion is more likely to develop in clearly defined policy areas. A common technical rationality of political decision makers in specific areas facilitates cooperation based on professional arguments. In contrast, the involvement of political officials and the ideological directives of governments acted as major impediments to independent sectoral work (Hoffmann, 2019).

Unfortunately, the functionally differentiated cooperation in Unasur's sectoral councils was discontinued when the central political decision-making bodies were paralyzed. The question arises as to how this functionally differentiated cooperation can be revived. Perhaps it is better to create new sectoral organizations such as a South American Health Organization (to mention an important policy area) than a single umbrella organization with sectoral sub-units. It could also be easier for civil society actors to work with such sectoral, technically oriented organizations. A more technical approach to regional cooperation would also strengthen the role of development banks such as the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) or the Inter-American Development Bank as “orchestrators” (Palestini, 2020) of regional initiatives.

Functional differentiation of regional cooperation will lead to a more complex, but possibly more robust regional governance structure, held together by overlapping membership. Latin America has a long tradition of overlapping regionalism (Bianculli et al., 2021; Weiffen et al., 2013) and cooperative regional governance (Nolte, 2014), which in the case of South America must now function without a “central organization” (Nolte, 2016) or “hub institution” (Cooper & Stubbs, 2017) such as Unasur. It carries the risk of a more segmented regional governance architecture.

While a certain degree of shielding from the collateral effects of political polarization between presidents could increase the resilience of Latin American regionalism, there is also a lack of functioning forums to overcome or at least mitigate the political polarization, which complicates regional solutions to regional problems and makes the region more porous. At the same time, global conflicts (and conflicts in other regions) overlay regional conflicts in Latin America, making them even more difficult to resolve within a regional framework. Latin America is experiencing a “de-regionalization of governance problem-solving” (Legler, 2020, p. 150). Such is the case in Venezuela, where the United States is facing China, Russia, and Iran (Turkey has also become an external actor). At the same time, as mentioned earlier, Latin

America has become one of the battlefields on which the global conflict between the United States and China is being waged. In this context, Fortin et al., (2020) propose a policy of active nonalignment, by keeping an equal distance from both superpowers and their geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries. The goal of this policy is “to maximize the benefits for the region's integration into international trade, investment and financing flows, but also to preserve policy space and policy instruments that allow the countries of the region to define and implement their own national development models” (Fortin et al., 2020, p. 16).

This proposal is a step in the right direction, but it would be easier to implement if the region were less porous and external powers were not already part of the intraregional dynamic. A simultaneous and proactive engagement with these actors could complement the strategy of active non-alignment. It is particularly true of the Venezuela crisis. González et al., (2021, p. 65) propose a regional political dialogue with the government of Venezuela, sectors of the political opposition, and social organizations to find a peaceful solution for the country. Yet, a strategy that is restricted to the region does not work. Latin America needs a forum to discuss the challenges that put security at risk in the region, and to mitigate the spillover of other conflicts and the influence of external actors. The region may need something like an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean, which must include all countries in the region but also external actors with interests in the region, such as the European Union, China, Japan, and Russia, and of course the United States. The proliferation of ad hoc meetings with and without the participation of external actors to deal with the crisis in Venezuela shows that such a forum is in demand, but there are reasonable doubts as to whether the United States would accept such a forum that would undermine the role of the Organization of American States (OAS).

## LOW-PROFILE REGIONALISM

Looking back, Ayuso (2020, p. 166) argues that there were too many regionalisms, and there was too little regionalization in Latin America, but now the situation is worse. Regionalization has continued to decline, and there are no new regional projects, while the old ones have lost their appeal. For Latin American regionalism, the road through the plains will be rocky and long. A return to the summits may have to wait for a change of government in central Latin American countries. Without a way out of the Venezuelan swamp—the “epicenter of the crisis in Latin American regionalism (Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 56)—the polarization of inter-presidential relations will not decrease. The division in Latin America between authoritarian regimes (of different political colors) and democracies could deepen even further and make political cooperation more difficult. It is conceivable that the revival of summit diplomacy will not come from the region but from the region's external relations, through events such as the Summit of the Americas, the Ibero-American Summit, the European Union–CELAC Summit, or a CELAC–China summit.

In the better days of Unasur, Riggiorozzi and Grugel (2015, p. 785) wrote, “This new phase of regional governance is less headline-grabbing and dramatic than previous projects of integration in South America.” This statement is even more true today. While the regionalism of the summits reflected “high-profile regionalism,” the regionalism of the lowlands and plains can be described as “low-profile regionalism.” In contrast to the regionalism of the summits, which went hand in hand with the launch of new, sometimes lofty projects, the regionalism of the plains will be more down-to-earth. In the years to come, the priority will be to consolidate existing regional organizations and to strengthen regional transnational policy networks. Latin American regionalism must advance toward greater economic regionalization and expand its regulatory scope, since it requires both a material and a normative basis. The discussion must continue on how the Latin American regional architecture can be made more crisis-resistant. What makes the “voice” option to advance

regional projects more attractive and increases the costs of an “exit” from regional cooperation? The fact that Latin America plays only a marginal role in international politics does not shield the region from the spread of pandemics, the ups and downs of the world economy, and the interference of external actors. For this reason, Latin America needs strong regional institutions.

Detlef Nolte 

*Institute for Latin American Studies (ILAS), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg, Germany*

### Correspondence

Detlef Nolte, Institute for Latin American Studies (ILAS), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg, Germany.  
Email: detlef.nolte@giga-hamburg.de

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The poem states that, “The fatigue of the summits are behind us/The labors of the plains lie ahead of us ....”.
- <sup>2</sup> By the middle of the second decade, the drive for greater sectoral regional cooperation had already declined in some areas. For example, the South American Defense Council has been characterized as being in a state of inertia since 2014 (Vaz et al., 2017, p. 8). The cooperation within Unasur's Infrastructure and Planning Council (COSIPLAN) also declined (Agostinis & Palestini, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> It confirms the results of Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2020), that the survival of international organizations correlates positively with age. One of the author's explanations is: “From a sociological viewpoint, age may be a good proxy for ‘environmental embeddedness’. Newly created organizations often lack stable social roles and routines, broad public endorsement, or secure exchange relationships” (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, pp. 363–364).
- <sup>4</sup> It should be noted that excluding Mexico from the calculation increases the share of intra-regional trade (exports) in Latin America and the Caribbean from 14.8% to 21.5% in 2018–2019 (ECLAC, 2021, p. 88).

## ORCID

Detlef Nolte  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2014-272X>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Detlef Nolte** is an associate fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), and a former director (2006–2018) of the GIGA Institute for Latin American Studies. He is adjunct professor of Political Science at the University of Hamburg, and associate fellow of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).