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UNASUR: South America's wishful thinking?

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Following World War II, South America embarked on a continuously multilateral approach, treasuring the spirit of the newly formed United Nations and intending to bring stability and security to a region often neglected by the rest of the international community, but seen as a natural area of influence (and interference) for the world's primary superpower, the United States.

However, South America's apparent natural calling for regional solutions seems bound to clash with the existing theoretical explanations of the basis of successful integration processes among different nations. Most scholars, dazzled by the European Union's pioneering experience, commonly fall into two schools of thought: neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist. Led by Ernst Haas, neo-functionalists see regional integration as "the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities to a new center whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states". Amongst the main ideas proposed was the concept of "spill-over" (the positive effects of an increasing interdependence that would impel a greater motivation to integrate other areas of interest) together with a plurality of actors involved, including influential social elites, in the creation of a supranational solution.

However, neo-functionalism came under heavy criticism, due to its excessive dependence on the EU experience, which, with its subsequent setbacks in further integration, is seriously compromising the theory's viability. On a clear opposite side, intergovernmentalism tried to prove its worth advocating the essential and undisputable role of individual states in any joint efforts with other partners on the international stage. Accordingly to Stanley Hoffman, the rational defense of national interests, alongside a simple cooperation among states, preserving core sovereignty, is therefore considered to be the key to properly address common issues between different countries.

A sub-theory would later emerge in the so-called liberal intergovernmentalism, an attempt by Andrew Moravcsik to harmonize the existing theories in order to present a unified front that would better explain the growing proliferation of regional integration projects and fill in the theoretical gaps of previous assumptions. Combining negotiations between individual states with the accepted existence of supranational institutions, liberal intergov-

ernmentalists also highlight the importance of domestic preference formation, including among social interest groups.

But despite this panoply of working theories, overwhelmingly based in Europe alone, none has been able, by itself, to fully explain and sustain the numerous attempts to institutionalize multilateral relations among state actors in other parts of the world. In South America, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) is no exception.

Priors and origins

Although UNASUR currently gathers the focus and expectations of the entire continent, South America should be accustomed by now to such formal entrepreneurships. In fact, since the 20th century, South America has diversified its internal relations and encouraged multiple solutions towards a sustainable development and a peaceful co-existence, though with mixed results.

In 1948, the Organization of American States (OAS) was created, constituting an intergovernmental forum designed to bring to the table the leaders of every nation in the Northern and Southern continents and which gathered preexisting regional structures, serving as the first and most comprehensive taste of multilateralism for the region. However, this project would later become irredeemably associated with the US's Latin American foreign policy, thus not fully satisfying the regional desires for integration without external hegemonic interference.

Amongst the possibilities integration brings, trade and economic cooperation are commonly accepted (as set by the European example) to be the priorities. Bearing in mind that military dictatorships and political unrest plagued South America for decades after the formation of the OAS, issues of economic cooperation were the easiest upon which to focus. In 1960, the Treaty of Montevideo was signed, forming a new regional intergovernmental structure, the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), which envisioned delivery of social and economic development to the region through the eventual creation of a free trade zone (and ultimately, a common market) in Latin America. Although later re-branded as the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), the cited goals of LAFTA showed themselves to be unrealistic due to the vastness and variety of territories, political regimes and social-economic disparities in the region.

Smaller projects, with fewer members and greater geographic concentration, soon proved to be the way for further integration on the continent. Already in 1969 with the Cartagena Agreement, Bolivia, Chile (who withdrew in 1976), Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru (and later, Venezuela) formed the Andean Community (CAN), a regional trade bloc with aspirations of political integration between its members. Although managing to achieve a small but substantial level of supranationality in its institutional organs (rarely accomplished before in the entire region), CAN eventually began to lose traction, due to a lack of political will, as well as the signing of Free Trade Agreements with the US by Peru and Colombia. These trade agreements with Washington directly affected the core purpose of CAN and prompted Venezuela's withdrawal from the organization in 2006.

On the other hand, the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) soon arose as the pinnacle of South American regional integration. With the Treaty of Asunción in 1991, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay decided to create a common market, with a common commercial policy, among the countries of the Southern Cone. Powered by the Brasília-Buenos Aires axis, this bloc managed to successfully eliminate some trade barriers and increase the economic relations between its members. However, as in CAN, political will subsided and the lack of further institutional evolution clearly compromised the goal of regional leadership that MERCORSUR craved.

Increasingly frustrated by the general inability to advance toward a greater EU-inspired regional integration, the local governments decided to start convening in high-level meetings to accelerate the debate. In 2000, the first Summit of Heads of State issued the Declara-

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tion of Brasília, which envisioned the establishment of a free trade zone between CAN and MERCOSUR until 2005. Nevertheless, at that time, South American nations were more concerned with the success of the negotiations surrounding the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which would grant effective access of local exports to more developed markets, such as the United States.

The next summit, in Guayaquil in 2002, would once again embellish the possibility of a regional solution without actually materializing it, while continuing to support the FTAA solution. This option, however, soon saw its progress stalled, mainly due to trade disputes and property/copyright issues with the United States, which inevitably led to the FTAA idea's failure and official ending in the Mar de la Plata Summit in 2005.

Foreseeing such an outcome, the leaders of all South American countries convened in Cuzco, Peru, in 2004, to lay the groundwork for the initial steps of the then-named Community of South American Nations. Highlighting shared values among state members, their interconnectedness, and the need to face several internal and external challenges, it was decided to gradually merge MERCOSUR and CAN, without institutional duplication, seeking greater political, economical, social and energy integration. Summits in Brasília and Cochabamba in the following two years would further enlarge the scope of action, ambitiously envisioning a real South American identity that could unite all states and their citizens in such project.

In 2007, at the first South American Energy Summit, was decided to change the name of the future collectivity to UNASUR, while setting a one-year deadline to effectively and formally establish it. And although the Colombia-Ecuador strife briefly endangered this goal, on 23 May 2008, the Constitutive Treaty was officially signed by representatives of Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru, Guyana and Suriname. UNASUR was thus officially born.

> Alongside Venezuela, Brazil is also expected to take the lead in the advancement of UNASUR's integration, but all things considered and despite the initial public enthusiasm, President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and his team appear to merely use the organization as a means to an end. In other words, Brazil's growing regional preponderance and the desire for more external weight (i.e. a permanent seat in the UN's Security Council) often overwhelm any plans to further UNASUR's integration process.

Goals and structure

Right from the start, a concrete example was in the mind of every state member who signed up for UNASUR: the European Union. Its level of deep integration, its construction of supranational democratic institutions, the active participation of various civil society groups and the visible economic and social development of each member constituted reasons enough to pursue a similar project, this time in South America.

With an estimated GDP of US$973 million and 361 million people residing in its constitutive countries, this project's ambition can be easily identified in the extensive set of goals established by the Constitutive Treaty. From "political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, energy and infrastructure" integration to the promotion of "sustainable development and wellbeing" and the fight against "persistent poverty, social exclusion and inequality", to the strengthening of "multilateralism and the rule of law in international relations" and the acceptance of "functioning democratic institutions" and "unrestricted respect for human rights" as "essential conditions for building a common future of peace, economic and social prosperity and for the development of integration processes among the Member States". Such a wide range of principles is further complemented by a clear emphasis on a "determination to build a South American identity and citizenship", sustained by a "shared history and solidarity of our multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural nations".

Albeit carefully avoiding new structures that would interfere with the pre-existing ones (both from CAN and MERCOSUR), UNASUR needed some institutionalization to formally present itself to the region and the world. Accordingly, and hierarchically undisputed, the Council of

Chiefs of State and Government is granted the essential role of locomotive of the organization, in charge of establishing the main political directives, plans of actions, priorities and projects of UNASUR. It is complemented by the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (responsible for the implementation of the decisions taken by the Council of Heads of State and Government) and by the Council of Delegates (permanent representatives overseeing the general functioning of the Union). It is also assisted by the Pro Tempore Presidency (occupied by each one the state members, for the duration of one year) and by the General Secretariat, with headquarters in Quito, mandated to handle the bureaucratic overload inherent in any multilateral organization.

In order to achieve its purposes, UNASUR is also bound to include several existing institutional mechanisms. Among many, of particular note is IIRSA (the Initiative for Infrastructure Integration of South America), created in 2000 and meant to promote new transportation, telecommunication and energy projects that would increase regional trade among countries. Likewise, the need for considerable investment in the region led to the creation in 2007 of the Bank of the South, which intends to finance economic development and act as a regional credit institution similar to the World Bank. Although not formally part of the Union, such organs are largely considered to be under UNASUR's influence and will probably soon be fully and formally integrated into its organizational framework.

However, one institution that still does not actually exist is the South American Parliament. Despite its provision in the Constitutive Treaty and the definition of its future location (in Cochabamba, Bolivia), the nascent body is still expecting an additional protocol to be passed to actually be installed and to take its place as the regional citizens' representative institution par excellence.

Failed expectations?

At first glance, UNASUR seems to have all the tools to actually succeed in its intent to integrate the South American nations in one common project. It had a history of rather unsuccessful prior attempts at integration to build upon, experiences that provided precious know-how when it comes to the creation of effective multilateralism. It has a well defined formal organization, with a Constitutive Treaty clearly defining the guiding principles, as well as a set of institutions meant to actually work for the construction of a South American region and identity. Even political will to push forward with integration does not seem to be lacking.

Nonetheless, when analyzed more closely, UNASUR's weaknesses are easily perceived. Already, from a theoretical point of view, this organization is difficult to explain. From a neo-functionalist point of view, the lack of supranational institutions or, at the very least, the diminished will to create them is bound to be problematic. The clear emphasis on and the multitude of powers given to the Council of Head of States and Government (following an obvious pattern in South America's multilateral history) are more likely to appeal to intergovernmentalists, although the common rules of engagement and principles accepted by all UNASUR members, can eventually clash with states' national authority. On the other hand, liberal intergovernmentalism is also inapplicable, since the civil societies of all the involved states have been shut out of the process, unable to contribute and constructively critique the project. Even if one is inclined to overlook the lack of nationwide contributions or the failed promises of a South American Parliament (quietly shelved and forgotten), it is impossible to hide the poor record of civil participation in the development of UNASUR.

> As a further proof of the organization's uncertainty, until January 2010, only Bolivia and Ecuador had fully ratified the Constitutive Treaty, while Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela had only initiated the necessary due process. Apparently, the initial enthusiasm witnessed and widely publicized almost two years ago has been lost along the way.

Despite academic and theoretical skepticism, one can still find the merits of this "regionalism" in the making. Not wanting to definitely exclude eventual partners, the Constitutive Treaty's Article 20 already allows the eligibility of all Latin America and Caribbean states for full membership in the organization in a near-future scenario.

In fact, presented with greater external and public demand for a unified approach to common problems, the discursive focus in "shared identity" and history can probably bear some fruit when it comes to integrating local foreign policies. One example worth mentioning is

the unrest in Bolivia in September 2008, when, for the first time and in a gesture rarely displayed in the region, all of UNASUR's member states declared their support for and solidarity with President Evo Morales as a token of regional unity. Likewise, and after much debate concerning its purpose and range, the South American Defense Council (designed as a mechanism to promote defense cooperation and confidence-building measures amongst every country) was formed in March 2009, marking another important milestone in the development of UNASUR's unity.

Nevertheless, fissures within these unified actions were evident. During the summer of 2009, amidst growing rhetorical escalation over the United States-Colombia military bases agreement, dissent among the different South American leaders became clear. Although it was used as the preferential forum for discussion, UNASUR and its Defense Council inevitably proved incapable of solving this crisis and cooling down tensions along the Venezuela-Colombia border.

From such an episode, it is possible to ascertain how hardened and difficult ideological differences prove to be when exacerbated in an open multilateral arena. Massing regional, and sometimes worldly, attention, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez manages to capture UNASUR's spotlights, while continually sending mixed signals about the organization. As one of its first patrons, he actively fought for its existence as a way to fully integrate the region without the "unwelcome" interference of the United States. However, his subsequent personal creation, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA, his new institutional vehicle for advancing 21st century Bolivarian Socialism), appears to contradict the very existence of UNASUR and even threaten its future.

Alongside Venezuela, Brazil is also expected to take the lead in the advancement of UNASUR's integration, but all things considered and despite the initial public enthusiasm, President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and his team appear to merely use the organization as a means to an end. In other words, Brazil's growing regional preponderance and the desire for more external weight (i.e. a permanent seat in the UN's Security Council) often overwhelm any plans to further UNASUR's integration process.

Another example of the political differences between the numerous leaders and how they affect UNASUR's functioning is the position of Secretary-General. Although commonly agreed to be a mere figurehead for the organization, with irrelevant bureaucratic powers, the choice of a regional personality for the job resulted in a permanent deadlock after Ecuador proposed former Argentinean President, Néstor Kirchner, to whom Uruguay strongly opposes. As of result, UNASUR still remains without a designated Secretary-General.

On the other hand, the cleavages and the petty differences between the member states are nowhere more visible than in the Council of Heads of State and Government, where the Constitutive Treaty's Article 12 formalizes "consensus" as the normative rule for the approval of any measures. Interestingly enough, such "consensus" is solely understood as "unanimity", which, given the difficulty in obtaining clear unanimous positions in matters of international or regional policy, will likely become an obstacle that could paralyze political dialogue among members and jeopardize UNASUR's objectives.

UNASUR's potential merits are indisputable. It envisions a shared and mutual future for nations once considered irreconcilable, and proposes a common regional identity that fosters the external role of South America on the world stage.

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Conclusion

UNASUR's potential merits are indisputable. It envisions a shared and mutual future for nations once considered irreconcilable, and proposes a common regional identity that fosters the external role of South America on the world stage. It proves that integration theories, based on the European experience alone, are not completely applicable in different cultural, historical and geographical contexts. And by leading the region to discuss issues previously unconsidered by other organizations, it has also gained the praises of local populations and of the international community.

Nevertheless, its birth was flawed by a lack of effective civil society participation and the designation of a complex, and probably deadlocking, mechanism of decision making. These are symptomatic of the variety of political tensions existing in South America, which

compromise UNASUR's institutional growth and the accomplishment of its goals. To overcome such obstacles in its path, UNASUR will inevitably have to face its supranationality fears (in contradiction with the regional leader's assertive and overexposed role) and start creating mechanisms that surpass states' authority, in issues where full integration is likely to succeed and improve common development and growth.

If not, calling it a "new dawn", like Evo Morales, or "the accomplishment of a dream", as Lula da Silva did, will simply be proven false, because UNASUR will remain nothing more than a continent's bare wishful thinking.

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