

“Stranger Things”: the future of Latin American regionalism

“Stranger Things”: o futuro do regionalismo latino-americano

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Abstract

Latin American attempts at regionalism have been pursued through different waves. The last wave, post-liberal or post-hegemonic regionalism, is fading. Building on contributions from International Political Economy, European Studies and International Relations, the paper aims at answering two main questions: how can we characterize the current paths of regional integration in Latin America considering the trends of the last ten years? What can we expect of Latin American regionalism over the next decade? Grounded on a qualitative content analysis, we address three premises based on the past trajectory of Latin American regionalism in order to grasp some of the present and (possible) future trends: membership of regional organizations, institutional design of regional organizations and the role of the United States. After contrasting these elements with recent Latin American regionalist developments, the paper engages in a creative exercise of forecasting. The purpose is not to pretend to know the future nor to predict it but to present two imaginable scenarios: a short-term scenario and a longer-term scenario. Maybe we are about to witness some “stranger things” in the future of Latin American regionalism, opening up to different realities, different explanations and alternatives.

Keywords: Latin America; Regionalism; Future.

Resumo

As tentativas latino-americanas de regionalismo têm sido perseguidas através de diferentes ondas. A última onda, o regionalismo pós-liberal ou pós-hegemônico, está desaparecendo. Com base em contribuições da Economia Política Internacional, dos Estudos Europeus e das Relações Internacionais, o artigo tem como objetivo responder a duas questões principais: como caracterizar os caminhos atuais da integração regional na América Latina considerando as tendências dos últimos dez anos? O que podemos esperar do regionalismo latino-americano na próxima década? Fundamentados em uma análise de conteúdo qualitativo, abordamos três premissas baseadas na trajetória passada do regionalismo latino-americano, a fim de compreender algumas das tendências atuais e (possíveis) futuras: a adesão de organizações regionais, o desenho institucional das organizações regionais e o papel dos Estados Unidos. Depois de contrastar esses elementos com os recentes desenvolvimentos regionalistas latino-americanos, o artigo se engaja em um exercício criativo de previsão. O objetivo não é fingir conhecer o futuro nem o prever, mas apresentar dois cenários imagináveis: um cenário de curto prazo e um cenário de longo prazo. Talvez estejamos prestes a testemunhar algumas “coisas estranhas” no futuro do regionalismo latino-americano, abrindo-se para diferentes realidades, diferentes explicações e alternativas.

Palavras-chave: América latina; Regionalismo; Futuro.

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Introduction

Latin American attempts at regionalism¹ have been pursued through different waves, generally associated with specific economic and political models adopted by participating states. Over seven decades, regional initiatives survived thanks to a constant process of adaptation and transformation to new regional and international environments during and after the Cold War (GRATIUS, 2019). Current regional developments are shaped by legacies of past trajectories and *ad hoc* responses to global and regional politics and context (RIGGIROZZI, 2010).

With the exception of Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA) – replaced by the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA) – regional processes of integration have not disappeared but rather persist with adaptations and overlap. The idea of social change and development that inspired regional integration efforts during the 1950s and 1960s was switched to a different logic. Old regionalism was largely outmoded by a shorter period of open regionalism in the 1990s that resisted a whole decade when the region acquiescently embraced the Washington Consensus. New-brand initiatives were born such as the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), while older projects – e.g. Andean Community and the Central American Common Market (CACM) – experienced major transformations in tune with neoliberal-led regionalism.

Later on, this wave of Latin American regionalism was replaced by a third generation called post-hegemonic (RIGGIROZZI; TUSSIE, 2012) or post-liberal regionalism (BOUZAS; DA MOTTA; RÍOS, 2007; SANAHUJA, 2010; 2016) which entail alliances focused on South-South cooperation as a path towards autonomy. MERCOSUR became more protectionist and South-oriented, while new initiatives appeared, like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

At the subregional level, UNASUR emerged in 2008 as a Brazilian initiative for sectorial cooperation and incorporated the 12 South American states, including Guyana and Suriname, traditionally linked to Caribbean initiatives. Venezuela and Cuba founded ALBA in 2004, as a scheme of assistance and South-South cooperation, with a strong anti-US ideological content. They were later joined by some other leftist governments and small Caribbean states. With the inclusion of the program Petrocaribe – based on Venezuela's granting of oil subsidized prices and preferential payment options –, it reinforced the counterpoint with open regionalism. At the regional level, CELAC was established as an instrument of dialogue and political agreement carrying on the tradition of the Rio Group.

Instead of abandoning regional schemes that no longer counted on the consensus of the countries involved, the third wave of regionalism added to the pre-existent overlapping.

Briceño-Ruiz (2018) asserts that one of the features of post-hegemonic regionalism was the absence of a unique and hegemonic model of and narrative about regionalism. In consequence, despite the predominance of left-wing governments, Latin American regionalism was marked by diversity.

However, this wave of regionalism has lost strength and is facing disappearance. Post-liberal regional organizations were soon subsumed by other initiatives like the Pacific Alliance in 2011 and, eight years later, the South American Progress Forum (PROSUR). This decline in many ways meant not only a failure to tie the region closely in terms of its cohesion but maybe, a dilution of its identity. The overall picture nowadays is one of maximum fragmentation and disintegration, with some schemes resisting on the horizon, others in a struggle to the death and finally others striving to materialize.

Latin American regionalism is rather over than under-researched. A vast literature has periodically taken stock of the progress and setbacks of regional integration in Latin America. Analysing this literature exhaustively is beyond the scope of this paper, but some of their fundamental features are presented.

¹ According to Börzel and Risse (2016) regionalism is a process of political cooperation to create a “region” in geographical, political, and cultural terms that differentiates itself from regionalization that measures the level of economic interdependence between the states in a certain “region”.

Building on contributions to regionalism from International Political Economy, European Studies and International Relations, we attempt to address three premises lying under the large volume of regionalist research in Latin America. We then test them *vis-à-vis* the latter developments in the aftermath of the collapse of post-liberal regionalism and use them to make predictions about some (imaginable) forthcoming regional scenarios.

First, there is a strong tendency towards the assumption that Latin American countries remain in regional organizations and do not exit: constituent members stay due to high costs related to exiting. In a recent article, Alvarez and Gratius (forthcoming) suggest the need to establish the viability of the hypothesis that the costs of joining a Latin American organization are low, the benefits of belonging to one are higher than the costs of being excluded, and the estimated costs of exit are simply too high for opting out (DUBÉ, 2018). It is possible that national leaders' tradition to remain part of Latin American schemes and refuse the exit option in case of dissatisfaction could be varying.

Secondly, the notion coming from Eurocentric conceptions that the study of the agency of regionalism – focused on governmental leadership and inter-governmental agreements, and formal integration processes – explains the nature of it can be applied to Latin America. In this sense, it is taken for granted that regionalism is only built 'from above', being always formal and institutional (VIVARES; HERRERA-VINELLI, 2020). Post-liberal regionalism (and what is appearing on the horizon) has focused on arrangements based on hyper-flexible commitments and little (hardly any) regional bureaucracy with practically no involvement of civil society.

Finally, some regional studies on Latin American based on Realist premises rest upon a research format that emphasises more the political than the economic purposes, with the relationship with the United States being the barometer to measure the objectives of Latin American regionalism's trajectory (GRATIUS, 2019).

Thus, in order to assess the main features of the last developments in regionalism and to contemplate a far-reaching picture by contrasting them with some basic premises of Latin American regionalism (and eventually use them to design upcoming scenarios) three arguments merit inspection.

1. Latin American countries remain in regional organizations and do not exit: many regional organizations overlap but Member States tend to stay due to high costs related to exiting.

2. Even though supranational institutions in Latin America only exist on paper, institution building was a task that every regional arrangement has delivered to a certain extent.

3. Regionalism in Latin America is often seen as a means of containing the United States and strengthening the negotiation capabilities of the countries with the rest of the world.

We aim at answering two main questions: how can we characterize the current paths of regional integration in Latin America considering the trends of the last ten years? What can we expect of Latin American regionalism over the next decade? To answer them, we will address the three premises about regional governance mentioned above. Also, we attempt to make some predictions about forthcoming regional scenarios. However, this does not mean that this paper has the potential to fully describe and capture the overall moment of Latin American regionalism but rather to display some of its present and (possible) future trends.

Grounded on a qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources, we address these premises based on the past trajectory of Latin American regionalism in order to grasp some of the present and (possible) futures trends. After this introduction, the next sections address the three postulates mentioned above and contrast them with recent facts in Latin American regionalism. Afterwards, the paper engages in a creative exercise of forecasting. The purpose is not to pretend to know the future nor to predict it but to present two imaginable scenarios and its key trends. As Dabène warns, "[...] the exercise of theorization and prediction [is] very risky and an invitation to modesty" (2009, p.5). In the final section, the paper draws conclusions from the previous sections.

Membership and exit

Most regions feature more than one regional organization. Often, these organizations are complementary and perform different functions. In Latin America, many regional organizations overlap with regard to their mandates and constituent members, and typically tend to follow stop-go cycles, usually surviving in weakened versions. In the literature, it is possible to find a differentiation between two types of overlap: an overlap in mandates (or policy areas) and an overlap in the members of regional organizations (WEIFFEN; WEHNER; NOLTE, 2013). Mandate refers to the functional dimension of an institution; that is, the issue areas it covers. Membership addresses the geographical reach of each institution (NOLTE, 2018). In this paper, we focus on overlap in membership.

Since the 1990s, Latin American regional schemes have turned flexible, allowing different levels of commitment, adaptable pace, and “à la carte” agendas. The intricacy and juxtaposition of efforts characteristic of the last wave of regionalism was justified by modular regionalism, which accepted that the architecture of Latin American regionalism is structured in different projects. Countries could choose which project(s)/module(s) to join depending on the issue, time and opportunity. The result of this behaviour allowed for multiple memberships and non-exclusiveness of alliances and interests (GARDINI, 2015).

The final picture in Latin America is that of the proliferation and overlapping of regional organizations, initiatives, and memberships (VAN KLAVEREN, 2017). For some authors, “the presence of segmented and overlapping regionalist projects is not a manifestation of successful integration but, on the contrary, signals the exhaustion of its potential” (MALAMUD; GARDINI, 2012, p.117).

Exiting regional organizations, therefore, is (or was) not a traditional external policy action of Latin American countries. Despite the constant threats, especially from small countries, MERCOSUR has not lost any members but rather expanded its boundaries and became a non-contiguous bloc as Venezuela joined in 2012. The opting out of first Chile from the Andean Community in the 1970s and later on Venezuela under Chavism, have been perceived as rather anomalies.

It has been argued that the costs of joining a Latin American organization are low, the benefits of belonging to one are higher than the costs of being excluded, and the estimated costs of exit are simply too high for opting out (DUBÉ, 2018). It is possible that national leaders’ tradition to remain part of Latin American schemes and refuse the exit option in case of dissatisfaction – until now a regular behaviour – could be changing. Withdrawals from ALBA, CELAC and UNASUR demonstrate that it may be now the case.

ALBA is losing members. Ecuador withdrawn from the regional bloc led by Venezuela in 2018 in a bid to further distance itself from that country’s socialist government.² More recently, Bolivian interim government broke off diplomatic relations with the government of President Nicolás Maduro and announced its withdrawal from ALBA. A day before the Bolivian announcement, the Political Council of ALBA refused to recognize the new government. The Bolivarian alliance is now composed of only two countries in the continent (Venezuela and Nicaragua) and insular Caribbean countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada and St. Kitts and Nevis).³

Brazil has decided to suspend its participation in CELAC due to its failure to protect democracy, according to Brazil’s foreign minister (REUTERS, 2020). CELAC was established when leftist Latin American governments were in power and like UNASUR, it focused less on the trade agenda and more on a genuinely political dimension.

One of its main functions has been to serve as a regional partner with the European Union (EU) and other relevant external partners, such as China, Russia and India. Although CELAC has been less ideological and activist than other

² Ecuador was once a close ally of Venezuela but relations have soured since Lenin Moreno, a centrist, replaced leftist President Rafael Correa.

³ Meanwhile, Guatemala withdrew from Petrocaribe in 2014 and Belize in 2017. In June 2018, Venezuela announced the suspension of its oil shipments to Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis and Haiti (Antonin 2018). Also El Salvador, under the government of Nayib Bukele, broke relations with Venezuela in late 2019, expelling each other’s diplomatic missions and exiting Petrocaribe *de facto*.

postliberal projects, it has lost influence in recent years, and for example was forced to suspend its biannual dialogue with the EU (VAN KLAVEREN, 2018).

UNASUR has been dismantled altogether. As early as April 2018, the government of Brazil – the proponent of UNASUR ten years ago – along with Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru decided to temporarily suspend their membership. Later the Colombian government withdrew from the bloc. It was followed by Ecuador in March 2019,⁴ Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay in April, and Chile in June. More recently, the Uruguayan government, led by new leader Luis Lacalle Pou, has also decided to depart from UNASUR.

In addition, two countries have expressed their wishes to leave the organization. The government of Peru submitted to Congress the denunciation of the UNASUR Treaty in May 2019. After the resignation of Evo Morales, Bolivian interim government is planning to withdraw from the bloc (MERCOPRESS, 2019). If these countries follow through on their intentions, UNASUR will become a subregional organization composed of only three members: Guyana (which takes part in PROSUR), Suriname and Venezuela.

Until recently, exiting from regional organizations – even the most criticized ones – was not really an option for Latin American countries (DUBÉ; THIERS, 2017). The consequences of withdrawal were seen as negative for the withdrawing state especially in political and symbolic terms. These costs largely accrued because of implications on the withdrawing state's reputation after it reneged on a regional agreement.

This no longer seems to be the case. Post-liberal regionalism (and its inability to solve regional conflicts such as the situation in Venezuela) turned out to be a disruptive exercise among Latin American countries. Logics around regional schemes were attached to different visions and models that ultimately led to a divisive gap between leftist governments and right and centre-right governments. Adducing lack of efficiency and expediency, the latter withdrew from regional organizations in an attempt to get away from “over-ideologized” projects, unperturbed about the costs – in neither economic nor symbolic or political terms.

Institutions

Latin American leaders have always been reluctant to create real supranational regional organizations with effective powers (DUBÉ; THIERS, 2017). Whereas Central American Integration System (SICA), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Andean Community rather respond to European-like integration that include -albeit powerless- supranational institutions, and more ambitious economic goals (a common market), MERCOSUR and the Pacific Alliance as free trade plus agreements that do not share supranational institutions and economic goals (customs unions) are more modest. From this perspective, the Euro-centric vision that Latin American integration does not work because there are no supranational institutions (MALAMUD; GARDINI, 2012; MALAMUD, 2013), is not sustainable any more, since even the European integration experiences a comeback of nation states (ALVAREZ; GRATIUS, forthcoming).

While in the 1990s the creation of supranational institutions was a theme in vogue in Latin American regionalism, in the early years of the 21st century, light regionalism was the dominant concept (SANAHUJA, 2008). As Nolte (2019) asserts, the trend in regional integration processes in the last few years is that they have an even lighter institutional structure.

An example of this trend is PROSUR – which was created in 2019 and has allegedly replaced UNASUR –, a rather insubstantial political arrangement that materialized against schemes based on ideological convergence of left-wing political agendas, although the new initiative also represents ideological convergence but “under the opposite sign” (SANAHUJA, 2019, p.122). In institutional terms, the presidents who create PROSUR expressed their unequivocal will to

⁴ Additionally, the government of Ecuador evicted UNASUR from its headquarters in Quito.

avoid bureaucratic, slow and rigid structures. In this sense, the Declaration of Santiago expresses that PROSUR must have “[...] a flexible, lightweight, non-costly structure, with clear operating rules and an agile decision-making mechanism [...]” (BRAZILIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 2019).⁵

The new scheme does not have the conditions to consolidate itself as a South American regional bloc. Its leaders, aligned with the flexible integration discourse, are unlikely to engage in a long-term agreement, either.⁶ It may be possible to see it as a platform to send a message to Venezuela. Dismantling UNASUR the government of Maduro was isolated, rising an additional tool of pressure against the regime.

Also, as consequence and cause of the polarization of the region concerning the situation in Venezuela, the Lima Group has emerged as an *ad hoc* intergovernmental mechanism (SANAHUJA, 2019). However, following the recognition of Juan Guaidó as President of Venezuela, in line with the position of the Venezuelan opposition and the US government, the Lima Group has not been able to play a relevant role in resolving the crisis (SANAHUJA, 2019).

Facing right-wing proposals, an *ad hoc* scheme composed of leaders, former leaders and opposition candidates, the Puebla Group appeared in 2019. As Míguez asserts,

From the outset, the group was proposed as opposed to the conservative turn in the continental international relations: it affirms Unasur’s relevance against the embarrassing Prosur; distances itself from the Lima Group created in 2017 under the orbit of the United States, and expresses the will to become a counter-power vis-à-vis right-wing governments (2019, p.68).

In this new cycle, ALBA finds its own internal limits and fails to stand as an “alternative integration”. Regionalism continues to be a fixed issue in every presidential agenda but it is hardly a matter for civil society. As long as this remains the case, regionalist patterns will change accordingly: each president will intend to leave his mark by prioritizing one model over another. The concept of inter-presidentialism was introduced to account for progress of regional integration in the absence of supranational institutions (MALAMUD, 2005) but it can also explain another effect in institutional terms: there is no room for social movements or grassroots movements.

Even though ALBA appeared as naturally prone to embracing the demands and further involvement of social movements, in practice this scheme is “basically an inter-state and, more precisely, inter-presidential initiative, of cooperation where the same limitations and a similar democratic deficit pointed out for other integration processes persist” (SERBIN, 2012, p.104).⁷ For instance, the Social Movements Council has no real decision-making power (SERBIN, 2012; CUSACK, 2019).⁸

The role of the United States

The United States has been – and remains – an important player in Latin American regionalism. Latin American mighty neighbour has performed different roles *vis-à-vis* Latin American regionalist projects. During the Cold War, it remained the “external federator” especially for Central American countries. Later on, open regionalism was closely linked to policies of structural reform and the opening of economies to international trade and investment, promoted by the well-known “Washington Consensus”, actively supported by US government (VAN KLAVEREN, 2017). Regional integration has

⁵ “[...] tener una estructura flexible, liviana, no costosa, con reglas de funcionamiento claras y con un mecanismo ágil de toma de decisiones [...]” (Author’s translation)

⁶ Note that Argentina founded PROSUR along with Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay and Peru under Mauricio Macri’s administration. New Argentinean leftist President Alberto Fernández has not participated in any PROSUR meeting since he took office in December 2019.

⁷ “[...] básicamente una iniciativa inter-estatal y, más precisamente, inter-presidencial, de cooperación donde persisten las mismas limitaciones y un similar déficit democrático señalado para otros procesos de integración” (Author’s translation).

⁸ As Cusack (2019, p.205) assesses, the Social Movements Council failed to get off the ground, and ALBA highly discretionary presidential brand governance left it “even less open to outside influence than a traditionally bureaucratic, institutionalized regional governance project”. Serbin (2012) states that the Social Movements Council did not constitute an effective channel of participation as long as it did not have a direct impact on ALBA decision-making, and acted more as a legitimizing component of states and inter-government bodies initiatives.

been stimulated – mainly in reaction to US influence – in the case of post-hegemonic regionalism, as well as blocked by US hegemony (for example, the US strategy of promoting bilateral Free Trade Agreements FTAs) (NOLTE, 2019).

The motivations behind and the characterization of the proliferation of regional initiatives in Latin America at the beginning of the 21st century is to be sought in the relative decline of US influence in the continent and the opportunities for autonomous agenda setting that this offered. Thus, Latin American regionalism became an attempt to “move beyond American-led patterns of integration” (RIGGIROZZI; TUSSIE, 2012, p.1).

Some, however, indicate that this trend in Latin America may be overemphasized (GARDINI, 2015; BRICEÑO-RUIZ, 2018). In fact, the United States is still the major economic partner of Latin America overall. While a move away from US paradigms was observable in South America, this was not necessarily the case in Central America. Integration models largely based on free trade are still alive (CARICOM, MERCOSUR, Andean Community, U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement USMCA) and kicking (Pacific Alliance)⁹ (GARDINI, 2015).

In addition, the post-hegemonic regionalism approach does not shed any light on how it coexists in practice with previous initiatives (GARDINI, 2015). According to Briceño-Ruiz (2018), post-hegemonic regionalism plainly meant the absence of any kind of hegemony. Regional blocs promoting economic models that were critical of neo-liberalism and political models that challenged US hegemony coexisted with other schemes committed to neo-liberalism and close relations with the mighty Northern neighbour.

In Latin American regionalism, the external dimension (as a reaction to exterior influences and incentives) is the driving force (NOLTE, 2019). The autonomy void present in the current forms of regionalism in Latin America and the re-activation of the US-oriented institutions, such as the Organization of American States and the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, put the region’s countries in a position of dependency (NEVES; HONÓRIO, 2019). According to these authors, the growing relationship between China and the Latin American states tends to occupy the existing autonomy void within regional institutions. China continues to be the region’s most dynamic export market, while the United States is Latin American exports’ largest destination market, following by the EU and the region itself (IADB, 2019).

Currently, China’s economic influence in Latin America has a centrifugal effect on intraregional exchange and cooperation. For instance, without a common project that remains during government changes or economic and political crisis, the Chinese approach to Latin America may represent a strategy that does not represent Latin American interests but reflects a project that benefits its drivers, in this case, China (NEVES; HONÓRIO, 2019).

Donald Trump’s administration was not able or willing to advance a wide-ranging agenda to engage with and cooperate productively with Latin America. Such a single-minded focus spurred the region’s governments to pursue and intensify ties with other external partners. However, despite Trump’s shocking and disconcerting style, most regional governments have pursued a pragmatic approach to deal with the US president (SHIFTER, 2018).

As Briceño-Ruiz (2018) states, the regional blocs that promoted a combination of an economic model which rejected neoliberalism, and a political model that confronted the US hegemony were among the pillars of the post-hegemonic era, and their weakening is a signal that a new cycle of regionalism is under way.

Future scenarios

Predicting the future is always a hazardous undertaking. There are so many volatile and unexpected factors that any prediction could be easily dismissed as imprecise and inaccurate. At the risk of performing a rather hasty exercise of

⁹ The Pacific Alliance is a form of open regionalism that clearly differs from post-hegemonic/post-liberal regionalism. Its members, Mexico, Colombia, Chile and Peru, share with the United States FTAs and a similar economic model. However, the creation of this bloc is mainly focused on boosting the trade with the Asia Pacific.

futurology, we examine different trajectories that regionalism in Latin America could take, out to the year 2030, in the form of two scenarios, mainly but not exclusively drawn from the three premises studied in this paper.

As shown in Table 1, the first scenario is rather negative and persists for the next 3 or 4 years, that is, involves the short term and the current correlation of forces at the domestic level. It depicts the continuity of fragmentation and overlapping among regional schemes, without a clear “winner” and with the countries being pulled toward different economic, political, and social poles. Commitments to regional structures remain low and flexible and countries join or exit regional organizations according to conjunctural national preferences.

This flexibility has been present before the collapse of post-liberal regionalism and is a shift when compared to the previous periods when all countries used to assume the same level of commitment. This approach of “*géométrie variable*” prevents the regional schemes from elaborating coherent representations of common interests. In addition, “it offers the member states incentives to a free ride and to think in terms of national interests that they have to defend in every regional integration process they are part of” (DABÈNE, 2012, p.62). This scenario imagines a construction of regionalism with even less binding powers and denying any effort to structure regionalization processes from “below”.

In this scenario, regional integration is not likely and cooperation is the maximum outcome to be expected, especially in the multilateral *ad hoc* space as the Lima Group, the Puebla Group or PROSUR demonstrate. It is doubtful that cooperation in these institutionally “light” fora could lay the basis for, or at least contribute to, the rise of more ambitious schemes.

The systematic destruction and decomposition of the regional governance structure achieved in the last decade removes the region as a pole of power in world politics. This self-oriented invisibility dynamic could increase the vulnerability of the region’s countries to external forces (NEVES; HONÓRIO, 2019). Tokatlián (2019) points out that Latin America is a drifting region in the global arena and emphasizes that this particular condition is highly dangerous for Latin American countries.

As in the Cold War, Latin America can once again become the battlefield between two extra-regional powers. There is a risk that global conflicts between the United States and China expand or have a negative impact on Latin America (NOLTE, 2019). Lingering widespread trade frictions may lead to further disputes in the multilateral framework, greater volatility in financial markets, higher uncertainty with negative impact on investment, supply chains disruptions, and stronger downward pressure on commodity prices (IADB, 2019).

Table 1 – Future scenarios of Latin American regionalism

| | Membership | Institutions | US role |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First scenario | Multiple accessions and exits Fragmentation and overlapping | Low and flexible commitments | Aloofness Rivalry with China |
| Second scenario | Greater costs to exit an organization | Countries honour previous commitments Minimum convergence | More engaged in the region* Tougher stance vis-à-vis China in LA* |

* If Democratic candidate Joe Biden is elected as next US President, as polls suggest (The Economist, 2020)
Source: author’s elaborations

The second scenario, as can be seen from the table above, more optimistic than the first one, may inform future debates on policy and institutional developments. It envisages the medium and long term and includes a new electoral cycle in Latin America with a possible new-fangled cycle of ideological convergence among presidents.

In order to move beyond the environment marked by significant downside risks, Latin American countries increase trade competitiveness and boost regional integration, which function as an effective insurance policy (IADB, 2019). With this in mind, emphasis on the social and the political becomes common to institutions of all political signs in Latin America, conservative and progressive, both at the national level as well as at the regional.

Even if governments change their ideological colour, new leaders avoid exiting regional organizations and breaking pre-existent commitments. In an effort to increase effectiveness, regional schemes search for minimal convergence, focusing on sectorial cooperation and integration, providing for a certain type of division of labour among them.

Regionalism continues to be a fixed issue in every presidential agenda but it remains to be hardly a matter for civil society. The resurgence of social movements is a phenomenon that rarely takes place in isolation and is inevitably vulnerable to cyclical dynamics. In the second scenario, despite the post-liberal “fiasco”, Latin American social and grassroots movements continue to lack a fresh opportunity to effectively engage in regional politics and policy-making.

As for the US role in Latin American regionalism, the 2020 presidential elections would have a great impact, especially since Democratic candidate Joe Biden is likely to beat Donald Trump (THE ECONOMIST, 2020). We can expect that Biden – as tradition dictates – would engage with Latin America in a more benign approach than President Trump. Blaming Trump for the “current absence of American leadership in the Western Hemisphere” Biden warned Russia and China to be on notice that Trump’s incompetence and neglect in Latin America and the Caribbean will end with his administration (AMERICAS QUARTERLY, 2020).

Conclusion

Despite permanent crisis, fragmentations, and few material results, Latin American regionalism constantly reinvents itself according to electoral cycles and ideological changes. The shifting political economy of Latin America, and recent transformations of its regional governance landscape, suggests a need to reflect upon the meaning of regionalism.

In particular, this paper aimed at answering two main questions: how can we characterize the current paths of regional integration in Latin America considering the trends of the last ten years? What can we expect of Latin American regionalism over the next decade? Addressing three premises about regional governance in the continent – membership of regional organizations, institutional design of regional organizations and the role of the United States – we tested them *vis-à-vis* the latest developments in Latin American regionalism and attempted to make some predictions about possible forthcoming scenarios.

Of course, the situation remains fluid and any unexpected change in the correlation of forces at the national, regional or global level could disrupt these trends and bring about new scenarios. For instance, COVID-19 adds new urgency and complexity to Latin American regionalist challenge. Fresh electoral cycles, fluctuant patterns of the US-China rivalry, global economic imbalances or new pandemics could affect Latin American regionalism in one way or another.

Maybe we are about to witness some “stranger things” in the future, as in the TV show for which the basis of the storyline is made up of supernatural events and it is not predictable. To an extent, *Stranger Things* provides an alternate way of looking at the world, opening up to different realities, different explanations and alternatives.

The year 2030 is fast approaching. At a time of much uncertainty, foresight analyses such as the ones this paper offers are critical for policy-makers to begin to imagine how the future may unfold (MARCZAK; ENGELKE, 2016). This leap of faith only stems from those who believe that you must question everything and cannot believe everything that is spoon-fed to you.

Expressions such as “integration-fiction” (PEÑA, 1996) have been coined to portray Latin American integration, away from the people and reality. The sense of failure has led to frustration in the face of the persistent gap between promise and fulfilment, and has profoundly marked the image of regional integration throughout the region. Above the horror thriller and the 80s nostalgia, *Stranger Things* – as the future of Latin American regionalism – provides audiences a reason to question what already is, and makes us wonder what could be (KANNAN, 2016).

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