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Multilateralism

Bleak Prospects?

Multilateral Cooperation in Latin America

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All Latin American countries have extensive historical experience with multilateral cooperation, but willingness to engage in regional and international efforts greatly depends on individual governments' policies and the degree of public interest. Although language, religion, and form of government are the same across almost all of these countries, this commonality has thus far contributed little to establishing effective Latin American multilateralism.

To jump right to an important conclusion of this article: Latin American states have a longstanding tradition of multilateral cooperation stretching back decades and in some cases more than a hundred years. This distinguishes them from other regions outside of Europe that did not enjoy the same early independence (about 200 years ago) from the European colonial powers of Spain and Portugal. Similarly, early Latin American participation in creating the League of Nations[1] and later the United Nations[2] influenced each state's self-confidence and the reputation of Latin American countries within an international community that, 100 years ago, scarcely encompassed 80 countries.

Most Latin American countries' involvement in global institutions for international cooperation is therefore consistent with historical trends. For instance, various Latin American countries have been on the United Nations Security Council, some of them more than once, and provided high-level functionaries for the UN and its suborganisations. An example is Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1920 to 2020), who headed the United Nations as its Secretary-General between 1982 and 1991. Latin American involvement in peacekeeping missions, on the other hand, is more restrained. In the current list of 121 countries involved in 13 UN missions comprising 81,370 personnel positions[3], Uruguay is an exception with 1,126 troops deployed (18th place among countries involved – for comparison, Ethiopia is placed first with 6,658 troops), followed by El Salvador (45th with 291), Argentina (47th with 267), Brazil (49th with 258), and Peru (52nd with 236).[4]

This makes the hesitance of Latin Americans to follow the lead of France and Germany in their initiative to form an Alliance for Multilateralism even more surprising. While Mexico and Chile joined France, Germany, Canada, Ghana, and Singapore among the inviting countries, the only other Latin American countries to attend a first meeting of the new alliance on the periphery of a UN General Assembly in September 2019 were Costa Rica, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic.[5] It was only with the joint declaration of the Alliance for Multilateralism for combatting COVID-19 in April of this year that the group expanded to include Argentina, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.[6] However, only future activities will show whether these countries will play an active role in the Alliance. This is because the Alliance has intentionally dispensed with official membership and sees itself as a loose network of countries whose aim is to enhance the existing rule-based international order and its organisations.

The question of current willingness on the part of Latin American countries to engage in multilateral cooperation is thus at the core of this article. To answer that question, the new Regional Programme Alliances for Democracy and Development with Latin America (ADELA) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung headquartered in Panama asked experts from selected countries in the region for their assessments.[7] Below, the most important conclusions of these individual reports are summarised to form an overview of current international involvement by Latin American countries.

What Concepts of Multilateralism Are There in Latin America?

The contributions submitted by the authors reveal how the continent's various countries have diverging concepts of multilateralism. These ideas are often influenced by the government in power in the country in question and its ideological orientation. For instance, Brazil is a country with a long multilateral tradition; the principle is even an instrument legitimising Brazilian foreign policy and anchored in the country's constitution. This traditional anchoring of multilateralism changed when the incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro took office. He is pursuing an explicitly anti-globalisation policy and is more likely to reengage in bilateral cooperation with the US than to place importance on his own country's former role as a multilateral global player.

The idea of multilateralism prevailing in Peru appears to be based more on macroeconomic preferences than on shared values.

We can observe a similar influence of ideology on the significance of multilateralism and the associated engagement in regional and global alliances in Argentina, where populist presidents as well as isolationist and anti-globalisation tendencies have repeatedly threatened multilateralism. The government has often failed to communicate effectively to civil society the advantages of multilateral action as a mechanism for solving global problems, and hence a society that is increasingly dissatisfied due to periods of crisis can show little understanding for multilateral compromises.

In turn, other Latin American countries perceive multilateralism as a principle firmly anchored in their foreign policy and take active roles in global institutions such as the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO), but also in regional alliances such as the Organization of American States (OAS), MERCOSUR, and the Pacific Alliance. Having said that, it is difficult to determine the importance that a government places on multilateralism merely due to their participation in a multilateral alliance, not least because many of these alliances are themselves in the midst of crisis[8] and the dedication of those countries involved varies depending on the government. For instance, Peru is a member of and host country to many multilateral initiatives. Yet, the idea of multilateralism prevailing in the country appears to be based more on macroeconomic preferences than on shared values. Nevertheless, Peru, unlike Brazil and Argentina, can look back on a foreign policy that has remained stable over a period of three decades.

In particular, during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012 to 2018), Mexico was especially active in multilateral cooperation and made efforts to distinguish itself as a player with global responsibility. Since as early as 2000, Mexican governments have been particularly committed to establishing the country as a regional heavyweight in multilateral organisations and thus gaining an international reputation.[9] Mexico views multilateralism as its best option for solving collective problems based on common standards, principles, and measures. Central concerns include safeguarding peace, international security, and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).[10]

Civil society's interest in multilateralism is rather modest in all four countries. However, this appears to be due to a general increase in public disenchantment with politics in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru over the past few years. In Peru, a great many scandals have led to a dramatic decline in interest even towards national issues, let alone international policy. In contrast, civic organisations in all four countries are committed to global concerns such as environmental protection, human rights, or health issues and view multilateral institutions as champions of their causes – including efforts to sway their own governments.

Historical Experiences with Multilateralism in Latin America

All the countries we compare in this article belong to at least one multilateral alliance and in some way can look back on a tradition of multilateral government action that is sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. This does not necessarily reflect a supportive position by all governments in favour of multilateralism.

Panama is a country that has special historical experience in this respect: back in 1826, when the country was still part of Gran Colombia, the Panama Congress took place. Here, Latin American countries met to lay the foundation for an association of states to integrate the South American continent both economically and politically along the lines of Simón Bolívar's idea[11]. Following its separation from Gran Colombia in 1903, Panama also joined the most important institutions of global governance and, in 1920, became one of the 32 founding members of the League of Nations. To this day, Panama pursues this approach of effective global participation with activities in the Global Governance Group (3G), advancing joint policy design with the G20 nations and the UN. Panama continues to be a member of such organisations as OAS, where it is active in the management of the Panama Canal and helped initiate the Contadora Group (now the Rio Group), which focuses on peace in Central America. Panama has been the venue of various multilateral summits, among them the 1973 meeting of the UN Security Council and the 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama City. The country is the location of many regional offices for international organisations, among them various UN institutions (such as UN Women), for all of Latin America or for Central America and the Caribbean.

Colombia also has a vibrant multilateral tradition even though its governments, unlike Panama's, have not aligned themselves with the models or structures of global governance. Instead, its foreign policy activity has focussed on interests and ideological foundations it shares with other countries. Colombia sets itself apart for being both donor and recipient of international cooperation, especially through its active development cooperation with a number of Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. In its efforts to end the conflict with FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), Colombia received support from the United Nations that was instrumental in securing a peace treaty in 2016, while other relevant international players such as the EU, Germany, and the US also continue to cooperate with the Colombian government to establish a stable, lasting peace. In all, Colombia contributes funds to nine different multilateral organisations. Colombia's current government demonstrates a growing interest in active involvement in regional and international alliances, with the UN, the OAS, the Andean Community (CAN), and the Pacific Alliance at the centre of its efforts.

After its reintegration within the community of nations, Chile has dedicated itself to a foreign policy shaped more by pragmatism and less by ideology.

Owing to its positive historical experience with multilateral cooperation, Chile has remained faithful to its foreign policy principle of "open regionalism". After its reintegration within the community of nations following a military dictatorship, Chile has dedicated itself to a foreign policy shaped more by pragmatism and less by ideology. The Chilean capital of Santiago has been the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) since 1948. That same year, Chile joined OAS and became one of the initiators of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights. Chile also actively supports the United Nations peace mission. Thus, Chile has so far participated in 23 international peacekeeping missions (including MINUSTAH in Haiti)

Reluctance: The quantity of Latin American involvement in peacekeeping missions is low in international comparison.
Source: © Paulo Whitaker, Reuters.

and supported the UN resolution concerning the Libyan civil war and the founding of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague.

Mexico, too, has a long history of dedication to multilateral organisations: for instance Mexican security forces were deployed as part of eight different UN peacekeeping missions in the Western Sahara, Lebanon, Haiti, the Central African Republic, and Mali between March 2015 and June 2018. Moreover, Mexico has served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council on several occasions, expanding its influence in regions of the world where it previously had little access.[12] In addition to Mexico's involvement in the UN peacekeeping missions, its support of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the formulation of the 2030 Agenda, the struggle against drug trafficking, and the regulation of migration deserve special note. The last two items present Mexico with huge domestic policy challenges.

Latin American Multilateralism – Effective or Prone to Crisis?

There are many multilateral alliances in Latin America, but they have proven to be more or less unstable and vulnerable to political and economic

upheaval in their member countries. The recent history of these regional alliances begins parallel to consolidating the international community of nations in organisations of multilateral cooperation. In the aftermath of the East-West conflict that had dominated international cooperation until then, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) took place in Brazil in 1992. It was the first UN conference held in the country and marked a radical departure in multilateral cooperation with respect to the issues of environment and biodiversity. Among other things, it led to the ratification of Agenda 21 and several environmental agreements. Especially for Brazil, this was an important milestone in gaining a reputation with the international community as a representative of environmental protection issues. In 2012, Brazil hosted the follow-up conference to UNCED, Rio+20, which laid the foundations for ratifying the SDGs by the UN General Assembly in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda. The relevance of Latin American regional powers such as Brazil went hand in hand with the rise of several former developing countries to become influential on the global stage, making the Latin American region more attractive for multilateral cooperation over the years to come. The group of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) deserves mention here.

Latin American multilateralism is currently also weakened by inadequate management of regional crises.

After the end of the Cold War, Central American states increasingly began to engage in multilateral cooperation. In 1991, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Guatemala founded the Central American Integration System (SICA). Important achievements of this organisation with the support of the EU and the US are the peace processes in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). In the same year, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela joined forces to form the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) to advance South American integration.[13] Venezuela's membership has been suspended since 2016 due to blatant restrictions on freedom and the curtailment of democratic rights and thus in violation of the organisation's rules.

Nowadays, more potential is attributed to regional alliances such as the Pacific Alliance and the OAS, including for cooperation with the EU or other regions of the world, than to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) or MERCOSUR. Founded in 2004, UNASUR has practically ceased to exist following the departure of eight of the nine member states owing to the Venezuelan conflict and disagreement over the election of a new Secretary General[14]. MERCOSUR suffers under the policies of the current governments of Brazil and Argentina and is in danger of drifting into an existential crisis.[15] The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), from which Brazil withdrew at the beginning of January 2020, is equally crisis-ridden. The Pacific Alliance is considered a stable community, whereas domestic social tensions in the member states of Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico have eroded cohesion, and this could in turn make cooperation with the EU more difficult in future. The same is true for the Andean Community (Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru). Overall, it is clear that Latin American multilateralism is currently weakened not only because of frequent changes in government and ideology in recent months, but also because of inadequate management of regional crises (especially in Venezuela).[16]

These examples clearly show that multilateral alliances in Latin America have stagnated or have been in crisis over recent years. Venezuela in particular shows the "ambivalence of multilateral cooperation at the interface between regional stability and political self-interest"[17]. The OAS was the first to denounce the situation in Venezuela, but polarisation driven by ideology and party politics prevented it from imposing sanctions.[18] Mexico, which sharply criticised Venezuela's undemocratic form of government,

faced charges of inconsistency between its domestic and foreign policy. At the time, Mexico itself was under public pressure to investigate the disappearance of 43 students who had allegedly been murdered, and from which it sought assistance from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, CIDH).[19] This balancing act between multilateral policy, which supports the protection of human rights and democracy, and a national policy that often fails to ensure this protection, has been characteristic of Mexico since the early 2000s.[20]

In summary, Latin America has no shortage of multilateral alliances or memberships in international organisations. More importantly, the majority of countries on the subcontinent are democratic, and they have the rules and institutions to deal with relevant policy areas of multilateral cooperation policy. However, the "political, economic, and military elites prevent or thwart the application of these rules"[21]. A central problem here is the endemic corruption that goes unpunished in many places.[22] This may also be the reason why Latin American countries do not consult existing established bodies such as the OAS when they experience internal crises. Rather, internal political and ideological differences that greatly weaken these regional organisations result in ad hoc alliances as solution mechanisms (such as the Lima Group, an international contact group for handling the Venezuelan crisis).[23]

Latin American Commitment to the Alliance for Multilateralism

Although all Latin American countries are members of regional groups (some of them of more than one) and part of the international community of nations, their interest and participation in the Alliance for Multilateralism initiated by France and Germany in 2019 varies widely. This illustrates what the previous section analysed: in Latin America, multilateral alliances or adherence to corresponding treaties often fall victim to ideological shifts in

Cooperation is key: There are many multilateral alliances in Latin America. Source: © Jorge Adorno, Reuters.

direction on the part of various national governments, corruption and impunity, protectionism, and greater emphasis on bilateral foreign policy.

On the one hand, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic have supported the Alliance for Multilateralism from the outset. Mexico and Chile were even among

the inviting countries when launching the initiative on the periphery of the 2019 UN General Assembly. At the first meeting of foreign ministers, Chile's Minister of Foreign Affairs said that, in view of the global challenges, it was urgently necessary to renew willingness to engage in multilateral action and modernise international organisations that his country wanted to advance. During the current COVID-19 crisis, the Chilean government is calling for joint action on the part of the global community to combat the pandemic, emphasising its position by signing the Alliance's joint declaration in April 2020.[24]

The Argentinian government is critical of the Alliance for Multilateralism: Participants have too little say in developing proposals.

Costa Rica also actively supports the Alliance. At the last Alliance meeting, the Costa Rican Foreign Minister highlighted that, especially in view of the current threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic, multilateral cooperation is critical since the virus does not respect national borders. Peru, under the government of President Martín Vizcarra, has decided to join the Alliance. However, there was low awareness in Peruvian civil society of the creation of the network in 2019 and the COVID-19 meeting in 2020 due to little to no media coverage as well as to only scant attention in the country's social media. Argentina is also among the signatories to the above-mentioned declaration. The country's participation in the network has been limited to signing selected declarations, though. The Argentinian government is quite critical of the initiative: for one thing, it believes that participating countries do not have much to say in the development of proposals, and for another, it fears that the Alliance can achieve little without participation on the part of the US and China. Moreover, the Alliance is seen as a European attempt to exert influence – Germany and France in particular are suspected of trying to consolidate moral power in the international system.

These participating Latin American countries contrast with those either ignoring the creation of the Alliance or having demonstrated limited interest in participating. Among the latter are Brazil, Guatemala, and Panama, which this article has already mentioned. Brazil is especially conspicuous, since it has such a long multilateral tradition, whereas under Bolsonaro's government, Brazil's international participation in global organisations has come to a virtual standstill. Coverage in Brazilian media and interest in academic circles on founding the Alliance for Multilateralism in 2019 clearly did not impress the current Brazilian government. Panama's government so far also appears uninterested in active participation in the multilateral alliance; even though its positive experience with international cooperation would seem to demand an active role. In Guatemala in 2019, President Jimmy Morales was embroiled in a dispute with the UN and its Secretary-General António Guterres after his government abolished the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). As a result, no further notice was paid to the Alliance for Multilateralism.

Conclusion

The criticism that the Alliance for Multilateralism has encountered, above all because of the participation of countries such as Mexico and Singapore, is that there are major differences in the quality of democracy and in the political and ethical behaviour of incumbent governments in the participating countries. For instance, the Freedom House Index rates Chile and Ghana as only "partly free", in contrast to the other founder of the network, Canada. For Mexico, this can be traced back to the difficult security and human rights situation. Criticism is also levelled against the fact that the Alliance is an initiative involving cooperation among nations with diverging regulatory and ideological ideas. This prevents it from tackling deep global problems

and instead limits its focus to pragmatic agreements in specific areas where such agreements are relatively easy to reach because they are not particularly binding.[25]

The reasons why, despite years of multilateral traditions, not all Latin American democracies are cooperating in the Alliance for Multilateralism are as follows:

1. As already outlined in the criticism by Argentina's government, the initiative is perceived to be a European attempt to improve its image and manifest its power on the international stage.

2. Both the US and China are influential superpowers on the Latin American continent, especially as sources of economic investment and financial support. It is reasonable to suspect that several countries fear that joining the Alliance will endanger good relations with the US or Chinese governments.

3. Interest in participating in new initiatives such as the Alliance for Multilateralism is suffering from Latin America's crisis of multilateralism, which can be traced back primarily to an inability to solve regional conflicts and the governments' unwillingness to compromise on multilateral issues, alongside protectionist tendencies.

4. The Alliance is a relatively loose network of states with varying ideological ideas in policy areas (security, trade regime, human rights, international law) that are vital for multilateral action, and hence its sphere of influence is limited to the "sideshows of international politics"[26]. However, these are precisely the core areas of global politics that many Latin American countries consider crucial for their foreign policies. We can therefore assume that not all Latin American democracies will find participation attractive as long as the Alliance continues to focus on the soft issues of international cooperation.

It remains to be seen whether the current global corona crisis will change this willingness to participate, especially since the crisis has moved global health to the top of the Alliance's agenda as a new core area of international politics. After all, among the signatories of the joint declaration for combatting the COVID-19 pandemic are ten Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, and Uruguay).

–translated from German–

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1 The 32 founding countries of the League of Nations, consisting of the victorious Allied Powers in the First World War, included the following: Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru. Immediately after the League's founding on 10 Jan 1920, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Venezuela were invited to join.
2 Latin America provided 37 per cent of the 51 founding countries of the United Nations, including all 17 continental countries and the island nations of Cuba and the Dominican Republic.
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5 Alliance for Multilateralism 2019: Ministerial Meeting: Building the Network and Presenting Results, 26 Sep 2019, in: https://bit.ly/3fkmMgG [22 May 2020].
6 The text of the declaration with a list of signatory states can be found at: Federal Foreign Office 2020: We need strong global cooperation and solidarity to fight COVID-19, 25 May 2020, in: https://bit.ly/3jOYGxo [4 Sep 2020].
7 The contributions of the country experts will be published in a separate study by the ADELA regional programme.
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10 Ibid., pp. 648–649.
11 Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) was one of the two leaders of the Latin American liberation and independence movement. He fought against the Spanish colonial rulers of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Panama. Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb): (Post)kolonialismus und Globalgeschichte. Köpfe der Unabhängigkeitsbewegungen (dossier), in: https://bpb.de/227911 [14 Aug 2020].
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18 Ibid., p. 7.
19 Covarrubias 2019, n. 9, pp. 656–663.
20 Ibid.
21 Kurtenbach 2019, n. 17, p. 5.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 7.
24 Federal Foreign Office 2020, n. 6.
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26 Ibid.