

Your Regionalism and Mine: The United States and South American Cooperation in the Global Pandemic

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Abstract

International Relations often adopts a broadly functionalist view of regionalism: states create regional organizations to address shared problems. However, faced with the unprecedented global health emergency of COVID-19, regionalism in the Americas largely failed to produce regional goods during the pandemic's first year. The shortfall in regional cooperation emerged from a conjunction of conditions in place preceding the pandemic's outset. We apply a framework of ideology, leadership, and interactions across three time periods: just before the pandemic, during the first year of the pandemic in 2020, and subsequently during 2021. Fragmented visions of regionalism, weak leadership will and capabilities, and adverse interactions among major powers darkened the inter-American panorama. The United States and Latin America approach regionalism through distinct ideal-typical models – as a “protectorship” or partnership for the United States, or as confederative or relational regionalism in the case of Latin America. While technical cooperation still played an important role, high-level political reticence and competition over scarce resources dampened initial regional responses to the pandemic. A reassertion of US regional engagement in 2021 has produced greater, though still uneven, inter-America regional cooperation, though heavily reliant on U.S. whims and fragmented by ad hoc extra-regional interactions.

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Introduction: regionalisms in crisis

Regional cooperation in the Western Hemisphere was in a dire state in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic. When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, fragmentation reigned. Fear of the disease justified “triage” actions driven by national chauvinism (Barnett, 2020). Borders were closed unilaterally. Migrants were forcefully excluded (Marinucci, 2021). Supplies were hoarded. With few exceptions, regionalism fell short. Mounting rapid and effective regional responses to the pandemic was always a longshot. But the weakness of the regional “*status quo ante pandemus*” further undermined this possibility. Ideologically, no vision of regionalism enjoyed widespread support. Potential leaders lacked the capacity and/or political will to provide regional goods. Patterns of interactions among key powers worked against strong regionalism before and during the early stages of the pandemic. Although some conditions grew more favorable after the pandemic's first year, the legacies of early failures weigh heavily.

Although most of this volume focuses on regionalism in South America, in this chapter we expand the scope. By looking across the Western Hemisphere more broadly, we explore the United States' participation in and effects on regional cooperation in Latin America. We include the effects of U.S. actions on regional cooperation to which it is not directly a party (e.g., Unasur, CELAC, Prosur), and its contributions to regional cooperation through the hemispheric organizations in which it participates (e.g., OAS, IDB, PAHO). We also consider bilateral engagement and indirect engagement in Latin America through global channels (e.g., UN, WHO). Drawing on the framework enunciated by Deciancio and Quiliconi in the introduction to this volume, we ask the following questions with particular attention to the role of the United States:

- What conditions shaped the success or failure of regional cooperation in the Western Hemisphere early in the pandemic?
- How did regional cooperation develop after the outbreak of the pandemic in the Americas?

Before turning to our analysis of the United States and regionalism during the pandemic, we start by assessing the rationales behind recurrent patterns of regionalism in the Americas. Different visions – as well as varying levels of leadership commitment – have characterized regionalism in the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, the pandemic erupted against a background divisive Brazilian and U.S. leadership and increasing Chinese presence. The hemisphere seemed to lack a willing regional leader, and it faced the dismantling or paralysis of regional institutions. This set of conditions, we argue, shaped the regional political paralysis in the face of the pandemic.¹

Visions of regionalism in the American long durée

Like the South American counterparts at the heart of this volume, more geographically expansive forms of hemispheric regionalism have long roots. So, too, do subregional regional projects involving the United States. Pan- and Inter-American initiatives likewise emerge from ideologies and interactions dating to Spanish American independence movements. At times, visions of regionalism united. Shared republican commitments created a basis for a “Western Hemisphere idea” (Whitaker, 1965; Santa-Cruz, 2021). Some of the earliest calls for Spanish

¹ There was greater technical and scientific cooperation at times, with important subregional variation as several recent studies have pointed out (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Ruano & Saltalamacchia, 2021; González 2021). Our point here is that the changes and resources demanded by the pandemic required renewed regional commitments at a political level; this was largely absent.

American independence sought to deploy “the language of hemispheric unity to imagine a collective break from colonial subjugation” (Chang, 2021, p. 8). These consolidated in a “republican internationalist” vision that emphasized regional solidarity but also legalism and sovereign equality (Long & Schulz, 2021).

At other times, political, national, and regional differences were more salient, diminishing enthusiasm for hemispheric regionalism (Corrales & Feinberg, 1999). Power political interactions produced both centrifugal and centripetal pressures. External threats could serve to unify Latin American states and generate alignments with the United States (De la Reza, 2000, p. 100). Conversely, the rapid territorial expansion of the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century created tensions with its neighbors; these conflicts were often marked by U.S. prejudices regarding religion and race (Gobat 2013). From early on, the United States loomed as both a threat and an opportunity (Long, 2021b, p. 18–20). By the middle of the twentieth century, U.S.-led, inter-American institutions emerged as a hemispheric grand bargain between the superpower and its hemispheric neighbors.

Nevertheless, cultural differences and political tensions led many, such as Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman to point to a “great divide” that ruptured supposed hemispheric unity (Santa-Cruz, 2021, p. 163–64). Divergences in ideology and interactions, along with the steadily increasing disparity of power between the United States and its hemispheric counterparts, produced various approaches to regionalism. Fawcett (2005) pointed to two historical strands, a U.S.-led Pan Americanism and a Spanish American-led Bolivarianism. Building on this, Santa-Cruz (2021, p. 165) suggests different underlying motivations, with Pan Americanism based on “abstract values and economic interests” while Bolivarianism has been “an identity-based cultural and political project.”

We suggest, instead, a different disaggregation. While the United States was *included* in Pan-Americanism, Latin American states also claimed leadership roles “to further their domestic interests” (Petersen & Schulz, 2018, p. 108). Latin American-led regionalism often diverged from the anti-imperialist Bolivarian ideal type. Instead, we see two Latin American visions of regionalism in the Western Hemisphere, belonging to *confederative* or *relational* traditions. Confederation possesses deep roots in Spanish American republican solidarity (De la Reza, 2000; Long & Schulz, 2021, p. 12–15), later expanding to incorporate Brazil (Spektor, 2019). Rooted in a need for unity for external defense and internal consolidation, *confederative regionalism* is skeptical of the inclusion of the United States. *Relational regionalism*, as Russell

and Tokatlian (2003) argued regarding relational autonomy, sees compatibility – even where born of necessity and geography. In this vision, the context of (asymmetrical) interdependence makes regional “isolation, self sufficiency, or opposition” to United States counterproductive. Relational regionalism sees Latin American national interests as advanced through “active participation” and engagement with the United States (ibid., p. 13, 16).

While we see these as the ideal typical visions on regionalism, there were also wildly fluctuating levels of Latin American commitment to regional solidarity in practice. U.S. oscillations of (in)attention are widely noted, but Latin American governments – Brazil most prominently – have not always seen their national interests as convergent with regional unity. Latin American states, too, sometimes shun a regionalist path in favor of unilateral and bilateral policies.

The United States’ approach to regionalism in the Americas also has two primary currents. The first traces back to the Monroe Doctrine, in which the United States claim the role of regional protector. As its primary characteristic, *protectorship regionalism* is resolutely unilateral, with the United States proclaiming a right and duty to protect Latin American states from extra-hemispheric threats, from one another, and even from themselves (Gilderhus, 2006; Schoultz, 1998). In the second current, *partnership regionalism*, the United States see themselves as a member of a hemispheric community, though even here the country often presumes itself to be *prima entre pares* (e.g., Lowenthal, 1987). This strand is multilateral in conception, though imperfectly so in practice. It grants consideration to Latin American sovereignty, though appreciation of sovereign *equality* is more limited than in most Latin American conceptions of regional international society (Scarfi, 2021).

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There is a fundamental difference in the application of these types. Despite internal divisions, the United States can be reasonably understood as one actor; Latin America and the Caribbean cannot. While one can ask whether a particular U.S. administration or policy resembles the *protectorship* or *partnership* model, one must assess the prevalence of regional visions across all Latin American countries – an inherently more ambiguous task. Not all actors will prioritize regionalism in the same way, and United States’ policymakers have often accorded low policy salience to Latin American regional affairs (Milani, 2021; Valenzuela, 2005). In Latin

America, rhetorical regionalism usually retains sway, but the pursuit of individual national interests often diverges from “declaratory regionalism” (Jenne et al., 2017). Whether through nationalism, protectionism, or the prioritization of extra-regional partners, many Latin American governments’ actions diverge from ideals of regional solidarity.

Ideology, leadership, and interactions: an adapted framework

Deciancio and Quiliconi (this volume) emphasize the role of ideology, leadership, and interactions as the primary drivers of regionalism in South America. In this chapter, we assess the development of regional cooperation – or the scarcity of cooperative efforts – in response to the pandemic across the Western Hemisphere. To do so, we will consider how pre-pandemic conditions of regional ideology, leadership, and interaction hampered cooperation early in the pandemic. We then track their development over the first two years of the pandemic. But to begin, we elaborate our adaptations to the analytical framework.

Ideology

An extensive literature links domestic ideology, namely of South American executives, to patterns of regional cooperation. This literature tends to place presidents on a left/right political spectrum, linking the right to free trade agreements and the left to “political and social cooperation” (Deciancio & Quiliconi, this volume, p. 15). This split seemed evident in South America in the early 2000s to describe the emergence of the politically minded evolution of “post-hegemonic” or “post-neoliberal” regional bodies like Mercosur and ALBA, in contrast with the pro-liberalization Pacific Alliance and pursuit of free trade agreements.

We are skeptical, however, that domestic ideology exercises these effects in a way that can be generalized to other moments or to a hemispheric level. Two recent examples suffice. Much was made of the ideological convergence of far right-wing presidents in the hemisphere’s two largest countries from 2018-2020. But similar politics – even emulation – did not produce meaningful cooperation between Presidents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro (Thomaz et al., 2021). Despite being on the right, both cast aspersion on international institutions and free trade. Nationalism trumped ideological convergence. Ideological similarities on the left have not been more conducive to the regionalism of late. Prominent left leaders, such as Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador, deploy a neo-corporatism that is skeptical of international

scrutiny and pooled sovereignty. As Centeno (2021) points out, López Obrador has largely stuck to liberal regional policies, including the Pacific Alliance and an updated North American trade deal, and domestic austerity in the face of the pandemic. Despite the much-heralded convergence between Mexican and Argentine left leadership, it has produced little demonstrable regionalism or even salient, shared interests (Merke, 2020).

The depth, form, and content of regional cooperation are often orthogonal to the left/right ideological spectrum. Instead of emphasizing domestic ideology, we propose a different approach to thinking about convergence and its effects. This emphasizes ideologies of regionalism instead of domestic politics. These regional ideologies relate to our assessment of historical patterns, above.

Recent U.S. engagement has been guided by a relatively narrow ideological range and set of issues, yet there are differences in inflection concerning how the United States approach Latin America and the Caribbean. In the simplest terms, does unilateralism or multilateralism dominate the U.S. approach to regionalism in the Western Hemisphere? Does it approach the region as a self-proclaimed protector or as a partner? Rarely has this difference been as clear as in the yo-yo-ing U.S. stance of the Monroe Doctrine over the past three administrations. Declared “over” by the Obama administration, the doctrine was resuscitated by the Trump administration, before returning to obsolescence under Biden (Long, 2021a, p. 121). This difference in regional vision manifests itself in the U.S. willingness (or not) to work through regional organizations. It may direct funding to bilateral initiatives or via multilateral bodies where it has less direct control. It may consult – or reject consultation.

We then assess the prevalence of regional ideologies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Convergence does not mean unanimity; even in the heyday of post-hegemonic regionalism, diverse initiatives thrived (Briceno-Ruiz & Morales, 2017; Quiliconi & Espinoza, 2018). But regionalism is a political project that requires a critical mass to reach minimal agreements on form and content. Leaders may favor confederative regional projects that prioritize the defense of sovereignty and prioritize joint negotiations with extra-regional actors. Conversely, the prevalence of relational regionalism will suggest closer cooperation with the United States. On its own, convergence does not guarantee deep engagement nor the commitment of resources from the United States or other regional leaders. For that, ideology must be complemented by the next element of the framework: leadership.

Leadership

Leadership captures both the capacity and the will to construct and maintain a regional political project. It also requires followership, often spurred by a combination of benefits and pressure (Schirm, 2010), as well as convergent ideologies of regionalism. Creating a structure of costs and benefits conducive to regionalism requires the material capacity to provide the carrots of “regional public goods” (Estevadeordal & Goodman, 2017), and some means of coercion – though this is not necessarily military – to enforce regional order. In practice, regional public goods are closer to “club” goods than truly public goods (Sandler, 2006). Indeed, the ability to exclude actors from regional goods is what makes them useful to regional powers trying to build regional order.

The emphasis on regional capabilities typically turns our attention to large states. This is a partial error, as the level of capacities required is related to the size and characteristics of the region. Relatively small states in the Caribbean may exercise regional leadership (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010). At the South American or hemispheric level, however, fewer states have this potential. First, one must ask whether the purported leader possesses adequate material capabilities and, secondly, whether the leader commits to expending them.

“Leadership” has featured prominently in discussions of the rise and fall of Brazilian-led regional initiatives. Some point to individual-level presidential leadership as a source of varying political will to act as a regional leader: the centrality of Lula, the ambivalence of Dilma, the impotence of Temer, and the hostility of Bolsonaro (Spektor, 2021). But the more consistent question is the level of material capabilities. Even before the crash, some scholars criticized Brazil for trying to lead on the cheap (Malamud, 2011; Burges, 2015, p. 204). Later, it became more obvious, how a painful recession undermined the material basis of Brazilian leadership even further (Bernal-Meza, 2020, 527–32).

U.S. material capacities for regional leadership are more than sufficient – these include military power, economic heft, deep capital markets, technical expertise, socioeconomic ties, and tremendous legacies of structural power. Regional institutions help the United States’ “legitimate authority” while providing platforms for influence and voice for Latin American states (Hurrell, 2005). But political commitment has rarely been salient in the post-Cold War period. While the United States have pursued – often aggressively, energetically, and unilaterally – global hegemonic leadership, the importance of Latin America in its geopolitical vision has been limited and marked by cyclical patterns of attention (Pastor, 2001, 17–19). This

produced moments of investment in the construction of regional institutions, but longer fallow periods. More recently, U.S. region-wide engagement has centered on trade and democracy promotion; with some exceptions, it has tended to address issues like migration and drug trafficking unilaterally and bilaterally.

Interactions

The third element of the framework focuses on the interactions of large states. Though “interactions” could capture most aspects of international politics and economics, we simplify this element to a single question: Do relations among major powers favor regional cohesion or fragmentation? Much work on regionalism argues that greater multipolarity favors greater regionalism (e.g., Acharya, 2007). On the contrary, Garzón (2016, p. 110) points out that multipolarity presents more options to “defect” from one’s region as secondary states seek better bargains elsewhere while retaining autonomy from would-be regional leaders.

For the sake of analytical feasibility, we narrow “major powers” to three primary nodes: Brazil, China, and the United States. Relations between Brazil and the United States are the key hemispheric axis, belied by the often-muted salience of the relationship (Long 2018). For some time, Brazilian actions seemed almost sufficient for explaining regional interactions in the South American context. Its growing economy created rising expectations. Its energetic will to lead seemed to fill a void left by the absence of visible political leadership by the United States. From this conjuncture, Brazil managed a regional projection that outstripped its material resources and commitments. In the absence of such favorable conditions at home and in South America, the pattern of interactions shifted. The gravitational pull of larger states created centrifugal pressures in South America (Garzón, 2016), weakening confederative regionalism. Old asymmetries drew states towards large economies, even in the absence of salient regional projects.

The third primary node is China, now a constant economic presence and a salient diplomatic player during the pandemic. Though we would argue that analogies to the Cold War are overly Manichean, there is little doubt that the externalities of U.S.-China relations reverberate through regional dynamics in the Western Hemisphere (Fortín et al., 2020). Increasing bilateral tensions have put growing stress on multilateral cooperation at the regional and global levels (Bernal-Meza, 2021). We will focus on these interactions below.

Analysis

We apply the framework across a tripartite periodization. First, we assess the conditions for regionalism before the onset of the pandemic. Second, we look at how these conditions affected initial responses to the pandemic, from March to December 2020. Third, we examine the evolving response to the pandemic in the Western Hemisphere, examining reciprocal effects between this global event and the three main elements of the framework: ideology, leadership, and interactions.

Regionalism on the eve of COVID-19

On the eve of the pandemic, regionalism in the Western Hemisphere was widely perceived as having eroded in the face of mounting crises (Nolte & Weiffen, 2020; Mijares & Nolte, 2018; van Klaveren, 2020). At the political level, divisions over the political situation in Venezuela and the related flow of migrants further weakened the confederative projects of earlier years. Materially, most regional economies faced lackluster growth given the end of the commodity super-cycle, including the regional leader, Brazil. Before the pandemic, rising tides of protest had drained attention and energy from regional projects. Individual leaders in Brazil and the United States were polarizing figures, more inclined to unilateral and bilateral approaches (Brun & Legler, 2021, p. 248). At an institutional level, the strains were clearest in the collapse of Unasur and the stagnation of CELAC (Nolte, 2021), but there were also battles over the futures of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Mercosur. The leadership of the Inter-American Development Bank and the Organization of American States grew unusually contentious as well. Unilateral U.S. policies were coupled with limited regional goods provision; Latin American regionalism was fragmented, with a weak material basis for generating new regional goods.

In terms of ideology, the critical mass that supported “post-hegemonic” confederative regionalism dissipated well before the pandemic. In part, this was a result of political reconfigurations at the domestic level, with the removals of Presidents Dilma Rousseff in Brazil and Evo Morales in Bolivia, as well as electoral change in Chile and Ecuador. Given its previous ideological leadership, Venezuela’s political turmoil and economic devastation weighed heavily. Poor economic conditions across the region hurt and internal contradictions grew evident in the model that had underpinned ALBA and Unasur. The confederative vision relied on resource extraction. That extractivism was primarily connected to China, reproducing

many of the same patterns of dependency – and related environmental, social, and economic problems – that confederative regionalism sought to reject. In addition, these confederative visions were reticent to pool or delegate authority, thus they created little independent institutional capacity.

By 2019, more relational – though seemingly weakly held – visions of regionalism were prevalent. After encouraging the collapse of Unasur, the right-wing, pro-market leaders of Chile and Colombia proposed a new regional grouping called Prosur, appeared as “the answer to a question nobody asked” (Binetti, 2019). Prosur rejected confederative visions of the region. Despite that, it mimicked its predecessor’s thematic focus: Prosur appeared to be Unasur à la carte. Even compared to Unasur, Prosur celebrated its lack of institutionalization as a point of pride – “a light and flexible structure...without excessive bureaucracy” (PROSUR n.d.). But similar to other regional organizations, the body’s lack of functional capabilities means it has little capacity to catalyze or implement regional responses (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021; Ruano & Saltalamacchia, 2021). Absent the incentives created by large consumer markets at a region’s core, shared ideological affinities for trade liberalization may fragment regional cohesion instead of building it. The logic for Prosur is not clear, in vision nor material incentives.

The picture of regional leadership was perhaps even less conducive to cooperation. Political will and commitment of material capacity to produce regional goods were scarce. The United States maintained expansive capabilities, after a gradual but robust recovery from the 2008-09 financial crisis. The Trump administration repeatedly requested major cuts to diplomacy and international organization funding, but the U.S. Congress ignored them and funded the State Department and USAID at consistent levels (Morello, 2020). U.S. capabilities did not translate into regional leadership, though. The Trump administration’s attention to Latin America was largely limited to migration and the purported threat from what National Security Advisor John Bolton dubbed the “troika of tyranny” of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (Thornton, 2021). Trump’s bellicose position towards Venezuela added divisions in inter-American organizations like the OAS. The Trump administration did turn to regional groupings to pressure Venezuela, including the OAS and the ad hoc Lima Group (Smilde, 2020; Pedroso, 2021). But as with migration and the border wall, aims were set unilaterally. Regional antagonisms and ideological disdain for international organizations meant that there was no attempt at region-building.

Across Latin America, material capacity and political will were both scarce. The material basis for hemispheric cooperation from potential Latin American regional leaders had eroded in terms of broad economic capability and specific commitments. A brief look at larger regional players underscores this shortfall. Mexican President López Obrador and Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard have espoused regional solidarity, notably in trying to revive CELAC during Mexico's rotating presidential term (Ruano & Saltalamacchia, 2021, p. 104). But CELAC is bureaucratically ephemeral; it depends on "borrowing" national capabilities. This is a problem given that Mexico's budget for foreign affairs has eroded. In real terms, the budget dropped 13 percent from 2012-2018 (Schiavon & Figueroa Fischer, 2019); under AMLO's "republican austerity" budgets, the Mexican foreign ministry lost a further 10 percent of its budget from 2020 to 2021 (Sánchez, 2020). Despite declarations of solidarity, Mexico's actions in the region have largely been relationally oriented to keep the peace with the United States on issues of trade and migration. In Brazil, the material shortfalls in general and health diplomacy are equally notable (Ventura & Bueno, 2021). Brazilian engagement had been greatly diminished since the outbreak of the political crisis that resulted in Rousseff's controversial impeachment. After a period of diplomatic expansion, Brazil has retrenched yet still faced shortfalls in meeting routine expenses in embassies and consulates (*Poder360*, 2021). As noted above, some regional organizations retained latent capacity, including in relevant areas like health and development finance. However, the onset of the pandemic would show the importance of political leadership in expanding and deploying those capabilities, especially the notably weak response in the Southern Cone (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021, p. 418–19).

In addition to considering the capacity and willingness of Brazil or other individual states as regional leaders, it is worth assessing the potential of Latin American regional institutions to provide leadership. Before its collapse, Unasur seemed to be developing forms of capacity to spur cooperation in social policy (Riggirozzi, 2016), though state-level capacity remained key (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021). Financing organizations like the Inter-American Development Bank and CAF or technical bodies like the Pan American Health Organization created sector-specific capacities. There is less capacity from regional organizations to spur political cooperation, but the issue-specific capacity of regional organizations should not be overlooked. As Ruano and Saltalamacchia (2021) note, this produced subregional variation and some bodies, most notably CARICOM, did manage to catalyze information sharing, technical cooperation, and some joint action.

Before the outbreak of the pandemic, patterns of interaction had centered on Brazilian cutbacks, U.S. myopia, and Chinese expansion. Brazil's position, as well as its relations with the other two nodes, weakened the context for South American regionalism, especially of a confederative nature. U.S. "protectorship" regional engagement did not disappear so much as retrench to Mexico and the Caribbean. This weakness of the Brazil-U.S. axis – despite domestic ideological sympathy – allowed China to continue to expand its influence in South America (Bernal-Meza, 2021, p. 283), even as the "China boom" receded (Urdinez et al., 2016).

Regionalism faces the first wave

The pandemic found an ideologically and institutionally fragmented Latin America. At the hemispheric level, the material capabilities of important Latin American states were diminished; the United States had the means but lacked the political interest and will – and for many, the legitimacy – to foster regional responses. If political leadership was low generally, on the specific issue of the pandemic, it was perhaps even worse. As Ruano and Saltalamacchia (2021, p. 95) argued, "When Covid-19 landed in the continent, the vitality of regional organisations was at a very low point, and they seemed irrelevant to national governments in articulating their initial responses to the pandemic."

Regarding ideologies of regionalism, the prevalence of a largely relational regionalist view among Latin American executives combined with the United States' unilateralism. Major states dabbled in denialism and boasted of their unwillingness to lead. The then-presidents of the United States and Brazil diminished the gravity of the pandemic and the need to address it. Both leaders vitiated multilateral forums at key moments – including Brazil's resignation from Unasur and CELAC and the U.S. denunciation of the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization. What made this worse is that South America's regional health governance was premised on endogenous regional leadership (Agostinis & Parthenay, 2021, p. 418–19). With Brazil recalcitrant and at loggerheads with neighboring Argentina, little cooperation emerged in Mercosur to replace Unasur. Though Mexico would try to reinvigorate CELAC, the forum lacked institutional capacity or experience in health, let alone capabilities adequate to the tremendous scale of the pandemic (Ruano & Saltalamacchia, 2021, p. 103–5).

The weak regional response occurred despite some notable, specific material capabilities in the region. Argentina, Mexico, and especially Brazil, are important actors in terms of global health and pharmaceutical capabilities. All three have medical manufacturing capacity and expertise,

which was developed to enhance national and regional autonomy (Shadlen, 2020), as well as high levels of self-sufficiency in the production of other vaccines (Ortiz-Prado et al., 2021, p. 18).² Yet, none of them were able to draw on these capacities to foster regionwide responses in the face of the pandemic. The partial exception to this limited cooperation also serves to suggest the limits. In August 2020, Mexico and Argentina’s presidents signed an agreement with AstraZeneca to produce what they called a “Latin American vaccine.” This aimed to address the huge asymmetry of capacities and vaccine access anticipated in the region. Argentina would produce the active pharmaceutical ingredients, while Mexico would bottle the vaccines (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2021). Initial doses would become available in May 2021, months after imported vaccines started arriving. Still, Mexico struggled to start production and had to rely on U.S. bottling facilities (Graham, 2021).

Neither Brazil nor the United States made salient efforts to lead or catalyze regional responses to the pandemic or, later, plans to share vaccines once made available. Under Bolsonaro and Trump, these countries were even reluctant to promote national policies to address the pandemic, delegating the responsibilities of such to mayors and governors (Van Dusky-Allen et al., 2020). The latent capabilities and funding of hemispheric organizations like the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) provided something of a lifeline, but U.S. unilateralism prevented the expansion in capacities and cooperation the situation demanded. During early 2020, the United States’ temporary shortfall in medical supply manufacturing worsened regional dissensus, as the would-be regional leader instead participated in a beggar-thy-neighbor scramble for medical supplies.

Against this backdrop, Chinese engagement in Latin America became even more salient. China’s response to the pandemic in Latin America mainly took the form of bilateral agreements between central governments, their subnational unities, or enterprises. Moreover, Chinese donations were multilayered – in terms of sources and destinations. Non-state actors were major players, with the Jack Ma foundation being the second biggest Chinese donor. Many donations were sent directly to sub-national entities (Telias & Urdinez, in this volume). However, China also made coordinated efforts. In June 2020, when vaccines were still unavailable, China’s foreign minister offered a U.S. \$1 billion loan to Latin American and Caribbean leaders in the context of a CELAC forum to access Chinese vaccines (Harrison et

² Some Latin American countries rank in the top 20 of worldwide vaccine manufacturers: “Cuba, Brazil, México, and Colombia have a self-sufficient production of 72.7, 54.2%; 25%; and 7.7% of the national vaccine demand, respectively,” according to Ortiz-Prado et al., 2021, p. 18.

al., 2021). The attraction of the Chinese offer is clear, however, given China's ability to link loans with medical goods and vaccine provision.

On the other side, the quantity of U.S. donations to Latin American and Caribbean countries during the pre-vaccine phase of the pandemic is difficult to assess. The United States' presence in the region – in terms of donations of medical supplies and loans – is also multilayered. These contributions gain less attention as a result. During a hearing on China in Latin America and the Caribbean, a U.S. congressman claimed that the United States had failed to properly advertise its donations.³ Many sources fail to distinguish between donations and purchases. Furthermore, though much of U.S. engagement is bilateral, the country has longstanding investments through the IDB and PAHO. The multilateral structure of those bodies, along with the funding mechanisms for the IDB, makes assessing the U.S. contribution difficult. The IDB offered record-breaking \$21 billion of new loans and grants in 2020, perhaps the largest component of the hemispheric multilateral response – though one that failed to attract many headlines. This included some \$8 billion in pandemic-related funding, as well as \$1 billion to support vaccine purchases, according to the IDB. Much of the lending, however, was still focused on loans to the IDB's traditional areas of support for economic development (IDB, 2020). Regional bodies like PAHO, as well as specialized U.S. agencies like the Centers for Disease Control, provided notable support and coordination to national actors and subregional bodies, including SICA and CARICOM (González, 2021). Though hemispheric and U.S. organizations provided important coordination of health information and some funding lifelines, only with a change of U.S. administration would they take on more salient roles.

The visibility of so-called Chinese mask diplomacy reinforces the impression that China is filling voids left by the United States' inattention and lack of leadership (Urdinez et al., 2016); during the pandemic, China also seemed to step into the space occupied by Brazil during the previous decade. Brazilian criticism of China did not dissuade the power from playing an active presence in either Latin America or Brazil. On the contrary, China has increased its engagement in the region, promoting a multilayered, although unambiguously shaped diplomatic and economic insertion (de Aragão, 2021).

U.S. and Brazilian denialism and an initial lack of specific capabilities interacted with a salient Chinese presence and capacity to further favor regional fragmentation. This encouraged nationalistic responses and aggravated the humanitarian, economic, sanitary, and social

³ Transcript available here: <https://www.uscc.gov/hearings/china-latin-america-and-caribbean>

consequences of the pandemic in Latin America. With a few exceptions, like CARICOM, the responses of regional institutions were limited by ideological division and a dearth of leadership. Others, like Prosur, Mercosur, the OAS, and CELAC, were restricted largely to virtual meetings and collective reports, and some information-sharing. There were few visible remnants of post-hegemonic regionalism. Nor did hegemonic leadership, either from the Brazil or the United States, reappear to stake a claim or, more positively, offer regional goods and problem-solving in the face of the crisis. In fact, the Americas – and especially would-be leaders Brazil, Mexico, and the United States – were epicenters of the pandemic.

Regionalism and the pandemic's second year

The beginning of 2021 brought about major changes to the global political landscape; on the one hand, the victory of Joe Biden as president of the United States fueled optimism. Under the slogan “America is Back” the United States recommitted to the World Health Organization and made large commitments to the United Nations-led COVAX initiative. The Biden administration highlighted these policy shifts in one of its first appearances at the OAS in February 2021 (Freden, 2021). Despite the optimism created by the beginning of vaccination campaigns, the pandemic's second year started with worsening public health situations. In many Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as in the United States, health systems collapsed due to the exponential growth of infections and deaths.

Regarding ideologies of regionalism, then, the Biden administration tried to signal its shift towards a more multilateral, partnership-focused approach. However, during the first half of 2021, the change often appeared largely rhetorical. The United States expanded some forms of engagement, but in the most-watched topic, it made limited vaccine donations or sales in Latin America, as it prioritized domestic distribution in early 2021. Starting in mid-2021, the administration first followed a multilateral logic and prioritized vaccine donations through COVAX. Initial bilateral donations of AstraZeneca vaccines – unapproved in the United States – went to neighbors Canada and Mexico starting in March 2021. More significant numbers of doses only arrived at the rest of the region starting in July 2021. In practice, U.S. multilateral regionalism was limited initially by pressures over vaccine patents and contracts and by U.S. vaccine nationalism fueled by the imperatives of domestic politics (Halabi & Santos Rutschman, 2021). By the middle of 2021, the Biden administration began to emphasize PAHO

and the OAS, alongside COVAX, in expanding vaccine access, manufacturing capacity, and future pandemic preparedness.

Though there was a less salient change in visions of regionalism within Latin America, the issue of unequal access to vaccines spurred some attempts at solidarity. However, early access to vaccines was highly uneven within Latin America as well, and much higher than in some other developing regions. Latin America is home to countries among the greatest and the worst percentages of vaccinated populations – for example, whereas Chile and Uruguay have more than 70% of their populations fully vaccinated, Haiti only has 0.16% (Ritchie, 2021). The most salient attempt to revive confederative regionalism at the hemispheric level, came in September 2021, when Latin American presidents met under CELAC after a five-year hiatus. Mexico, as president pro tempore, proposed regional initiatives, including cooperation for “self-sufficiency in health matters.” However, the meeting also highlighted lasting divergencies among Latin American leaders’ visions of regionalism. High-level participation was uneven; amongst participants, many disagreed on the preferred institutional path.

Latin American regional leadership remains limited by capacity shortfalls, further complicated by the economic devastation wrought by the pandemic. CEPAL estimated that the region suffered a 7.7% decline in GDP output – the worst in the world (ECLAC, 2021). Capacities in vaccine production also remained limited. Mexico and Argentina’s pledge to produce 250 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines to distribute throughout Latin America encountered major delays. Beyond this initiative, there was some limited intra-regional bilateral cooperation. For example, Chile donated 40,000 Sinovac shots to Ecuador and Paraguay as early as March 2021. The region still lacks a comprehensive and articulated regional response. The overwhelming majority of formalized contracts to acquire vaccines are bilateral.

Having said that, as argued before, we should not overlook the issue-capacity of regional organizations. Facing continued, uneven vaccine access, PAHO announced in August 2021 that it would dedicate funding to procuring and distributing vaccines in the region, beyond the COVAX commitments. The United States have expanded its engagement bilaterally and through COVAX.⁴ As with expanded IDB lending in 2020, the United States’ role in PAHO and COVAX is crucial, if often less salient. The United States provide more than half the assessed contributions for PAHO, though most PAHO-purchased vaccines come from

⁴ The United States and Spain are the two main donors of vaccines through COVAX to Latin American countries so far, have donating 8,073,410 and 4,953,780 million, respectively. However, so far, the US donations through COVAX are restricted to four countries, while Spain’s to eleven.

AstraZeneca and Chinese manufacturers. Even as the United States recovered some momentum with its expanding vaccine engagement and improved image under the Biden administration, many Latin American leaders cultivated the Chinese presence as a counterweight. China's president, Xi Jinping, delivered a virtual speech at the September 2021 meeting of CELAC, where he reiterated Latin America's importance to China and the Chinese willingness to increase cooperation with countries in the region.

When comparing Chinese to US vaccines administered in Latin America so far, two contradictory patterns emerge. First, nearly twice as many doses administered in the region come from China as the United States⁵. China sustained its pattern of interaction with Latin American countries. Latin America and the Caribbean are the second biggest regional buyer and recipient of Chinese vaccines, as well as the region with the second most vaccine manufacturing deals with China⁶ – as demonstrated in table two, below. These agreements are mainly, if not solely, bilateral.

< TABLE 2 here >

On the other hand, while the United States escalated its engagement later and is still playing catch up on total doses, it dominates in terms of vaccine *donations* both bilaterally and via COVAX. China donated some 1.4 million vaccines, while the United States donated 49 million doses to 28 Latin American and Caribbean countries as of November 2021. U.S. donations to CARICOM countries alone surpass Chinese donations to Latin America and the Caribbean (Harrison, 2021). It becomes clear, then, that with the shift in the U.S. presidency, U.S. engagement with Latin America became somewhat multilateral and more partnership-oriented, but also more clearly focused on responding to the prominence of China's engagement in 2020. Despite the U.S. joining COVAX, it increased bilateral donations to Latin America even more (Table 3). From the perspective of interactions, U.S. commitments to multilateralism sometimes sit uneasily alongside competition with China, as when U.S.-backed PAHO announced it would acquire and distribute Chinese-made vaccines in September 2021.

< TABLE 3 here >

⁵ China accounted for 92,226,925 million two-dose vaccines versus 46,136,297 million U.S. vaccines, of which 6,626,729 are one-dose vaccines. Information available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/vaccine-rollout-latin-america-medical-diplomacy-and-great-power-competition>. Accessed 30, September 2021.

⁶ Information available at: <https://bridgebeijing.com/blogposts/china-and-latin-america-covid-19-vaccine-collaboration-and-the-way-forward/>. Accessed 30, September 2021.

Turning to leadership capacities within Latin America, the story remains one of fragmentation and national focus. Given the fragmentation of regional efforts, there is great variation in vaccine distribution across Latin America. In Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay, more than half of the vaccines administered are from Chinese laboratories (Sinovac and Sinopharm). At the regional level, however, the British firm AstraZeneca dominates. In part, this is due to its more extensive production agreements. Having been stung by global shortages and unequal distribution, several Latin American states invested in homegrown production. The Brazilian health foundation Fiocruz produced 90 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine – initially with active pharmaceutical ingredients imported from China – as it prepared to produce AstraZeneca vaccines nationally.⁷ In August 2021, Chile announced a partnership with the Chinese firm Sinovac to make Chile the regional hub for Chinese production and distribution of vaccines. The agreement goes beyond the COVID-19 vaccines to produce and distribute vaccines for diseases such as influenza and hepatitis in Latin America. Chile, Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil manufacture or have agreements to produce Chinese vaccines. There is also an emphasis on diversification, as the latter three also produce AstraZeneca vaccines, and Brazil aims to start national productions of Pfizer vaccines in late 2021. Still, Latin America and Caribbean countries exported few pharmaceutical products in 2020-21, while depending heavily on imports.

Conclusions

The global pandemic of 2020-21 was an incredibly trying time for the Western Hemisphere and the state of regionalism there. Though some organizations notched successes in spurring cooperation amongst states, on the whole, the results were not impressive. Regional organizations are often seen to have value as mechanisms to address transnational challenges. In the Americas, they mostly fell short in a moment of great need. In part, the poor results were a consequence of the unprecedented, immense challenges created by the rapid spread of COVID-19. However, those challenges hit all regions. In the Americas, the performance of regionalism was worsened by the poor initial conditions when the pandemic hit. Visions or ideologies of regionalism were fragmented and generally un conducive to cooperation. The usual suspects for regional leadership went missing, lacking political will, capabilities, or both. Interactions among major powers contributed to the fragmentation, with Brazil and the United

⁷ Information available from <https://portal.fiocruz.br/vacinasCOVID19>, accessed September 28, 2021.

States withdrawing and ad hoc, bilateral deals with China proliferating. Previous models of regional cooperation left scarce capacities in health coordination, though where these existed – through CARICOM and PAHO for example – they made meaningful contributions. Setting aside those examples, however, the pandemic erupted in a hemisphere facing inauspicious conditions for regional cooperation, especially regarding high-level political cooperation.

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