

Is it Possible to Build an Analytical Framework for Regional Integration in the South? Insights from Brazilian Foreign Policy towards Mercosur

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(Vigevani, Tullo and Ramanzini Jr., Haroldo. *The Challenges for Building Regional Integration in the Global South: the case of Brazilian Foreign Policy towards Mercosur*. New York: Springer, 2022)

What challenges are posed for building analytical frameworks and empirical studies on regional integration processes in the South? The authors aim to contribute to this debate by producing a detailed empirical analysis of Brazil's foreign policy regarding the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and South American regional integration.

From a theoretical-methodological standpoint, the authors introduce an important innovation in this work, with a multilevel analysis of the Mercosur regional integration process, looking into the domestic, regional, and systemic levels.

The foundations of this broad analysis are introduced in the first chapter (Introduction), in which they engage in a dialogue with different branches of Political Science and International Relations literature to point out the multifaceted character of the book's analytical framework. As the authors recognize the complex interconnection between how national and international factors influence Brazilian foreign policy and help to understand Mercosur's history, the structure of the book is based on two interrelated analytical dimensions. The first dimension, addressed in chapters 2 and 3, is related to ideas; the second dimension, addressed in chapters 4 through 7, discusses behavior and agency of political and economic interests.

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As they carry out their analysis, however, these two dimensions appear back and forth across domestic, regional, and systemic levels. This review therefore proposes an assessment of the book with a structure based on these three levels of analysis to better organize its contribution.

At the domestic level, the authors review the development of the bloc, mainly focusing on the contributions of the intellectual elites—which make up the basis of Brazil’s political and social thought, as well as its strategic elites—, looking into two major guiding elements in foreign policy, the ideas of autonomy and universalism, which are pervasive among these strategic elites and the institutional memory of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministério das Relações Exteriores*–MRE).

The first contribution to this level of analysis is found in chapter 3 (Brazilian Thinking and Regional Integration). The authors argue in this chapter that regional integration was not a central topic of reflection for the many different currents they investigated, including the Advanced Institute of Brazilian Studies (*Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros*–ISEB), the Independent Foreign Policy (*Política Externa Independente*–PEI), Responsible Pragmatism, and the geopolitical scholars of the Brazilian War School (*Escola Superior de Guerra*–ESG), or for the cultural, economic, or political fields of Brazilian political and social thought. The authors nevertheless acknowledge that the changes outlined by these different currents in the 1970s and later consolidated from 1985 onwards have been important. They also argue that such currents, and especially the organic intellectuals who have worked at the center of foreign policies established during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva administrations, mainly with Celso Lafer and Samuel Pinheiro de Guimarães, already emphasized at the time issues regarding the country’s ability and need to play an independent international role.

The second contribution regarding the domestic level is developed in chapter 4 (The Grounding of Regional Integration for Brazil: Universalism, Sovereignty, and Elite Perceptions). Here the authors address how the idea of autonomy has been expressed in Brazil’s relations with the region as an insistent reevaluation of the potential for specific national action, not subject to the shackles that an institutionalized integration could imply (PINHEIRO, 2000). They also argue that Mercosur’s experience shows that, while the economic benefits of integration are necessary, they are not enough to

guarantee the continuity and deepening of the process. Their argument then leads to an understanding that integration cannot be considered merely as a foreign policy project, but it requires a strong intersection with a domestic policy project, as Bueno de Mesquita (2005) argues.

Regarding the idea of universalism, the main impact observed in the authors' review lies in the perception that further deepening the bloc would lead to a loss of sovereignty and autonomy in Brazil's relations with the world. The authors write that this argument was present throughout the integration process and ultimately became an important component of state and society action. Consequently, any policy option that limits Brazil's international space of agency and that is contrary to universalism tends to be rejected. And its resulting stance in this regard ultimately puts constraints for Mercosur.

This idea is reinforced by Lima's (2003, 1994) explanatory argument, according to which there is a pattern in Brazil's relationship with Mercosur in which Brazil objects further institutionalization and its aspirations to become a relevant international actor prevail, as well as the belief—especially in Argentina—in Brazil's exceptional nature compared to other Latin American countries, an idea that is also pervasive in the political culture of Brazilian elites.

At the regional level, the authors provide three empirical contributions. The first looks back at integration processes in Latin America, with the aim of understanding the transition from an idealistic formulation of integration to the formulation of a concrete project, which eventually led to the subsequent implementation of Mercosur. The second one is an analysis of the social dimension of Mercosur. And the third contribution is where the authors analyze Brazilian positions mainly focusing on relationships between Mercosur, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Organization of American States (OAS).

The first contribution is developed in chapter 2 (A Long Perspective on Latin American Regional Integration Seen from Brazil), in which the authors review the history of Latin American integration, especially looking into Brazilian positions, aiming to highlight the elements of continuity in the country's foreign policy from the early years of the Republic of Brazil, particularly the time when the Baron of Rio Branco was in office (1902-1912), to present-day Brazil. Their proposal is connected to the perspective of *longue-durée* analysis, based on historical institutionalism, to contribute to building

theories that aim to understand the reasons behind regional integration and its intricacies. After providing their analysis throughout the chapter, the authors come to the conclusion that different Latin American initiatives of this period—the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI)—did not provide decisive contributions to introducing the topic of integration in Brazil. However, economic and political changes brought about in the 1970s and 1980s have stimulated the transition from an idealistic formulation of integration to the formulation of a concrete project, with the subsequent implementation of Mercosur. The notion of development therefore found a common basis with the notion of integration.

The second contribution in this sense starts with the analysis of the social dimension of Mercosur. This argument is developed in chapter 5 (The Social Mercosur Within a Brazilian Foreign Policy Perspective), in which the authors discuss the main changes that have occurred in Mercosur since the 2000s in terms of reducing inequality and expanding the issues incorporated by the bloc towards greater social participation.

Overall, the authors note that, over the course of the 2000s, as social participation spaces at different levels materialized in Mercosur, it produced results and expanded the interface between actors and national policies with dynamics within the bloc. Nevertheless, they were still limited around the goals of expanding the influence of social actors within the integration process and the executive bodies of Mercosur. This is explained by the fact that the consolidation of bodies and social issues within the bloc has to do with the ambition to achieve certain defined goals. There is, however, a discrepancy between the discussion and the conditions for achieving these goals. On the one hand, the Brazilian state pursues a defensive stance and, in Mercosur's case, it accepts and even encourages this participation, while also tending to limit it to a mere advisory jurisdiction.

The third contribution regarding the regional level was developed in the final chapter (Between Alliances and Disputes: Brazilian Attitudes Towards OAS, CELAC, Unasur, and Mercosur). The authors then analyze Brazilian positions and relations between Mercosur, UNASUR, CELAC, and the OAS, illustrating the logic of support for this architecture and the consequences for these blocs of Brazil's decreasing role in the region. To understand the dynamics of these relations, the authors use the concept of concentric circles, to provide a better understanding of Brazil's position regarding these regional organizations. By presenting a hierarchical conception, they

conclude that the perception of the Executive branch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the early 2000s to 2016 had the following order of priorities: Mercosur represented the first circle, UNASUR represented the second, CELAC represented the third, and the OAS represented the fourth circle.

They identified the factors motivating the adoption of strategies in terms of bilateral, subregional, regional, continental, and multilateral strategies. In addition to understanding that building new cooperative mechanisms such as UNASUR and CELAC does not necessarily result in greater commitment to regional institutions, the authors also argue that the established agreements are considered as a platform for international action and a means of strengthening cooperation and state sovereignty, making it more difficult to further develop Mercosur.

Then moving towards an analysis of the systemic level, the authors provide a contribution by assessing the impacts that changes in the international system since 1985 have had on Brazilian economic interests and, ultimately, on the Brazilian perception of regional integration.

The authors elaborate on this argument in chapter 6 (The Brazilian Economic Interests in Regional Integration: Mercosur and Latin America), arguing that a significant aspect of Brazilian foreign policy between 1985 and 2016 was the aspirations to ensure at least some level of cohesion to Mercosur. This cohesion has allowed the country to use the integration process as a platform for its international insertion. They also argue that, even with the radical changes introduced in foreign policy since 2016, and especially after 2019, the position of Brazilian business elites has not completely changed. A recent example was the National Confederation of Industry (*Confederação Nacional de Indústria*–CNI), which supported the continuity of Mercosur during the Jair Bolsonaro administration, because of the advantages that this would imply for some Brazilian industrial sectors. This chapter also emphasizes the rise of conservative governments that are deeply rooted in pro-market perspectives, arguing that this has changed the configurations of UNASUR’s regional organizations and undermined Mercosur. They also argue that growing regional instability has also led to other consequences, including the inability to support legitimate governments (Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil) or to mediate cases of extreme radicalization, like in Venezuela. Moreover, the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (*Foro para el Progreso de América del Sur*–PROSUR), a Chilean initiative by President Sebastián Piñera, was established in March 2019 and

created within this context, initially having eight South American countries taking part in it (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guyana, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru), bringing together several conservative leaders from the region.

“The Challenges for Building Regional Integration in the Global South” provides a rich and comprehensive description of the advances and challenges found in analytical and empirical studies on the processes of regional integration in the South. Using a multilevel analysis– domestic, regional and systemic–based on the Mercosur case study, the authors demonstrate the complexity of studies on regional integration in the South and build an important analytical framework that can be replicated to investigate other regional integration processes in the South.

There are, however, some empirical elements that are missing and could assist in consolidating this multilevel framework. We will point out below what is empirically missing at each level of analysis, based on the proposed structure designed for this review.

From a domestic standpoint, there was no empirical emphasis on the role played by the Brazilian National Congress. The impact of this actor in foreign affairs has engendered wide-ranging discussions. There are interpretations regarding lawmakers’ lackluster performance on the subject (SPOHR and SILVA, 2016), either arguing that members of parliament have little expertise in dealing with issues associated with international relations (OLIVEIRA, 2014; OLIVEIRA, 2003a), or that this is because the topic is not very appealing to voters (OLIVEIRA, 2004; OLIVEIRA, 2003b). However, as Santos and Lopes (2023) demonstrate, there are other ways of understanding the phenomenon, with reflections on “veto power” (SILVA, 2012); “delegation” (MARTIN, 2000; NEVES, 2003); or even the role that the Committee on Foreign Affairs and National Defense (*Comissão de Relações Exteriores e de Defesa Nacional*–CREDN) could play, at the ministerial level, in the implementation of actions aimed at the regional integration of South America (MATTOS, 2018, p. 109).

In their regional analysis, while the authors have advanced to a detailed study of Brazilian positions especially on the relations between Mercosur, UNASUR, CELAC, and the OAS, they provide no empirical analysis of other important South American examples. An important case, which is not highlighted, is the creation of the Lima Group in 2017, in which South American states institutionalized their opposition to the Venezuelan constitutional system. There was also room for empirical analysis of the impact of interregional agreements. One example is the Preferential Trade Agreement between

Mercosur and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), signed in 2008, which has helped consolidate Brazil's rapprochement with South Africa and the Southern region of the African continent. Another more recent example is the joint work between Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance, signed in 2019.

At the systemic level, there are some empirical elements missing from the authors' analysis. For example, they could have looked further into the US strategy in confronting China's growing presence and in destabilizing progressive governments in Latin America. They could have looked into Colombia's accession process to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which started in 2018, as addressed by Almeida (2022). Or into the "hybrid media warfare" that led to the deposition of governments—the most recent case being the resignation of Evo Morales, in Bolivia—and the imprisonment and persecution of leaders including Lula da Silva and Rafael Correa, respectively, which contributed to the rise of the far right in the region (NERU, 2021).

Even though these topics are missing from the authors' analysis, it should be noted that this work contributes to research efforts by Botelho (2014)¹ and others and shows that it is indeed possible to investigate the integration processes of the South without necessarily applying, exclusively and exhaustively, the criteria elaborated to review the European case. That means this work demonstrates how it is possible to develop a multilevel analytical framework, taking into account the domestic, regional, and systemic dimensions located in the context of each case under review. They therefore provide a deeper understanding of the challenges facing theoretical and empirical research on regional integration in the Global South, while also maintaining a dialogue with classic theories on the institutionalization process of European integration, which are traditionally used as the parameter for studies on regional integration.

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¹Botelho's research (2014) begins with the need to establish criteria that can be universally applied to assess integration blocs according to their level of institutionalization, without necessarily applying the criteria elaborated for the European case to other processes. In his research, he proposes a set of criteria that can measure the level of institutionalization in different areas of integration and indicators for each criterion.

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