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# Geopolitical Labyrinths of the Three Guianas in the Regional Cooperation and Integration Processes

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## Abstract

The purpose of the article is to analyze to what extent regional cooperation and integration strategies helped strengthen Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana in international and regional geopolitics. Through bibliographical and documentary analysis, combined with field trips, a schematic periodization of regionalism processes is outlined to conclude that historical, geographical and cultural factors position these Guianas as an interface between different regions. Despite various challenges, Guyana and Suriname's presence in regional blocs intensify their political and economic ties and the French administration has expanded its outreach, collaborating with neighbors on common issues such as environment, security and infrastructure.

**Keywords:** Regional Cooperation; Regional integration; Geopolitics; Three Guianas.

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## Introduction: The enigma of the three Guianas

In the field of international geopolitics, regional integration and cooperation processes stimulate reflections on opportunities and challenges in contexts that are both increasingly connected and fragmented. As an interface between South America and the Caribbean, the three Guianas – Republic of Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana (France) – stand out in this scenario for playing an important regional role, although they do not exert much influence in relation to major international agreements.

These Guianas stand out for being the only territories in South America colonized by Great Britain, the Netherlands and France, a history similar to that of most Caribbean islands, which leads them to be frequently included by social sciences in Caribbean

regionalizations, due to their similarities in ethnic, cultural, and productive aspects, taking into account regional historical and social realities (Menke and Menke 2015). Also, like the island territories<sup>1</sup> of the Caribbean, these Guianas are characterized by low demographic density<sup>2</sup>, with 796,208 inhabitants in the Republic of Guyana, 600,008 in Suriname and 318,400 in French Guiana.

Another affinity factor refers to late independence, since these territories remained under European rule until the mid-twentieth century as exploitation colonies<sup>3</sup> and the very process of building a national identity was delayed. Essentially agricultural spaces, the British Guiana became independent in 1966, and Dutch Guiana in 1975, while sparsely populated and underproductive French Guiana has been a French Overseas Territory since 1946, with the end of the colonial status. Moreover, these territories also share portions of the Amazon Forest, forming with Venezuela what Procópio (2007) defined as the “Caribbean Amazon”, more due to geographical conditions than political ones.

In order to consider whether regional cooperation and integration strategies have strengthened the Guianas’ geopolitical positions, it is useful to frame them in an investigative universe anchored in international and regional political dynamics. Thus, they are contextualized schematically in the following periods: old regionalism (1970-1990), new regionalism (1990s), post-liberal regionalism (2000s) and post-hegemonic regionalism (2010 to present), with comments on the liquid regionalism (referring especially to the Americas from 2010 onwards).

Periodization is widely used in international relations studies and historical research as a useful methodological tool. Following the approach of Espinosa and Walker (2021), periodization is applied to the study of complex systems, as it allows mapping and analyzing changes and transformations in complex international systems, such as the geopolitical and economic context of the Guianas, over time.

In this way, a panoramic view of the evolution of geopolitical and economic relations in the region is constructed, essential for understanding the current context, identifying opportunities, trends and challenges in terms of regional development and relations with other regional and global actors. It allows, therefore, understanding of how the Guianas have adapted to changes in the global geopolitical scenario in the elaboration of their policies and strategies, and how regional cooperation and integration, as well as the dialogue between them, were transformed over the mentioned periods.

<sup>1</sup> Islands still belonging to the Netherlands in the Caribbean: Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten; to France: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Bartholomew and Saint Martin; to the United Kingdom: Bermuda, Montserrat, Virgin Islands and Turks and Caicos, in addition to the independent islands of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados etc., still in the British Commonwealth.

<sup>2</sup> “Worldometer estimates.” Accessed January 20, 2023. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

<sup>3</sup> Colonies whose main role was to provide primary, mineral or agricultural resources to the metropolis, as opposed to *settlement colonies*, which were intended to receive metropolitan populations.

In addition, the analysis is enriched by the use of documentary and bibliographic sources (Walliman 2011; Rauen 2018) combined with fieldwork (Yin 2001; Gray et al. 2020). Such diverse methodologies help to understand how regionalism strategies have strengthened the Guianas in international and regional geopolitics, while allowing the assessment of challenges and opportunities arising from their participation in regional blocs and from the expanded action of the French administration in the region.

In this study, the ideas of Bertha Becker (2004) are fundamental to understanding the geopolitics of the Guianas region, especially her view that the Amazon (which includes the three Guianas) is a “strategic territory” for regional development and for environmental issues on a global scale. Agnew’s (2009) geopolitical approach is also used to broaden the understanding of the Guianas beyond traditional conceptions of power and territory, since geopolitical “power” is increasingly expanding beyond traditional notions limited to physical territory, with an emphasis on global flows of capital, people and information. This view is especially relevant when considering the Guianas’ position in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

This text initially reflects on differences and convergences in the concepts of regional cooperation and integration, subsequently presenting the periodization in four phases, still in a theoretical-methodological perspective. Next, the role of the Republic of Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana in the regional schemes created in each phase is evaluated more specifically.

## Geopolitical considerations on regional cooperation and integration

Regional cooperation and integration are concepts that represent processes aimed at enhancing interaction between states and fostering stability and prosperity in a given region. Each involves different factors and implications for the countries involved, especially with regard to the degree of commitment and depth of relations between them (Börzel 2011; Acharya 2013).

Regional cooperation refers to the establishment of collaborative relationships between neighboring countries or those belonging to the same geographic region, seeking to work together to face common challenges and promote mutual interests (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). This collaboration can cover topics as varied as politics, economics, security, environment and social development. It takes the form of strategies for commercial agreements, resource governance, and coordination of security policies, composing a voluntary and flexible collaboration that allows the maintenance of autonomy while seeking joint solutions to common problems (De Lombaerde and Fawcett 2012).

On the other hand, regional integration implies a deeper and more structured process to promote the convergence of policies and the harmonization of rules and regulations, often involving the creation of supranational institutions with authority to make decisions and implement policies at the regional level (Mattli, 1999). Because it involves the partial transfer of sovereignty and the creation of supranational institutions with the power to make binding decisions, it can generate

more lasting benefits, such as the creation of a common market and the harmonization of policies, but it also implies greater commitments (Laursen 2018).

Although regional integration and regionalism have similarities, regionalism refers to different processes in various areas (political, economic, etc.) associated with the logic of interactions in a given region, defined in: regionalization, regional awareness and identity, interstate regional cooperation, regional integration and regional cohesion (Hurrell 1995). Similarly, Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) consider regionalism a political project that can lead to the formal creation of institutions, suggesting that there are many regionalisms in different periods for specific regions, constituting a type of world order based on the sharing of interests and commitments between the states.

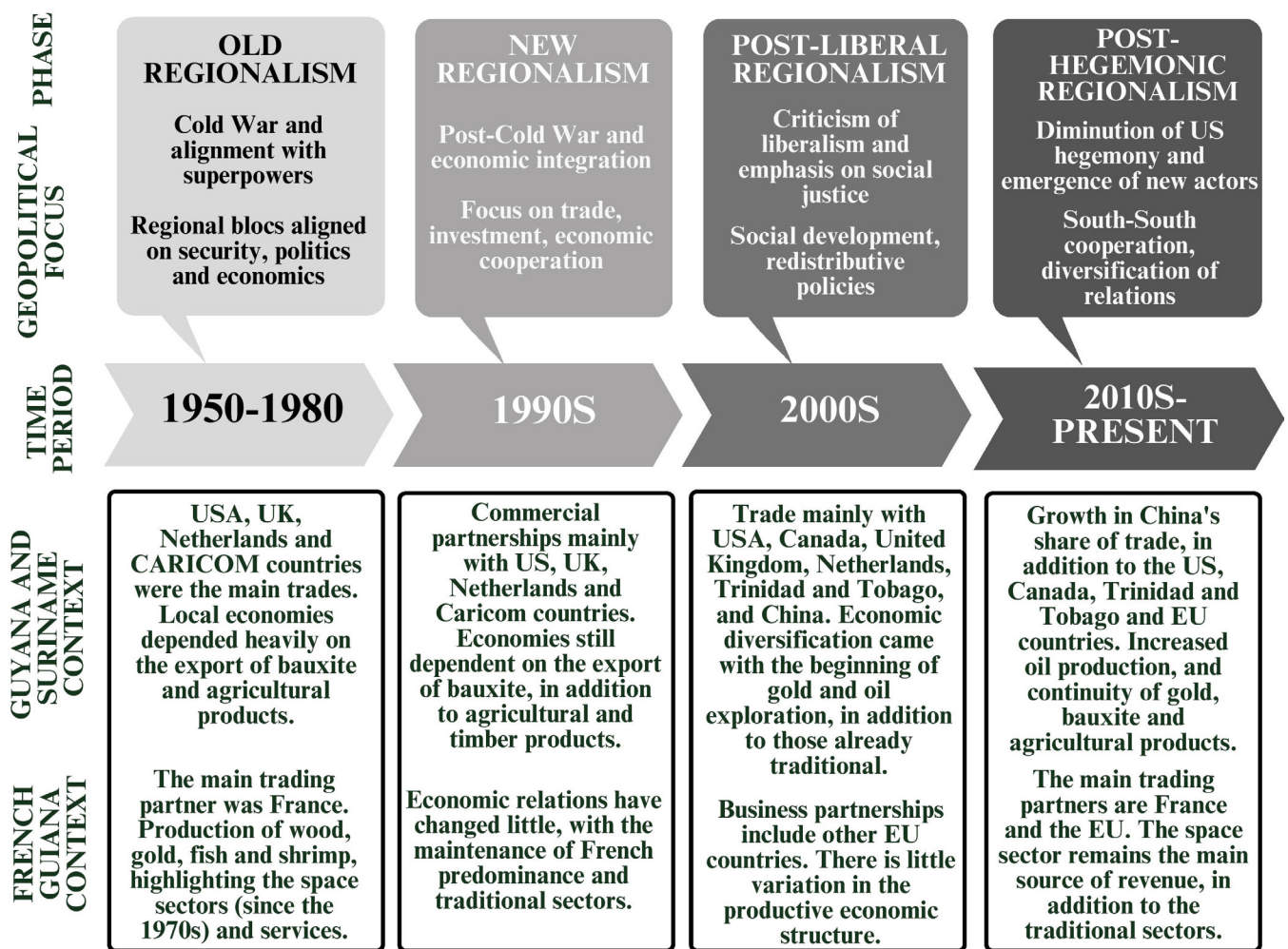
The vast literature on regional cooperation and integration includes many theories and approaches to explain the determinants and outcomes of these processes. Furthermore, countries have multiplied these agreements as a way to achieve competitive insertion in the international scenario (Baldwin 2012). It is important to point out that both mechanisms also present challenges and limitations, since political divergences, historical rivalries and economic inequalities can hinder consensus building and the implementation of regional policies and programs (Dent 2016).

## Regional cooperation and integration strategies in the Guianas

The geopolitical and socioeconomic challenges that countries faced after the Cold War stimulated different regional integration processes as a way to promote economic cooperation, political, security and defense integration, including the consolidation of democratic values and human rights.

For the three Guianas, the historical-cultural context distinguishes the region from its Latin American neighbors, with closer links to the Caribbean and Europe, and only more recently with other South American states. Since such relationships take place at different and variable levels, the various regional schemes in which the Guianas participate make it possible to strengthen these connections and expand their international presence, often adapting to external contexts, as illustrated in the periodization of Figure 1.

**Figure 1** – Periodization of the regional integration of the three Guianas in 4 phases (1950-2023)



Source: Authors, based on the information gathered during the study period (2023).

The focus of each era depends directly on the priorities of particular historical-political conjunctures. While old regionalism was focused on the security and geopolitical interests of the Cold War (including great economic protectionism), new regionalism emphasized economic cooperation and integration in the post-war period. Post-liberal regionalism emerged as a critique of the former and sought to address issues of social justice and equality. Post-hegemonic regionalism, in turn, reflects the change in the global balance of power and emphasizes diversity and regional pluralism.

Specifically, it stands out how the economic base of Guyana and Suriname remained largely concentrated in the production and export of primary products (in particular agricultural products, gold and wood), with the maintenance of traditional partners, especially in contexts aligned with great powers, including former metropolises, in the search for economic guarantees. The recent exploration of hydrocarbons has created great expectations of a greater search for autonomy and national development, even diversifying its relations with the growth of the Chinese presence.

On the other hand, as a French territory, French Guiana has institutional, financial and commercial relations directed towards France and the European Union (EU), to the detriment of connections with neighboring countries. Moreover, it has historically had few productions and only in recent decades has it experienced greater economic growth due to the launches of several rockets with commercial satellites for the EU from the Kourou space base.

## Unfinished bridges: a periodization of regionalism efforts of the three Guianas

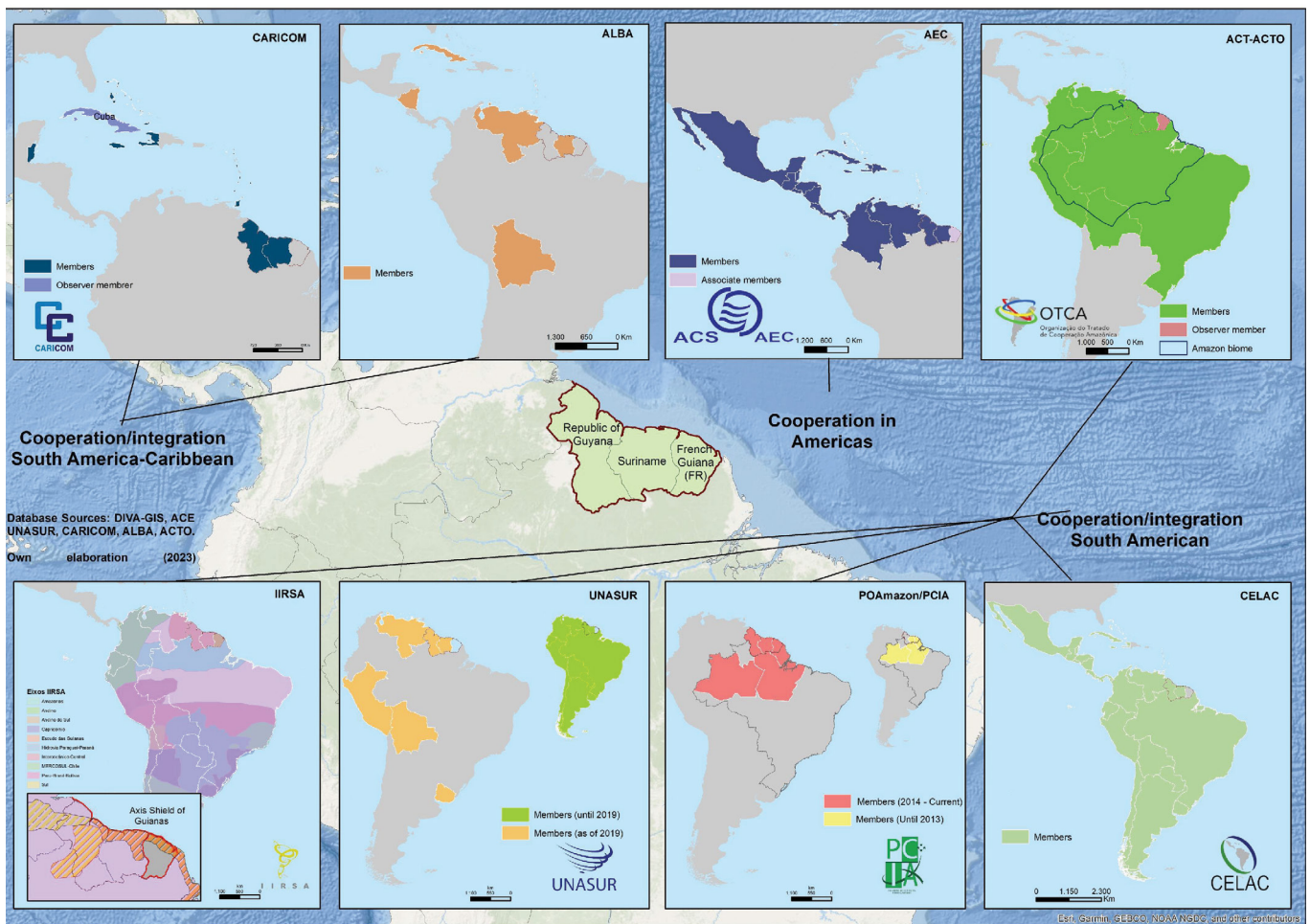
The evolution of regional cooperation and integration mechanisms in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is a complex topic that is intertwined with historical, political, economic and social transformations both on a regional and global scale (Rodrigues and Haag 2022). The geopolitical decisions taken by those countries (and by the metropolises, in the case of non-independent territories) were strongly influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War and by the global transformations of the 21st century (Riggirozzi 2012).

International political economy also played a decisive role in shaping Latin American and Caribbean regionalism. The open regionalism of the 1990s, for example, was influenced by the rise of neoliberalism thanks to the end of the Cold War, allowed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Washington Consensus, which spurred the creation of trade blocs and regional economic integration as a development strategy (Mariano, Bressan and Luciano 2021). In the specific case of the Guianas, the context of its multiple affiliations throughout each phase reflects the hybrid and complex nature of this region.

Menke and Menke (2015) point out that, for a long time, the relationships between the territories of the Guianas region remained unknown and little explored by political actions (and by academic production), largely due to the linguistic and institutional separation that hindered more analyses with a regional focus. However, it has been increasingly perceived that the Guianas, due to its strategic geographic position, serve as a bridge between the Caribbean, the Amazon, South America and Europe, presenting a diverse range of interactions in political-economic and environmental terms (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012).

Overlapping regionalism in South America is considered ambiguous because, while multiple organizations could foster complementarities, they could also denote an administrative inability to articulate different regional insertion strategies. Mariano and Ribeiro (2020) argue that, for the subcontinent, the articulation would be frustrated because the diversity of actors and interests makes it difficult to converge around a common project, which contributes to the maintenance of overlaps and fragments the region. In this context, Figure 2 shows how the three Guianas approached different regional arrangements to comprehend how they have adapted and participated in the different phases of regionalism.

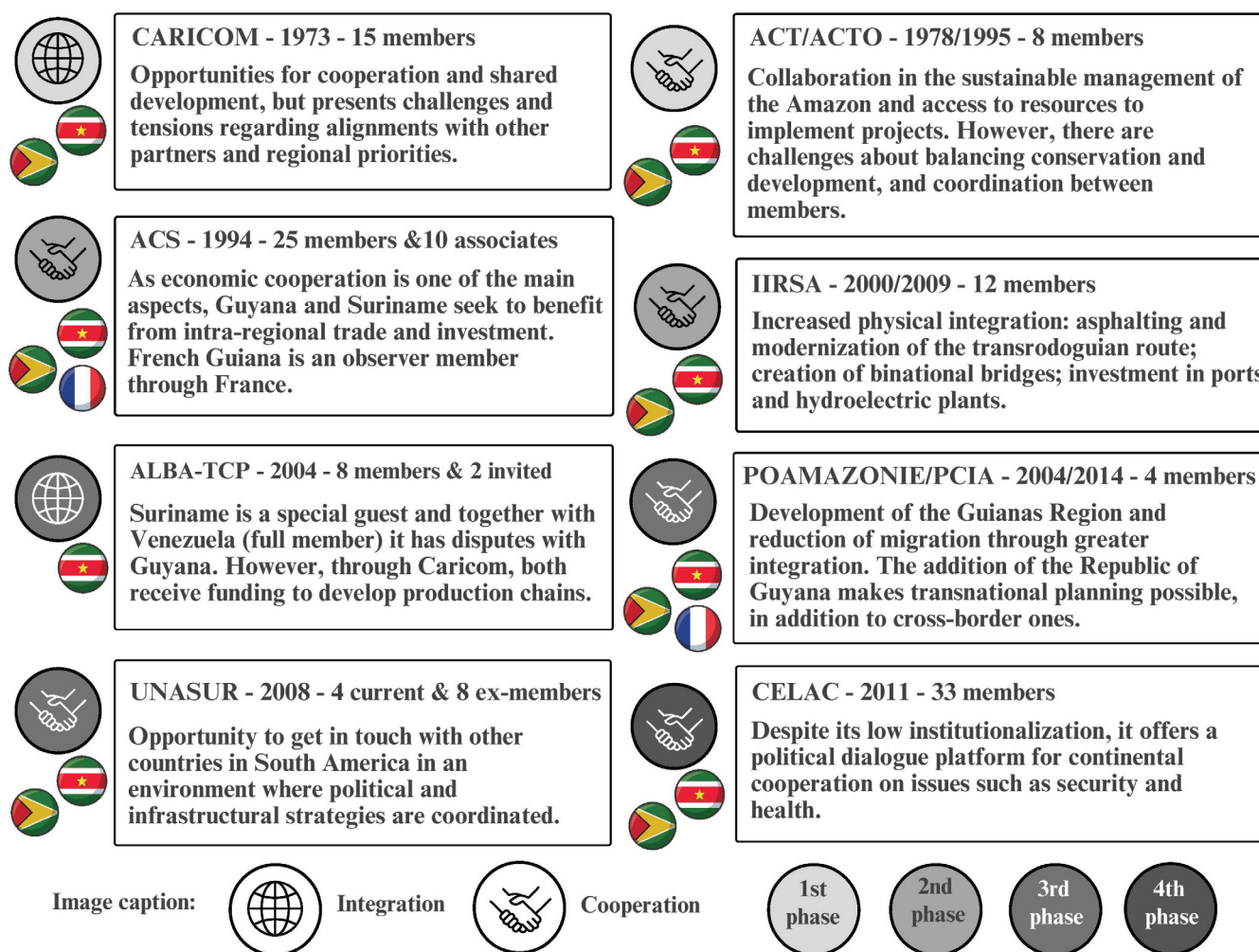
**Figure 2 – Regional cooperation/integration schemes involving the three Guianas (2023)**



Source: Devised by the authors (2023).

In each of these phases, they deal with the complexity of the regimes and the phenomenon of overlapping regionalism, which often implies participation in organizations with contradictory objectives and obligations (Hurrell 2006), and must consider different perspectives and priorities to coordinate expectations about regional management and international insertion. More descriptively, Figure 3 illustrates how the three Guianas have inserted and positioned themselves in the main regional cooperation and integration agreements, in order to take advantage of the benefits of each scheme according to their objectives and membership.

**Figure 3 – Participation of the three Guianas in Regional Arrangements (1973-2023)**



Source: Devised by the authors (2023).

Despite the political-structural obstacles that ultimately fragment regionalism, the three Guianas seek to explore such opportunities to compensate for commercial and governmental weaknesses, as well as to share experiences – even if, in the case of French Guiana, participation occurs through France, which limits the capacities of the state government. It is important to note that managing this complexity of regimes and overlapping regionalism requires political and strategic skill, as it can generate both opportunities and challenges for member states, as observed in the case of the Guianas.

Mariano and Ribeiro (2020) also argue that the varied and overlapping processes of regionalism in South America tend to continue because such dynamics serve the political interests of governments in the region, which can prioritize their actions between projects, according to the strategies of that particular moment. For the Guianas, the possibility of regional integration and cooperation represents a way to promote interests at different levels to enhance capacities and deal with collective challenges, so other topics have been added to regional agendas over time. From the first projects in the 1970s, each phase brought new discussions and configurations



that contributed to a greater or lesser extent for such ambitions, as shown in Figure 3 and discussed in the following topics.

## The search for identity in old regionalism

The context of the Cold War and decolonization guided geopolitical relations and, amid the promotion of nationalism and the search for import substitution, the Guianas tried to establish bilateral and multilateral relations with their neighbors. However, their geographic location and lack of integration with other South American countries, in addition to latent political and territorial tensions and the late construction of a national identity, placed them in a regionally peripheral position.

The independent Republic of Guyana became linked with the Non-Aligned Movement<sup>4</sup>, while Suriname faced political and economic instabilities, including a military coup in 1980. French Guiana, in turn, as a French administrative region maintained privileged ties with European Community.

Created in 1973, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) was the first regional integration initiative, whose headquarters are located in the capital of the Guyana (Georgetown), initially focused on the former British colonies of the Caribbean, and reformulated in 1995 to include Haiti and Suriname (former French and Dutch colonies respectively). It proposes a common market with lower customs duties between members, in force since 2006; however, many products continue to be taxed, there are obstacles to the movement of people and capital, and there is no macroeconomic coordination (Al-Hassan et. al., 2019; Braithwaite, 2020).

Suriname and Guyana take advantage of this initiative as a space for dialogue and cooperation with the Caribbean, in order to achieve greater integration, alignment of interests and access to resources and knowledge in areas such as economic development, security, climate change and culture. However, they are unable to maximize these advantages because they are generally more competitors than complementary to each other due to their environmental and economic similarity as primary products exporters. French Guiana, in turn, applied for observer membership in 2015, motivated by the desire for greater regional cooperation, diversification of its trading partners and the import of products cheaper than those of the EU, but it has not yet been admitted (Silva 2018).

Five years after the creation of Caricom, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACT) was constituted as a result of political, economic and social transformations: the Amazon began to attract greater international attention due to its natural wealth and vital role in the global environmental balance, at the same time as economic development and resource exploitation were causing deforestation and environmental degradation.

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<sup>4</sup> Forum of 120 countries that was not formally aligned with or against any major international power bloc in the Cold War.

Thus, in the context of socio-environmental demands, the creation document defended specific issues of the Pan-Amazon<sup>5</sup>, operationalized in the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO), in 1995, which has contributed to intensify international ecological debates and to carry out joint projects in several areas, such as biodiversity and health (Zorzi, 2020). Nevertheless, disinterest has a direct impact on the fragility of cooperation on environmental issues, and implementation has been hampered by low autonomy, inconstancy of decision-making meetings and disarticulation between different instances, undermining the implementation of sustainable development plans (Filippi and Macedo 2021).

The participation of Guyana and Suriname in ACTO symbolizes their inclusion in a South American organization for the first time and they seek to promote dialogue and cooperation with other members as well as balance objectives of economic development and environmental conservation. On the other hand, as one of ACTO's objectives was to remove the influence of foreign powers in the Amazon space, and despite the recognition of challenges that are common to the signatories, French Guiana is not admitted as an effective member and France was accepted only as an observer in 2004, with the help of Brazil<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, rivalry of competences between the French national government and the French Guyanese state government continues to hinder the desire for regional integration of that territory (Granger 2013).

Regarding the relationship with Europe, the Lomé Convention in 1975 created the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP<sup>7</sup>) group, with the subdivision of the Caribbean Forum (Cariforum<sup>8</sup>), formalizing several cooperation agreements with the EU. In 2000, it was superseded by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement to include political dialogue as one of the core values for the partnership. Eight years later, economic cooperation was intensified with the Cariforum-EU Economic Partnership Agreement, as well as convergence to the Trade Facilitation Agreement of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (Montoute et. al. 2017).

For Guyana and Suriname, Cariforum diversifies EU-Caribbean ties, and the agreements are relevant because they allow for asymmetric trade liberalization and offer exemptions to Caribbean regional products such as bananas and fish. Even so, limited internal coherence between the ACP states and the asymmetrical relations between the ACP and the EU generate tensions and low trade performance, mainly due to the high costs associated with complying with European regulatory requirements and adapting Caribbean products that still face non-tariff barriers (such as safety and environmental standards) (Lodge and Remy 2022). Therefore, the EU remains an exporter of

<sup>5</sup> Pan-Amazon encompasses the territories that comprise the Amazon rainforest: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, French Guiana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

<sup>6</sup> French President Sarkozy was invited by Brazilian President Lula to the ACTO summit in 2009, but this was boycotted by the other heads of state, with the notable exception of the President of the Republic of Guyana.

<sup>7</sup> Composed of 48 countries from sub-Saharan Africa, 16 from the Caribbean and 15 from the Pacific, gathered to coordinate the cooperation of those countries with Europe, in favor of sustainable development, integration into the global economy, coordination of activities and consolidation of solidarity and peace.

<sup>8</sup> Established in 1992, it brings together members of Caricom and the Dominican Republic, and promotes political dialogue, regional cooperation and integration between the two regions.

industrial goods, while ACP exports are primary products. Furthermore, French Guiana's fishery production (which is costly, and mainly focused on shrimps), is not competitive in the European market (its preferential market) compared to ACP productions.

At the same time as the Guianas were part of Caribbean schemes, they were also approaching South America with the help of Brazil, in a movement of "continentalization" (Blanquer, 2005) or "South Americanization" (Granger, 2008) since the last decades of the Cold War, with lower US influence in the subcontinent during the Carter doctrine and Brazil's desire for regional affirmation, which led to rapprochements with the region, including Guyana and Suriname (Granja Hernández and Mesquita 2020).

## New regionalism and institutionalism

The trade openness and economic liberalization of the 1990s allowed the Guianas to expand their commercial and diplomatic relations: mainly Guyana and Suriname in relation to Caricom and South America, while French Guiana continued to strengthen its ties with France and the EU through its state government, while beginning to emphasize connections with its direct neighbors (Suriname and Brazil).

Cooperation between the three Guianas has grown on environmental and development issues in the Amazon region, and regional integration in South America and the Caribbean has also intensified. However, the effectiveness of this integration was limited by the lack of infrastructure and political and institutional challenges, especially for French Guiana, which depends on the interests of its country.

In the Caribbean, the Association of Caribbean States (AEC) was created in 1994, an organization more political than economic, with the aim of expanding Caricom's relationships with Spanish-speaking neighbors. AEC was conceived to promote a better international insertion of the region, but also to foster functional cooperation in areas such as trade, as a platform to accommodate Caribbean diversity and facilitate dialogue and cooperation among member states, and promote sustainable development to strengthen the region's economies (Martínez 2020).

However, the difficulty in establishing a concrete plan of action, permanent funds and greater participation, and the accentuated asymmetries between the countries of the Greater Caribbean make it difficult for them to interact in terms of infrastructure, economic capacity and political limitations. Even so, Guyana and Suriname take advantage as a forum for consultation and concerted action with an emphasis on environmental and trade issues, strengthening the connection between this sub-region and other blocs or countries (Ulloa and Sánchez 2020). In addition, the search for a large cooperation zone also resulted in the opening to non-independent territories, welcoming French Guiana as an associate member due to its relationship with culturally similar Caribbean territories, despite the divergences between national and state governments (Daniel 2018; Martínez 2020).

French Guiana was officially recognized as an Outermost Region (the definition for territories belonging to the European Community through its guardianship state, but away from the European continent) for being part of an EU member, through the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which also determined its participation in the Community's regional policy and in the European Exclusive Economic Zone.

For South America, the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) emerged in 1991 as a reaction of the Southern Cone (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) to the economically restrictive scenario of that decade, aiming to stimulate the regional market and a more competitive international insertion. Although the objective of the common market has not been achieved, due to the excessive bureaucracy that hinders exports and the lack of institutional coordination that delays the implementation of common policies, the organization has contributed to the deepening of relations between the southernmost countries (Mariano and Menezes 2021).

Because of the relative regional isolation of Guyana and Suriname, they were admitted as associate members only in 2012, but despite having privileged access to that market, they do not have full voting rights, are not members of the customs union, and are closest only to Brazil. French Guiana, on the other hand, could benefit in terms of supply and disposal of products through the Mercosur-EU agreement. However, European requirements, enforced in particular by France (officially, mainly for environmental reasons), continue to be rejected by South Americans as being considered too rigid<sup>9</sup>.

## Common paths during post-liberal regionalism

The geopolitical relations of the three Guianas in the early 21st century were influenced by global trade expansion and the rise of China as a major economic player, so they sought to diversify their trading partners and deepen regional cooperation, especially on environmental and development issues. Cooperation was intensified between them and other South American and Caribbean countries, as well as greater participation in regional and international organizations, with more opportunities for south-south cooperation and the search for regional solutions to common problems, such as environmental preservation and sustainable development.

The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) emerged in 2004 from the desire for political integration in protest against US domination in LAC, with a proposal of solidarity and complementary exchange between members through of the Peoples' Trade Treaty (TCP) – renaming the institution ALBA-TCP in 2006. Without legal personality, ALBA does not intend to constitute a supranational organization, relying only on political and bilateral agreements

<sup>9</sup> Borges, B., and E. Clavery. "European proposal to conclude the Mercosur-EU agreement is 'hard and difficult', says chancellor." *GI*, May 11, 2023. Accessed May 12, 2023. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2023/05/11/proposta-europeia-de-conclusao-do-acordo-ue-mercosul-e-hard-and-hard-says-chancellor.ghtml>.

to compensate for the asymmetries in the region, but it is paralyzed due to recent internal crises among its members (García 2020).

Suriname joined ALBA in 2012 as a special guest, in an attempt at complementarity and political alliance, and this surrounded Guyana with neighbors to the east and west claiming parts of its territory (García 2020). However, relations with AEC are also established through the ALBA-Caribe Fund, created in 2005 to use oil revenues in the execution of socioeconomic development projects, and the ALBA-Food Fund, created in 2008 to contribute to food self-sufficiency through support for integral rural development. It also financed projects such as a factory for processing smoked fish in Suriname and the improvement of the dairy sector in Guyana (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América - Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos 2012; Ulloa and Sánchez 2020).

At the continental level, the creation of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) in 2008, including Guyana and Suriname, reflected the efforts of South American presidents for greater integration and convergence, rehearsing a specific regional governance to stimulate the connectivity and cohesion of the bloc (Granja Hernández and Mesquita 2020). Among its activities, presidential diplomacy and ministerial councils worked to promote joint action in multilateral forums, in addition to being a space to converge on policies and the implementation of long-term plans and projects on more pragmatic topics such as energy, defense and infrastructure (Long and Suñé 2022).

Aiming to execute integration and modernization projects of the region's physical infrastructure, the Initiative for South American Regional Integration (IIRSA) was incorporated into Unasur through the South American Council of Infrastructure and Planning (Cosiplan), created in 2009 to institutionalize it at ministerial level and secure investments. The initiative emerged in 2000 to reduce asymmetries in the continent, focusing on transport, energy and communication sectors, and the subsequent formalization attributed greater political importance as a model focused on regional articulation and development (Oliveira 2020).

The three Guianas are covered by IIRSA within the scope of the Guiana Shield Axis<sup>10</sup>, with some projects already or almost completed, such as the bridge over the Takutu River and the Georgetown-Lethem road, both from Guyana to Brazil, to optimize multimodal transport, supply energy and strengthen the most important ports in the region. Although French Guiana is officially excluded, the bridge with Amapá on the Oiapoque river is part of the integration portfolio, allowing for a physical relationship between Mercosur and the EU (Consejo Suramericano de Infraestructura y Planeamiento 2017).

Although Unasur was considered a consolidated mediator in the region, the conservative wave from 2018 led to the suspension and subsequent departure of several members<sup>11</sup> and to the new

<sup>10</sup> It includes 20 projects totaling US\$4.581 million and comprises Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and the Brazilian states of Amapá, Pará, Roraima and Amazonas.

<sup>11</sup> Between 2018 and 2020, seven of the twelve member countries notified the denunciation of the Constitutive Treaty and left the organization: Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Peru and Colombia left in 2018, followed by Ecuador in 2019 and Uruguay in 2020.

regional ideological convergence that criticized integration policies made by leftist predecessors. Thus, the Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (Prosul) was launched in 2019 as a new political project with low institutionalization and reduced integration agenda (Long and Suñé 2022).

In the scenario of the institutional crisis, Guyana, Suriname and Venezuela were the only countries that did not decide to denounce the Constitutive Treaty<sup>12</sup>, making it still in force in these states. While Venezuela was not invited to join the new bloc, the other two joined Prosul to maintain contact with its members. Guyana joined the first meeting in 2019, defending joint efforts on topics such as health, economy, migration, security and climate change<sup>13</sup>; Suriname joined in 2022 aiming at collaboration for unity, cooperation and sustainable development – arguing that Venezuela should work on its own problems without foreign interference, while seeking to establish closer relations with Colombia, one of the new leaders<sup>14</sup>.

Meanwhile, Unasur was paralyzed and, consequently, so was IIRSA, resulting in uncertainty about the continuity of infrastructure projects, since Prosul does not refer to IIRSA or define actions to replace it, nor does it include all countries in the continent as members. On the other hand, that organization still exists legally at the international level and governments committed to regional integration (in particular, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil and Alberto Fernández in Argentina) have been working to relaunch it (Long and Suñé 2022).

On the other hand, European territories in the Caribbean act as a bridge between their neighborhood and the EU, which has placed this bloc as a significant source of cooperation through the European Development Funds (EDF) to finance key sectors and offer technical cooperation. Cooperation is also largely supported by a multi-year project management regime: the 2007 Amazon Operational Program (POAmazônia) which, at the request of the state government of French Guiana, aimed to enhance the cross-border environment in the Guianas (involving Suriname and the Brazilian states of Pará, Amapá and Amazonas, in addition to French Guiana). In 2014, this initiative became the Interreg Amazônia Cooperation Program (PCIA), expanded to transnational issues by including Guyana in its funding guidelines (Lodge and Remy 2022).

Since the beginning, the Program has focused on economic, social, health, educational and environmental issues, in order to improve conditions for joint development. European planning considers that Suriname's participation has greater stability of partner institutions due to its tradition of cooperation, so most projects involve the shared border. For Brazil, long-term cooperation is hampered by the high turnover in agencies (although Amapá is a privileged ally) and Guyana is

<sup>12</sup> Bolivia and Peru announced the decision to denounce it, but as the withdrawal or suspension processes were not completed within the national legal framework, they continued as members.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Public Information of Guyana. "PM calls for great collaboration among south american nations." *DPY News*, December 12, 2020. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://dpi.gov.gy/pm-calls-for-greater-collaboration-among-south-american-nations/>

<sup>14</sup> "Minister Albert Ramdin Bevestigt Nogmaals: 'Suriname wordt lid van regionaal blok prosur'." *Dagblad Suriname* January 28, 2022. Accessed March 20, 2023. <https://www.dbsuriname.com/2022/01/28/minister-albert-ramdin-bevestigt-nogmaals-suriname-wordt-lid-van-regionaal-blok-prosur/>.

strategically included in cooperation projects that deal with problems common to the region – especially the environmental issue (Commission Européenne 2022).

This cooperation initiative, included in the EU's cross-border policy, provides European funding for wide-ranging projects dedicated to development initiatives in French Guiana and chosen partners. Among the projects that have been completed or are close to completion are the fiber optic coverage of Amapá by the French-Guyanese company Guyacom, programs to fight malaria, land use planning on the banks of the Maroni to better accommodate binational speedboats, or sustainable development projects (Agence Nationale de la Cohesion des Territorie, France 2022).

The focus on expanding regional integration and opposition to US influence inspired greater approximations between regional actors at different levels, especially regarding infrastructure, trade and security, but internal political crises faced by several member countries have hampered the evolution of articulations. Guyana and Suriname are also dealing with their own crises while trying to keep pace with changes driven by larger players. However, it stands out how France, through French Guiana, started to pay more attention to its neighbors to drive collective and more specific solutions.

## Geopolitical chess for post-hegemonic regionalism

The most recent period has been characterized by multipolarity and the weakening of US hegemony in the region, leading the three Guianas to seek opportunities to establish new partnerships and reinforce their presence on the international and regional Amazonian scenario. Their geopolitical relationships have been shaped by global challenges such as climate change, sustainability and rising trade tensions between major powers.

With a wide regional scope, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) was created in 2011 as a result of a long process of attempts to promote the economic, political, and social integration of the two sub-regions without the US presence, constituting a complementary forum for dialogue and political concertation. In the search for autonomy and in the context of the integration crisis fueled by conservative governments, intergovernmental cooperation has been privileged over more bureaucratic institutions, so the flexibility of “summit diplomacy” has guaranteed multilateralism due to articulation at the presidential level, despite implying a weaker institutional framework and low monitoring of commitments (Minutti and Bruto, 2021).

CELAC's key strength for Guyana and Suriname is to provide a platform to increase Caribbean's international engagement and collaborate to develop trade and cultural exchange with the EU. High-level summits are held in the EU-LAC Foundation<sup>15</sup>, created in 2010 in order to design action plans in priority areas to strengthen and promote the bi-regional strategic relationship,

<sup>15</sup> Created in 2010, it has the 33 CELAC states, the 28 EU members and the EU itself in a strategic partnership to promote political dialogue, global governance, technical cooperation and investments aimed at deepening relations.

especially for issues such as transnational security and climate change. However, such relationship lacks the security of a legally binding commitment, and funding from the EU's Development Cooperation Instrument limits triangular cooperation between the EU, Caribbean and Latin America (Lodge and Remy 2022).

Considering the current international scenario, China's growing presence in LAC has influenced the geopolitical relations of Guyana and Suriname, which seek to attract investments in infrastructure and development. As Vadell, Brutto and Leite (2020) found, such initiatives by the Asian giant, especially for low-income countries, represent a direct challenge to the existing international cooperation regime based on the behavior of Western countries. The country takes advantage of its position as the largest trading partner of most countries, to offer development aid and assistance in a relevant and attractive model, defining new political and economic relations based on pre-existing flows and agreements, combined with new political dialogue practices, trade agreements and infrastructure financing.

Chinese strategy also includes greater approximation to those regional arrangements seeking to secure access to global routes, natural resources, raw materials and agricultural products, in addition to new markets and political support at the international level, reflected in the efforts of the China-CELAC Forum, for example. Furthermore, Chinese investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, Suriname and Guyana included) have replaced IIRSA in concessions of strategic stretches, and Caricom members also see that country as an alternative to North America and Europe for trade, investment and cooperation (Baksh et. al. 2020; Oliveira 2020; Minutti and Bruto 2021).

Rodriguez and Haag (2022) also argue that China establishes itself as a demobilizing factor for regional integration insofar as Chinese interest and Brazilian disinterest promote a change in the set of costs and benefits of member participation, which increases competition between organizations in a context of project proliferation and low institutionalization, and deepens institutional fragmentation already shaken by the conservative wave.

Particularly, issues such as border disputes between Guyana and Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname and Suriname and French Guiana, and the security and migration challenges in the region (Caribbean, South American and even African and Middle Eastern migrations) also continue to shape the region's geopolitical relations during this period (Silva 2018; Granger 2013).

When analyzing recent political transformations in the Americas, the concept of Liquid Regionalism is also useful to understand the current regionalism scenario for the Guianas. Based on Bauman's reflections on the fluidity of liquid modernity, Mariano, Bressan and Luciano (2021) suggest this typology to explain the weakening and liberalization of regional organizations in the continent since the mid-2010s, characterized by consultation projects with low degrees of institutional complexity and commitment of the actors, and a certain volatility guided by liberal governments – which implies more superficial, informal and restricted regional arrangements, and increases the unpredictability and insecurity in regional processes.



As already mentioned in previous topics and reinforced by these authors, several regional projects were weakened by recent international political shifts, which facilitated the crisis of regional institutions on the continent (Mariano, Bressan and Luciano 2021). It is observed, therefore, that the performance of South American blocs tends to depend on the political orientation of each head of state (which creates polarizations to the detriment of a collective project), while in Caribbean blocs cooperation is prioritized (even in economic integration schemes) to address common vulnerabilities.

Thus, most of these arrangements' actions have taken place at the political level, and have become important means for Suriname and Guyana to strengthen their regional positions and establish contact with larger countries or other economic regions. Specific issues related to internal contexts and interactions with neighbors play an important role in shaping the geopolitical relations of the three Guianas, even for French Guiana, which is making increasing efforts in paradiplomatic competencies, despite the fact that its state government is still subject to French diplomacy.

Although the three Guianas are part of several regional organizations and agreements, their regional cooperation is still limited, due, in part, to their peripheral geographic location and the lack of transport and communications infrastructure that could facilitate interaction between these territories and between them and their neighbors. They face joint challenges of reconciling economic development and the exploitation of natural resources with environmental preservation and the protection of indigenous and local communities, as well as security-related problems, such as drug trafficking and cross-border crime.

## Conclusion

In the South American and Caribbean context, the Guianas play an important role in mitigating geopolitical challenges and promoting sustainable development. Economic, political and social links with neighboring countries are intensified through the participation of these territories in regional integration and cooperation mechanisms, stimulating the sharing of experiences, best practices and resources. This regional interaction, in addition to fostering synergies and collaborative solutions, expands the presence and influence of the Guianas on the international scene. This allows for the defense of its interests and the promotion of a more favorable international order.

However, participation in regional processes faces obstacles, which demands balance between national and regional interests. Geopolitical challenges emerge from historical characteristics, political, economic and cultural diversity, strategic geographic position and political alignments. Such challenges manifest themselves in multiple dimensions, such as:

- Economy: The Guianas deal with the need to diversify their economies, traditionally concentrated in sectors such as mining, agriculture and space (French Guiana);

- Infrastructure: Internal and external infrastructure and connectivity problems limit the development of these territories;
- Security: Issues such as drug trafficking, organized crime and violence pose significant security challenges;
- Environment: Located in the Amazon, the Guianas face problems related to environmental protection (caused by clandestine mining, for example) and climate change;
- Human Rights: The protection of human rights, especially for indigenous populations, migrants and other social minorities, is a constant concern;
- Diplomacy: The Guianas need to promote their interests in the regional and global scenario, which becomes especially complex for French Guiana, given its dependent political status.

Therefore, China's growing influence and fluctuating relations with the US bring both opportunities and challenges. In addition, historical and cultural ties with the Caribbean have limited integration with South America, but participation in blocs such as Caricom and Unasur strengthen agreements with neighbors on the continent, especially amid expectations for the resumption of regional initiatives. Unresolved territorial disputes in the Guianas region continue to affect regional stability and security. It is therefore imperative that the Guianas work cooperatively with their neighbors to resolve any disputes peacefully, maintaining stability in the region and enhancing regional integration.

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