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Crisis in South American regionalism and Brazilian protagonism in Unasur, the Lima Group and Prosur

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202100209>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 64(2): e009, 2021

Abstract

This paper discusses the crisis in regional governance in South America from 2017 onwards by analyzing Unasur's disintegration and the emergence of new arrangements (the Lima Group, Prosur, and the Leticia Pact), as well as the regional and global conditions that enabled them. We assessed their performance in responding to different crises in South America, concluding that the constraints and challenges they faced jeopardize their aim to prosper in the future. Special attention is given to changes in Brazilian foreign policy guidelines toward South America, which contributed to these outcomes.

Keywords: Regionalism; Regional Governance; Unasur; Lima Group; Prosur; The Leticia Pact.

Received: June 1st, 2021
Accepted: August 29, 2021

Introduction

In 2016, phenomena such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump – and his decision to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership and renegotiate the North American Free Trade Area with Canada and Mexico – were events that “revitalized the argument that regional integration had gone too far curtailing state power in favour of regional institutions” (Riggirozzi & Tussie 2018, 160). Regionalism is under stress in Europe and Latin America (Nolte & Weiffen 2020), and South America became part of globalized phenomena such as the rise of right-wing nationalism (Sanahuja 2019; Sanahuja & López 2020) and the crisis in regional governance, which led to the questioning of the role of regional organizations and other regional mechanisms.

The region is currently experiencing trade disintegration and political fragmentation. Trade disintegration refers to the decline of

inter-regional trade: South America has a historically low level of intra-regional trade, between 15% and 20% of the total amount. From 2004 to 2017, Brazil's exports to South America represented 17% of total exports, which decreased to 15% in 2018 and to 12% in 2019. By 2020, exports to South America represented only 10% of Brazil's total exports (Barros et al. 2020a).

Political fragmentation refers to the fragmentation of regional organizations due to political shifts and the absence of consensus between countries regarding the purposes of regional institutions. These phenomena are leveraged by Brazil's declining protagonism (Caballero & Crescentino 2020; Saraiva 2020), with notable effects in regional governance bodies (Vaz et al. 2017; Mijares 2020).

The proliferation of regional arrangements during 21st century, such as the Bolivarian Alliance, the Pacific Alliance, the Community of Latin American States (Celac) and the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), reveals that regionalism in Latin America is segmented, where different blocs, multiple memberships and strategies overlap and do not promote integration (Malamud & Gardini 2012). The authors posit that, as it follows an intergovernmentalist and interpresidentialist logic, regionalism is responsive to national agendas in the absence of a strong regional bureaucracy.

This proliferation helps to understand current political fragmentation to the extent that it resulted in a logic of accommodation of different objectives. It repealed the convergence of interests in South America, directly impacting the expectations of countries around regional integration and their commitment to regional cooperation in the long term (Mariano & Ribeiro 2020).

Even though such initiatives were intergovernmental organizations, they all had a certain degree of institutionalization, which were embedded in legal documents that required parliamentary approval for coming into force, as well as for withdrawal.¹ The degree of institutionalization is also a relevant feature for the resilience of integration processes during crisis because it "gives continuity to the integration project in times of discord between the member states" (Nolte & Weiffen 2020, 8).

Unasur's crisis and its subsequent disintegration occurred due to its "lax institutional design" in a context of ideological and political polarization, alongside the absence of regional leadership, of consensus, and the disagreements among its members about the need for a strong bureaucracy (Mijares & Nolte 2018). As Mariano and Ribeiro (2020) argue, Brexit revealed that the higher the degree of institutionalization and economic interdependence, the higher the constraints for countries not to withdraw from regional organizations. They argue that not only did this not occur in the case of Unasur, due to the absence of economic interdependence, but also its frail institutional arrangement favored initiatives such as the Forum for the Progress of South America (Prosur).

¹ In the case of Unasur, the withdrawal procedure in the legislative branch differed in each country. Ecuador's parliament approved the withdrawal; the Chilean Senate voted in favor of it, but the Chamber of Deputies voted against; Peru's Executive branch sent a legislative resolution to Congress; whereas it was not debated in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Paraguay.

In this paper we discuss the crisis in regional governance in South America by analyzing Unasur's disintegration and the emergence of new regional arrangements. For this purpose, we begin our discussion with two useful and entangled concepts: regionalism and regional governance.

Regionalism is defined as a “primarily state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions and organizations among at least three States” (Börzel & Risse 2016, 7). As a process, regionalism organizes political spaces to regulate agendas through capable institutions. It is also a governance strategy of states to leverage their agency power: in South America, regionalism has been a project of regional construction and institutionalized space for policy-making and coordination facing market opportunities and demands (Riggirozzi & Tussie 2018).

Regional governance defines the region as a subsystem that shapes the relationship between a group of states. It is also “a way of cementing normative and policy coordination to regulate social and economic, as well as political, transborder processes” (Riggirozzi & Tussie 2018, 159). As Nolte and Weiffen (2020, 4) point out, regional governance is “essentially, but not exclusively, based on intergovernmental regional organizations”.

We focus on Unasur because it was the most relevant regional organization promoting regional governance in South America in the last decade. By the year 2000, all twelve South American presidents gathered for the first time to discuss topics related to regional integration, and in 2008 they established Unasur, which was strongly influenced by Brazilian diplomacy. We start from the premise that Unasur was able to bring all South American countries together, to promote decisions by consensus despite differences in political orientations, and to establish 12 Sectoral Councils.

Its institutional framework had the potential of strengthening regional public policies regarding the protection of democracy, political stability, infrastructure integration through the Infrastructure and Planning Council (Cosiplan) (Fuccille et al. 2017), governance on health through the South American Institute of Government in Health (Isags) (Riggirozzi 2015), and regional cooperation in security and defense matters through the South American Defense Council (SADC), by securing consensus-based decision-making procedures (Vaz et al. 2017).

These analyses point out the role of Brazilian foreign policy in constructing Unasur and its broad and ambitious agenda, which also consolidated its protagonism in South America. Nevertheless, it experienced a downfall from 2011 onwards, especially after the rise of Michel Temer to the presidency (following Dilma Rousseff's impeachment) and the nomination of José Serra (2016-2017) as Foreign Minister led to the constructed narrative that the Labor Party's (PT) foreign policy was ideological (Saraiva 2020). This was manifested in the criticism toward Unasur and the countries that condemned the impeachment process, as well as in the joint actions with Argentina and Paraguay to suspend Venezuela from Mercosur in 2016. Such tensions were intensified in the subsequent government (Saraiva 2020).

Therefore, the extinction of Unasur and the lack of an effective instance to promote regional governance is a result of political fragmentation. It is well known that the three main episodes that marked Unasur's disintegration process were 1) the vacancy of the General Secretariat since the

end of Ernesto Samper's term; 2) the suspension of Unasur participation following the withdrawal of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru from Unasur; and 3) the creation of Prosur in 2019 to replace Unasur's role in regional governance.

Our major contribution in this paper is to advance on the assessment of the regional governance crisis in South America by developing the argument that this phenomenon is deeply related to the worsening crisis in Venezuela and the way these countries chose to respond to it, that is, by creating the Lima Group rather than employing Unasur's mechanisms on democracy protection, and the Prosur, which was born out of the radicalization of the Lima Group. Prosur was also the joint effort of Chile and Colombia to propose the replacement of Unasur and isolate Venezuela from regional governance – reinforcing the rhetoric that the organization had become the bastion of “Bolivarian ideology”.

To this end, in the next section we will analyze the following events and how they are related to each other – the 3 main episodes abovementioned plus 2 others: 1) the end of Ernesto Samper's term as the head of Unasur's General Secretariat in January 2017; 2) the creation of The Lima Group to manage Venezuela's crisis in August 2017; 3) the standoff over Unasur's Secretary General elections, followed by six countries suspending their participation in April 2018; 4) Colombia's withdrawal from Unasur in August 2018; 5) the radicalization of the Lima Group and the creation of Prosur in early 2019.

To explore how these events are connected and how they explain an outcome (crisis in regional governance), we employ process-tracing. When applied to explain an outcome, this method attempts to “craft a (minimally) sufficient explanation of the outcome of the case where the ambitions are more case-centric than theory-oriented” (Beach & Pedersen 2013, 3). Therefore, we explain crisis in regionalism (outcome) by identifying a causal chain between the five events aforementioned.

In the third section we will address the challenges of regional governance in South America, due to the loose institutional design of these newest initiatives. We demonstrate that neither the Lima Group, nor Prosur or the Leticia Pact, can promote regional governance, since they exacerbate the same structural problems observed in Unasur.

Our analysis is based on literature review on regionalism and regional governance, and mainly on Brazilian foreign policy in South America, as well as primary data such as decisions, speeches and joint declarations from Presidents, Foreign Affairs Ministers and other representatives available at official government websites and online newspapers; from Brazilian diplomatic telegrams; and from institutional reports.

Disintegrating Unasur and regional governance: the reasons and actors behind the process

Regionalism is under stress in Latin America, and regional cooperation has been affected by the lack of regional leadership, ideological conflicts, and difficulties responding to and tackling

the Venezuelan crisis (Nolte & Weiffen 2020). The current status of regionalism and regional governance in South America should be analyzed as a phenomenon linked to the global rise of nationalism, and a subordinate realignment of its countries' foreign policies to the United States (US) under Trump's administration (Sanahuja 2019).

The election of Donald Trump and Brexit were events that constituted a new scenario to help understand Brazilian foreign policy and its relationship with the region during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (Caballero & Crescentino 2020). The US became involved in regional issues – especially the Venezuelan crisis – in the context of the weakening of Unasur and the strengthening of the Organization of American States' (OAS) actions toward South America (Mijares & Nolte 2018).

The rise of post-regionalism benefited from the 2000s commodities boom and the geostrategic reorientation of the US toward Asia-Pacific and Eurasia, in which South American governments adopted a favorable view toward an autonomous foreign policy strategy for the revision of the international system (Mijares 2020). In this sense, current economic disintegration (Barros et al. 2020a), the disintegration of Unasur and the US rapprochement to South America via OAS (Mijares & Nolte 2018) were factors that challenged the post-hegemonic regionalism (Mijares 2020).

As Sanahuja and López (2020) argue, the political changes that took place from 2015 to 2018 in South America were followed by the emergence of a neo-patriotic far-right, whose political actions to impact the system rely on their ability to diffuse their ideology through discursive practices, either by leading governments (Brazil and Colombia) or joining political coalitions that support liberal-conservative right-wing governments (Chile). To some extent, these countries – which had shaped Unasur and actively participated in its events in previous decades - prompted the narrative of Unasur having an institutional framework that was too costly and not presenting effective results, later adopting the “anti-Bolivarian” rhetoric (Barros et al. 2020a).

Starting the analysis with the role of Unasur's Secretary General, Narea and Benzi (2020) argue that the duration of its terms was often unstable and the names appointed to occupy the position had faced great resistance since the very beginning. The term of the last Secretary General (former Colombian president Ernesto Samper) was supposed to end in June 2016, but the members did not name a successor. Argentina proposed to extend Samper's term until January 2017, which was approved by all countries (Narea & Benzi 2020).

When Argentina took office of the Pro Tempore Presidency (PTP) in April 2017, the country announced the candidacy of the Argentinian Ambassador José Octavio Bordón for the position of Secretary General. The announcement revealed the interest of Mauricio Macri's administration to bring issues such as trade, direct investments, and infrastructure to the core of the regional integration agenda. However, Narea and Benzi (2020) argue that his candidacy did not generate consensus among countries either, while a growing conflict between the Argentinian and Venezuelan chancellors was eroding Argentina's interest to continue promoting its candidate.

For Argentina, Unasur was a space to be strengthened in order to promote regional governance. It proposed an agreement between Mercosur and Unasur to assist in the dialogue between the Venezuelan government and sectors of civil society, and during a meeting at the

OAS it opposed applying the OAS Democratic Charter before any attempt of mediation and dialogue (Dinatale 2016).

However, in August 2017, the Lima Group was created to propose a resolution to the Venezuelan democratic crisis, in response to the election of the National Constituent Assembly to replace the National Assembly, and due to the inability to reach the minimum quorum to invoke the OAS Democratic Charter. The Lima Group is an ad-hoc mechanism (Sanahuja 2019) conducted by its members' chancellors, where membership is voluntary and countries define where meetings will take place in accordance to chancellors or representatives of the grouping (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

Since the First Meeting of the Lima Group in August 2017, there has been an effort to increase international pressure against Maduro's government. On that occasion, Foreign Ministers agreed not to support Venezuelan candidacies in any regional organizations and to postpone the CELAC-European Union summit, which would take place in October of that year. Since 2017, the Lima Group has been arguing that Nicolás Maduro's regime represents a rupture of the constitutional order and democracy, a violation of individual liberties, of the rule of law, of human rights, and of international norms and American values (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

Nevertheless, throughout 2017-2018 Unasur remained a relevant space for regional policies and joint actions. Despite the standoff over the Argentinian candidacy for the position of Secretary General, the Argentinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied that the country would immediately withdraw from the organization ("Argentina estudia abandonar la Unasur" 2017). Meanwhile, the presidents of Chile and Ecuador signed a joint declaration to express their willingness to revitalize CELAC and Unasur through the nomination of a new Secretary General ("Ecuador y Chile, aliados por la Unasur y la Celac" 2017). In March 2018, the newly inaugurated Chilean president, Sebastián Piñera, declared that the Democratic Protocol of Unasur should be applied in Venezuela (Montes 2018).

In February 2018, the presence of Kurt Tidd, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, in Colombia led to harsh stances from Nicolás Maduro and Evo Morales, demanding an active role of Unasur in defending sovereignty in Venezuela ("Maduro pide cumbre de Unasur para hablar sobre Venezuela 2018; "Evo Morales: 'Sudamérica tiene la obligación de defender a Venezuela'" 2018).

However, this claim was not endorsed by the other members of Unasur. Instead, during the Lima Group meeting in February 2018, the government of Peru decided to withdraw the invitation to the Venezuelan president to attend the VIII Summit of the Americas in April of that year in Lima. The Brazilian Ambassador in Lima insisted that the Summit of Americas was not an appropriated meeting to uninvite Venezuela, which then triggered tensions with the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and led to the revocation of bilateral meetings with the Brazilian counterpart (Itamaraty 2018a). This episode reveals that Brazil was not passive to Peruvian protagonism in defining the agenda within the Lima Group, but it also reveals the constraints and limits faced by Brazilian diplomacy to influence regional outcomes.

Concomitantly the Lima Group was increasing pressures on the Venezuelan government, the standoff on the nomination of a new Secretary General was leading to escalating tensions within Unasur. On April 13, 2018, on the sidelines of the 8th Summit of the Americas, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru made the decision to suspend their participation in Unasur, which became public on April 20, 2018.

The decision also entailed payment suspension. However, Brazilian diplomatic telegrams from 2017 and 2018 reveal that national delegations at Unasur had been debating budget allocations without discussing the possibility of countries suspending the payments, which would then jeopardize the ongoing debate on the 2019 budget (Itamaraty 2017; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d).

By the end of 2017, Unasur had a budget surplus, due to balances of the General Secretariat, SADC and Isags. Brazilian diplomatic telegrams outlined that Unasur's surplus was due to the high degree of polarization, which reduced High Level Meetings, and to the Argentinian PTP, which limited the expenses to activities regarding economics, infrastructure integration, and the Citizen Participation Forum (Itamaraty 2018c). National delegations argued in April 2018 that the current budget allocation could only cover expenses until July 2018. The Bolivian delegation prompted its counterparts to honor their contributions, and the Argentinian PTP endorsed a cash flow projection to be channeled to pay crucial expenses, such as personnel salaries and rents (Itamaraty 2018c).

Therefore, we can contend that payment suspension was decided exclusively by Unasur's presidents. Originally, the decision was related to their demand that Bolivia call an extraordinary Unasur meeting to nominate a new Secretary General (Bordón was the name supported by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru), since all decisions were supposed to be consensual. According to the Peruvian vice-chancellor, the vacancy of the Secretary General's position was an intolerable situation, and countries should resume "the organization activities in accordance with its original objectives, which are fundamentally related to integration and infrastructure" ("Perú y otros cinco países exigen que se reactive Unasur" 2018). The president of Ecuador promptly reacted against the decision, stating that the full existence of Unasur was indispensable for the region ("Ecuador considera indispensable la existencia de Unasur" 2018).

Even though the decision was based on the stated interest of those countries to bring Unasur back to its original objectives, it settled the ground for the "anti-Bolivarian" rhetoric to rise. The election of Iván Duque in Colombia was decisive for the country to lead the withdrawal from Unasur (this was one of his main presidential campaign promises), a decision later adopted by the same countries that suspended their participation in April 2018.

Duque has always adopted a critical stance toward Unasur, but from 2017 onwards, especially during the Colombian presidential campaign, he proposed Colombia's withdrawal because, in his words, it had become an accomplice of Venezuela.² The US recognized the new Colombian

² Twitter's Advanced Search tweets with the term "Unasur" from @ivandunque until December 31 2018. [https://twitter.com/search?q=%22unasur%22%20\(from%3Aivandunque\)%20until%3A2018-12-31%20&src=typed_query](https://twitter.com/search?q=%22unasur%22%20(from%3Aivandunque)%20until%3A2018-12-31%20&src=typed_query).

president as a powerful actor against Nicolás Maduro's regime, due to his diplomatic efforts in the Lima Group and the OAS. They had converging stances regarding the strengthening of the OAS' role in the region and the Venezuelan crisis (Sánchez 2021).

Following the 8th Summit of the Americas and members' aforementioned decision to suspend their participation in Unasur, the Lima Group became the main regional South American instance for managing the Venezuela crisis, with its decisions backed by the Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro. The pressures on Venezuela began to increase after the non-recognition of the election results in August 2018, in which Lima Group representatives jointly adopted measures against Maduro's regime (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

Also in August 2018, Colombia denounced the Constitutive Treaty of Unasur, becoming the first country to withdraw from the organization. Brazilian diplomacy acted to avoid total abandonment from Unasur when Brazilian Foreign Minister, Aloysio Nunes, argued that political divergences should be overcome and that "Brazil has worked to preserve this integration system" being "very strongly attached to Unasur" ("Brazil chancellor advocates strengthening of Unasur" 2018).

This reveals some differences between chancellors Serra and Nunes that are worth pointing out: by associating regional governance to an ideological matter in order to criticize previous governments and diminish Brazilian presence in regional instances, Serra paved the way for initiatives from Peru and Colombia to gain prominence; he also thwarted Brazil's ability to build consensus and keep its neighbors from adopting more radical positions.

The growing division within the region had effected Unasur, especially in the absence of a greater involvement of Brazil and its associated bodies, such as SADC (Vaz et al. 2017), Isags, and Cosiplan. All these significant achievements expressed Brazil's engagement in areas such as health – Isags headquarters were located in Rio de Janeiro –, financing of regional infrastructure projects through Cosiplan, and of defense through the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) (Riggirozzi 2015; Fuccille et al. 2017). Currently, infrastructure integration has been discussed in parallel instances, as is the case of the Bi-Oceanic Road Corridor (Barros et al. 2020b).

From August 2018 to March 2019, the main arguments to withdraw from Unasur and later to establish Prosur and its guidelines were consolidated: i) Venezuela's ideological influence over Unasur; ii) the problem of consensus decision-making; iii) Unasur's onerous budget. These arguments were leveraged in a context of right-wing and far-right governments in South America and their increased ties with the US – especially under Trump's administration – regarding the management of the Venezuelan crisis.

Venezuela, especially Maduro's regime, bolstered these arguments, which were consolidated between the moment Colombia withdrew from Unasur and the creation of Prosur. The Chilean Foreign Minister at the time declared that Unasur was a "political corpse" and suggested that integration should take place in an environment where vetoes and ideologization did not occur (Estrella 2018).

As an example of the joint action between Chile and Colombia, the Colombian president stated:

We have been making progress for the end of Unasur and the creation of Prosur [...] to seek the utmost coordination for the end of the dictatorship in Venezuela and the end of Unasur, but also for us to build a better scenario for cooperation among countries committed to the defense of democracy in the hemisphere (“Presidente Duque anuncia la creación de Prosur, un mecanismo de cooperación y defensa de la democracia en Suramérica” 2019.).

In this sense, Prosur represented the effort of Colombia and, especially, Chile to occupy a leading role in the absence of Brazil’s protagonism in the region. The creation of Prosur should be understood not only as the mere replacement of Unasur by another instance, according to the abovementioned arguments, but as another response to the Venezuelan crisis and even as another factor that aggravates it to the extent that it excludes the country from discussions inherent to regional governance – such as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it will be addressed in the next section.

A significant change in the strategy of the Lima Group, which abandoned its initial stance of proposing negotiations between government and opposition, occurred when its countries recognized Juan Guaidó as the president of Venezuela on late January 2019. This had effects on how the grouping began to favor sanctions against Venezuela and the removal of Nicolás Maduro from the presidency. It also became skeptical of the role of new arrangements and countries outside the Lima Group in proposing measures to overcome the crisis (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

The shifts observed in the Lima Group occurred during Prosur’s establishment, since it was born out of the radicalization of the Lima Group. In February, the presidents of Chile, Colombia and Paraguay, as well as Brazilian chancellor Ernesto Araújo, met with Juan Guaidó while attending the humanitarian campaign in Cúcuta, on the Colombian-Venezuelan border. The Colombian president helped organize the humanitarian campaign that prompted his own protagonism, as well as Luis Almagro’s and Juan Guaidó’s (Sánchez 2021), whereas the Chilean president invited Juan Guaidó to attend the first Prosur Presidential Meeting, which would take place in March 2019.

The first Prosur Presidential Meeting was held in Santiago in March 2019, when seven South American presidents and the Guyanese Ambassador signed the “Presidential Declaration on the Renewal and Strengthening of South America Integration” with topics that reflect the principles of not adopting a burdensome bureaucracy, fostering a non-ideologized and pragmatic integration (Prosur 2019a). In September 2019, Prosur’s countries met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly at the headquarters of the Chilean delegation to discuss and approve them as Prosur’s guidelines (Prosur 2019b).

The decision to directly withdraw from Unasur, not only suspend participation, by Ecuador in March 2019, and Bolivia and Uruguay in November 2019, resulted from government changes in the cases of Bolivia (resignation followed by a coup) and Uruguay (presidential elections),

as well as shifts in foreign policy orientations of Lenín Moreno's government in Ecuador, taking him even further from *correísmo* (Meza 2019; "Bolivia anuncia su retiro del ALBA y analiza salida de la Unasur" 2019; "Uruguay se retira de la Unasur y retorna al TIAR" 2020).

These three countries' official statements reinforced the role of Prosur over Unasur, emphasizing the rhetoric that Unasur lacked functionality, that it was a highly ideologized organization, with a costly budget, in stark contrast with its underperformance. Unlike the episode of April 2018, the decision to withdraw was not motivated by the standoff on the General Secretariat of Unasur, but by the consolidation of Prosur as the main instance for regional cooperation and the aim to enhance bilateral relations of these three countries with the region – especially in the case of Bolivia, in which the new government sought legitimacy before the neighboring countries.

Furthermore, Colombia led the "Leticia Pact for the Amazon" initiative to strengthen a coordinated action for the forest and biodiversity assessment in September 2019. Due to the increasing number of wildfires and the lack of effort from the Brazilian president to address this issue, the Colombian president presented himself as the regional and global protagonist in defending the Amazon and proposing an agenda regarding this area ("En el Foro Económico Mundial, el Presidente Duque lanzó la estrategia de Biodiverciudades para la protección de la Amazonía" 2020).

Like Prosur, the Leticia Pact was created to discuss an issue related to a regional governance which had already been addressed in an institutionalized framework: the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization. Like Prosur and the Lima Group, the Leticia Pact does not encompass all the countries that share the Amazon basin, since it excludes Venezuela. Indeed, the creation of the Leticia Pact is justified by the wildfires in Amazon, but also by illegal activities and drug trafficking in the region – reasons that also began to appear in the Lima Group declarations to increase pressure on Maduro's regime (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

Regional Governance in South America from 2019 onwards

In this section, we aim to argue that the proposals of these regional initiatives didn't match their own goals, due to the lack of a proper institutionalization and a budget capable of generating governance in South America – especially during political crises and the Covid-19 pandemic – highlighting the decline of Brazilian protagonism as one of the causes.

Jair Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency marked a significant change in Brazil's role toward the region due to his right-wing ideological biases and alignment to the US (especially Donald Trump). He named Ernesto Araújo as the Foreign Minister and diplomats who shared these same beliefs to key positions in Itamaraty. The main episodes of his foreign policy that express these changes are the attempt to move the Brazilian Embassy to Jerusalem, the refusal to condemn the Cuban embargo, tensions with China (its main trade partner), withdrawal from the Global Pact on Migration and criticisms of Paris Agreement (Saraiva 2020).

In regard to South America, Brazil had suspended its participation in Unasur in 2018, but it was in 2019, during Bolsonaro's government that the country decided to join the Prosur, and officially withdraw from Unasur and CELAC. Moreover, the Brazilian government has been supporting economic liberalization and trade openness in Mercosur, and has been actively condemning Maduro's regime.

Both the globalist right, which advocates the ideals of multilateralism and cosmopolitanism, and the neopatriotic right, which adopts a notably anti-globalist rhetoric, have converging stances regarding the institutional and normative contestation of regional integration and regionalism. This had a direct impact on the crisis of regional organizations and the dismantling of regional governance, eroding the region's capabilities to respond to common challenges (Sanahuja & López 2020). The Lima Group, Prosur and the Leticia Pact, in a broad sense, are regional projects that reflect this new political scenario.

The Leticia Pact has not advanced on environmental protection in the Amazon due to rising deforestation rates, lack of joint actions and international financing, as well as retraction of Brazilian protagonism while favoring Colombian protagonism on this matter (Grandelle 2021). The First Presidential Meeting was held in Colombia in 2019, attended by all presidents except Brazil's; a virtual meeting took place in 2020, resulting in two Presidential Declarations without any substantial effect. Its countries couldn't translate its intentions into concrete policies – specific targets, actions and resources – or an assertive regional approach. This situation was aggravated during the Covid-19 (Tigre 2021).

In the case of the Lima Group, none of the declarations mentioned the intention to create an organizational structure or internal regulations to guide the grouping's actions toward crisis management – as other international initiatives such as the International Contact Group or Montevideo Mechanism have. The Lima Group countries imposed economic sanctions against Venezuela and supported other countries to do the same, aggravating the economic, humanitarian, and health situation in that country (Barros & Gonçalves, 2019). Mexico in 2020, and Argentina in 2021, withdrew from the Lima Group due to their disagreement over practices of crisis resolution in Venezuela. Bolivia joined the Lima Group in 2020 during Jeanine Áñez term, but withdrew as soon as Luis Arce took office.

The Lima Group helped to aggravate the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' preliminary study:

In 2019, 13 of the 14 Lima Group countries agreed to ban the entry of Venezuelan officials and deny them access to their financial systems. Also in 2019, a majority of parties to the Rio Treaty approved a resolution allowing targeted sanctions, including asset freezes, against Venezuelan officials alleged to participate in drug trafficking, terrorist activities, organized crime and/or human rights violations. [...] Today, Venezuela faces a lack of necessary machinery, spare parts, electricity, water, fuel, gas, food and medicine. Venezuelan assets frozen in United States, United Kingdom and Portuguese banks amount to US \$6 bln. [...] The private sector, non-governmental

organizations, universities, sport clubs and citizens of Venezuela are reporting the rejection or reluctance of foreign banks to open or keep their bank accounts, including those with correspondent banks in the United States and Europe; difficulties with getting visas and buying tickets; the need to act via third-country agents; and the need to pay extra insurance costs (United Nations Humans Rights 2021).

The actions of the Lima Group from 2019 onwards have been at odds with its own stated goals back in 2017. The recognition of Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's self-declared president has not, as it was expected, led to the resolution or alleviation of the crisis. The US support on applying economic sanctions against Venezuela in 2019, as it has been doing since 2015,³ reinforced the collapse of Unasur and its mechanisms on democracy protection; it also boosted the Lima Group as the only regional mechanism to manage the crisis. These sanctions also triggered Venezuela to foster diplomatic ties with China, Russia, and Turkey in political, economic, and military issues (Barros & Gonçalves 2019).

Recent revelations on the USAID audit have shown that the humanitarian campaign in Cúcuta was articulated by the US and Juan Guaidó with the support of Brazil, Chile, and Colombia to weaken the government of Nicolás Maduro (“Entrega ayuda de EEUU a Venezuela en 2019 no se alineó con principios humanitarios, según auditoría” 2021). Brazil has been supportive of these actions against Maduro's regime, which have increased since Bolsonaro took office. When Guaidó's supporters invaded the Venezuelan Embassy in Brasilia in November 2019, Itamaraty did not condemn the event, but instead declared it was a disturbance caused by Maduro's diplomatic body (Chade 2020).

Prosur, although publicly advocating for democracy in the region, did not published any press release regarding the coup in Bolivia, or the social protests in Chile and Ecuador; instead, it published one recognizing these governments' attempt to protect democratic institutionalism and condemning any type of violence (Ramanzini Júnior et al. 2021).

In the current scenario of regional fragmentation due to the collapse of Unasur, no other South American instance has the institutional guarantees capable of monitoring and ensuring the validity of commitments regarding democracy protection – including Mercosur, which had already suspended Venezuela's membership in 2016, or the Lima Group, whose purpose was to follow up on the Venezuelan crisis.

Unlike previous periods when regionalism and democracy evolved from the effort to prevent the return to dictatorships by strengthening South American institutions for democracy protection, democracy in this new scenario has been used for domestic political purposes and to legitimize governments (Ramanzini Júnior et al. 2021).

In the case of Prosur, which sought to establish itself as the main instance to promote regional governance as the substitute of Unasur, it set up a different institutional design. Table 1 compares institutional features among them.

³ See United Nations Humans Rights (2021) for further details on this topic.

Table 1. Institutional frameworks of Unasur and Prosur

	Unasur	Prosur
Membership (States)	12	8
Thematic Groups	12 Sectoral Councils	6 Thematic Areas
Decision-making Process	Consensus	Absolute Majority
Constitutive Treaty	Yes	No
General Secretariat	Yes	No
Model	Intergovernmentalist and interpresidentialist	Intergovernmentalist and interpresidentialist

Source: authors' own elaboration.

There are significant changes in its composition: i) Unasur encompassed all South American countries and established 12 Sectoral Councils, whereas Prosur only encompasses eight of them and has established 6 thematic areas; ii) the decision-making process is no longer by consensus, but through absolute majority voting rule; iii) Prosur does not have a Constitutive Treaty nor a General Secretariat.

However, Prosur follows the intergovernmentalist and interpresidentialist model, which is also observed in other regional arrangements, but exacerbates it to the extent that it becomes even more responsive to national agendas. Indeed, Prosur is “an intention to adjust regionalism to the views of the groups and ideologies that support the governments of some of the countries in the region” (Ramanzini Júnior et al. 2021, 10).

Its institutional design reveals a low level of institutionalization, a less comprehensive agenda, and a shift away from decisions by consensus. Regarding the latter, this shift is better understood according to what Mijares and Nolte (2018) hypothesize on consensus-based decisions being a feature that aggravated tensions within the organization.

Due to the absence of a General Secretariat and the prominent role of the Pro Tempore Presidency in conducting Prosur's activities, from 2019-2020, Chile was responsible for structuring the six thematic areas by establishing the Annual Work Plan for each.

Throughout 2020, the Chilean PTP focused its efforts on containing the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the performance of Prosur in tackling the crisis can be negatively assessed if compared to the performance of other regional organizations. The Central American Integration System (SICA), the African Union (AU), and the EU, as comprehensive organizations, established joint work plans, adopted measures for economic recovery, and provided financial assistance to countries within 6 months of the Covid-19 outbreak (Barros et al. 2020).

In 2019, Prosur's agenda on health was focused on the areas of “healthy aging” and “digital transformation” – two subgroups within the health thematic area. Epidemiological surveillance, an issue encompassed by Isags' agenda, was not initially included in Prosur's, and it only became a subgroup in May 2021 (Prosur 2021).

Although Prosur presidents recognized the need to preserve the acquis of integration within a new framework during the First Presidential Meeting (Prosur 2019a), Prosur refused to include Venezuela in the discussions on regional governance, and Isags was no longer operational, nor had it been incorporated into Prosur, leaving South America without executive and technical institutions to properly tackle the pandemic by the time it became widespread in the region, thus favoring individual foreign donations to South American countries, mainly from China (Barros et al. 2020a). China began to promote the “mask diplomacy” with Latin American, with Venezuela receiving the largest amount of Chinese aid (Urdinez & Telias 2020).

According to Prosur’s reports on 2019-2020 activities, the pandemic delayed the thematic areas’ activities to July 2020 in order to restructure plans for the new regional and international scenario (Prosur 2020). Therefore, the promised “flexible framework” of Prosur, which was supposed to enhance regional cooperation, had even more shortcomings when providing the continuity of regional projects and better responses and preparedness capacities during health crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and during political crises (in the cases of Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador).

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to discuss the crisis in regionalism and regional governance, explaining the reasons behind Unasur’s disintegration and shedding light on how this outcome is linked to global and regional phenomena such as rising nationalism, right-wing and far-right ideologies; the return of the OAS to South America, and countries aligning to the US (especially under Donald Trump’s government); trade disintegration and political fragmentation within South America; and the decline of Brazil’s involvement in the region.

We focused on the actions of the Lima Group, Prosur, and the Leticia Pact in democracy protection, health cooperation, and combating deforestation in the Amazon, respectively. The emergence of new regional arrangements in the wake of Unasur’s collapse has not led to the replacement of its role in regional governance. This is mainly due to the lack of adequate institutional mechanisms, political disagreements, lack of budget, as well as the decline of Brazilian protagonism and the significant changes in foreign policy guidelines from 2016 onwards.

The lack of a bureaucratic structure and a proper budget in recent regional initiatives, such as the Lima Group and Prosur, reinforces the tendency of ideological instrumentalization by the president-in-office, and enhances political proselytism on the regional agenda. Moreover, these initiatives did not preserve the integration acquis of infrastructure, defense, health, among others, which then became crucial to tackle periods of crisis, as seen in South America’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic if compared to other regions.

The Lima Group, Prosur and the Leticia Pact reflect changes in regional political dynamics, and although they continue to reproduce the interpresidentialist and intergovernmental trait of Latin American regionalism, all three exacerbate such characteristics and make them strictly

circumstantial initiatives. They are all also related to the worsening of the Venezuelan crisis. Yet, governments' attempts to exclude and isolate Venezuela, identified as the main problem for South American regional governance, contributed to worsen the crisis of regional governance and to push Venezuela closer to extra-regional powers.

It reveals their limitations in leveraging states' agency power, institutionalizing space and cementing normative and policy coordination, shaping relationships among countries within a region (Tussie & Riggiozzi 2018) and giving continuity to regional projects (Nolte & Weiffen 2020). Episodes of political instability in Chile, Colombia and Peru in 2019 reveal the frailty of these instances in providing mechanisms that ensure political spaces for concertation and dialogue. Furthermore, it fosters the debate of whether the development of regional governance strongly relies on Brazil's protagonism toward South American regionalism.

Brazil has been adhering to these fragmented initiatives since the Michel Temer administration, when it joined the Lima Group. Nevertheless, Brazilian diplomacy acted to avoid more extreme stances from South American countries in the following episodes: when it discouraged Peru's initiative to uninvite Nicolás Maduro to attend the Summit of the Americas in Lima, and when it discouraged other countries to join Colombia in withdrawing from Unasur without a new arrangement to replace it.

However, in the current period, Brazilian actions toward regionalism should be analyzed according to Jair Bolsonaro's right-wing ideological biases and his alignment to the US (Saraiva 2020). Unlike previous decades, Brazilian diplomacy has not been able to contribute to converging stances in moments of crisis in the region. Jair Bolsonaro decided to officially withdraw from Unasur in 2019, when Brazil was supposed to hold the Pro Tempore Presidency for the first time since its creation. This not only demonstrates changes in Brazilian foreign policy, but symbolically represents the abandonment of a long-standing tradition that had placed South American regionalism among the top priorities in the foreign policy agenda.

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