

CEPAL after meeting with China: What is next for Latin America?

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Document prepared for the EMERICs Project

Introduction

After the III Ministerial Meeting of the Forum between the countries that make up the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and China on December 3, some questions about CELAC appear that deserve its approach and analysis: is CELAC the most important organization as for representing the interests of the countries that compose it? Does the overlapping of blocks harm union and harmony in the region? What else can be expected from CELAC in its relations with China, the United States, the European Union, and other important actors in the international political and economic system?

Common Interest, but Different Ways

Considering that CELAC is an intergovernmental mechanism for dialogue and political agreement, whose membership includes thirty-three countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, that is, more than 630 million inhabitants, the challenge of reaching agreements is not an easy task. With the commitment to advance in the gradual process of integration of the region, the balance between unity and the existing political, economic, social, and cultural diversity poses challenges that, in recent years, have seen progress and setbacks.

Since its operational launching in December 2011, CELAC has proposed to work on areas such as social development, education, nuclear disarmament, family farming, culture, finance, energy, and the environment. All of them, topics of common interest in which consensus should be sought that would allow CELAC and, above all, the region, to achieve the objective of having a better insertion and projection in the international arena. It can be said, that CELAC has been one more attempt at “post-hegemonic” regionalism that questioned the Washington Consensus, seeking to regain control of its own resources¹.

Since the VI Summit that was held in September in Mexico, the analysis of factors that harm Latin American integration has hovered: rhetoric, nationalism, and the lack of leadership to

¹ Crivelli, E. & Lo Brutto, G. (2021). La CELAC más allá del regionalismo poshegemónico. *Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios de Desarrollo*. 10(1). ISSN-e 2254-2035

carry out development in the region². In this sense, CELAC appears as another frustrated attempt at regional integration. Topics such as democracy and respect for human rights are at the center of the discrepancies between the countries, specifically in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela's matters. For instance, right-wing governments feel incompatible with sharing common spaces and forums with authoritarian regimes.

Since the arrival of the pandemic, CELAC has played a small and peripheral role, without being able to concretely capitalize on a favorable situation to demonstrate its vocation to unite and coordinate the region in the face of a common challenge. Only one international claim has been made for fair and equitable access to coronavirus vaccines and drugs. In addition, CELAC approved the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) document 'Guidelines and proposals for a health self-sufficiency plan in Latin America and the Caribbean'. However, progress can be highlighted, although in other areas, such as the creation of a Specialized Group for the Prevention and Fight against Corruption³, and the Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency⁴.

CELAC versus Another Regional Bloc

CELAC seeks to complement the existing regional architecture based on non-duplication of efforts, to enhance common elements and foster complementarity. However, not a few have argued that CELAC should be strengthened to address the deficiencies of the Organization of American States (OEA), considering that there are no democratic practices in the latter, alluding to the influence and interference of the United States in matters considered strategic for the block. Even, from CELAC, many have suggested that the OEA should be replaced by another similar body without the United States or Canada's participation, or else, reissue the European Union's experience, adapting it to local particularities. In addition, the possibility of recreating the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which had been scrapped in 2005.

Whether or not CELAC competes with other integrationist blocs, what stands out is the fact that Latin American governments have avoided strong regional institutions and joint sovereignty, opting instead for intergovernmental cooperation, to achieve greater state capacity with which to negotiate in hegemonic systems. This goes in parallel with the current crisis of regionalism in Latin America, leading to several years of coexistence of different types of regionalisms, articulated from different objectives and with institutional trajectories that have been different in their dynamics, beyond the growing overlap in membership terms and / or agendas.

Relationship with Extra Regional Actors

At the VI Summit, it was demonstrated, in the case of some countries, an alignment against the United States, a country that has a clear vision about the fact that prosperity in the region is crucial to guarantee the stability of security inside and outside its borders. In addition, its interest and concern could be growing about how the region is approaching to China. However, the United States has not specified its supposed interest in the region, even during the current administration of Joe Biden, a person who knows Latin America very well as few, especially during his trips to the region when he was Vice-president during the Barack Obama's administration. From CELAC, especially from Mexico as President pro tempore, a call has been

² Malamud, C. & Núñez, R. (2021). La integración latinoamericana: irrelevancia tras el intento de liderazgo mexicano. *Análisis del Real Instituto Elcano*. 84. ISSN-e 1696-3466

³ "La CELAC crea un grupo anticorrupción para Latinoamérica" (Octubre 27, 2021). *Agencia EFE*. <https://www.efe.com/efe/usa/mexico/la-celac-crea-un-grupo-anticorrupcion-para-latinoamerica/50000100-4662285>

⁴ Borrego Llorente, M. (2021). La Agencia Latinoamericana y Caribeña del Espacio: Un modelo de cooperación regional en beneficio de las personas. *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*. <https://revistafal.com/la-agencia-latinoamericana-y-caribena-del-espacio/>

made to the United States to lift the blockade it has imposed on Cuba, which does not help to bring both parties closer, due to the iron stance of the Americans to continue with the sanctions.

The European Union is, for some Latin American leaders, a model for CELAC. This is because it is not an "ideological club" and thus democratic values prevail, with an integration that was first economically and then politically developed. As for the meetings between the two, they have been suspended since 2015, even though this year a virtual meeting was held between leaders of Latin America and the Caribbean (but not grouped within CELAC) and the European Union. The European bloc offers Latin America comparative advantages over other powers, mainly regarding social, productive, and ecological transition. For Europe, given its need to create functional coalitions to reform the World Trade Organization (WTO) and reinforce the agreements of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), Latin America is a fundamental partner for its objectives⁵.

China has undoubtedly been one of the main extra-regional actors in terms of interaction with CELAC. In fact, the recent developments of CELAC would derive, to a great extent, from its experience of rapprochement with the Asian country. The China-CELAC Forum, established in 2014, has since made it possible to strengthen relations between both parties, which seek to be characterized by equality, mutual benefit, innovation, openness, and well-being for the peoples. For China, the approach in search of support for its policy of recognition of one China is very important, which implies that the countries break diplomatic relations with Taiwan, something that has been achieved with countries such as Panama, El Salvador and, more recently, Nicaragua. In addition, the importance of China has a prominent point in the economic aspect, since it is the second commercial partner of the region, apart from being a key strategic investor.

Conclusion and Future Expectations

Nowadays, Latin America and the Caribbean region presents a plural, complex and heterogeneous mosaic of regional projects, being CELAC an example that has tried to be a mechanism for dialogue and political agreement, articulating (which works based on consensus), advancing on the convergence of common actions and interests, and facilitating a greater presence of Latin America and the Caribbean in the world.

Notwithstanding, in this mosaic of integrationist attempts, neither CELAC nor another bloc are the most important ones. To achieve this, a pending task is the creation of a roadmap with the concrete steps to advance in the integration process, with the definition of objectives and values to deepen the meaning of regional integration. Thus, the regional framework presents a complex scenario which, added to the internal dynamics in each country, means that common and concerted responses continue to be elusive. For example, the situations in Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela. In this scenario, the superposition of different blocks and the non-prevalence of one over another is prevailing. The overlapping of regional integration initiatives does nothing more than hinder the CELAC's objective of regional integration, with the existence of different interests in concrete terms, over and above what was dictated in the initial objectives.

It will be important to follow the evolution of CELAC in 2022 and, for example, the roles of the main regional powers: Mexico and its apparent attempt to be a leader in the region, even after its role as President pro tempore of CELAC during 2020-21, and Brazil, currently outside CELAC under Jair Bolsonaro's administration because of his negative view of CELAC's progress; furthermore, in 2022, Brazil will be a political protagonist with its presidential elections. Here, a

⁵ Guerra Rondón, L. (2021). Multilateralismo y Asociación birregional entre la Unión Europea y América Latina y El Caribe. EU-LAC Policy Brief, 2. Septiembre 2021. https://www.institutdesameriques.fr/sites/default/files/documents_actualites/eulac_policybrief-no2-es-5.pdf

new question arises: what could happen to Brazil and its foreign policy towards Latin America if Luis Inacio Lula da Silva returns to power? In this scenario, a return from Brazil to CELAC is imaginable and, with it, a greater boost to regional articulation and integration.

The region is expected to increase its cooperation ties with China, mainly. Regarding the United States and the European Union, their sanctions on countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, do not end up aligning all Latin American countries in a strengthening of cooperation. On the other hand, it is recommended that CELAC could be able to re-establish ties with other actors, for example, Korea and Japan, with various topics that may be of interest, such as innovation and technology, climate change, vaccines, among others. This author advises the approach with ASEAN, since Southeast Asia and Latin America are developing regions, and it is perfectly possible to work under the framework of South-South Cooperation. The same applies to CELAC and its potential link with Africa.

Latin America and the Caribbean should take note of the international context which, aggravated by the pandemic, has been characterized by polarity and tension, to the detriment of international cooperation. Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the differences between the countries, must have a strong voice to enforce their values and rights, marking their importance in the international system. Latin America and the Caribbean must be clear about its position in the world, what it can offer in the framework of international cooperation, and, in that sense, what is the CELAC's role in it. To do this, it will be necessary to have regional leaders, put ideologies aside and join voices and actions in search of a common prosperous development.

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