





Latin American regionalism and integration in the ongoing process of hegemonic transition

Giusseppe Lo Brutto

Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, México  

Eduardo Crivelli Minutti

Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, México  

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Resumen: Al observar el crítico balance latinoamericano y caribeño del siglo xxi, que se disputa entre el repliegue de los Estados Unidos y el ascenso de China en la escena política y económica mundial y regional, surge la pregunta sobre ¿qué rumbo está tomando el regionalismo y los procesos de integración regional en América Latina y el Caribe en ese escenario? Aquí la hipótesis es que el regionalismo y los procesos de integración regional no pueden ser entendidos como procesos “autonómicos”, es decir, de habilitación de consensos, solo entre los distintos actores políticos regionales, sino en la convergencia con las potencias extrarregionales que se disputan la hegemonía mundial, incluso en medio de una absoluta diversidad ideológica. Por lo tanto, este trabajo tiene el objetivo de develar los cambios del regionalismo y los esquemas de integración regional guiados por la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA) y la Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC) ante el anómalo e intersticial proceso de transición hegemónica en curso que parece estar delineándose de los Estados Unidos hacia China, como las referencias extrarregionales que sin duda están marcando una pauta en el regionalismo latinoamericano y caribeño del siglo xxi.

Palabras clave: Transición hegemónica; regionalismo; integración regional; América Latina; OEA; CELAC.

ENG Regionalismo latinoamericano e integración en el actual proceso de transición hegemónica

ENG Abstract: When observing the critical balance of Latin America and the Caribbean in the 21st century, caught between the withdrawal of the United States and the rise of China in the global and regional political and economic stage, one cannot but wonder on what course the processes of regional integration and regionalism will follow in Latin America and the Caribbean in this context. Our hypothesis is that regionalism and the processes of regional integration cannot be understood as “autonomist” processes –that is, as mere processes of facilitating consensus between different regional political actors– but must rather be perceived as a convergence with the extra-regional powers that dispute world hegemony, even amidst an absolute ideological diversity. Therefore, this work looks into the changes taking place within regionalism and the schemes of regional integration led by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in the face of the ongoing anomalous and interstitial process of hegemonic transition from the United States to China that appears to be taking place; these are, undoubtedly, the extra-regional references shaping Latin America and the Caribbean regionalism in the 21st century.

Keywords: hegemonic transition; regionalism; regional integration, Latin America, OAS, CELAC.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. The historical structure of Latin American regionalism. 3. The integration of Latin America and the Caribbean in dispute. 4. China and the United States in the regional balances of the 21st century. 5. Final considerations. 6. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction

The 15th of July 2026 will mark the 200-year anniversary of the Congress of Panama, called by Simon Bolivar to bring together the new American states that were emerging at that moment from the ruins of the Spanish viceroyalties in America; therefore, in a sense, it will also be a commemoration of the bicentennial of American regionalism. If one looks back at the development of regionalism and the processes of regional integration in the continent during that period, one will observe an obscure variety of models and initiatives and, at the same time, a great accumulation of new facts which are still far from complete¹. Thus, even though the plan outlined by Bolivar has undergone considerable changes, the idea persists that political agreements between the countries in the region on issues of common interest must be reinforced and systematized, even more so in the face of the withdrawal of the US and the increased presence of China in the regional and global economic and political scene.

Let us not forget that the Organization of American States (OAS) has aligned itself with the positions of the US since the second half of the 20th century, with the consensus of the political elites of the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region; in fact, the organization's secretary generals have considerably influenced political debate in the countries of the region. As a result, the OAS has been criticized for meddling in the domestic politics of states as well as for condoning the antidemocratic actions of certain military governments who placed the fight against communism and other dissident groups in the region at the center of their agenda. The drive of certain political actors in the LAC Region to promote a different or alternative regionalism not involving the US led to the establishment of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century; this seems to have resonated with the project of a new world order pursued by China, particularly given that the Chinese government has favored dialogue with this regional organization to assert its influence in the region (Crivelli and Lo Brutto, 2021: 253).

When observing this critical balance in global and regional politics, one cannot help but ponder on the course of regionalism in LAC at the dawn of the third decade of the 21st century. Hence the hypothesis that regionalism and the processes of regional integration cannot be understood as "autonomist" processes consisting in the facilitation of consensus in different spaces of intraregional dialogue, but that they rather develop on the basis of the convergence of different extra-regional references, mainly of powers that compete for global hegemony and pursue alliances at all costs to strengthen their world order project, even amidst an absolute ideological diversity. Therefore, this work aims at unveiling the changes taking place in regionalism and in the schemes of regional integration led by the OAS and the CELAC in the face of the ongoing anomalous and interstitial process of hegemonic transition. One which is taking place within the context of a shift in the focus of the global economy from the US towards China and East Asia, the extra-regional references that are undoubtedly shaping global and regional politics in the 21st century.

Following a methodological framework that is based on the approach proposed by Robert Cox (1983), showing the relation between world orders, states, and social forces, we divide the article into four sections to highlight a process of regional integration taking place on the fringes of the prevailing hegemonic order. In the first section we reflect on the historical structure of the processes of regional integration and shed light on the motivations that led to the emergence of the OAS and the CELAC at different historical moments. In the second section we outline the evolution of both organizations in the 21st century at the intraregional and extra-regional level; we describe LAC as a contested region and, in this sense, speak about what both schemes could represent in terms of autonomy. The third part unveils the interests of each of these mechanisms in the broader context of 21st-century US-China relations within the region's geopolitical and geo-economic balances. The work closes with a fourth section of conclusions which highlights the elements that allow us to rethink regionalism in the LAC region today.

2. The historical structure of Latin American regionalism

To paraphrase Robert Cox (1983), regionalism and the processes of regional integration can act as an anchor for a global hegemonic strategy, that is, for regimes with a state so powerful it manages to impose its rules upon the rest of the interstate system to serve the needs of the economic groups operating within it; these rules serve different interests, as well as the universalization of their politics. Thus, regionalism and the processes of regional integration are part of a historical structure defined by a hegemonic power, based on a complex combination of material forces, ideas and institutions that can be adopted, resisted, or entirely rejected, but never ignored. Ernst Haas (1958) rightly argued that regional integration is a process through which political actors from different national contexts are convinced to shift their allegiances, expectations and behaviors towards a new institutionalized center that possesses or requests jurisdiction over pre-existing national states (Haas, 1958: 16).

Therefore, this change of allegiance and the redefinition of interests occur firstly among the national elites that find themselves "trapped" between the efforts of cooperation, shifting their support and allegiance from

¹ Since the 19th century, LAC countries have experimented with different forms of integration: initially under the scheme of a closed and defensive regionalism, the frustrated ideals of "regional unity" expressed in *Letter from Jamaica* by liberator Simon Bolivar (1815) resonating in the Monroe Doctrine, and now under one fostered by the US government to keep at bay the influence of European powers in the American continent. It is under this scheme that the First International Pan-American Conference took place in Washington in 1890, where the International Union of American Republics was established with a permanent secretariat in the city; later, in 1910, this became the Pan-American Union, which in turn gave rise to the OAS in 1948 as a superior economic and political Last consulted: body in the continent.

national authorities to community institutions in exchange for the satisfaction of vital interests (Webb, 1983: 17-18). That is why, at the beginning of the 20th century, the closed regionalism that had prevailed in LAC since the end of the previous century translated as an implementation of a series of politics of industrialization to substitute for imports, whereby the political and economic elites sought the associated development of the entire American continent².

Thus, the Conference of Chapultepec³ of 1945 lay the foundations for the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, which became the Pan-American Union of the Organization of American States (OAS) a year later. It contemplated a process of institutionalization of pan-Americanism within the hemisphere's policies of security and of the containment of communism, which characterized US geostrategic interests during the Cold War. Perhaps the most representative example of this was the expulsion of Cuba in 1962, the ideology of the new revolutionary government considered incompatible with the values that the US-led inter-American system sought to promote.

As Cox (1981) argues, it is worth remembering that institutions can find themselves out of step regarding other facets of reality, and this can undermine their efficiency as a means of conflict resolution and, therefore, their hegemonic function (Cox, 1981: 137). Thus, arguably, along with institutions, regionalism and the processes of regional integration can also reflect hegemony, but they cannot be synonymous with hegemony. That is why, when the economic and commercial factor became crucial in the shift towards more pragmatic models of integration, the defensive spirit of the OAS became outdated and had to reinvent itself to become aligned with the "new", "open-type regionalism" that the US governments were promoting when fostering neoliberal policies after the Cold War.

According to Andres Serbin, Alfonso Laneydi and Haroldo Jr Ramanzini (2012), this open-type regionalism prioritized commercial exchange as the central element of integration and cooperation between the countries in the region (Serbin; Laneydi and Ramanzini, 2012: 11). That is why, with the promotion of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), LAC economies committed to opening, seeking to become more competitive through a decrease in tariffs, and even tried to create customs unions through superregional mechanisms in order to further penetrate the global economy through subregional free trade agreements⁴ (Gratius, 2012: 15).

It is within this new scheme of open regionalism that the Southern Common Market emerges –established by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay in 1991⁵– as well as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) –signed by Mexico, the US and Canada– amongst other regional tendencies favoring trade, which gradually undermined autonomous regional processes in general and, more specifically, the paradigm of defensive regionalism fostered by the OAS. In other words, open regionalism led to a reform of the pre-existing schemes of integration, such as the Andean Community (CAN), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), or the System of Central American Integration (SICA); all the aforementioned would become articulated within the framework of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which served as an umbrella for all bilateral and subregional free-trade agreements in the region.

However, in time, the neoliberal policies became laden with irregularities and asymmetries, unable to eradicate commercial hurdles despite efforts to eliminate tariff barriers; as a result, free-trade areas became more of a rhetoric than a reality. According to Atilio Boron (2014), the governments with a clear left-leaning tendency which emerged in LAC during the first decade of the 21st century gained visibility for conducting an internal reordering in their countries and, above all, for rethinking foreign relations, politically and diplomatically supporting regional and subregional alliances through a geopolitical perspective that openly opposes the Washington Consensus (Borón, 2014: 26-27).

Thus, the open questioning of the Washington Consensus and of the paradigm of neoliberal integration led to the construction of a new regional architecture; the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance of our Americas (ALBA-TCP) in 2004 as an alternative to the FTAA is an example of this, symbolizing a turn towards a more meaningful participation of LAC in "integration" as a project that is more political and ideological and clearly opposes US interests in the region. Antonio Sanahuja (2008) perceives a depletion of open regionalism that gives way to a new integrationist scheme, one that is defined as post-neoliberal and is later analyzed by Pia Piggiozzi and Sandra Tussie (2012) through the concept of post-hegemonic regionalism. The latter emerged through the observation of the premises of comprehensive development, popular mobilization, and citizen participation, in a broader scheme of regional political cooperation (Riggiozzi and Tussie, 2012: 34).

² Also known as the "Inter-American Conference on the Problems of War and Peace," it took place in Mexico in 1945. The conference sought to define the guiding principles of the economic cooperation of the American countries with the rest of the world, but the initiative ended up focusing more on the idea that any aggression against a Member State would receive a collective response from the rest of the acceding countries.

³ In 1960, the OAS sanctioned the government of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo for participating in the *coup* against Venezuelan president Romulo Betancourt. Later, in 1962, Cuba was expelled from the organization through a resolution that stipulated that the adherence of any member of the OAS to Marxism-Leninism was incompatible with the inter-American system, thus undermining pan-Americanism and multilateral collaboration in the continent. However, the organization did not exclude or interfere in any of the military dictatorships that were established in Latin America and the Caribbean, not even following the well-documented reports of the Inter-American Human Rights Committee on the atrocities perpetrated by many of said governments in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁴ The turning point in regional processes occurred when the countries of the region, especially Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, asked international creditors for large sums of money in order to modernize their internal production facilities.

⁵ Venezuela joined later in 2006, but is currently suspended from the block, and Bolivia is in the process of accession.

This context explains the shift of MERCOSUR towards a more progressive approach in 2006, as well as the emergence of new regional integration processes such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2008 and CELAC in 2011. Despite their different scopes and objectives, these new models coincided in that they left a strong political and social mark and began to compete in regional politics with the old schemes that remained anchored in the Washington Consensus, turning LAC into a contested region.

3. The integration of Latin America and the Caribbean in dispute

As regional processes grew and pursued integration, the perception prevailed that, due to their very nature, the tackling of issues of economic interdependence required a multilateral scheme between governments; as a result, interdependence fomented the capacity of states to adapt to be more prepared for multilateral cooperation (Rosenau, 1976: 48-49). In other words, regional and global politics led by competitive and self-ish national interests seemed to turn to the domestic sphere in the face of processes of interdependence; this sphere was considered a “permissive” context which encouraged “global political processes” to “approach domestic political processes” (Hanrieder, 1978: 1278-1279).

The process of interdependence and the strengthening of relations between American countries fostered by the OAS was organized from its permanent headquarters in Washington and regional offices in the 35 member states, who met at varied intervals in the American International Conferences, until they were replaced in 1970 by the organization’s General Assembly. However, the end of the Cold War thrust the OAS into an existential crisis, for the wave of democratizations that took place at the end of the 1980s freed the organization from the silence imposed on it by the tutelage of the US, steering it more and more towards the observation of electoral processes to ensure and preserve its credibility (Long, 2020).

David Held (1996) was right in saying that the changes in how international and transnational organizations develop reflect the transformations in the structure of global politics (Held, 1996: 411). Thus, the OAS reinvented itself to try and implement the FTAA, which was set to come into effect in 2005; as of 1994 the Summits of the Americas began to take place within the framework of this organization, uniting the heads of state and government of the hemisphere on a regular basis to debate on commercial and diplomatic issues of continental importance⁶ (Table 1).

Table 1. Summits of the Americas

Year	Summit	Location	OAS Secretary General	Main objectives/achievements
1994	1°	Miami	Cesar Gaviria (Colombia)	The Declaration of Principles established a pact for development and prosperity through economic integration, sustainable development, and the protection of the environment
1996	Sustainable Development:	Santa Cruz de la Sierra	Cesar Gaviria (Colombia)	Establish a common vision for the future in accordance with the concepts of sustainable development
1998	2°	Santiago	Cesar Gaviria (Colombia)	Consolidate and improve the quality of democracy, respect for human rights and the road towards an Area of Free Trade in the Americas
2001	3°	Quebec	Cesar Gaviria (Colombia)	Prepare the Interamerican Democratic Charter, which reinforced the instruments of the OAS to actively defend representative democracy
2004	Extraordinary	Monterrey	Miguel Ángel Rodríguez (Costa Rica)	Focused on three areas: (i) equitable economic growth to reduce poverty, (ii) social development and (iii) democratic governability
2005	4°	Mar del Plata	José Miguel Insulza (Chile)	A framework for growth through employment, jobs to combat poverty, the training of the workforce, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, and the strengthening of democratic governability
2009	5°	Puerto España	José Miguel Insulza (Chile)	Commitment to tackle the current economic and financial crisis with the goal of promoting human prosperity
2012	6°	Cartagena	José Miguel Insulza (Chile)	Focused on the importance of physical integration and regional cooperation for development and on overcoming the challenges of poverty, inequalities, citizen security, disasters, access to and use of technologies
2015	7°	Panama	Luis Almagro (Uruguay)	Discussed the different axes that underpin Prosperity with Equity: health, education, energy, the environment, migration, security, citizen participation and democratic governability
2018	8°	Lima	Luis Almagro (Uruguay)	Establishes the Lima Commitment: Democratic governability in the face of corruption
2022	9°	Los Angeles	Luis Almagro (Uruguay)	Aimed to commit concrete actions that dramatically improve pandemic response and resilience, promote a green and equitable recovery, bold strong and inclusive democracies, and address the root causes of irregular migration

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Summits of the Americas (2022).

⁶ From its creation, the OAS sought to facilitate decision making, dialogue and integration in America under the idea of strengthening peace and security and consolidating democracy, promoting human rights and social and economic development in favor of the sustainable growth of the continent.

It must be noted that during its 39th ordinary session period, in 2009, the OAS General Assembly issued Resolution AG/RES. 2438 (XXXIX-O/09) which annulled the exclusion of Cuba from the inter-American system that had been in force since 1962; this did not lead to the automatic reincorporation of the island to the organization, but it did launch a series of dialogues for its return (OAS General Assembly, 2009). Nevertheless, on that same year, Honduras was suspended as a member of the organization after the *coup d'état* that rejected the OAS ultimatum to restore the presidency of Manuel Zelaya, who was forced to exile. It was not until 2011 that Honduras was reincorporated in the organization, following an agreement which allowed the return of former president Zelaya to the country.

The OAS also supported the establishment of the Lima Group in 2017 –initially formed by Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru, and later on also joined by Guyana, Haiti, Santa Lucia and Bolivia– creating a front along with the European Union and the Venezuelan opposition, also endorsed by the US, Granada and Jamaica, to question the institutional order in Venezuela and demand the liberation of political prisoners and the call to free elections in the country (SFA-Mexico, 2018). Under the rhetorical umbrella of democracy and of the fight against corruption,⁷ the OAS came together with certain right-leaning presidents, such as Argentina's Mauricio Macri, Brazil's Michel Temer, or Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos, amongst other members of the Lima Group, who called for the non-recognition of the elections held in Venezuela in 2017 by the government of Nicolas Maduro.

To this we must add the constant criticism of OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro regarding the situation in Venezuela, characterized by Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro as “attacks of interference”. That is why, considering this organization as an instrument used by the US to intervene in its territory together with the right-leaning governments, the Venezuelan government decided to abandon the OAS in April 2017 and focus its energies on the CELAC, which, through this process, seemed to suddenly recover the leading role in the region. In the 9th Summit of the Americas, held in Los Angeles in June 2022, the US did not invite Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua accused of having undemocratically elected leaders. This prompted the leaders of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, and El Salvador to refuse to attend and send lower-profile delegations. Other leaders also declared their inconformity with the exclusion action of the US.

Unlike the OAS, the CELAC was not conceived as an international organization, that is, it did not require a binding agreement amongst its members (*pacta sunt servanda*); therefore, it has neither a permanent institutional organization that is independent from governments nor a bureaucratic body with headquarters or regulatory-prescriptive norms that grant it a defined legal structure.

The CELAC traces its origins to the Permanent Mechanism for Political Last consulted: and Concertation, better known as the Rio Group of 1986⁸, which had 24 members from Latin America and the Caribbean, holding annual meetings to generate a space for dialogue and mediation of interests in the region. In 2010, the XXI Rio Summit took place in conjunction with the II Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development within the framework of the Latin American and Caribbean Unity Summit, in Playa del Carmen, Mexico, having therefore the creation of the successor body of the Rio Group: The CELAC.

The CELAC is articulated based on regular summits and a *Pro-tempore* Presidency, with its troika,⁹ as well as other ordinary (thematic) meetings of ministers or representatives and the sectoral working groups, constituting the forms of operation of this space. To date, eight summits of heads of state and government have been held in the context of CELAC, as well as two summits with the European Union and three Fora with China (Table 2).

Table 2. CELAC Summits

Year	Summit	Place	<i>Pro-tempore</i> presidency	Main objectives / achievements
2010	Creation Summit	Playa del Carmen	-	Agreement of creation of the CELAC, with the subsequent disappearance of the Rio Group
2011	Establishment Summit	Caracas	-	Official Constitution of the CELAC
2012	I CELAC-European Union	Santiago	Chile	For the first time, the region of LAC was represented by a unified voice in dialogue with an extra-regional actor.
2013	I	Santiago	Chile	The Santiago Declaration, which recognizes the commitment to eradicate hunger and poverty in the region
2014	II	La Habana	Cuba	With the <i>Pro-tempore</i> Presidency of the CELAC, Cuba obtained the support of the region following the embargo imposed in the 1960s

⁷ The OAS has insisted on strengthening “democratic governability in the face of corruption”, which, for example, has been the main theme of the Lima Commitment that came out of the 8th Summit of the Americas, held in the Peruvian city. The Summit sought to consolidate the commitment of the 35 member states through three main axes: (i) to strengthen democratic institutions and thus prevent and combat corruption, (ii) to develop a culture of transparency, citizen participation and prevention of corruption, and (iii) to promote the use of new technologies to facilitate digital government and thus promote transparency, interaction with citizens and accountability (OAS, 2018).

⁸ In turn, the Rio Group was created as a replacement for the activities of the Contadora Group of 1983 (Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama) and the Contadora Support Group of 1985 (Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Uruguay), which sought promote peace in Central America.

⁹ The CELAC has a *Pro-tempore* Presidency that is assisted by an “Amplified Troika”, constituted by the state that holds the presidency, the state formerly occupying this position and the one which will assume it afterwards, as well as by a member state of CARICOM, represented by the one holding the *Pro-Tempore* presidency. This is the CELAC quartette that constitutes the *Pro-Tempore* Presidency.

Year	Summit	Place	Pro-tempore presidency	Main objectives / achievements
2015	III	Belen	Costa Rica	Welcomed the restoration of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US and celebrated the region's strengthening of relations with China
2015	I CELAC-China Forum	Beijing	Costa Rica	Endorsed the strategic commitment with the Asian country to diversify political relations in the LAC region
2016	IV	Quito	Ecuador	Focused on food security, drug trafficking, migration, energy development and the environment
2017	V	Punta Cana	Dominican R.	Touched on issues of food security, nutrition, the eradication of hunger and the fight against poverty
2018	-	Cancelled	Salvador	-
2018	II CELAC-European Union	Brussels	Salvador	Strengthened biregional relations
2018	II CELAC-China Forum	Santiago de Chile	El Salvador	Invitation to CELAC members to join <i>The Belt and Road Initiative</i>
2019	-	Cancelled	Bolivia	-
2021	VI	Mexico City	Mexico	Focused on issues of contribution and international cooperation to mitigate migration and improve living conditions for those living in member states, strengthening the economy, and promoting mutual aid by the more developed countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic
2021	III China-CELAC Forum	Virtual	Mexico	The declaration and joint action plan focused on cooperation in key areas such as agriculture, trade and investments, culture, health, and education. Actions to combat COVID-19.
2023	VII	Buenos Aires	Argentina	The Buenos Aires Declaration expresses the region's shared vision on a wide range of issues, including post-pandemic economic recovery, food and energy security, health strategy, environmental cooperation, science and technology, digital transformation, infrastructure, among others.

Source: author's elaboration based on CELAC Summits.

At the express request of the Lima Group, the 3rd CELAC-EU Summit –which was to be held in October 2017– was postponed, exacerbating the ideological confrontation that led to the cancellation of numerous sectoral and ministerial meetings. This even led to the cancellation of the 6th Summit of Heads of State and Government, whose five previous editions had been held on an annual basis without interruptions. A consensus was reached during the 11th Meeting of Chancellors to elect the 2017 *Pro-tempore* Presidency, but then no consensus was reached on who would preside over the integrationist mechanism in 2018. This, combined with the fact that no member state wished to assume that year's presidency, led to El Salvador holding the position for a year longer than stipulated.

This ultimately harmed the organization's relations with extra-regional partners, as in the case of the 3rd CELAC-EU Summit, set to take place in October 2017 in El Salvador but postponed due to internal divisions within the mechanism (Duarte, 2019). What did take place in this context was the 2nd CELAC-China Forum (2018), where the Chinese government extended a formal invitation to the countries constituting this regional initiative to join the ambitious *Belt and Road Initiative* project, which promotes an important scheme of financing and investments in infrastructure to create a set of maritime and land links connecting China to the different regions of the world.

Despite the expiry of the deadline for the formal withdrawal of Venezuela from the OAS¹⁰ on 5 June 2018, this inter-American organization issued a resolution in which it did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the Venezuelan presidential elections held in May 2018. Furthermore, the OAS endorsed the accusations of fraud which cut short the 2019 presidential elections in Bolivia, leading to the resignation and exile of President Evo Morales. The organization's constant meddling also led Nicaragua to announce its withdrawal from the OAS in November 2021, especially after Secretary General Luis Almagro qualified the elections of spring 2018 and 2021 as "illegitimate". In short, the internal conflicts of the OAS, particularly those referring to Venezuela and Nicaragua and to complaints made by Bolivia, are rooted in the rejection of US imperialism in the region.

In line with the US and the OAS, Jair Bolsonaro's government decided to suspend Brazil's participation in CELAC in 2020, citing the organization's inability to protect democracy. However, the Brazilian president sought to strengthen his relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia, this affected the convergence of common visions in the OAS with the United States¹¹. Without Brazil, the 6th CELAC Summit of Heads of State and Government, which took place in Mexico, focused on issues linked to the distribution of and access to vaccines for COVID-19 in the region and on the creation of a Latin American space agency; but the matter that

¹⁰ Once the fundamental statutes of the OAS have been admonished, there is a two-year period during which all debts, in this case amounting to US\$12 million, must be paid.

¹¹ Despite the refusal of the United States, Bolsonaro met with Putin showing interest in Russian nuclear power plants, preventing discussion of the Ukraine crisis (Galarraga, 2022).

had everyone's attention was the relationship of the states of the LAC region with the US and Canada. In his opening speech, the Mexican President defended the idea of replacing OAS with the CELAC turning it into "something resembling the economic community that preceded today's European Union" and stated that, ideally, economic integration with the US and Canada should be attained within the context of respect for sovereignties (Sanchez, 2021).

In 2023, with the new Lula government, Brazil returned to CELAC and participated in its VII summit of Buenos Aires, marked by the tension over the future of MERCOSUR and the political crisis that Peru has been experiencing since 2021. The small Caribbean state of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, an ally of Nicaragua, succeeds Argentina in the pro-tempore presidency of 2024 (Centenera, 2023). However, it is now feared that with the new presidency of Javier Milei in Argentina, and Lula in power in Brazil, the relationship that Fernández and Bolsonaro had in regional politics could be reversed (Restivo, 2023).

Thus, perhaps the process through which political actors shift their allegiances, expectations and activities *vis-a-vis* central political institutions is not geared only from within the region—that is autonomously, by the elites, political parties, trade unions, corporate groups or social movements—as Haas (1958) argued, but rather depends to a great extent on the historical structures and economic and political powers that put pressure from the outside to increase their influence in the region's fragile balances.

4. China and the United States in the regional balances of the 21st century

During the second decade of the 21st century, the OAS seems determined to block Venezuela from regional politics, mainly through the non-recognition of the Nicolas Maduro government, and is also closing in on its allies, supporting for example the application of the Democratic Charter on Nicaragua, urging the Ortega government to free political prisoners and allow a "mission of good offices" into the country. This scenario of polarization reduces the analysis of regional politics to the split between progressist or pro-Maduro postures and right-wing, pro-Washington tendencies¹².

In this process, the controversial role of Luis Almagro as secretary general of the OAS stands out¹³. His actions do not seem to pursue a negotiated and pacific solution to the Venezuelan crisis or an amelioration of the situation in Nicaragua; they rather favor the politics of enclosure and promote the exit of Maduro or Ortega, harming the image of the organization as a credible and neutral inter-American actor and pinning it to the ups and downs of US foreign policy in relation to Venezuela and Nicaragua. The OAS has a very close relationship with the US. The US and Canada have been covering over 80% of the organization's operational expenses from the moment it was established. In 2020, the OAS received more than 115 billion USD to finance projects linked to democracy and governability, human rights, multidimensional security, comprehensive development, administration, as well as executive operations and support to member states. Over 84 billion USD (84.147 billion USD) of this amount was provided by the US for the organization's operation, while Canada contributed over 15 billion USD (15.249 billion USD) for multilateral actions (Hernandez, 2021). Therefore, its enormous reliance on US money for its operation is more important to the OAS than the convergence of the political decisions of member states.

The divisions within the OAS ultimately harmed the overall processes of regional integration and led to the paralysis of regional initiatives launched from the Left, mainly the ALBA-TCP, which largely depended on the economic and political potential of Venezuela. Furthermore, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, and later Ecuador chose to withdraw from UNASUR and, in its place, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay and Peru promoted in 2019 the Forum for the Progress of South America (PROSUR) as a new form of regional articulation launched from the Right. However, in presenting itself as the interlocutor and natural platform of the region's countries, as a strategic and intergovernmental political (and geopolitical) component, the CELAC acted as a facilitator of agreements of extra-regional co-operation such as the cooperation fora held with China (Vadell, 2018: 18).

Unlike the less-than-friendly discourse of the US in the region, China has approached LAC countries through political dialogue, trade agreements and the financing of infrastructure. Even though there was no lack of diplomatic and commercial approaches between China and LAC during the Cold War, the close relationship of the countries of this region with the US obstructed the Asian country's penetration into the western hemisphere (Hongbo, 2017: 281). Today, the region has become a diplomatic battlefield, mainly because Chinese diplomacy has been particularly interested in LAC states changing their policy of recognizing Taiwan to recognize "One China". At least at the dawn of the 21st century, 13 out of the 18 countries that recognized the island—considered by the Chinese government a rebel province—were in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁴

¹² To escape this bipolar logic, Anabella Busso (2021) suggests looking at the "original flaws" of the Lima Group as a multilateral forum, which does not imply ignoring the magnitude of the Venezuelan crisis but, rather, reflecting on the characteristics that regional mechanisms should have to contribute to a negotiated, pacific, and democratic solution. A closer look at the Lima Group reveals it was boosted by the Trump administration after a set of countries failed to activate the Inte-American Democratic Charter within the OAS, citing the rupture of the constitutional order in Venezuela. Therefore, the Lima Group aimed at a prolongation of the crisis, supporting the Venezuelan opposition, demanding the liberation of political prisoners and the organization of free elections, and offering humanitarian aid (Busso, 2021).

¹³ In June 2023, Almagro was questioned after being accused of having a romantic relationship with a collaborator. In 2023, the external investigation to which the Secretary General of the OAS appeared demonstrated that he did not violate OAS regulations. The US supported the conclusions.

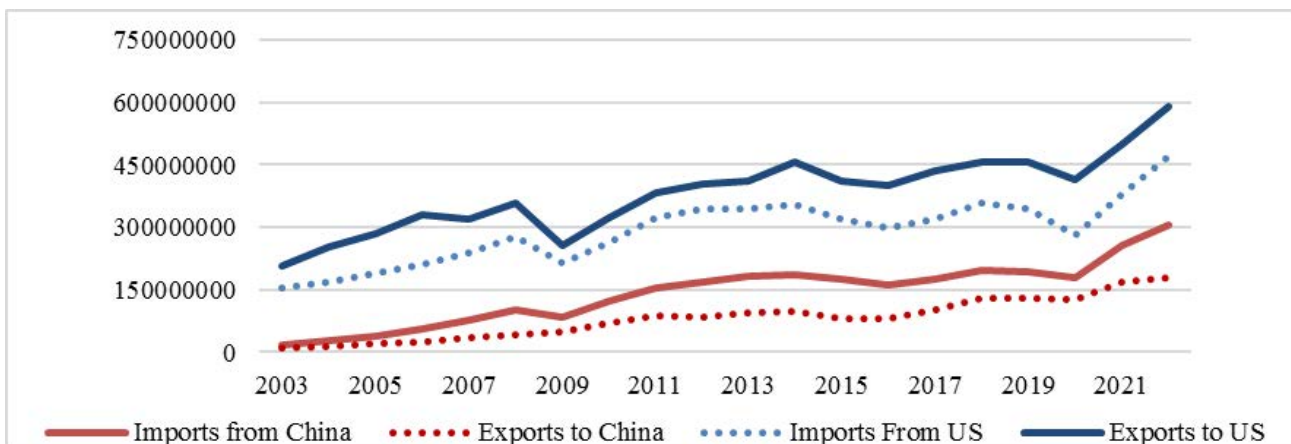
¹⁴ The countries that recognize the People's Republic of China ("One China") include Cuba (since 1960), Chile (1970), Ecuador, Peru (1971), Argentina, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico (1972), Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela (1974), Surinam (1976), Barbados (1977), Colombia (1980), Antigua and Barbuda (1983), Bolivia (1985), Uruguay (1988), Bahamas (1997), Dominica (2004), Granada (2005),

That is why the Chinese government has insisted on its partners maintaining a policy of recognizing “One China”, with more or less success in this diplomatic field. For example, Costa Rica recognized “One China” in 2007, after more than 60 years of relations with Taiwan; the same occurred between 2017 and 2018, when Panama, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, aligned with US interests in the recognition of the island, changed their diplomatic relations to recognize the continental Chinese government and even signed memoranda of understanding and contracts that significantly increased the commercial and political position of the Asian country in Central America without previously informing the US. The fact is that China has become an increasing attraction in the region, 12 out of the 24 LAC countries having established diplomatic relations with the Chinese state¹⁵.

On a multilateral level, the Chinese Government actively engages in various regional organizations. In 2008, China attained full membership status in the Inter-American Development Bank and has maintained its status as a permanent observer at the OAS since 2004¹⁶. Additionally, China has established a Last consulted: system with the Andean Community (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru), as well as with MERCOSUR and the extinct Rio Group. However, the primary focus of China’s foreign policy action revolves around the establishment of the China-CELAC Forum in 2015 (Salgado, 2022: 234). In his speech, President Xi Jinping describes the work of the China-CELAC Forum as a breakthrough in building a “community of shared destiny” in a “New Chapter in the Partnership of Comprehensive Cooperation Between China and LAC” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2016: 11).

Since the establishment of China-CELAC forum, the priority areas for a comprehensive cooperation have been grouped under the Cooperation Plan between China and the region, encompassing different fields¹⁷ included in the 1+3+6¹⁸ plan proposed by President Xi Jinping, whose goal is to promote industrial connections between China and the LAC region and strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation. This strategy was defined in the 2015-2019 and 2019-2021 Work Plans of the CELAC-China Forum, with hundreds of specific proposals for long-term cooperation in cultural and academic exchange, bilateral and multilateral political issues, cooperation in commerce, investment, science and technology, environmental issues, tourism, energy, and infrastructures, with recommendations for the transfer of technology (Dussel, 2020). All of this translates into an increase in trade relations between LAC and China, which has become the second most important trading partner in the region behind the US (Graph 1).

Graph 1. Commercial balance of Latin America and the Caribbean with the United States and China (2003-2022)



Source: authors’ elaboration based on data from the International Trade Center (2022).

In this panorama, China presents itself in the region as an important trading partner, and a pragmatic actor that does not seek to interfere in the political affairs of Latin American and Caribbean countries. Thus, meanwhile, the US Department of State said on that Nicaragua’s formal withdrawal from the OAS in 2023 is “another step further from democracy” (San Diego Tribune, 2023); the Chinese spokesperson, Geng Shuang, refused to comment on the Venezuelan government’s decision to withdraw the Caribbean country from the OAS since 2019, stating that: “Venezuelans have the key to solving the conflict” (Diario de las Américas,

Costa Rica (2007) Panama (2017), Dominican Republic (2018) and El Salvador (2018). Those who maintain relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) include Guatemala (1933), Honduras (1944), Haiti (1956), Paraguay (1957), Belize (1989), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (1981), Saint Kitts and Nevis (1983), Nicaragua (1990) and Santa Lucía (2007).

¹⁵ To date, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Surinam, and Jamaica have established relations of Strategic Partnership, and the first seven have even established a relation of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Asian country (CEVEC, 2021: 23).

¹⁶ The cooperation agreement between China and the OAS was renewed for five years in 2009 and in 2014.

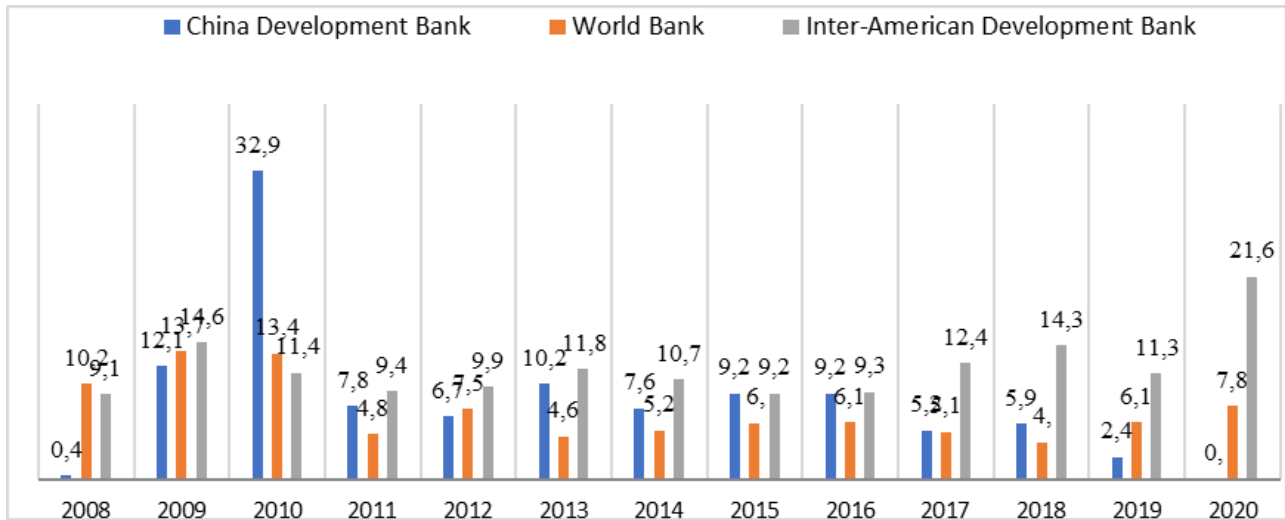
¹⁷ These fields include politics and security, international affairs, commerce, investment and finance, infrastructure and transport, energy and natural resources, agriculture, industries, science and technology, aerospace cooperation, education and capacity building in human resources, culture and sports, press, media, edition, tourism, protection of the environment, disaster risk management and mitigation of natural disasters, elimination of poverty, health, and friendship of the people.

¹⁸ This plan pursued a swifter, more comprehensive cooperation based on three drivers, namely commerce, investments, and financial cooperation, and six priority areas of cooperation, namely energy and natural resources, infrastructure construction, agriculture, manufacturing, technical innovation, and information technology.

2023). In this way, China maintains its policy of not intervening in the internal affairs of other nations and, without seeking a conflict with the US, the Chinese have known how to support new spaces for regional coordination, for example by strengthening their relations with CELAC, to consolidate their economic and financial relationships.

Although the US continue to have a strong commercial presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, trade relations between China and Latin America have increased considerably and are embedded in the bilateral loans granted by China's two main development banks, the China Development Bank and the Exim Bank of China; this is a significant aspect of the financial integration of China and Latin America, for the amounts credited since at least 2008 add up to 150 billion USD (of which 62 billion assigned to Venezuela alone) (Graph 2).

Graph 2. Comparison of the loans granted to Latin America and the Caribbean by the China Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, 2008-2020 (in billion USD)

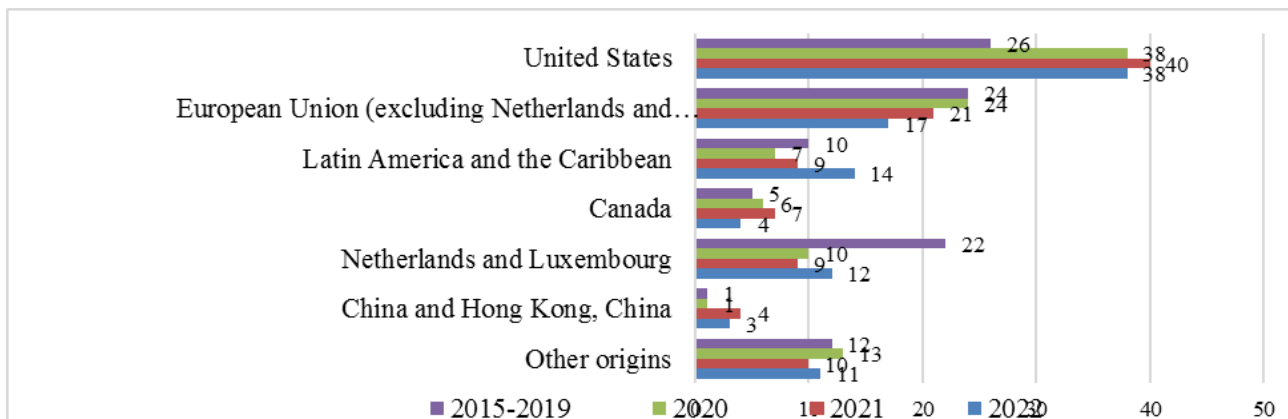


Source: authors' elaboration based on the China Development Bank (2021: 40).

While it is true that Chinese loans in the region have decreased in the past years –in 2020, for example, China granted no loans to Latin America and the Caribbean– these loans have mainly financed the energy sector, often to guarantee oil provision to China, although the financing of infrastructure projects such as railways and highways has become increasingly important for the economic development of LAC countries (Bencivelli and Tonelli, 2020: 79). From the OAS, Luis Almagro has criticized this relationship, pointing out that “We must ensure that relations are stable, we have to have a joint strategic vision”, since “relations based on exports are unsustainable in the long term” (*La Vanguardia*, 2016).

However, given the serious infrastructure and logistics deficits in the region, the Chinese investments have been attractive to many governments in the region who welcome rapid access to low-cost and expanded options of financing. This in the framework of a wider competition from the US and the European Union, who also look for access to resources and influence in LAC. The following graph shows the main source of foreign direct investment in the LAC region between 2015 and 2022.

Graph 3. Latin America and the Caribbean (11 countries):^a distribution of foreign direct investment inflows, by origin, 2015–2022 (Percentages)



^a The countries are Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Bolivia and Trinidad and Tobago which have sector-level data for 2022. The information for Brazil does not include the reinvested earnings component.

Source: authors' elaboration based on ECLAC (2023: 40).

Chinese investments are still lower than those of other extra-regional actors, but *The Belt and Road Initiative* has led to an increase of political China's influence in the region¹⁹, joined by 21 LAC countries. However, who "is in" and who "is out" of this initiative²⁰ might not even be that important, considering China's activities in LAC countries have for years followed the same logic of financing and aiding the development of infrastructure (Barrios, 2018). In fact, eight Latin American countries joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Brazil was one of the 57 founding countries of this bank and, to date, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, and Uruguay have also become members (CEVEC, 2021: 23-24).

CELAC's efforts to turn LAC into an increasingly important ally of China, in a context in which the weight of the US and its Western allies in the global economy is decreasing, contrasts with the failure of the OAS to time to mediate regional conflicts. Far from promoting the multilateral interests of the region, the OAS has limited itself to accompanying the unilateral actions of the US government²¹, even serving as a platform to the roadmap of the *Build Back Better World* initiative, that seeks explicitly to counteract the global expansion of China (Monge, 2022).

US regional leadership appears to rest on the institutional structure of the OAS to carry out a large-scale geopolitical reordering and realignment in the Western Hemisphere. In line with it, in the Summit of the Americas programed to 2024, the OAS seeks to reform its Inter-American Democratic Charter, to fight against "authoritarian tendencies" that put institutional and democratic norms of the region in "constant threat" (*El Economista*, 2023, May 30). The US ambassador to that regional organization, Frank Mora, suggests acting through the OAS before reaching "a process of dismantling democratic institutions" (Morales, 2023). In this way, for example, the OAS seeks not to repeat the mistakes made with Venezuela and to keep Nicaragua on the US radar through the legal system that exists in the inter-American system²².

The situation of Cuba, Venezuela, and now Nicaragua has been used as part of the political game that has the geopolitical dispute between China and the USA as a background. Christopher Dodd, special advisor for the Americas of the White House, before participating as an observer in the VII CELAC of 2023, summit, issued a statement pointing out that the OAS "continues to be the main multilateral forum in the Western Hemisphere". With this, the US official seems to respond to the statement by Mexican President López Obrador to replace the OAS with another organization, at the same time discrediting the autonomy of CELAC, which is the only regional body for dialogue and negotiation with China (Frenkel, 2023).

In short, following the ideas of Cox (1983), LAC seems to be one of the boards where world hegemony is disputed, in a scenario in which the US redefines its leadership, while China seeks to gain consensus for its new world order project. In any case, for the time being, economic relations will continue to be defined by an increasing and strengthening link between China and the LAC region, highlighting the need to reinforce regional mechanisms such as the CELAC to support coordination and ensure a successful political dialogue which will strengthen regionalism in LAC *vis-a-vis* the global challenges of the 21st century.

5. Final considerations

Perhaps Tim Marshal (2016) was right in perceiving the lack of natural affinity of Latin American and Caribbean countries with the US, the latter remaining trapped within the politically enclosed geography of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, whose spirit is preserved by the OAS in its effort to keep extraregional powers out of American territory. China, on the other hand, seems to be closer to the countries in the region, even more so with the progressive governments seeking autonomy from traditional US tutelage (Marshal, 2016: 254-55). China has been gradually occupying the spaces left vacant by the US in the LAC region, nevertheless following a principle of non-provocation (Dominguez, 2017: 69). Unlike the US, China has been penetrating the region as a pragmatic actor, appearing to be more interested in economic and commercial relations rather than internal politics.

That is why, beyond the shift of regional politics to the domestic sphere which the ideas of post-hegemonic regionalism try to explain, LAC regionalism seems to be turning into a contested terrain, where the new integrationist schemes that articulate with China try to impose themselves on the older ones that are anchored to the US hegemonic order (Crivelli and Lo Brutto, 2021: 146). The processes of regional integration are a privileged setting for the observation of the ongoing process of hegemonic transition delineated by Cox (1983): the US have been finding it increasingly difficult to impose their agenda in the region, as shown

¹⁹ Also, it is important to mention the Chinese effort to include Argentina as a member of the BRICS forum, formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa since 2008, became BRICS Plus on 2024, by in addition of that South American country, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Iran. With this, China pressures in favor of its geopolitical interests, strengthens its presence in the Middle East, Africa, and LAC.

²⁰ The LAC countries that have gradually joined *The Belt and Road Initiative* are Panama (2017) Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominica, Ecuador, El Salvador (2018), Barbados, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Granada, Guyana, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Peru, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela (2019) and Argentina (2022) (Belt and Road Portal, 2023).

²¹ Since that moment, the OAS has been constantly criticized as an inter-governmental organ that executes the unilateral US agenda for the hemisphere, from the moment Cuban leader Fidel Castro (1962 defined it as the Ministry of US Colonies or Ecuador's President Rafael Correa considered it an organization "completely influenced by the power of hegemonic countries" (Página12, 2015).

²² On November 20, 2023, just one day after Nicaragua's official withdrawal from the OAS, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the OAS Office of Legal Affairs sued the Ortega government for failure to comply with international conventions on human rights. This is in addition to the individual sanctions that the US has already imposed bilaterally on more than 50 senior Nicaraguan officials and the elimination of hundreds of visas for citizens of that country (Chamorro, 2023, November 20).

by the failure of the FTAA negotiations and the rupture of the OAS *status quo*; the creation of the CELAC, on the other hand, allows us to discern the horizon of a new world order that is outlined from the global South, one that is multilateral and fairer and will possibly be led by China under the thrust of its growing economic and financial potential.

However, the facts also show that LAC governments continue to resist the construction of strong supra-national institutions and that, beyond a change in ideology and discourse, it is hard to visualize a true rupture with the old regional schemes for the time being (Botto, 2015: 30-31). The CELAC is pursuing a healthy relationship with the countries of the North, with less intervention and intromission —mainly by the US— in the political and economic life of Latin America. This includes swapping the OAS for a regional organization that will collaborate for the common good of the continent, and whose influence will not be rooted only in the US but will be based on common agreements that provide solutions for the problems facing the countries in the LAC region.

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