UNASUR: An Eclectic Analytical Perspective of its Disintegration

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ABSTRACT. **Objective/Context:** This article aims to explain the causes of the virtual disintegration of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) from the perspective of analytical eclecticism. It is part of the growing literature around the debate on the end of International Relations theory in which analytical eclecticism and integrative pluralism emerge as viable but contested explanatory strategies. **Methodology:** Based on recent historical evidence and a voluminous body of research on the object of study, we start from analytical eclecticism and sequentially analyze UNASUR from neoclassical realism, institutional liberalism, and social constructivism to comprehensively explain the case. **Conclusions:** While any of our three approaches can convincingly explain the reasons for UNASUR's failure, none of them by itself captures the full complexity of its demise. The explanations provided by these analytical approaches are not contradictory but complementary. The creative combination of different International Relations approaches enhances our understanding of an atypical case in the history of Latin American regionalism, generally characterized by the resilience of regional organizations. The analysis of the disintegration of UNASUR reveals structural challenges and tension factors for South American regionalism. It helps understand why PROSUR, as the supposed successor to UNASUR, has not yet taken off. **Originality:** Research on UNASUR and its destiny has been prolific. Rival explanations such as neoclassical realism, institutional liberalism, and social constructivism have prevailed. This article is the first to collect and integrate these explanations to provide a comprehensive response that accounts for the complex process of South American disintegration.

KEWORDS: Analytical eclecticism; UNASUR; South America; regionalism.

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Unasur: una perspectiva analítica ecléctica de su desintegración

RESUMEN. **Objetivo/contexto:** este artículo tiene como objetivo explicar las causas de la virtual desintegración de la Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Unasur) desde la perspectiva del eclecticismo analítico. Forma parte de la literatura creciente en torno al debate sobre el final de la teoría de las relaciones internacionales, en el que el eclecticismo analítico y el pluralismo integrador emergen como estrategias explicativas viables pero cuestionadas. **Metodología:** a partir de la evidencia histórica reciente disponible, así como de un voluminoso cuerpo de investigaciones sobre el objeto de estudio, partimos del eclecticismo analítico y analizamos secuencialmente a Unasur desde el realismo neoclásico, el liberalismo institucional y el constructivismo social para explicar de manera integral el caso. **Conclusiones:** si bien cualquiera de nuestros tres enfoques puede explicar de manera convincente las razones del fracaso de Unasur, cada uno por sí solo no capta toda la complejidad de su desaparición. Las explicaciones brindadas por los enfoques analíticos no son contradictorias sino complementarias. La combinación creativa de diferentes enfoques de relaciones internacionales mejora nuestra comprensión de un caso atípico en la historia del regionalismo latinoamericano, generalmente caracterizado por la resiliencia de las organizaciones regionales. El análisis de la desintegración de Unasur revela desafíos estructurales y factores de tensión para el regionalismo sudamericano. Hace comprensible por qué Prosur, como supuesto sucesor de Unasur, aún no ha despegado. **Originalidad:** el estudio sobre la Unasur y su destino ha sido prolífico. En él han predominado explicaciones rivales como el realismo neoclásico, el liberalismo institucional y el constructivismo social. Este artículo es el primero en recoger e integrar dichas explicaciones para dar con una respuesta articulada que dé cuenta del complejo proceso de desintegración suramericana.

PALABRES CLAVE: Eclecticismo analítico; Unasur; América del Sur; regionalismo.

Unasul: uma perspectiva analítica eclética de sua desintegração

RESUMO. **Objetivo/contexto:** este artigo visa explicar as causas da virtual desintegração da União de Nações Sul-Americanas (Unasul) a partir da perspectiva do ecletismo analítico. Faz parte da crescente literatura em torno do debate sobre o fim da teoria das Relações Internacionais, em que o ecletismo analítico e o pluralismo integrativo emergem como estratégias explicativas viáveis, mas questionadas. **Metodologia:** com base nas evidências históricas recentes disponíveis, bem como em um volumoso corpo de pesquisa sobre o objeto de estudo, partimos do ecletismo analítico e analisamos sequencialmente a Unasul a partir do realismo neoclássico, liberalismo institucional e construtivismo social para explicar de forma completa o caso. **Conclusões:** embora qualquer uma de nossas três abordagens possa explicar de forma convincente as razões do fracasso da Unasul, cada uma por si só não captura toda a complexidade de seu desaparecimento. As explicações fornecidas pelas abordagens analíticas não são contraditórias, mas complementares. A combinação criativa de diferentes abordagens de Relações Internacionais aumenta

nossa compreensão de um *outlier* na história do regionalismo latino-americano, geralmente caracterizado pela resiliência das organizações regionais. A análise da desintegração da Unasul revela desafios estruturais e fatores de tensão para o regionalismo sul-americano. Dá para entender por que o Prosul, como suposto sucessor da Unasul, ainda não decolou. **Originalidade:** o estudo sobre a Unasul e seu destino tem sido prolífico. Explicações rivais como o realismo neoclássico, o liberalismo institucional e o construtivismo social prevaleceram nele. Este artigo é o primeiro a coletar e integrar essas explicações para encontrar uma resposta articulada que evidencie o complexo processo de desintegração sul-americana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ecletismo analítico; UNASUL; América do Sul; regionalismo.

Introduction

UNASUR was a product of its time regarding the criticism of an ideological project. The organization was supported by most left or center-left governments when created. However, in the end, all South American governments across the whole political spectrum sign≈unding document. The definition of the goals and the structure of UNASUR reflected the will to facilitate the participation of all South American governments. Self-proclaimed goals were "politically neutral," including each government's possibility to opt-out or minimize cooperation in certain areas. Hence, it must be asked how a project to which twelve South American governments had agreed to by joining a regional organization could become an ideological project in the perception of a growing number of its member governments.

Political and academic explanations for the disintegration of UNASUR are contradictory, and they include a variety of ideational, structural, actor-related, and institutional factors. Hence, the withering away of UNASUR is a great case to go beyond analytical singularism (Grieco 2019) and integrate from an analytic eclectic perspective "empirical observations and causal stories that are posited in separate paradigm-bound theories or narratives" (Sil and Katzenstein 2010a, 3). We follow the research strategy outlined by Sil and Katzenstein (2011, 484) "to construct a problem-specific complex analytic framework that is capable of revealing the interconnections among discrete sets of mechanisms and processes normally explored in isolation."

Thus, we will discuss the reasons for the dissolution of UNASUR from a neoclassical realist perspective, a liberal intergovernmental approach, and a social-constructivist point of view. Our pluralistic approach reflects an epistemological skepticism, as we share "the position that no single knowledge system can

ever possess the whole truth, at least as this applies to political matters" (Levine and McCourt 2018, 93). It is the case regarding the disintegration of UNASUR, which had become a highly controversial political topic with sometimes quite polarized views in the public debate and academia. In such a case, an analytically eclectic approach may be advisable to offer and combine different research perspectives on the same topic, to prevent thus an "omitted variable bias and underspecified modeling of important international processes and outcomes" (Grieco 2019, 425).

In our analysis, we practice what Wight (2019) defines as integrative pluralism or the integration of insights. Hence, we will build on and take advantage of the broad literature on the rise and fall of UNASUR and Latin American regionalism. We will systematically screen three different research perspectives to combine insights and hopefully produce more ample knowledge. Due to space limitations, we will not comprehensively introduce the different International Relations paradigms we mention. But our lines of investigation are deduced from these paradigms.

We follow the advice made by Cornut (2015, 53) and first make "clear why certain theories or approaches are used in a problem-driven analysis" and then clarify the contribution of each theory or approach within the combination. From a neoclassical realist perspective, we analyze the systemic factors that first favored the creation of UNASUR but later complicated the implementation of an autonomist South American regional project, paying particular attention to domestic factors that intervened in systemic stimuli and foreign policy responses. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, we focus on how the member states' diverging strategic views and the institutional design of UNASUR contributed to the disintegration of the regional organization. And from a social-constructivist perspective, we ask why UNASUR did not manage to create a common identity as a counterweight to the centrifugal tendencies within the organization.

It might be argued that our approach may lead to a loss of parsimony and an over-determination of the outcome we try to explain. But we are interested in analyzing a complex political phenomenon with an approach where "theories are combined because, in the context of the inquiry, they answer complementary contrastive questions about the studied phenomenon" (Cornut 2015, 61). Following Sil and Katzenstein (2010b, 412), we "forgo parsimony to capture the interactions among different types of causal mechanisms normally analyzed in isolation from each other within separate research traditions." Moreover, to understand the disintegration of UNASUR, it is necessary to take a dynamic perspective and include both the foundation and the subsequent decline of the regional organization in the analysis. What were the driving forces behind the demise of

UNASUR, and what changed in the time from the founding to the decay and disintegration of the regional organization?

Our triple analysis demonstrates that the creation of UNASUR was not a linear and conflict-free process. UNASUR was the result of a constellation among governments that took a leadership role, but the overall conditions changed and became adverse. Our analysis will reveal that UNASUR ship-wrecked in a perfect storm in which each analytical approach can explain the disaster. None of these approaches by itself captures the whole complexity of the demise of UNASUR, but, together, they give us a better, more comprehensive picture of the decay and disintegration of the organization.

Declining state power in a less permissive international system[1]

In contrast to European regionalism that responds more to intraregional incentives than Latin American regionalism, the external dimension has been the engine (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2018, 15). From this perspective, the creation of UNASUR can "be interpreted as a reaction to the established perception of the US as a regional crisis manager, transferring this identity to the collective of South American states" (Lazarou and Luciano 2015, 403). But South American governments are the weaker party in the asymmetric relationship with the United States, which constrains their opportunities for action. Therefore, a neoclassical perspective can further enrich our understanding of the reasons for UNASUR's failure as it puts its focus on the international or systemic dimension of region-building and on the factors which facilitate the transformation of systemic opportunities into foreign policies promoting regional projects.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities" (Rose 1998, 146). But neoclassical realists also emphasize that the impact of these power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and influenced by intervening

1 Throughout this section, we will refer to international permissiveness following the definition of permissive/restrictive strategic environments by Ripsman *et al.* (2016). According to these authors: "The distinction between permissive and restrictive strategic environments relates to the imminence and the magnitude of threats and opportunities that states face. All things being equal, the more imminent the threat or opportunity and the more dangerous the threat (or the more enticing the opportunity) the more restrictive the state's strategic environment is. Conversely, the more remote the threat or opportunity and the less intense the threat or opportunity, the more permissive the strategic environment is. Restrictive and permissive strategic environments thus exist along a continuum with the former entailing relatively less complexity than the latter because there are fewer viable alternatives to redress threats or exploit opportunities" (52).

variables at the state level. They are interested in "how the structural pressures of power in the international system are translated into foreign policy outcomes by states" (Kitchen 2010, 119). Concerning the goals of the foreign policy executive, neoclassical realists assume a hierarchy: "(1) to preserve the state's physical survival and political autonomy; (2) to maintain its power position; and (3) to safeguard all other ideological, religious, political, social, and economic goals they may possess" (Fiammenghi *et al.* 2018, 198). While the foreign policy executive will always prioritize the first set of goals, they argue that in "a permissive international security environment, the foreign policy executive may have the luxury of focusing on the second and third sets" (Fiammenghi *et al.* 2018, 198). About UNASUR, it can be explored whether its rise and decline were related to changes in the international security environment, and which factors at the state level helped transform the systemic incentives into new regional projects.

The creation of UNASUR was not the result of a significative power shift in the international system or, more specifically, in the Western Hemisphere. Instead, it resulted from a specific combination of a permissive international security environment and an economic boom cycle that increased state strength in South America and, consequently, the scope for action of governments in the region. This constellation was transitory. From a neoclassical realist perspective, it can be argued that what changed between the creation and demise of UNASUR was not the relative power resources but the capacity to use them effectively. Concepts such as "state mobilization capacity" (Schweller 2006, 13-15), "state strength," and "state power" (Zakaria 1998, 3) are helpful to guide this line of argumentation.

The distribution of national power capabilities did not change in the Western Hemisphere in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Malamud 2017). The US was the dominant power by far; South American countries, especially Brazil (Rodriguez 2018), did not close the power gap (Mijares 2020a, 11). What changed was the interest and involvement of the US in South America. UNASUR was created when Latin America was not so much on the radar of the US government, which after 9/11 focused on the Middle East and Central Asia. It was a period of greater international permissiveness (Urdínez et al. 2016). Competitors of the US in the international system, such as China and Russia, made inroads in the region (Mijares 2017). Moreover, while the national power of South American governments did not increase, their state power improved. From the perspective of the driving states beyond the project, the creation of UNASUR seems to confirm that "nations try to expand their political interests abroad when central decision-makers perceive a relative increase in state power" (Zakaria 1998, 38).

The (perceived) increase of state power was related to the commodities boom during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the "golden decade"

of regional economies (Maira 2019, 167). Rising commodity prices improved the terms of trade for Latin America and increased the incomes of South American governments. Between 2003 and 2010, the economies of UNASUR grew at an annual average of 5.3%, or 4.6% per capita (CEPAL and UNASUR 2011, 35). In a period of abundant international liquidity, Latin America also benefited from massive capital inflows. External vulnerability decreased as foreign debt declined (Ocampo et al. 2018). Moreover, trade dependency from the US diminished in this decade, especially in South America (ECLAC 2010, 109; Ayala and Ramírez 2017).

As a result of the commodities boom, the scope of action of South American governments in foreign policy increased. Countries such as Venezuela used the increased incomes from oil to advance their foreign policy goals (Serbín and Serbín Pont 2017) and fortify their military power (Romero and Mijares 2016). Even a small country like Bolivia increased its clout due to increased incomes from commodities. Also, Brazil became more independent regarding energy resources after the discovery and exploration of oil offshore.

When focusing on the role of Brazil in creating UNASUR, attention should be paid to the domestic factors that facilitated the Brazilian government to embark on its South American strategy based on increased state strength. First, President Cardoso stabilized the Brazilian economy by reducing external dependence on foreign creditors and controlling inflation (Stuenkel 2019). Cardoso also increased Brazil's state capacity in foreign policy or "diplomatic GDP" (Malamud 2017, 157) by introducing important reforms in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Faria *et al.* 2013). His successor Lula would build on this fundament to promote the South America agenda. Second, relevant economic sectors (for example, construction companies) supported the South-Americanization strategy of the Brazilian governments from Cardoso to Lula.

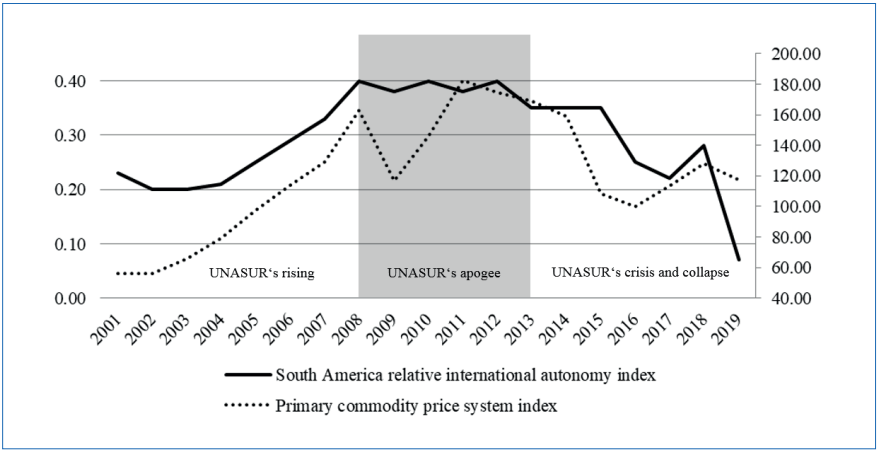
While the UNASUR project was favored by the South American governments' greater political and economic autonomy, it was also instrumental to national autonomy projects. Nevertheless, the overlapping of regional and national autonomy projects created tensions and weakened the organizational structure of South American regionalism. This puzzle was well described by Chaves (2010) when UNASUR was still in the honeymoon period. He argued that the reinforcement of the principle of sovereignty, economic nationalism, and the state's return as the leading actor of integration processes had been catalysts for the rise of post-hegemonic regionalism. But the very same factors simultaneously set up severe limitations for the consolidation of South American regional cooperation in the future. Later Mijares (2020b) coined the concept of the "paradox of autonomy" to capture the same contradiction "in which governments face the

decision of choosing between a collective good, such as regional autonomy, and an individual good, such as national autonomy" (95).

In addition, the dominance of Brazil in the South American regionalism project activated reflexes of balancing by secondary and tertiary powers to defend national autonomy. While Brazil had set on bandwagoning behind its leadership (Spektor 2010, 200), this leadership claim also provoked a balancing effort both within the region (for example, Bolivia allying with Venezuela) and beyond it. The Pacific Alliance (PA) can be seen as a balancing tool by the inclusion of Mexico as a major non-South American country (Flemes and Wehner 2015). Moreover, Colombia sought close cooperation with the US to counterbalance Brazil's regional power and its temporary competitor Venezuela (Burges 2007).

South American governments took advantage of a permissive international security environment and increased internal state strength. The V-Dem indicator of international autonomy (Coppedge et al. 2020) illustrates that the period of greater autonomy (and high commodity prices) (IMF 2020) coincided with the creation of new multilateral cooperation mechanisms such as UNASUR.

Figure 1. South America's relative autonomy and IMF commodity price index, 2001-2019[2]



Source: Coppedge et al. 2020

After 2011, the favorable constellation for a South American regional project changed slowly, as the international system became less permissive, and the

2 The V-Dem indicator of international autonomy responds to the question: "Is the state autonomous from the control of other states with respect to the conduct of its foreign policy?" 0 = Non-autonomous; 1 = Semi-autonomous; 2 = Autonomous. The scale is ordinal converted to interval. To control variations and avoid spurious results, we take into account the difference between the South American annual average and the world average (X = South America - World).

mobilization capacities of Latin American states declined. Commodity prices and the terms of trade deteriorated, economic growth rates started to decline (even more pronouncedly after 2014), and government debts increased.

Governments had to start fiscal adjustment policies, which harmed state strength, as in the case of the Brazilian government of Dilma Rousseff (Mares and Trinkunas 2016, 75-82), which even started to cut down the budget of the Foreign Ministry (Schenoni et al. 2019, 13). The governments of most UNASUR member countries, not only Brazil (Chagas-Bastos and Franzoni 2019), became focused on domestic politics; they were facing the consequences of economic stagnation and corruption scandals. Weak governments had few resources to spend on regional projects (Comini and Frenkel 2020, 141-142). According to Saraiva (2016, 307), the foreign policy that suffered most in Brazil was its regional dimension.

Simultaneously, step by step, the US government re-engaged South America. First, the deteriorating situation in Venezuela after the death of President Chávez brought South America back on the radar screen of the US government. The US started to impose sanctions on Venezuela in December 2014. In March 2015, President Obama signed an executive order that declared that Venezuela was a threat to the national security of the US. Later, during the Trump administration, China's growing economic cloud in Latin America was perceived as a direct threat to US interests in the Western Hemisphere. In late 2017, the Trump administration launched its new US National Security Strategy, which accused China of pulling the region into its orbit through state-led investments and loans. In the document, the US government accused China and Russia of supporting the dictatorship in Venezuela and expanding military linkages and arms sales across the region (The White House 2017, 51). Latin America was again a battlefield in a global geopolitical confrontation; Venezuela was seen as a disruptive factor for US security interests.

It was the combination of domestically driven strategic preference shifts (see below) and changes at the systemic level which converted the Venezuela crisis into the catalyst for the implosion of UNASUR. As part of a "de-regionalization of governance problem-solving" (Legler 2020, 150), Venezuela stopped being a problem that could be solved within the confined environment of South America; it transcended the region. Venezuela became part of the broader power game played on the global stage.

This new constellation had several consequences for UNASUR. Systemic pressures forced the member countries to take a stand on the Venezuelan regime. This decision was not free of charge because it could impact relations with the US. The cost-benefit analysis depended on the ideological proximity of a government to the United States and the degree of economic interdependence.

Therefore, changes of government in the member countries mattered. For many countries, the best option was not to meet with the other governments within UNASUR and not to take decisions on Venezuela. UNASUR was no longer seen as an instrument to strengthen the member states' autonomy within the international system but as a burden that negatively affected South America's foreign perception. UNASUR had become a regional organization, which for most member countries only produced costs but no benefits.

Changes in the international system regarding the incentives to achieve greater regional autonomy help explain both the creation and the disintegration of UNASUR. Nevertheless, they do not explain why certain actors took the initiative (in both directions), nor do they explain the chosen institutional design of UNASUR that played a role in the breakdown of the regional organization.

Diverging strategic preferences and institutional deadlock

UNASUR was an intergovernmental project driven by the foreign policy elites of the member countries. In this respect, it is obvious to ask from a liberal intergovernmental perspective why South American governments once decided to establish UNASUR and then withdraw from it. The paralysis of decision-making processes preceded the disintegration of UNASUR. Therefore, another question is why the member states chose an institutional structure based on consensus when they created UNASUR.

Liberal intergovernmentalism is based on the assumption that states are rational actors. The creation of international institutions is explained as the outcome of strategic decisions taken by states. From this perspective, states that found regional organizations "first define preferences, then bargain to substantive agreements and finally create (or adjust) institutions to secure those outcomes in the face of future uncertainty" (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009, 69). By turning the argumentation of liberal intergovernmentalism upside down, we expect a regional organization to get into crisis when state preferences (regarding the objectives and/or benefits of cooperation) start to diverge, which happens when substantive agreements become once again questioned, and the institutional design no longer guarantees that the core interests of member states are protected.

Brazil and Venezuela were the main drivers behind UNASUR. Originally UNASUR was a Brazilian project (Gavião and Saraiva 2019; Maira 2019; Sánchez Cabarcas 2017; Saraiva 2010) that coincided with the interests of the Venezuelan government for a limited period and to a certain extent. Other governments joined the project for different reasons and with varying levels of commitment to the organization.

From the beginning, UNASUR had the congenital disability that "Brazil's push for an imagined 'South America' did not follow the perception that shared governance problems required collective action that promoted regional coordination" (Spektor 2010, 198). For Brazil, UNASUR was an instrument to delineate a zone of influence and a tool for its global projection as an emerging regional power. Brazil's interest in South America was mainly driven by three objectives (Spektor 2010, 199-200). The first was to control the region as a possible source of instability and turn it into a more benign environment. A lousy neighborhood could fall back on the outside perception of Brazil, and it could open the door for foreign interventions in the region. The second objective was to use the region as a shield against globalization's adverse effects and turn the region into a privileged market for Brazilian companies. With this orientation, during the Cardoso presidency, Brazil focused on improving infrastructure in South America as a prerequisite for better economic integration in the region. This was the main topic during the South American presidential summit in 2000. The Brazilian government was the driving force behind the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South American (IIRSA), which later would become part of UNASUR's Infrastructure and Planning Council (COSIPLAN) (Palestini and Agostinis 2018). Brazil's third objective was to use the region to increase its power in international politics as the regional leader and as a springboard for its own global ambitions (Amorim 2010). Over time, Brazil became more focused on its global role and neglected its regional commitments (Lazarou and Luciano 2015, 390-391). Later, Brazilian governments became absorbed by domestic politics. Moreover, troubles in the neighborhood increased the costs of regional leadership and made it less attractive.

The beginnings of Brazil's South American project can be traced back to the 1990s. After positive experiences with Mercosur, the Brazilian government launched the idea to create a South American Free Trade Area (SAFTA) (Amorim 2014, 99-101; Briceño-Ruiz 2010), which later found its continuation and expression in the signing of the Economic Complementarity Agreement between Mercosur and the Andean Community (CAN) in 2004. This made it easier for Brazil to accept a downgrading of the trade dimension in the UNASUR treaty. However, according to former foreign minister Celso Amorim, the Brazilian government was quite aware of the risk that the lack of an economic standing leg would pave the way for member countries to turn their backs on UNASUR (Amorim 2014).

UNASUR was a regional project that, in its origins, had a clear leadership following the classic script of regional integration, promoted by a regional power (Mattli 1999). However, Brazil never perfectly fulfilled this function. It

was unwilling to cover the costs—as a "paymaster"—of the regional integration project in South America. There was not enough domestic support for exercising the role of regional leader (Guimarães et al. 2020) and Brazilians did not identify much with the region (Almeida 2016; Onuki et al. 2016). It was symptomatic that Brazil was the last country to ratify the UNASUR treaty due to opposition in Congress. When the crisis of UNASUR unfolded, Brazil had become a reluctant regional leader (Destradi 2017), creating a vacuum of leadership in South America (Comini and Frenkel 2020, 138).

But Brazil's wavering leadership and the lack of domestic support have not been the only factors explaining the problems of UNASUR. From the beginning, the interests of the twelve member states were difficult to reconcile. The path from the first South American Summit to UNASUR was not a linear but a rocky one (Amorim 2014, 99-112; Briceño-Ruiz 2010; Briceño-Ruiz and Ribeiro Hoffmann 2015; Sánchez Cabarcas 2017). There was always the risk of a standstill due to the countries' diverging interests.

From the beginning, Brazil's neo-developmentalist South American discourse (Hernández Nilson 2019) focused on autonomy, development, and peace was challenged by the Venezuelan government's more confrontational discourse (Sanahuja 2010; Serbín 2009). Brazil's South America project competed with the aspiration of regional leadership of Venezuelan President Chávez after he had consolidated his rule domestically and rising oil prices increased his international leverage (Amorim 2014, 99-112; Briceño-Ruiz 2016; Serbín and Serbín Pont 2017). Venezuela promoted an anti-hegemonic project with a primarily political and, ideally, military orientation (Gratius 2008). Moreover, Venezuela's ambitions went beyond South America and included the Caribbean and Central America. With the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), Venezuela propagated an explicit counter-project to free trade agreements.

In contrast, the Brazilian South America project has been multidimensional, focusing on economic development and trade to insert itself and the region more advantageously in the international economy. It did not question the principles of economic liberalization and a market economy. In the end, UNASUR combined the Venezuelan with the Brazilian approach (Martínez Castillo 2011).

Venezuela's strategy concerning South American integration was supported mainly by Bolivia when Evo Morales came to power (2006) and by Ecuador during the presidency of Rafael Correa (since 2007). In contrast, Argentina was not an enthusiastic supporter of the project of South American integration. Argentina's regional priority was Mercosur, and the Argentinean government also took a broader Latin American perspective. Finally, Argentina signed the Constitutive Treaty, but this decision stood at the end of a complicated

process with many ups and downs and conflicts and tensions between Argentina and Brazil (Comini 2016; Nolte and Comini 2016).

At the same time, like Colombia and Peru, Chile generally preferred a polygamous mode of international insertion (Comini and Frenkel 2014). For the Chilean center-left government of Michelle Bachelet at the time, UNASUR opened up the possibility of overcoming the isolation of its choosing in matters of economic integration in South America and becoming more involved in the region. Chile had a particular interest in the defense and security dimensions of UNASUR (Wehner 2020). Colombia, the first country to leave UNASUR, was the most reluctant to get involved in the regional project and initially rejected the South American Defense Council (Mijares 2018). The leading Colombian reason for participating in UNASUR was not to become isolated in South America.

The first great challenge in creating UNASUR was to provide an institutional design flexible enough to allow states as dissimilar as Brazil and Suriname or rivals such as Colombia and Venezuela to converge on a common project. According to Koremenos et al. (2001), "states use international institutions to further their own goals, and they design institutions accordingly" (762-763). They argue that international institutions vary regarding five dimensions: membership rules, the scope of issues covered, centralization of tasks, flexibility of arrangements, and guidelines for institutional control. The membership rules met the geopolitical objective expressed in the Brazilian plan to build a South American region. Thus, physical belonging to South America was the central criterion of membership. Second, regarding the scope of issues covered, UNASUR's institutional design was ambitious and in line with post-hegemonic regionalism, establishing a dozen sectoral councils covering different areas (Hoffmann 2019): defense, health, electoral issues, energy, science, technology, and innovation, culture, social development, economy and finance, education, infrastructure and planning, drugs, citizen security, and the coordination of activities against transnational organized crime. The proliferation of sectoral councils sought to incorporate countries with different interests in the regional project. A single focal entity did not centralize these multiple goals due to the varying importance of member countries.

The institutional design of UNASUR allowed the member countries to promote their specific regional integration agendas (Nolte and Comini 2016). The consequence of this design was high institutional elasticity and a European-like "variable geometry" (Sanahuja 2010, 110), combined with restrained decision-making powers of the sectoral councils. Instead, UNASUR prioritized inter-governmental decision-making by the core executives and distributed veto power equally among all members.

The intergovernmental institutional configuration worked for a while because Latin American regionalism is intergovernmental and inter-presidential. This combination has given impetus to regional integration through summit diplomacy, particularly in cases of strong presidential leadership and political affinities between presidents (Baracaldo and Chenou 2019). The general ideological alignment of leftist governments served as an impulse for the creation and first thrust of UNASUR. Likewise, the organization's functioning was impaired by changes in government, which increased ideological diversity and tensions while reducing intergovernmental political communication.

UNASUR started to disintegrate once the member states' preferences regarding the objectives and the strategic value of the regional organization began to diverge, which had a direct negative spillover on the work of the sectoral councils (Agostinis and Palestini 2020). In several South American countries, right-wing governments came to power through elections or by other means (as in Brazil), which advocated a stronger economic orientation of regional integration (as part of a broader trade liberalization agenda) (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020). When the Argentine government was about to take over UNASUR's presidency pro tempore in April 2017, on the one hand, it proposed an Argentine candidate for the vacant position of general secretary and, on the other, it suggested a repositioning of UNASUR with a stronger focus on economic cooperation (Narea and Benzi 2020). Both proposals immediately met with Venezuela's (and Bolivia's) resistance.

From the beginning, UNASUR was seen as an instrument to keep the Organization of American States (OAS) out of South America. While the Brazilian government had lost its interest in the organization as an instrument of regional power projection, UNASUR became more critical for Venezuela as an instrument of "regime boosting" (Söderbaum 2016, 90-91) and "soft balancing" (Serbín and Serbín Pont 2017) against the US. It was a fortuitous constellation for the Venezuelan government that former Venezuelan foreign minister Ali Rodríguez held the organization's secretary-general position (from June 2012 to July 2014) when Maduro came to power since the regime became questioned after the controversial presidential elections in 2013. Rodríguez never visited the seat of UNASUR in Ecuador, exercising his function from Caracas. He stayed in office until August 2014, slightly over a year longer than initially planned. This was attributed to the lack of consensus between the UNASUR governments regarding a successor and the strategy of the Venezuelan government to avoid at all costs that someone not in accordance with their interests would take the position (Benzi and Narea 2019, 54). His successor, former Colombian President Ernesto

Samper, took a benevolent stance regarding the Venezuelan government, shielding it against the critics.

The Venezuelan government feared that his successor might become a second Luis Almagro (Benzi and Narea 2019, 61). In March 2015, Almagro had been elected nearly unanimously as Secretary-General of the OAS with the vote of Venezuela but soon became one of the most vocal critics of the Venezuelan regime. This explains why it was so important for the Venezuelan government to control the election of the successor of Samper, even risking the paralysis and breakdown of UNASUR. De facto, Venezuela and Bolivia blocked the Argentine candidate José Octavio Bordon, supported by seven governments. In the end, UNASUR's fate was sealed by Venezuela's veto (Rojas Aravena 2019, 128). While the Venezuelan government became openly authoritarian, culminating in the non-democratic reelection of Maduro in May 2018, the center-right governments in South America saw decreasing benefits in sharing membership with a hostile and trouble-making government in UNASUR. From their perspective, it was, in the end, a logical step to leave the organization.

Systematic and preference changes of governments, especially in the case of erstwhile drivers of the regional project, are important factors to explain the disintegration of UNASUR. But they do not answer why the UNASUR project had not developed more resilience when faced with its terminal crisis. Therefore, it should be asked why no South American regional identity emerged and became consolidated as a stabilizing element of UNASUR.

(De-)Construction of South America as a region

In the words of former Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim (2010, 2014), UNASUR was an instrument to project a "South American identity" and to give "South America a face." Ten years later, South America virtually lost its face. As regions and regional projects are historically contingent and changing social constructs, UNASUR can be seen as a failed attempt at region-building. Alluding to the title of Alexander Wendt's famous article, Riggirozzi and Tussie (2012, 3) wrote that a "region is what actors make of it." A social-constructivist approach takes seriously the actors involved in regional project statements, proposals, and narratives (Prieto 2020). In the case of "new" regions, the concept of "regional builders" (Neumann 1994, 58) is quite helpful. Concerning South America, the Brazilian governments of Cardoso and Lula can be seen as region-builders.

The framing of a regional agenda and the creation of regional organizations constitute and consolidate a region since these institutions give the region an identity or "actorness" as a social construct (Nolte 2011, 60). One might call this

an "institutional social constructivist approach," wherein international regions are considered the political constructions of nation-states (Powers and Goertz 2011, 2388). Social constructivism focuses on the sources and formation process of regional identities and institutions (Prieto 2020, 603). From a social constructivist perspective, "regionalism unfolds as long as there are ideational structures of regional identity and regional institutions mutually constituting each other and constituting states' interests" (Prieto 2020, 602). The question is why UNASUR was unable to create a common identity to counteract the centrifugal tendencies within the regional institutions mentioned in the previous sections.

The answer is complex. South America as a region is a relatively recent social construct, which was not built on solid historical foundations. While it might be argued that Simón Bolívar had promoted the idea of uniting South America, his proposals were related to Spanish South America. Brazil, still a monarchy at the time, had not been part of Bolívar's plans for a confederation (Bethell 2010, 462-463). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Brazil had often turned its back on its neighbors and sought a special relationship with the United States. But it also expected that the US recognized that South America was Brazil's zone of influence (Bandeira 2003). Moreover, Brazil was mainly interested in the Southern Cone, competing with Argentina for leadership.

The creation of a South American region based on UNASUR did not respond to a social demand; and it reflected only in part a growing interconnectedness within the region (Burges 2017, 106, 162-163) or a major "regionness." In the 1990s, intraregional trade had increased both within Mercosur and in the CAN. Subsequently, Brazilian multinationals became more interested in the South American market. Thus, in the 1990s, the Brazilian government started to promote closer collaboration between Mercosur and CAN. But economic integration did not become the central element of cooperation within UNASUR, which was much more a political than an economic project. Moreover, creating a South American regional organization that picked up intraregional speed trade within Mercosur and CAN has peaked. Although South American intra-regional trade recovered in the decade when UNASUR was created (Gavião and Saraiva 2019, 71), it did not take off. It decreased in the years when the UNASUR crisis started. When the crisis in UNASUR entered its final phase (2016-2017), intraregional trade within the regional sub-systems was relatively low: Mercosur 12-13% and CAN 8-9% as a share of total trade (ECLAC 2017, 58).

The project of a South American region neither had a robust material nor a solid ideational basis. South America was a regional project that was very much based on geo-strategically constructed ideas. The Brazilian government promoted the idea of South America as a region since the 1990s (Burges 2009),

with the Labour Party (PT) of President Lula da Silva as a latecomer at first but subsequently as an active proponent (Rocha et al. 2018). But Brazil did not see "the region as the foundation of a normative project." There was "no perception in Brazil of shared community or common ethos to support the regionalist move" (Spektor 2010, 201-202). When the primary driver of a regional project does not support the idea of a regional community, it is even more difficult to expect that other countries identify with the region. In addition, the Brazilian South America project competed with Venezuela's broader regional project.

UNASUR did not create solid institutions or a regional bureaucracy to promote regional identity-building as an intergovernmental project. We are not arguing that this should have been the case and that South America should have copied the EU model. Instead, we want to point out that the chosen integration scheme, which aimed at greater regional flexibility and national autonomy, suffered centrifugal institutional design consequences. While the sectorial councils could have constituted the basis for stronger anchoring beyond the core executives, creating inter-ministerial bureaucratic networks (Hoffmann 2019), and engaging with civil society, this only happened on a minimal scale. When the central decision-making structures entered paralysis, the rest of the organization became paralyzed, even in sectors where the cooperation was well advanced, such as in the health sector (Herrero and Tussie 2015; Riggirozi 2020). No institutional inertia was generated when national officials and regional bureaucrats got used to working with each other (Malamud 2015). The chosen institutional design was also the result of the South American governments' specific understanding of national sovereignty.

Spandler and Söderbaum (2019) argue that the socially constructed national sovereignty understandings shape regional cooperation and institution-building patterns. Safeguarding sovereignty, Serbín (2010, 8) speaks of "an obsession with the norms of sovereignty and independence," which is a central element that explains the structure of Latin American regional organizations. The protection of sovereignty, closely linked to the importance of autonomy in Latin American political discourse (Briceño-Ruiz and Simonoff 2015), constitutes an important motive for creating Latin American regional organizations. Spandler and Söderbaum (2019, 11) denominate this kind of regional cooperation "autonomy-oriented regionalism."

This understanding of national sovereignty has been internalized, especially by the main drivers behind the UNASUR project: Brazil and Venezuela. As Spektor (2010, 192) pointed out, Brazil's "governing elites are wedded to traditional understandings of national autonomy and do not consider pooling regional sovereignties into supranational bodies." Thus, delegating sovereignty was never on the

mind map of Brazilian governments. No South American government accepted to be outvoted. Therefore, decision-making was by consensus. Moreover, when UNASUR was created, Brazil was against a solid Secretary-General proposed by the Venezuelan and Ecuadorian governments (Amorim 2014, 109).

The quest for more autonomy is a response to that in Latin America. More specifically, South America had always been quite porous to external influence, including ideas that can promote or constrain the process of regional identity building. Porosity was high in the 1990s with the Washington Consensus, which imposed similar economic concepts on all South American countries. But the 1990s were also a period of transition. While "open regionalism" embodied in regional organizations such as Mercosur and CAN did not question the Washington Consensus, it gave new impulses for regional integration in South America. The same is true regarding the project of a Free Trade Area of Americas (FTAA). Combined with the Summits of the Americas, which started in 1994, the FTAA was part of a broader project of consolidating the Americas as a region. But the FTAA provoked counter-projects, such as the Brazilian proposal of a South American Free Trade Area and later Venezuela's (and Cuba's) ALBA project.

Moreover, as the Washington Consensus's neoliberal economic policies and recipes lost attraction, parts of the South American electorate turned to the left. This changing constellation created space for new thinking about regional projects, which resulted in post-hegemonic regionalism, which also meant the lack of a dominant regional project. Therefore, different regional projects coexisted and competed in the same space, making it challenging to develop a common regional identity.

South America was built on pre-existing sub-regional organizations and sub-regional identities, such as CAN and Mercosur. When the Community of South American States was renamed UNASUR in 2007 to signal that the aim of the new regional project was more than a community of interests, Alfredo Valladão (2007) popularized the idea of a new "Tordesillas line" to refer to the divergent strategies of integration into the world economy separating the Pacific Basin Latin American countries from Brazil and its Atlantic neighbors. In 2006, Peruvian President Alan García started to promote a Pacific Arc idea, bringing together the economically like-minded governments on the Pacific coast. And in 2011, three South American countries (Chile, Colombia, and Peru) created the PA with a liberal trade agenda and an outward orientation toward Asia. With the inclusion of Mexico, the PA transcended the imagination of a South American region. Thus, even before UNASUR reached the final stage of disintegration, it was possible to identify "a multiplicity of identities" (Quiliconi and Salgado Espinoza 2017, 37) in South America.

Even for Brazil, which had promoted the project of a South American region, South America did not constitute the central region. In a programmatic article, Brazilian foreign minister Celso Amorim (2008, 21) mentioned three levels of integration: Mercosur, South America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. While Amorim rejected the use of the concept of "concentric circles," other authors argue that "conscious or not, Brazil's regional policy follows a structure of concentric circles: Argentina, Mercosur, Unasur, and Celac" (Gratius and Saraiva 2013, 8).

A South American regional identity never solidified. Only for a short moment, UNASUR became the central organization of a "regional governance complex" (Nolte 2014) in a region characterized by overlapping regional organizations and identities. Overlapping can produce norm ambiguities (Malamud and Gardini 2012; Nolte 2018) and make it more challenging to create a regional identity.

In the final hours of UNASUR, the idea of South America as a region had lost attraction. With the increasing ideological polarization and conflicts with Venezuela as a trigger, many South American governments perceived their neighborhood as a burden (Burges 2018). Many South American governments were more than willing to turn the Venezuelan crisis from a South American problem into a problem within the Americas that the OAS and the Lima Group should discuss. Some countries strengthened their Pacific identity within the framework of the PA, which was used as an instrument of differentiation from the rest of South America. The idea of a South American region based on UNASUR became step by step deconstructed. While for former Brazilian foreign minister Amorim UNASUR had given South America a face, it represented the ugly face of an ideological project of the left that had to be disbanded for conservative governments.

Conclusions

UNASUR sank in a perfect storm: diverging strategic interests of the member countries made them question its value. From the perspective of many member countries, the cost-benefit balance became negative. A consensus-based decision system led to the paralysis of the organization; the presidents did not meet, nor was it possible to elect a new secretary-general. There was no way out of the conundrum. The stakes had become too high for both the Venezuelan government and its adversaries.

The UNASUR crisis unfolded in a context where the idea of a South American region based on a common identity and shared values had become illusionary. Even before the organization's creation, South America had been a region fractured by overlapping identities. When UNASUR went into crisis, other

identities became stronger (as is the case of the PA). The ideological polarization eclipsed regional bonds and commitments.

Creating an autonomous South American regional project with UNASUR at its core was favored by the permissive international security and economic environment. The benign neglect of the US after 9/11 was combined with high economic growth rates based on the commodities boom. The constellation changed, however, with the economic downturn and the evolving power competition in Latin America between the US and China. Moreover, the Venezuelan crisis, initially confined as a South American problem for which the South American governments sought a solution, became an international problem surpassing the region.

While any of our three analytical approaches can convincingly explain the reasons for the failure of UNASUR, none of them by itself captures the whole complexity of its demise. The explanations delivered by the analytical approaches are not contradictory but complementary. The creative combination of different IR approaches improves our understanding of an atypical case in the history of Latin American regionalism, usually characterized by the resilience of regional organizations. The analysis of the disintegration of UNASUR discloses structural challenges and stress factors (Nolte and Weiffen 2020) for South American regionalism. It helps understand why PROSUR as a putative successor has not yet taken off. Future government changes can give South American regionalism a new impetus, and some experiences with UNASUR (such as the cooperation in sectoral councils) can be used as building blocks. Nevertheless, as our analysis shows, rebuilding a strong South American regional organization will not be easy. Some factors that have fostered the disintegration of UNASUR and prevented the consolidation of a South American autonomy project are beyond the short-term influence of national governments.

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