

**(INTER)
REGIONALISM:
SAVIOUR OF
MULTILATERALISM
OR ITS LAST
REFUGE?**

Are regional cooperation and interregional partnerships means of countering unilateral offensives at a global level or instruments that at best help preserve the multilateral spirit at a smaller scale? COVID-19 and its economic, social and geopolitical effects will test regional cooperation. Like the fight against climate change, it could either be fertile ground for interregional dialogue or a divisive issue within regional blocs and above all between them.



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This contribution attempts to assess the interplay between (inter)regionalism and multilateralism, evaluating the extent to which regional cooperation can help cope with global challenges by focusing on articulating multi-level alliances. It focuses on COVID-19 as an example. The fight against the pandemic may reinforce or weaken multilateralism depending on the outcome of this cooperation, globally and regionally. Secondly, it discusses whether interregional dialogues could provide platforms to bridge the gaps between the priorities and positions of different regional blocs and, eventually, become incubators of transformative global agendas. It will illustrate this potential by focusing on the fight against climate change and the wider sustainability agenda.

Before analysing these two cases, it is worth drawing the bigger picture so as to better understand how this chapter relates to the other contributions in this volume. Regional multilateralism has not been spared the attacks made on multilateralism at global level. Three decades ago, scholars debated whether regionalism would erode multilateralism, particularly when it came to trade. For instance, Jagdish Bhagwati wrote in 1992 that “only time will tell whether the revival of regionalism since the 1980s will have been a sanguine

and benign development or a malign force that will serve to undermine the widely-shared objective of multilateral free trade for all” (Bhagwati, 1992: 554). Nowadays, the debate is turning towards whether regionalism – as a specific form of multilateralism – is threatened by unilateralism or a preference for transactional bilateralism.

In the last decade, several regional integration processes have suffered from the erosion of the very principles on which they were founded, mainly due to fragmentation and polarisation dynamics, the election or consolidation of uncooperative leaderships and a greater appetite for strictly bilateral relations (Sanahúja, 2019). Latin America was once studied as an incubator of regional platforms, but a number of authors have wondered whether regionalism in Latin America has reach its peak (Malamud and Gardini, 2012). Indeed, many regional organisations have gradually become hostage to sharp ideological divides across the continent and within individual countries (Nolte, 2019). The Arab world has also seen regional rivalries paralyse the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (del Sarto & Soler i Lecha,

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2018). In January 2020, the European Union for the first time experienced a member abandoning the project; but the United Kingdom’s departure was the culmination of 15 years of overlapping crises since the failed referendums on the European constitution in France and the Netherlands. This has led some scholars to discuss the possibility of de-Europeanisation and disintegration (Jones, 2018; Rosamond, 2019). And yet, there are some exceptions to this trend: the African Union and the Econom-

ic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are becoming increasingly relevant political actors, and major progress has been made in intra-regional trade and cooperation in Africa. Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been far less affected by centrifugal forces than its Arab and Latin American counterparts.

The UN system sees regional bodies as a driving force for global multilateralism. Indeed, Chapter VIII of the UN charter says that regional organisations and arrangements are key to furthering peace and security. Similarly, regional organisations tend to be vocal supporters of multilateralism at a global scale. A good example is the EU’s Global Strategy, which vowed to promote “a rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core” (European Union, 2016). Yet, EU support may not be enough to keep multilateralism alive (for more see Sánchez in this volume). Is the EU its sole defender or is this a shared position for other

regional organisations? To what extent can cooperation initiatives by two or more regional blocs support multilateralism globally? Are regionalism and interregionalism means of countering unilateralism or just ways to preserve multilateralism at a smaller scale?

Regional cooperation and global challenges: the case of COVID-19

It is a commonplace to say that individual states are too small to cope alone with global challenges such as global warming and that only collective efforts will bear fruit. Up until 2020, most of the attention was focused on preventing climate change and mitigating its effects. Other mega-trends such as digitalisation and automation and their effects on taxation systems and the future of work have started to move up on the global agenda. Yet the health crisis and its huge social, economic and (geo)political consequences have captured the attention and temporarily overshadowed any other concern. Inevitably, regional cooperation frameworks will be gauged by their capacity to cope not only with the pandemic but, equally importantly, its effects.

Once more, this puts the EU on the spot. First and foremost, because it is the most advanced example of regional integration. Secondly, because COVID-19 is challenging many of the assumptions on which European integration is built, such as the limits imposed on the free movement of people. Last but not least, because Europe became one of the pandemic's main epicentres. High levels of regional integration in the form of intra-regional mobility and trade have contributed to the rapid spread

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of the pandemic in Europe. What now remains to be proven is that regional integration also helps better contain the spread of the virus and cope with its devastating effects. What that means is that the EU's capacity to articulate collective efforts in research and development (R+D) and, equally importantly, to provide support to territories or sectors that have suffered the most from the pandemic will send a message not just to its own citizens but to the rest of the world.

Yet, in these uncertain times, we should cast our eyes further than the European integration process. As I write, Latin America is one of the areas where COVID-19 is spreading most rapidly. And while a few years ago, Latin America was seen as an interesting hub for regional and subregional cooperation efforts, nowadays many of those platforms are paralysed as a result

of mutually reinforcing regional and domestic polarisation trends. This is aggravated by the deteriorating economic situation and the scant appetite of regional powers to invest their energies in revamping those regional cooperation frameworks. When facing COVID-19 and its consequences the two largest regional powers, Mexico and Brazil, have shown no inclination to seek regional solutions. More generally, Latin American countries seem to be pursuing uncoordinated responses to a common threat and have adopted very different strategies (Ayuso, 2020). In Mercosur, for instance, the social and economic effects of the pandemic have even accentuated the differences between Argentina – advocating protectionist measures – and Brazil – which wants to boost international trade agreements with

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other countries and regional blocs. At the same time, it is no less true that the crisis offers a new opportunity for Latin American regionalism to become not only relevant but also useful in areas such as the joint purchase of medical equipment (Bianculli, 2020) and uniting efforts to cope with the acute financial vulnerability of middle-income economies.

A third case worth examining is the African Union, precisely because, as mentioned above, in Africa regional cooperation has shown steady progress. When it comes to the pandemic, Africa is sometimes presented as vulner-

able – because of precarious health systems – but it managed to contain the first shock, registering among the lowest rates of contagion and casualties (Puig, 2020). In fact, most African countries imposed severe lockdowns, set up emergency medical facilities and pan-African cooperation initiatives from the early stages of the pandemic (Medinilla et al., 2020). This is why Africa's response to COVID-19 has been characterised as “an island of internationalism” (Witt, 2020). This includes the active role of the African Union – at a political level – but also of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) at a technical one. In the same vein, whereas COVID-19 may delay the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the realisation of their hyper-dependence on China for basic protective equipment (face masks, gloves, etc.) and on other suppliers for more sophisticated equipment such as ventilators is pushing African economies to revisit their industrialisation plans with a regional focus. Some countries have already adapted to the new reality by transforming their factories to export medical equipment to African neighbours. The awareness of the economic and social costs for African countries – many of which are highly dependent upon commodities, tourism, remittances and international

cooperation – have also driven them to take action. For instance, several African countries are pushing collectively to ask for exceptional debt relief measures and have sought support in non-African capitals.

Finally, regional organisations and leaders have come out to defend the World Health Organization (WHO) from the attacks of the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump. The chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, called Trump's decision to suspend WHO funding "deeply regrettable", saying in a tweet on April 15th that "today more than ever, the world depends on WHO's leadership to steer the global Covid-19 pandemic response". The same day, via the same medium, EU High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell also lamented the US decision and said that "there is no reason justifying this move at a moment when their efforts are needed more than ever".

In light of these developments, it is safe to argue that COVID-19 will act as some sort of "stress test" for regional organisations. It will also reveal how solid – and productive – the alliance is between multilateral institutions at different levels.

EVEN IF ALL REGIONAL BODIES AFFIRM THEIR COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE, THEIR INTERESTS, PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES MAY DIVERGE.

Interregional dialogues to bridge gaps and propose solutions: the case of climate change and the wider sustainability agenda

Before the spread of COVID-19 the fight against climate change was the global topic capturing everyone's attention (see Vandendriessche in this volume). Regional organisations have incorporated this challenge into their agendas and have set up regional-level plans and adopted measures to reduce global warming or mitigate its effects. As Juan Pablo Soriano explains (2019), interregional dialogues "progressively warned against the emergence of novel transnational and multidimensional security issues" – including climate change – and "an important discursive change took place during the 2010s, as transnational challenges were said to be threatening not only peoples and states, but also the global multilateral framework".

Regional cooperation has tended to align with UN-led efforts, in spite of opposition from some powerful states – particularly the US, which even decided to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement. China's increased commitment to the climate change agenda has certainly favoured the alignment of regional organisations whose members are increasingly dependent on the country. Yet, even if all regional bodies affirm their commitment to addressing climate change, their interests, priorities and strategies may di-

verge. There is a marked difference between the EU – formed of developed and industrialised economies – and bodies from the Global South that represent emerging or developing economies. Although the two camps may agree that climate change is a priority, they often diverge about who should bear the costs of the policies to prevent it.

The fight against climate change could bring regional blocs closer together or it could turn out to be a divisive and contentious issue. Interregional relations between Europe and Latin America provide us with examples of both trends. On the positive side, it is worth mentioning EuroCLIMA+, a regional programme designed in 2008 that aims to generate common projects to

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preserve the environment. A less cooperative dynamic can be observed in the way the environment has impacted the negotiation of the EU–Mercosur trade agreement. Since October 2018, Brazil, the largest member of this Latin American bloc, has been led by Jair Bolsonaro, a climate change denier. The country's foreign affairs minister, Ernesto Araújo, even referred to climate change as a leftist conspiracy against the US and Brazil in a talk in Washington's Heritage Foundation in September 2019. This set Brazil on a collision course with the EU and its two largest members, France and Germany, which have stood out for their climate diploma-

cy. Thus, when the Amazon rainforest burned in summer 2019, relations between Brazil and some individual EU countries became strained, but so too did EU–Mercosur relations. Several countries and leaders – including France's Emmanuel Macron – announced that they would oppose the entry into force of the comprehensive trade agreement unless Bolsonaro changes his policies on deforestation.

Climate change and multilateralism also figure prominently on the EU–Africa agenda, as reflected recently in the European Strategy with Africa published in March 2020. The document says:

The fight against climate change and environmental degradation is this generation's defining task. Therefore Europe and Africa are allies in the development of sustainable energy, transport solutions, farming, circular and blue economies which can underpin Africa's economic growth. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the EU and Africa alike need to opt for a low-carbon, resource efficient and climate-resilient future in line with the Paris Agreement (European Union, 2020).

This assumes that the two regional blocs see eye to eye on this challenge. Yet, a few weeks earlier, in February 2020, at the meeting between 25 European commissioners and their counterparts in the African Union in Addis Ababa, it became evident that some differences remain and that the African Union does not want a strategy to be forced on it from the outside (Marks, 2020). This is not a new development but rather a structural trend in EU–Africa relations, where “solutions are seen as imposed instead of owned” (Miyandazi et al., 2018). While EU leaders thought that they could bring Africa closer to their own transformational projects – the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda – African interlocutors were reluctant. Some countries fear that the Green New Deal could become a new form of green protectionism; and as for the Digital Agenda, Africans want to avoid taking sides in the geopolitical competition between the EU and China. This example illustrates that whereas EU–Africa coordination on global challenges could be key to defining an ambitious interregional agenda, it will need prior technical and political efforts to align positions. What the EU leadership has begun to understand is the usefulness of resorting to previously agreed multilateral agreements such as the Paris Agreement.

**PREVIOUSLY AGREED
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Finally, another case worth looking at is Euro-Mediterranean cooperation where environmental issues have been part of the agenda for several decades. In fact, the first multilateral cooperation effort at Mediterranean scale concerned the environmental protection of maritime spaces. In 1975, 22 countries negotiated the Mediterranean Action Plan under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme and in 1976 they approved the Barcelona Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution, the inception of the Barcelona Process coincided with the amendment of the Convention and the Barcelona Declaration in November 1995 recognised the importance of reconciling economic development with environmental protection, of integrating environmental concerns into the relevant aspects of economic policy and of mitigating the negative environmental consequences that might result. As time went by, environmental affairs became even more prominent – particularly under the project-based structure of the Union for the Mediterranean. More recent attempts to boost Euro-Mediterranean relations are putting the emphasis on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a common goal. Despite the fact that the members of this cooperation framework may have different positions and interests when it comes to issues such as de-carbonisation, environmental cooperation can still become a confidence-building measure, if only because on other topics such as democratisation or regional conflicts the differences are far larger.

What these examples show is that climate change is becoming increasingly present in the agenda of bi-regional dialogues, particularly when the EU is one of the two parties. Yet, the idea that these fora will provide a platform to join forces at global level cannot be taken for granted, as the EU's leading role may raise suspicions among weaker partners and also because at times of acute polarisation, the environment may be politically instrumentalised on the domestic or international front. To mitigate those risks, more intense cooperation is needed at technical and political levels and the common attachment to previously agreed multilateral goals – the 2030 Agenda is a case in point – offers a safer playing field for interregional efforts.

Conclusion

Unilateral impulses are not only a threat to the global rules-based order but also to regionalised forms of multilateralism such as the European Union and many other regional organisations around the world such as the AU, ASEAN, CELAC and the Arab League among many others. Preserving the internal cohesion of each of those regional blocs and articulating alliances with the UN system is a strategy worth exploring to preserve multilateralism at all levels but also to better cope with global challenges such as climate change and COVID-19. Similarly, interregional dialogues at a technical or political level contribute to keeping the multilateral flame alive. Likewise, the multilateral agenda at global level – of which the SDGs are the best example – provide a mutually agreed roadmap for those interregional dialogues, reducing the risk that the stronger of the two blocs imposes its agenda on the other. In the best circumstances, exploring those avenues could turn regionalism and interregionalism into a laboratory to generate new ideas to reenergise multilateralism at global scale. In the worst-case scenario, (inter)regionalism could become the last refuge for multilateral resistance.

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