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Reimagining Regional Governance in Latin America

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and Andreas E. Feldmann

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Summary

Latin America's existing predicament stems from a complex set of interlinked social, economic, and political crises, which have been magnified by the advent of the coronavirus pandemic and a rising tide of isolationism and "antiglobalism." These crises range from domestic polarization and economic travails, to ideological divergence, personal rivalries among the region's leaders and U.S.-Chinese geopolitical competition, and all are hampering regional governance and negatively impacting the prospects of cooperation.

Latin American governments urgently need to work together to address the manifold challenges they face as events in recent decades have shown that unless better regional mechanisms can be found, domestic and transnational challenges—from organized crime and environmental degradation to migration and anemic economic growth—will become even more difficult to address, with potentially devastating long-term consequences. Yet, despite the high stakes, traditional regional governance mechanisms seem paralyzed, lacking even the capacity to discuss the current untenable situation, let alone address it. The conventional wisdom is that regional cooperation across Latin America is practically nonexistent because its heads of states have insurmountable ideological differences and because the region's dominant diplomatic institutions have failed to fulfill their purpose.

All is not lost in the realm of regional governance, however. While cooperation is either dysfunctional or nonexistent in many dimensions, in others it persists with surprising resilience and vigor, although it is often overlooked or underappreciated. Existing cooperation is for the most part technical and based on the committed work by government officials who, even during the bleakest moments of the pandemic, have shown adherence to principled norms and driven by a refreshing degree of pragmatism.

Effective regional governance and cooperation in Latin America is necessary for a broader conversation on the region's role in a rapidly changing global order, shaped by technological transformation and genuinely global problems such as climate change, migratory pressures, and increasing security threats. As great power competition continues to shape the global order, Latin America often is regarded as a peripheral player. Yet far from being somehow apart or exempt from today's rising geopolitical currents, Latin America, for better or for worse, is very much affected by them. Regional governance is a fundamental instrument to help Latin America overcome its numerous daunting challenges. Even when ideological differences make cooperation difficult at the high politics level, it is crucial to find avenues of progress at other levels and in informal or less visible ways.

Introduction

Latin America is experiencing one of the most difficult moments in its recent history as it confronts three overlapping crises: the coronavirus pandemic, a steep economic contraction, and high levels of political polarization and democratic erosion. No region has been more impacted by COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, than Latin America, both in human and economic terms.¹ As of April 30, 2021, Latin America had a total of 28 million confirmed cases (out of a world total of 150 million) and just over 900,000 deaths (out of a world total of just over 3 million). With around 8 percent of the world's population, the region has almost 19 percent of confirmed cases and 28 percent of total deaths. Also, as of April 30, Latin America had administered only 8 percent of the total vaccines.²

The economic impact has been equally devastating. The World Bank estimates that in 2020, 53 million Latin Americans saw their income fall below the region's poverty line of \$5.50 per day, pushing up the percentage of those living in poverty to an estimated 37.7 percent—a level not seen since 2006.³ According to the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Latin America is suffering its worst economic crisis in 120 years, with gross domestic product (GDP) having declined by a staggering 9.1 percent in 2020, eliminating most of the progress made during the commodity boom years (2003–2013). As might be expected, governments across the region are grappling with serious fiscal limitations and seem hard pressed to offer even basic responses to their population's significant needs.⁴ All the while, a toxic mix of insecurity and pervasive social turmoil is crippling most countries. As if this were not enough, the region faces what is arguably the most acute migration crisis of its history, with the exodus in recent years of more than 5 million Venezuelans.⁵

Several reasons explain why the region was hit so hard by the pandemic. First, even before the pandemic began, Latin America was economically vulnerable. Between 2014 and 2019, the region's GDP per capita shrank 4 percent, largely as a result of significant declines in commodity prices.⁶ As part of these economic difficulties, chronic underinvestment in public health limited most countries' capacity to treat COVID-19 patients, especially during the most acute periods of the disease. In addition, fiscal constraints limited governments' ability to provide emergency cash-transfer payments to the poorest in their societies. Labor productivity and the job market were also hit hard by lockdown orders and workplace closures: only about 20 percent of existing jobs in Latin America could be performed remotely, compared to 40 percent in advanced economies and 26 percent in the rest of the emerging world.⁷

Second, the region entered the pandemic in a politically vulnerable condition. Throughout 2019, large-scale protests rocked Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, and Venezuela, creating one of the most politically volatile years in memory.⁸ In most cases, social turmoil stemmed from popular frustration with low-quality public services, socioeconomic inequality, and detached political elites. Many people who joined Latin America's new middle class during the commodity boom of the 2000s slid back into poverty during the 2010s, and faced the realization that both they and their children are unlikely to escape poverty for many years to come. Popular demands for economic justice and support became more intense and difficult for governments to satisfy, creating openings for radical antiestablishment figures to come to power, like President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or President Nayib Bukele in El Salvador.

Finally, the region is beset by severe political polarization and democratic backsliding.⁹ In Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is undermining democracy by seeking to concentrate power in an already strong executive.¹⁰ In Nicaragua, the increasingly authoritarian administration of President Daniel Ortega has pushed through new laws to name "traitors" and to pressure media and human rights groups opposing his grip on power. At the time of writing, there have been twelve opponents detained since June 2.¹¹ In El Salvador, Bukele has enacted a series of controversial policies that many observers believe represent a serious threat to democracy. Neighboring Honduras is not faring much better, as an inflammable mix of corruption, violence, and authoritarianism under President Orlando Hernández is generating massive outmigration. Ecuador recently has seen widespread discontent, while Peru witnessed massive protests and instability following the legislature's ousting of caretaker President Martín Vizcarra in 2020.

Another regional trend, present in both Ecuador and Peru as well as in other countries, has been the acute fragmentation of political parties, which has made governance exceedingly difficult.¹² Colombia is in the midst of a serious crisis with widespread protests and a resurgence of politically driven violence, with one social leader killed every forty-one hours.¹³ Argentina's economy has hit rock bottom as its government aims to reach a deal with the International Monetary Fund while tackling high inflation rates. Following former U.S. president Donald Trump's playbook, Brazil's right-wing Bolsonaro continuously glorifies dictatorship and tests the resilience of Brazil's democratic institutions. In May 2020, for instance, Bolsonaro, while facing allegations that he tried to meddle with law enforcement for personal reasons, had to be convinced by generals to not ask soldiers to close the Supreme Court.¹⁴ Chile, once regarded as one of the region's few bright spots due to its economic growth and political stability, also has witnessed massive demonstrations and violent riots against the establishment. It now has the daunting task of attempting to design a new constitution even as it struggles to respond to the pandemic and undertake a rapid vaccination program to protect its citizens.

Given this complex set of interlinked social, economic, and political crises, Latin American governments and nongovernmental actors urgently need to work together to address collective challenges. The events of recent decades have shown that unless better regional mechanisms can be found, transnational and even domestic problems—from organized crime and environmental degradation to migration and lackluster economic growth—will become even more difficult to address, with potentially devastating long-term consequences. Yet traditional regional governance mechanisms seem paralyzed, lacking even the capacity to discuss the current untenable situation, let alone address it. The popular narrative is that regional cooperation across Latin America is practically nonexistent because its heads of states have insurmountable ideological differences and because the region's dominant diplomatic institutions have failed to fulfill their purpose. In addition, domestic turmoil is fueling rising isolationism and “antiglobalism,” most prominently in Brazil. Such a pessimistic view, however, stifles any capacity to reimagine regional cooperation. The dramatic crisis in Latin America requires more creative thinking, not less, about ways to promote renewed channels for regional cooperation.¹⁵

The situation in Latin America is indeed dire and there is significant room for sweeping pessimism; however, this paper posits that not all is lost in the realm of regional governance. True, in many dimensions, regional cooperation is either dysfunctional or nonexistent. In others, it persists, but often is overlooked or underappreciated. For example, in the realm of migration, existing regional norms have enabled Latin American governments to respond to the Venezuelan migration crisis. Even during the bleakest moments of the pandemic, some degree of technical cooperation took place across the region, steered by refreshingly pragmatic government officials. Extensive research and interviews with current and former government officials and scholars reveal how, underneath the acrimonious high politics rhetoric that sows distrust and often closes the door to meaningful cooperation, areas such as migration, health, security, and the administration of justice all have benefited from such technical cooperation efforts.¹⁶

For those who seek to strengthen regional governance in Latin America, these cases are crucial to understanding the state of existing cooperation and assessing the prospects for deepening translational links in other relevant areas. Notably, these cooperation schemes often fall under the radar, as they do not involve presidential summits or other high-profile diplomatic activities. Rather, they may involve government bureaucracies, the judiciary, or the armed forces, as well as subnational actors such as governors or mayors.¹⁷ By default, foreign policy experts tend to focus primarily on high politics—the doings of presidents and foreign ministers—which are precisely the areas where cooperation seems near-absent.

With this background in mind, this paper is organized into three sections. The first describes the impact that domestic factors, including democratic erosion, political polarization, and socioeconomic turmoil, are having on regional cooperation. This discussion highlights the manifest gap between the urgent problems that demand attention and the regional institutional mechanisms to address them. The second section examines the condition of existing regional governance. It begins by assessing the current condition of regional organizations, including the Organization of American States (OAS), the Southern Economic Market (Mercosur), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the recently created Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (PROSUR). It then analyzes cooperation initiatives in six thematic domains: migration, health, security, trade, democracy and human rights, and great power competition. The final section offers ten proposals about how to reframe and revive regional cooperation.

The paper reflects the authors' belief that regional governance is a fundamental instrument to help Latin America overcome its numerous, daunting challenges.¹⁸ It also embodies the view that even when ideological differences make cooperation difficult at the high politics level, it is crucial to find avenues of progress at other levels and in informal or less visible ways. More broadly, the paper proceeds from the conviction that effective regional governance and cooperation in Latin America is necessary for a broader conversation on the region's role in a rapidly changing global order, shaped by technological transformation and genuinely global problems such as climate change, migratory pressures, and increasing security threats. As great power competition continues to shape the global order, Latin America often is regarded as a peripheral player.¹⁹ Yet far from being somehow apart or exempt from today's rising geopolitical currents, Latin America, for better or for worse, is very much affected by them.

The Troubled Politics of Regional Cooperation

Despite the existence of historical rivalries among several countries, Latin America boasts a long and fruitful tradition of cooperation in diverse issue areas. The region's commitment toward collective approaches based upon a shared normative view is evident in its many cooperative mechanisms and institutions, including the diplomatic forum of the OAS, the UN-supported economic support structures of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the public health interests of the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO). Regional cooperation in Latin America saw remarkable progress during the 1990s and 2000s, with the creation of many normative arrangements, particularly in the realm of democracy and human rights. The latter were protected and legalized at the regional level, with the OAS and other regional bodies signing democratic

instruments. Despite their imperfections and shortcomings, agreements such as the Santiago Commitment to Democracy (1991), the creation of Mercosur (1991) and its democratic clause (1998), the Inter-American Democratic Charter (2001), and the South American Defense Council (2009) helped lay the groundwork for an unprecedented degree of cooperation.

The wave of democratization that swept the region in the 1990s disseminated a normative commitment to democratic values. This political shift, though far from comprehensive, helped stabilize political affairs in moments of crisis and created an unprecedented degree of trust between leading policymakers across the region.²⁰ A pivotal event in the new democratizing movement was a meeting of all South American presidents in 2000—the first summit of its kind, which led to numerous high-level meetings in the years that followed.²¹ Other notable moments of diplomatic success included efforts to reduce tensions between Peru and Ecuador in 1995 after a brief border dispute, successfully steering the two nations toward the signing of a peace deal in Brasília in 1998. Similarly, regional leaders helped to ameliorate mounting political tensions that threatened democracy in Paraguay in 1996 and 1999. Regional actors also convinced Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez to open a dialogue with opposition leaders after a failed military coup in 2002.²² South American governments strengthened their ties with Central America, Mexico, and some Caribbean nations in this period, as reflected by a growing number of visits of South American heads of state to their northern counterparts during the 2000s. Helped by the commodity boom, leaders across the region were able to increase social spending and enjoyed high approval ratings, facilitating frequent reelections. Since the end of the Cold War, many parts of the world have followed the trend of a greater emphasis on regional integration, and as a consequence regional organizations have proliferated. Latin America was no exception to this trend.²³

That said, even though regional institutions and platforms have multiplied across Latin America, mounting divisions have caused the region to backslide in terms of the depth of regional cooperation and the capacity to address common challenges. Examples of this negative trend include Bolsonaro’s refusal to congratulate his Argentine counterpart, Alberto Fernández, on his victory in 2019; Venezuela’s near-complete diplomatic isolation; and López Obrador’s frosty relations with fellow Latin American leaders.²⁴ On a related matter, the Lava Jato corruption scandal involving Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht—a company that traditionally had been the poster child of regional integration, owing to its activity in numerous countries across Latin America—raised uncomfortable questions about the role Brazilian administrations had played in the region.

The struggles of regional cooperation have been most noticeable in moments of domestic political turmoil. As Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador witnessed massive political and social upheavals in 2019, regional actors not only failed to offer help—by acting as mediators, for example—but actually

worsened the already volatile situations through untimely, inflammatory declarations. When Bolivia's security forces ousted then president Evo Morales after a disputed election, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro declared, without offering any evidence, that the United States had been involved. Argentina's government, similarly, described events in Bolivia as a coup, while Brazil's government called the process entirely legitimate.²⁵ For their part, the governments of countries enduring social turmoil were too ready to blame their problems on their neighbors. When large-scale demonstrations erupted in Chile and Ecuador in 2019, authorities from both countries argued that Cuban and Venezuelan operatives were behind the unrest, also without providing concrete evidence for their claims.²⁶ Rather than helping both countries address the crisis, the rumors about supposed foreign interference were fomented by the government of Brazil and, more worrisome still, by OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro of Uruguay.²⁷

Divisions widened further after countries adopted diametrically opposed strategies to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. While Peru and Argentina embraced stringent lockdowns similar to European countries, the presidents of Brazil and Nicaragua opted for denialism and refused to acknowledge the severity of the threat. Bolsonaro dismissed three ministers of health in the midst of the pandemic, severely limiting the potential for health officials to articulate broader regional cooperation, including medical research, border closures, medicine distribution, and vaccine purchasing. At a time when Chile was making rapid progress vaccinating a growing percentage of its population, some other countries in the region, such as Venezuela, had not been able to provide shots even to high-risk groups.

Several reasons may explain why regional mechanisms have ceased playing an effective role in the existing circumstances and, more broadly, why multilateralism in Latin America is facing what is arguably its worst crisis in decades.

First, the region lacks leaders who are willing to champion regional cooperation or have the political clout necessary to promote a shared vision for the future. After the victories of Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro in late 2018, Latin America's two largest countries embraced a profoundly nationalistic discourse that openly rebuked regional cooperation and multilateral engagement. With few exceptions, the Brazilian government's "antiglobalist" faction largely sees international rules and norms as a threat to its sovereignty, frequently attacking institutions such as the UN.²⁸ Similarly, López Obrador prioritizes a domestic agenda with nationalist overtones and pushes for a transactional view of foreign relations. Having two of the region's largest and most influential countries shun multilateralism presents formidable problems.²⁹ Yet even prior to the rise of nationalist leaders, concerns about sovereignty posed significant obstacles to deeper integration.

Second, several countries that have been more committed to multilateral approaches and could attempt to fill the vacuum are enduring severe internal crises that have prevented them from taking a leadership role. Chile is a case in point: in 2019, it was forced to withdraw as the host of the UN's Climate Summit in order to “prioritize re-establishing public order”³⁰—namely, widespread antigovernment protests. This decision was all the more embarrassing for Chile because it had stepped up and offered to host the summit when the previous host, Brazil, had backed out of holding the event. Because of the protests, President Sebastián Piñera opted to cancel not only the UN summit but also the 2019 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, where Trump and China's President Xi Jinping were supposed to meet. In the same way, numerous other governments in the region, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, face too many domestic problems to project a coherent strategic vision, or lack the political weight to mobilize others. The few countries that defend multilateralism and enjoy political stability, such as Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay, lack the wherewithal needed to set in motion a regional agenda.

Third, decreasing popular support is rendering governments across the region domestically vulnerable and politically paralyzed. This trend derives in part from the end of an unprecedented era of economic growth during the commodity boom in the 2000s, which furnished incumbents with the resources needed to increase public spending on social policies.³¹ Following the commodity bust, the popularity of incumbents plummeted, driven by their electorates' anger at the abrupt halt in social programs and investments and the slowing-down of inequality reduction—the so-called Toqueville Effect, in which social frustration grows as social conditions and opportunities improve. In a sense, persistent inequality and the associated political ups and downs pose serious obstacles to building political legitimacy and intertemporal public policies. Regional governance efforts are especially vulnerable under such volatile conditions. In 2020, for instance, not a single president in the region won reelection—the exception being Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, whose election for a new term was broadly seen as being neither free nor fair. In addition, the surge of populist leaders in several countries who railed against the political establishment has reduced the space available to more experienced politicians. This phenomenon is particularly visible in (but not limited to) Brazil's foreign ministry, which at present is led by diplomats who had never even occupied ambassadorial posts abroad before joining the cabinet, and thus had a more limited international network.

Fourth, marked political antagonism between leaders, often linked to domestic considerations, has made cooperation exceedingly difficult. Rifts often pit far-right leaders such as Brazil's Bolsonaro against their leftist counterparts such as Argentina's Fernández and Mexico's López Obrador. In August 2019, Bolsonaro utilized hostile rhetoric toward Fernández, calling him a “leftist bandit,” and Fernández enraged Bolsonaro by expressing his sympathy for Brazil's ex-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Bolsonaro's archenemy.³² The strong ideological divergence between heads of state in the region

has produced rival alliances, such as PROSUR, a bloc of center-right governments, and the Puebla Group, an amalgam of left-wing and center-left presidents, former presidents, and intellectuals. Given their dependence on ideological alignment, none of these initiatives can be expected to outlive more than one electoral cycle.

Fifth, Latin American policymakers have failed to contain Venezuela's acute social, economic, and political crisis, which has been going on for nearly two decades and has poisoned regional multilateralism. Although the failed coup in 2002 was addressed in a relatively constructive manner, Venezuela's subsequent decline into an authoritarian state has polarized the region. For a time—particularly until the death of Hugo Chávez—Venezuela had remarkable financial and political influence in Latin America, and governments across the Western Hemisphere were sharply divided on their responses to it, to the point where it became impossible to hold a regional meeting with all heads of state. Today, Latin American governments continue to disagree over whether Maduro is Venezuela's legitimate head of state, or how to address Venezuela's existential crisis. This rift is symbolized by Fernández's decision in March 2021 to remove Argentina from the Lima Group, a platform established to coordinate the regional response to the Venezuela crisis.³³ Latin American countries' influence over Caracas is also overshadowed by the growing role being played by major outside powers such as China, Russia, and the United States. Even though Venezuela's collapse has deeply affected the continent, Latin American governments have become mere bystanders to the crisis.

Venezuela's negative impact on hemispheric affairs has become an even greater concern for countries in the region, given the flight of millions of Venezuelans to other parts of Latin America. The exodus has grown to such proportions that no country can afford to remain indifferent anymore. Unfortunately, however, many decisionmakers have found out that the crisis provides an opportunity to further their objectives and thus many have politicized the matter. Brazil is a case in point. While far-right leaders like Bolsonaro accuse left-wing politicians of supposedly seeking to transform Brazil into a Venezuela, the opposition frequently points to parallels between the president and Nicolás Maduro, who also allowed the country's armed forces to take on extraordinary political powers.

Sixth, weakened states have had to confront ever more powerful organized criminal groups, many of which operate transnationally. Criminal activity has led to serious deterioration in security conditions across the region, marked by rising levels of violence and human rights violations linked to governments' attempts to control crime. In several countries, including Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela, there is evidence of organized crime either collaborating with or infiltrating the country's security institutions. In the same way, organized crime has gained greater political influence by either funding political campaigns or, even more directly, launching their own candidates.³⁴ There is growing evidence that the pandemic has

strengthened the role of organized crime across Latin America.³⁵ This trend has ominous consequences for the region's capacity to tackle not only security but also other issues including health, education, and the environment.

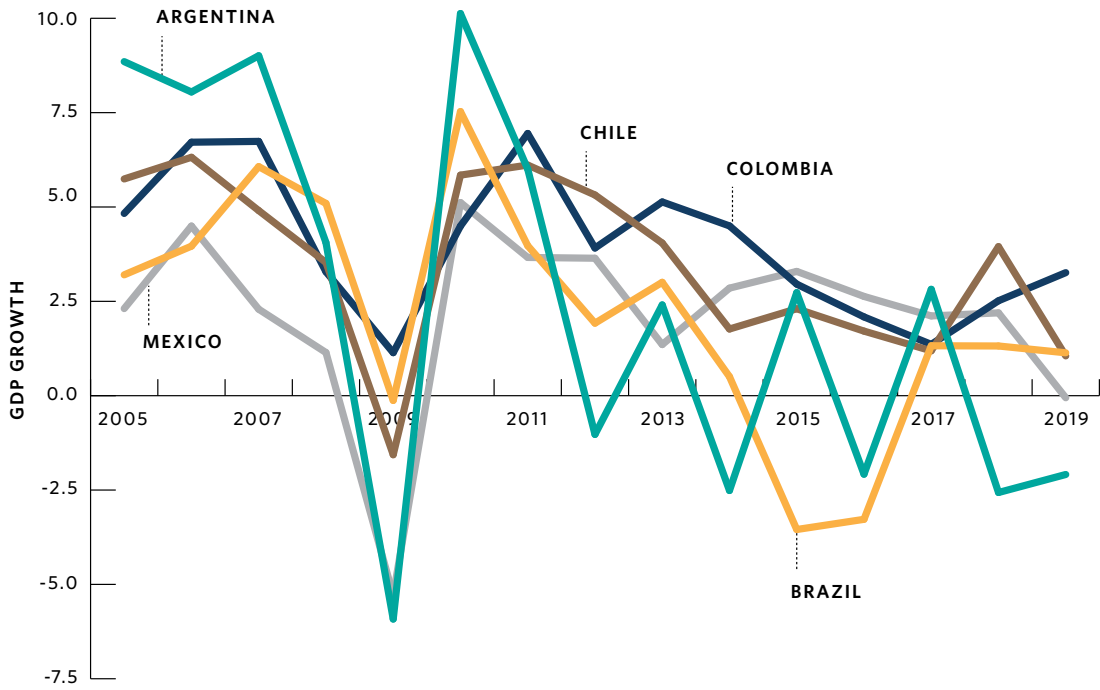
Seventh, as will be discussed in the third section, the emergence of great power politics in Latin America adds a further layer to regional dynamics that is unlikely to strengthen multilateralism. The geopolitical competition between the United States and a rising China is constraining other countries' room for maneuvering and further undercutting the prospects for regional cooperation. Notably, it risks politicizing foreign policy—as seen in Brazil, where Bolsonaro was one of the first Latin American presidents to be elected on an openly anti-China platform—which makes a rational debate about the subject more difficult. The more that other leaders embrace one-sided approaches, in either direction, the more difficult it will be to find ways to successfully manage the consequences of the return of great power politics in Latin America.

Finally, the region's challenging economic context must be considered. Numerous Latin American countries have stopped growing or did so at lower rates than in the early 2000s (see figure 1). When growth did take place, it happened at lower rates than other developing regions. Intraregional trade, for example, grew slower for most countries than extraregional trade.³⁶ For most Latin American countries, trade with China and the United States is now far more important than trade with neighboring countries. Reflecting the growth of the commodities markets, particularly in China, Latin America's economic complexity has been reduced (see figure 2). This re-primarization of its trade does not favor more regional integration, as it is the faltering manufacturing sector that drives regional exchange.

Perhaps most telling, trade between Brazil and Argentina declined in relative and absolute terms over the past decade. Brazil's exports to Argentina fell from 11 percent to 6 percent of total exports between 2000 and 2018. Uruguay's exports to Argentina and Brazil respectively likewise shrank from 17 percent to 5 percent and from 23 percent to 12 percent for the same period. Chile's exports to Argentina are one-third of what they were only 10 years ago.

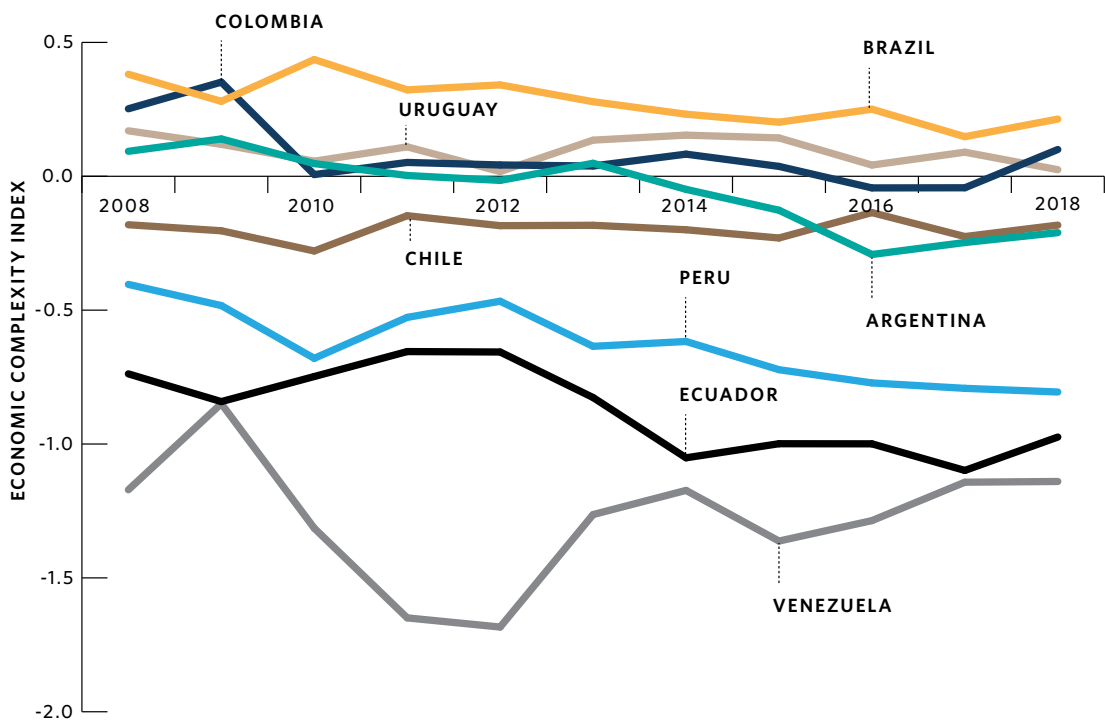
Only in Central America does intraregional trade show a more positive trajectory.³⁷ In 2020, for the first time, Brazil ceased to be Argentina's largest trading partner, being overtaken by China. As a consequence, individuals in many countries who have called for greater regional integration have seen their political influence decline.³⁸ The case of Brazil is symbolic: when the Bolsonaro government questioned the usefulness of Mercosur, only a small and politically marginalized group, made up mostly of academics and retired policymakers, sounded the alarm. The bloc's thirtieth anniversary—celebrated in March 2021 and dominated by mutual recriminations between Uruguay and

FIGURE 1
GDP Growth in Select Latin American Countries



SOURCE: World Development Indicators, World Bank.

FIGURE 2
Economic Complexity in South America



SOURCE: Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity.

Argentina—produced little public reflection about the future of the region. Given the important role that the creation of Mercosur played in ending the geopolitical rivalry between Argentina and Brazil that shaped regional dynamics for decades, this omission was remarkable.

These eight reasons explain why regional cooperation in Latin America is facing so many difficulties. They also lay out the size of the challenge that policymakers, bureaucrats, and scholars face as they seek to articulate strategies to lessen the damage and identify ways to actually strengthen cooperation in specific areas. As suggested above, the price of inaction is far too high to simply accept the status quo as a political reality that cannot be changed. The next section unpacks regional cooperation and offers a more nuanced analysis on the main drivers of collective action in Latin America and the alternatives that lie ahead.

Successes and Failures in Regional Governance

If the state of intergovernmental organizations is a barometer of regional cooperation in Latin America, then the picture looks bleak. The OAS, the oldest and most influential regional body, is going through what is arguably its worst institutional crisis since its creation in 1948. Divisiveness over thorny issues, in particular how to handle the Venezuelan and Honduran democratic crises, has led to bickering and paralysis. Particularly harmful were the attacks led by Venezuela and likeminded states of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America against some OAS divisions such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, one of the organization's most prestigious and important specialized bodies. These attacks sought to undermine the OAS as a whole and deflect attention from the accusers' problematic democratic and human rights records.

Yet other reasons have contributed to the organization's steady decline. A lack of levelheaded, skillful leadership on the part of the OAS secretary general has eroded the organization's stance and credibility. Although this problem dates back to the tenure of José Miguel Insulza of Chile, it became particularly pernicious under Luis Almagro of Uruguay, the current secretary general. Almagro's tenure has been characterized by an abrasive, lopsided, and ultimately counterproductive style that has further dented the organization's credibility.

Other organizations have not fared much better. UNASUR, created in 2008 as a purported South American alternative to the OAS (that excludes the United States and Mexico), predictably replicated the crippling divisions afflicting the Western Hemisphere. Acrimony and divisiveness became apparent almost immediately within the newly created body, as Brazil and Venezuela jockeyed for influence and countries such as Colombia and (to a lesser degree) Chile withheld their support and manifested their reservations. The worsening crises in Venezuela and Brazil ended up sinking the

project in less than a decade. In Mercosur, meanwhile, steep divisions between member states have tested the limits of the trading bloc's economic integration capacity. The inception in 2019 of PROSUR, a recently created club of like-minded states promoted by Piñera and Colombian President Iván Duque, promises to replicate many of UNASUR's shortcomings by advancing a center-right-wing agenda not shared by many countries in the region. Given its clear ideological tilt, PROSUR cannot be expected to survive the election of a leftist leader in one of its founding member states.

However, while political antagonism, mistrust, and opportunism have greatly damaged regional cooperation, a resilient undercurrent of cooperation has continued to flow amid the paralysis in higher political circles. This cooperation has two main sources. The first is the stock of global multilateral norms that the region has been able to transfer into the domestic domain. These norms have provided a standardized vocabulary to facilitate regional cooperation. Migration is a case in point: the South American Conference on Migration resulted from the impetus provided by the Cairo Conference on Population and Development. In health, the World Health Organization (WHO)'s International Health Regulations played a central role in organizing regional cooperation. For anticorruption issues, the UN Convention Against Corruption played a key role in promoting related initiatives at the OAS and the Inter-American Development Bank. Through these multilateral channels, regional engagement has been able to continue even when national leaders fail to see eye to eye on larger policy questions.

The second source of cooperation is the national bureaucracies, experts, and watchdogs in each country that have sought to go beyond the electoral cycle to think of regional solutions.³⁹ With creativity and scarce resources, these actors—together with civil society networks—have been able to push, within limits, a technical cooperation agenda on issues as varied as security, health, migration, and human rights. This undercurrent seems crucial today and needs to be examined more closely, as it may offer clues to break the region's ongoing deadlock. The following sections, therefore, look at existing cooperation initiatives in six issue areas: migration, health, security, trade, democracy and human rights, and the return of great power politics. For each issue area, there are three fundamental questions about big-picture trends: (1) Why does the issue matter? (2) Why did cooperation work? and (3) What are the risks and prospects for future cooperation in this area?

Migration

Why it matters. Migratory pressures are placing great strains on Latin American transit and receiving countries to integrate growing numbers of economic migrants and refugees.⁴⁰ Latin America is home to two serious migration crises that are among the most acute in the world. The Venezuelan exodus is second in size only to the migratory catastrophe connected with the Syrian civil war. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as of January 2021, 5.4 million Venezuelans had left their

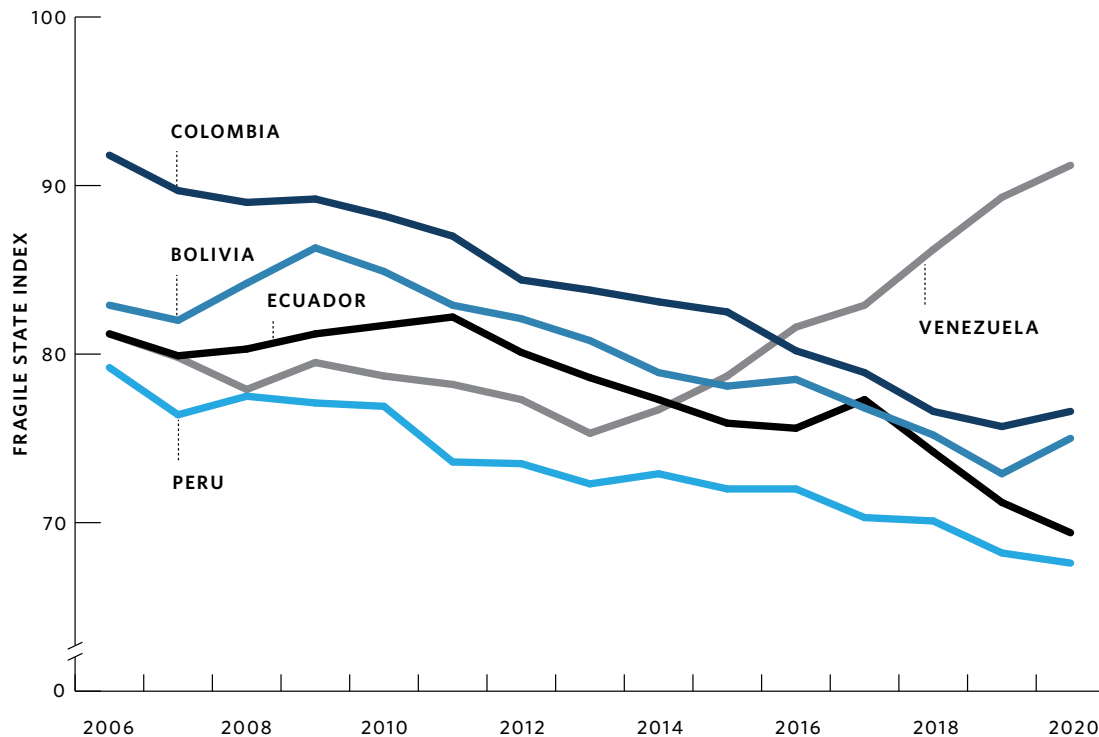
country, 4.6 million of whom moved to countries in the Americas.⁴¹ In northern Central America, meanwhile, a toxic combination of poverty and violence coupled with the attraction of a better life in the United States has pushed around 1 million people to flee their homes.

The state of cooperation. The growth of intraregional migration has led to important levels of cooperation on this issue in both South and Central America over the past three decades, including the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984), the San José Declaration on Refugees and Displaced Persons (1994), and the South American Conference on Migration (2000). The landmark Mercosur Residence Agreement (2002) extended permission for citizens of ten South American countries to reside and work in Mercosur member states for up to two years and offered a path to citizenship in member states and associated countries. This agreement came out of extensive dialogue and convergence between Argentine and Brazilian technical officials. Once Argentina and Brazil set the spirit and content of the agreement, a normative spillover followed suit in the region. The process enabled migrants in several receiving countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and as of late Colombia, to secure documentation to regularize their immigration status.⁴² Similarly in Central America, countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua have established the CA4 agreement, which grants free transit and other coordination mechanisms facilitating the free movement of people. Countries across the region also strived to implement the Cartagena Declaration, which introduces a more expansive interpretation of the conditions for granting refugee status—beyond an individual’s well-founded fear of persecution—thereby opening their doors to thousands of people escaping situations of generalized violence and massive violations of human rights.⁴³

Risks and opportunities ahead. The sudden explosion of Venezuelan outmigration caused by the acute sociopolitical crisis afflicting the country has revealed some of the limitations of cooperation in this area (see figure 3). In the beginning, most countries adopted a pragmatic stance and opened their doors to Venezuelan migrants, opting for quick regularization. Peru, for instance, extended its Temporary Permanence Permit, and Ecuador and Brazil offered humanitarian visas. However, as the number of migrants kept increasing, solidarity started to wane. All countries struggled greatly to absorb the sudden arrival of masses of Venezuelans and extend to them critical social services such as housing, healthcare, and education. Stretched to the limit and concerned about the strain the new arrivals would have on their societies’ highly informal labor markets, formerly welcoming countries began to place barriers to the entry of foreigners (such as visas or limited working permits), effectively undermining free movement. Matters worsened further still with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, as most countries decided to close their borders to prevent further transmission of the virus. At the same time, domestic pressure for stricter controls over migration arose as public opinion demanded that governments prioritize nationals for vital social services.⁴⁴

FIGURE 3

Fragile State Index Scores for Select South American Countries



SOURCE: Fragile State Index, Fund for Peace.

A complex context characterized by simultaneous health and economic crises saw the emergence of virulent episodes of xenophobia, which have further strained the relationships between sending and receiving countries across the region. Free riding in the context of a crisis that ideally would be better tackled through collective burden sharing gave rise to regional tensions similar to those seen in Europe during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. Relations also have been strained by the creation of humanitarian corridors to expedite the movement of people to bordering countries, as well as unilateral and sudden border closures that have forced Venezuelan migrants and refugees to remain in transit countries, unable to reach their preferred destinations for the foreseeable future. Quito protested when Lima imposed visas on Venezuelans and temporarily closed its northern border with Ecuador.⁴⁵ Ecuador then followed suit by closing its borders with Peru and Colombia. Bogotá also protested. Later, Chile prevented Venezuelans from entering its territory via its northern port city of Arica. In other words, the region moved from cooperation to recrimination to the rise of unilateral measures to cope with the difficult international and domestic context of migration.

A renewed effort to develop a regional strategy to address Venezuela's migration crisis could alleviate existing pressures. To start, governments could commit to adopting the same strategy and bureaucratic requirements at their borders, standardizing the process of regularizing migrants (for example, school registration for children). Second, they should develop a single monitoring system. With the help of their embassies in Caracas, it may be possible to collect data to design models that anticipate how many Venezuelans will leave each month—and thus better prepare public services like care centers, schools, hospitals, and police in border regions. Third, governments in the region should develop a regional fund to support the countries hosting the highest number of migrants and refugees, such as Colombia. Finally, each government should name special envoys who meet monthly to oversee the entire process and discuss best practices for integrating newcomers. Colombia's announcement that it would regularize the status of 1.7 million Venezuelans who live in the country, and thus provide them access to work and social services, is one positive development that sets an important example and facilitates cooperation in this area.⁴⁶

In Central America's Northern Triangle, where instability has produced a migratory crisis along the southern U.S. border, it is natural that the United States has taken the lead. Even there, a regionally inclusive rhetoric and approach that engages policymakers from across the region could help promote a sense that this is not only a problem between the United States and Central America but also a systemic problem that will bedevil the Americas for years and will require a joint effort to solve. One tangible consequence of the region's unwillingness to treat the twin migratory crises as a regional problem in the Americas is that the region received less aid from multilateral bodies (such as UNHCR) than was given to address other refugee crises. Latin American countries have received, on average, less than a tenth of the amount per capita that other countries received for the Syrian refugee crisis.⁴⁷ Rarely, if ever, does the total number of migrants in all of the Americas appear in public debate, making initiatives like a regional summit on migration less likely.⁴⁸

Finally, involving subregional decisionmaking bodies, such as governors and mayors, will be crucial to assure that migrants can be successfully integrated. For example, cities like Barranquilla, which has the third-largest migrant population in Colombia, have made active efforts to boost migrant employment by launching social impact bonds that fund projects in which a percentage of jobs are reserved for migrants.⁴⁹

Health

Why it matters. The coronavirus pandemic has underscored the relevance of a more unified approach toward public health issues impacting Latin America. The pandemic has helped to raise awareness on common challenges in this field, from the fight against endemic diseases (for example, yellow fever,

cholera, Zika virus disease, and tuberculosis) to the pressing healthcare needs of the region's migrant population, as the Venezuelan exodus has highlighted. Yet the reasoning goes beyond cooperation and solidarity; it has to do also with enlightened self-interest as the health of others is now part and parcel of national interest. Regional cooperation thus should not be seen as a reflection of altruism, but rather as mechanism enhancing states' national interest. Consequently, regional cooperation failures are better seen as rational—not moral—dilemmas.⁵⁰ There is no doubt that regional cooperation in healthcare issues could make a significant difference in Latin America. Vaccinating people across countries will be a major test of the region's ability to cooperate.

The state of cooperation. Latin American countries traditionally have cooperated in the realm of health. PAHO, the oldest regional organization in the world to address global health, has been a successful venue for cooperation on public health at the regional level. It operates as both the health extension of the OAS and a regional office of the WHO. It coordinates twenty-seven offices and three specialized centers and is responsible for 185 of 813 WHO collaborating centers worldwide. For years, it has offered vital scientific and technical assistance to member states in eradicating and combating diseases and in devising sound public health programs.

These achievements and its robust reputation notwithstanding, for several years PAHO has been under scrutiny. In 2010, it was questioned for the difficulties it encountered in containing a cholera outbreak in Haiti. In 2015, both PAHO and the WHO were criticized for responding late and ineffectively to the Zika virus outbreak in Brazil that put the 2016 Olympic Games at risk. Three years later, PAHO was criticized again after the departure of 8,000 Cuban doctors who had earlier arrived in Brazil as part of the *Mais Médicos* program, designed by then Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff in 2013.⁵¹ In August 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the accumulated debt at PAHO was \$162 million, with the United States holding 67 percent of that debt.⁵² Indeed, Trump was far more interested in blaming China for the pandemic than rallying an international response, his most noticeable move being to interrupt U.S. funding to the WHO and then have the United States leave the organization entirely.

In alternative fora, health was on the region's technical agenda but not the political menu. This was the case, among others, of the Andean Health Organization, composed of Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. This body was limited to technical discussions and constrained by existing political disputes between its member states' governments. Mercosur also established a working group on health and sought the harmonization of national health legislation as well as regional coordination to implement the International Health Regulations, first adopted by the World Health Assembly in 1969 and last revised in 2005. One of the merits of UNASUR was to raise the profile and importance of health. The result was the creation of the Health Council, driven mainly

by Brazil, with an agenda based on the design of an epidemiological shield, universal access to medicines, and universal health systems—three issues that the pandemic has brought back to the center of public health discussions. UNASUR not only promoted regional health governance but also took important steps to project itself externally through regional health diplomacy.⁵³ Even though these initiatives have withered as a result of UNASUR's dramatic weakening, they sowed the seeds of cooperation by building transnational networks between professionals that could be reactivated in the future.

Risks and opportunities ahead. In addition to the disparities among Latin American countries regarding their resources and health infrastructure, there are deep-seated internal inequalities that pose significant logistical challenges for vaccination programs. Vaccine distribution is set to be slower than expected. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's latest vaccine rollout forecast, only Chile and Uruguay can expect to see 60 percent of their adult population immunized by late 2021. A second group, comprising Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Peru, would reach that percentage by mid-2022. Ecuador would follow by late 2022. The worst estimates are for Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Venezuela, which are not expected to reach 60 percent until 2023.⁵⁴

The coronavirus pandemic reintroduced the idea of universal health systems into discussions on public health planning. Over the past two decades, health status in Latin America has shown some positive signs in areas such as life expectancy and infant and maternal mortality. Yet the region still needs to make more significant investments in health across the board.⁵⁵ Countries with delays in accessing vaccines will have to endure a longer pandemic than their better-resourced neighbors. Beyond global efforts to speed up vaccine distribution, such as the COVAX initiative, the region needs to be able to implement regional cooperation programs.⁵⁶ In March 2021, the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF) approved up to \$1 billion to strengthen the region's health sector, including access to treatments, epidemiological surveillance, and medical procedures, as well as ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines and other supplies. Without projects like these, the region's recovery inevitably will be delayed even further.

How could countries in the region work together to address the pandemic? Governments could cooperate, for instance, by enhancing their respective capacity to secure the temperature-controlled supply chain, particularly to reach rural or remote areas. Governments with greater production capacity for medical supplies (like syringes and face masks) or instruments (like ventilators) could offer market access facilities. The same holds true for countries with greater experience in biohazard waste treatment. Specific initiatives, such as training for vaccine providers, could have an immediate

impact in deprived areas. The software used to monitor the vaccines administered (particularly in cases where two doses are required) could be shared. Governments might develop joint campaigns against mistrust and lack of information about the safety and effects of vaccines, particularly at borders between countries.

In cases where a country's federal government does not share a science-based approach or is involved in spreading conspiracy theories, governors should be included. In Brazil, for example, governors of the major states including São Paulo, Bahia, and Rio Grande do Sul have actively sought to mitigate Bolsonaro's controversial policies and would most likely be interested in joining such an initiative. In border regions, cross-border hospital collaboration could compensate for shortcomings on either side, as proposed by the Mercosur Social Institute.⁵⁷ In sum, Latin America should make a virtue out of scarcity and take advantage of this moment of limited vaccine supply to better plan its administration, attune time expectations, and coordinate the necessary aid among neighboring countries.

Security

Why it matters. The sharp increase in violence in Latin America in the past twenty years has transformed it into one of the most dangerous regions in the world.⁵⁸ The levels of violence are uneven from country to country, ranging from relatively low in Chile and Bolivia to extraordinarily high in Venezuela and El Salvador—but violence is on the rise throughout the region. Violence occurs in epidemic proportions in the region, especially in the hardest-hit countries such as Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela. Not surprisingly, security has risen to the top of the political agenda. Insecurity is driven predominantly by armed nonstate actors of a criminal nature, many of them operating transnationally. Narcotrafficking in particular has had a severely negative effect on security across the region, while limited state capacity also plays a key role.⁵⁹ Brazil's coastal city Rio de Janeiro, which was host to football's World Cup Final in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016, provides an example of this challenge: An estimated 60 percent of Rio's territory is controlled by nonstate actors, largely militias that run extortion and drug rackets but are increasingly diversifying into other areas such as construction.⁶⁰

The state of cooperation. While there is a pressing need to cooperate in security, it has not been easy to create encompassing mechanisms. Countries in the region consider security a sensitive domestic matter and therefore are reluctant to work together. Although the region exhibits an intricate web of collective security arrangements, security has been most effective when only a few like-minded players are involved: "minilateralism" rather than multilateralism.⁶¹ Regional organizations, like OAS or UNASUR, have advanced confidence-building measures and conflict resolution mechanisms.

However, when nonstate and interstate security are dangerously mixed, their leverage wanes. As in other areas, bilateral cooperation has been more fruitful, especially among the military and the police on the ground. The vast majority of cooperation schemes are anchored within defense ministries and thus have sidestepped traditional diplomatic channels that can be more politically sensitive. Technical cooperation, which includes information sharing, training, and border surveillance, often entails informal, low-key coordination mechanisms. Most of these schemes have been conducted through military channels.

Security cooperation has been most fruitful in some particular bilateral contexts. One refers to bordering states with lingering rivalries that, in the hopes of improving their strained relations, have worked on confidence-building measures and other areas related to defense. A case in point is the cooperation between traditional rivals Chile and Argentina; their work has included information-sharing mechanisms regarding logistics and arms acquisition and the creation of the Cruz del Sur Combined Peace Force. Ecuador and Peru, also former rivals, have developed border cooperation initiatives that include information-sharing mechanisms, joint patrols, and the removal of mines in a large area of the border. There has also been cooperation in the fights against transnational criminal syndicates. Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay, for example, have in place an interesting cooperation scheme in the Triple Border, though it has weakened over the years. The Brazilian Federal Police force has provided important support to Paraguay and Argentina in combating the Primeiro Comando da Capital, Brazil's largest criminal organization, which has extended its operations to bordering countries. Even at a time when Brazil and Venezuela no longer had diplomatic ties, their armed forces maintained regular but informal contact, providing a channel of last resort that could be of help in particularly tense situations. Regional exchange programs in military and police academies are therefore generally to be welcomed, even though the armed forces' broad involvement in politics—such as in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela—is a growing concern.

Cooperation in the realm of security also arises as part of so called South-South schemes, whereby more resourceful countries offer training and technical expertise to less-developed neighbors, especially on matters related to policing.⁶² Brazil and Argentina, for instance, have provided important help to their Paraguayan counterparts, while the Chilean police (Carabineros de Chile) has had a long presence in Central America and participated extensively in the training of the newly created Haitian National Police, as part of the overall efforts on the part of Latin American countries in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti.

BOX

Combating Drug Trafficking Organizations

An intriguing and emergent example of cooperation in the realm of security is the country of Colombia. Its successful experience in confronting formidable drug trafficking organizations and other powerful nonstate armed actors (including paramilitaries and guerrillas) involved in the drug industry has transformed Colombian security forces, in particular the Colombian National Police, into an important reference in matters related to drug trafficking control and, more generally, the combating of organized crime. Working with both active members and retired officers, Colombia has cooperated with many countries in the region facing major challenges related to organized crime. The Colombian National Police has assisted its Mexican and Central American counterparts, offering training and sharing good practices and expertise in matters including surveillance, money laundering, and infiltration of drug syndicates. It has also collaborated with the Chilean police (Carabineros de Chile), sharing expertise on methods to combat organized crime–related activities.

Risks and opportunities ahead. While the stakes could not be higher and cooperation in combating transnational crime renders better results when there is coordination and information sharing among security services, the future of cooperation hinges on building higher levels of trust and developing joint partnerships, as well as on good governance. Furthermore, governments in the region are overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic, political polarization, social turmoil, corruption scandals, and the surge of violent protests, and thus have little room for dialogue and consensus on building a common security culture. Corruption and the penetration of organized crime in law enforcement agencies also pose serious risks that may shatter trust and undermine efforts. Likewise, collective action problems and free riding, especially in regard to obtaining foreign high-tech military equipment, may also undercut future cooperation. Most importantly, mistrust and outright rivalry between countries may create dangerous scenarios. The situation in the Venezuelan-Colombian border is a case in point. Connivance, cover ups, and even support for criminal groups operating in the area has transformed the border into one of the most dangerous areas in the region, where contraband, extortion, kidnappings, and cross-border operations on the part of security forces are daily occurrences.⁶³

Where do the opportunities lie? Because of the political realities on the ground, this is not a time for grand initiatives.⁶⁴ It is time to think pragmatically and take small but solid steps. First, governments must start with their neighbors and set specific agendas on how to secure better governance of their border crossings. The pandemic is an incentive to move down this path. Second, the pandemic has also deepened the need for more and better digital information systems. This should boost bilateral collaboration in the exchange of sensitive data on violent insurgent groups, organized crime, smuggling, or human trafficking. Third, the socialization of good practices and successful strategies against organized crime might be particularly relevant in a region short on ideas on how to move beyond a punitive approach. Fourth, the region needs to think more and better about the nexus between technology and security. Like-minded states could establish bilateral or multilateral fora to examine, for instance, the risks that technological advances in communication (such as 5G networks) and surveillance (such as drones and cameras) could pose to regional security. Fifth, governments should work together in elaborating shared assessments on the transnational threats undermining security and good governance. This approach might reduce cognitive biases (like in-group/out-group thinking) and increase social trust among policymakers.

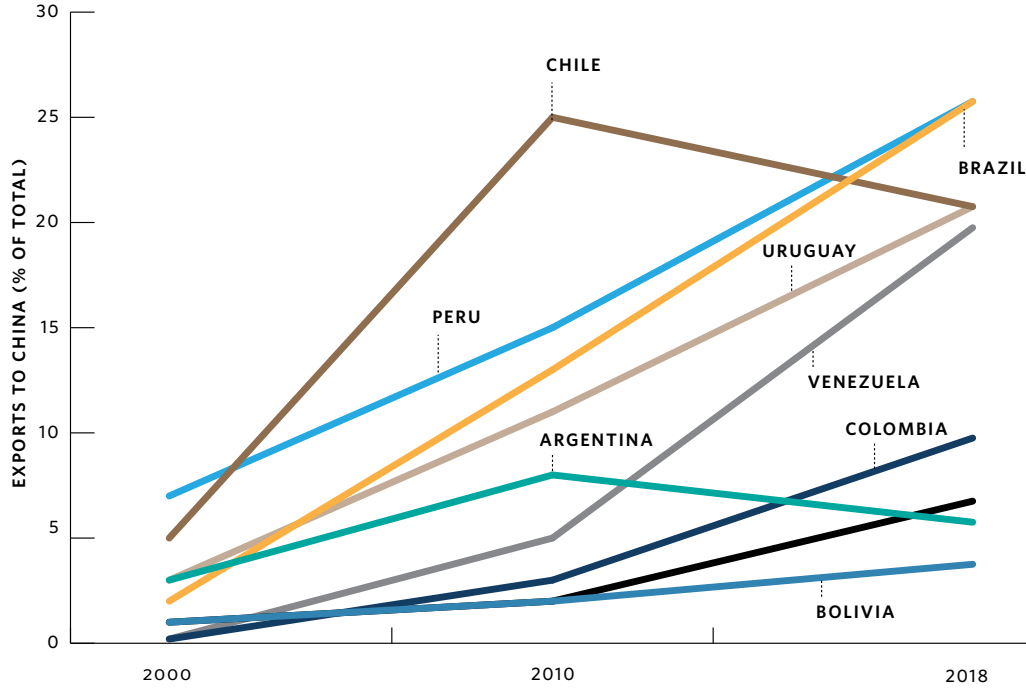
Economic Integration

Why it matters. In the wake of Latin America's existing economic challenges, trade continues to have a role to play as an anchor of integration and an engine for economic growth and, more generally, of stability. Increased integration in international trade and global value chains may support economic growth and boost the region's productivity. Amid shifting preferences in economic policy, Latin America still needs to take active steps to embrace productivity growth. It also needs to strike the right balance between economic openness and policy space to uphold national rules.

The state of cooperation. Latin America has always exhibited a consistent gap between trade integration commitments and a piecemeal approach to put them into action. Summits are held, plans are designed and loosely implemented, but over time progress stagnates—until a new cycle begins. The long-term result has therefore not been an upward trend but rather a disjointed pattern of integration. The number of trade agreements has increased significantly since the 1990s, and the region's weighted average tariffs declined markedly during the same period. But the progress made in trade liberalization seems to have stalled since the 2008 global financial crisis.

The region's rugged geography makes commercial integration difficult. Distances are vast, communication channels (navigable rivers, railroads, or binational routes) are scarce or nonexistent, and natural barriers such as the Andes Mountains or the Amazon Rainforest make any attempt at

FIGURE 4
Exports to China From South America



SOURCE: Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity.

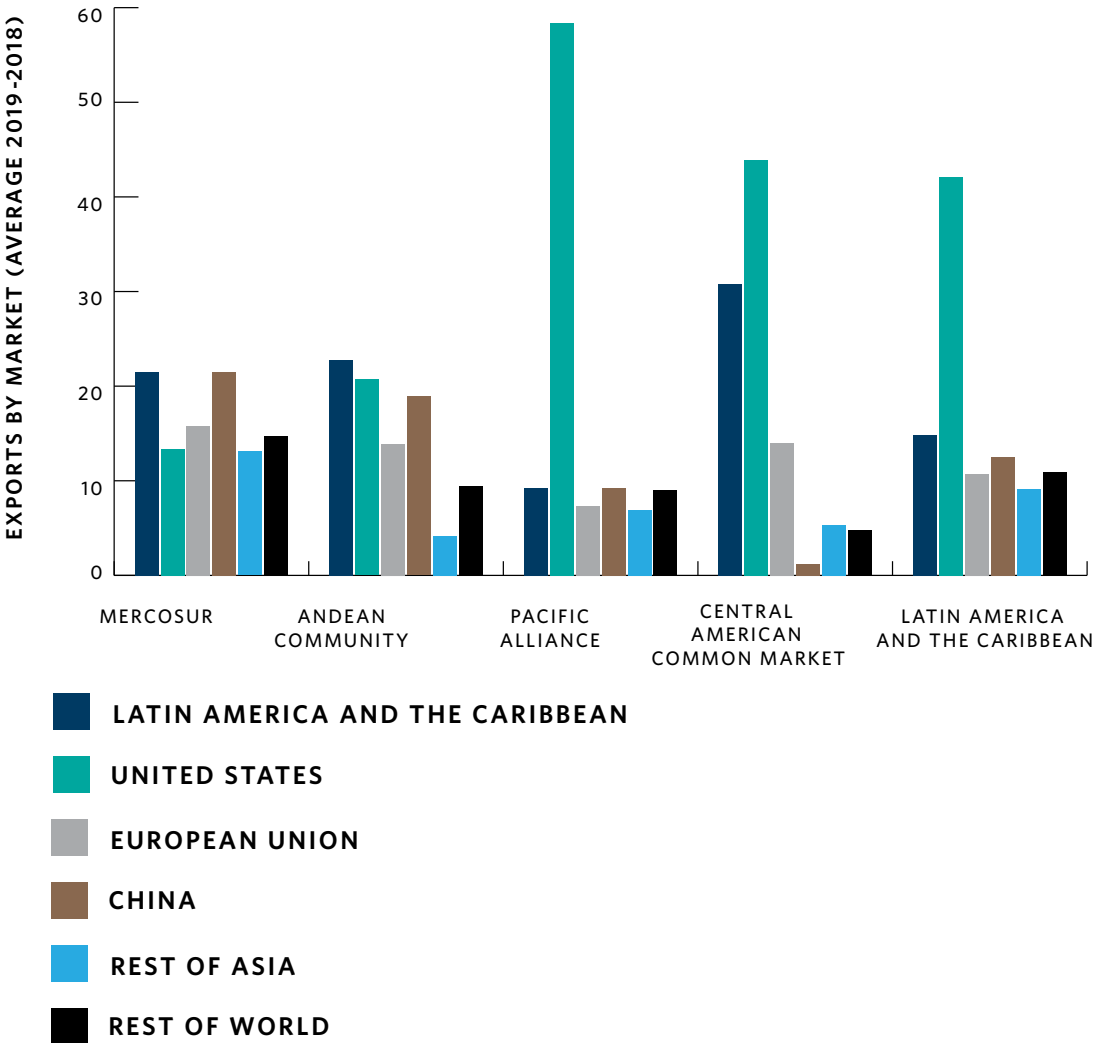
communication costly. Beyond geography, Latin American economies are not complementary and exhibit similar export patterns (based on livestock, crops, and mineral resources) and lack of diversification. China's transformation into a major consumption market for Latin American products has made this trend more apparent as countries have begun to compete to place their exports there. China is now the main export destination for Brazil, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, and Uruguay, and is the second destination for Argentina and Colombia (see figure 4).

Changing politics and interests in the region also have not been of much help. Governments in the region look at each other largely through ideological lenses, and the distance or closeness through that lens dictates much of their regional, if not global, policies. UNASUR is a case in point. The bloc was born out of a left-wing ideological approach, but a convergence on the right wing left it moribund. Bilateral dialogue between Argentina and Brazil is at its lowest point, in part because of the ideological distance between the right-wing Bolsonaro and the left-wing Peronist coalition led by Fernández but also because of a lack of consensus about the need to eliminate the many exceptions that continue to dominate intra-Mercosur free trade. In the Andes region, there is little diplomatic

dialogue between Venezuela and Colombia or between Ecuador and Venezuela; neither dialogue involves trade. Colombia’s exports to Venezuela represented 9 percent of its total in 2000. In 2018, they reached barely 1 percent.

In sum, there is no central regulatory body for Latin America like Brussels is for the EU, nor are there regional trade hubs in terms of network centrality, like China in Asia or Germany in Europe. Instead, there are myriad arrangements, with different clusters exhibiting mixed results. Central America, together with Mexico, is more open and closely linked to trade dynamics with the United States. Mexico and Brazil, the two largest countries, are not central to a Latin American trade network, and the role they play as regional hubs remains limited to their closer neighbors. Tariff and nontariff barriers are especially high among countries on the Atlantic Ocean (see figure 5).

FIGURE 5
Destinations of Latin American Exports



SOURCE: ECLAC.

Risks and opportunities ahead. For the first time in two centuries, Asia has a higher share of global GDP than the rest of the world combined. The changing global flow of trade, investment, and aid is a function of Asia's rise. Trade in services is growing faster than trade in goods, and automation is reducing the importance of labor costs. Value chains have become less trade-intensive and more knowledge-intensive, demanding more and more skilled labor. These chains are also becoming less global and more regional in their production, favoring proximity to demand, particularly in Europe and Asia. Offshoring might be replaced by variants of reshoring and nearshoring.⁶⁵ As protectionism increases and global trade liberalization stagnates, the digital, local, and global are forced to interact in new ways. The advance of new technologies is reshaping our patterns of information, production, and consumption.

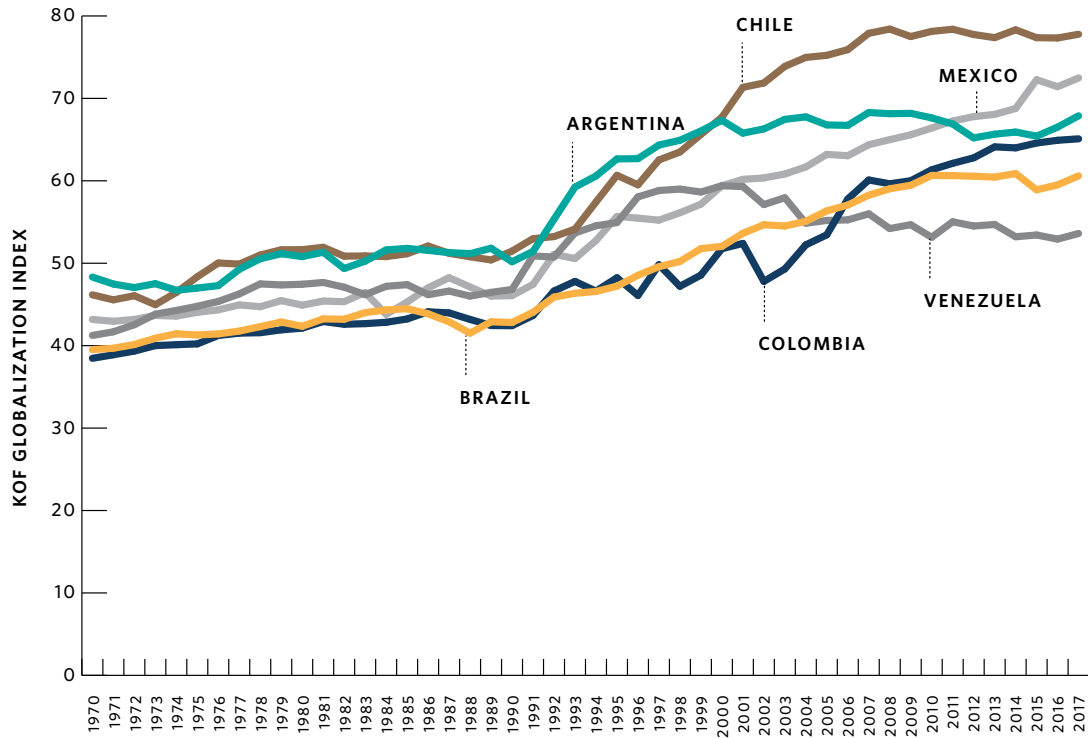
Latin America has found it extremely difficult to develop a regional conversation on how to address this shifting dynamic. Most of these issues are off the political agenda and, when they do enter, do so through outdated notions of how capitalism should work. The positions range from the critical embracing of neoliberal policies to entirely protectionist standpoints. For countries whose economies have been able to grow from an active trade policy—such as South Korea and Taiwan—their basis of success was strong institutions and a combination of methods including export promotion, subsidies, investment regulations, and domestic content requirements.⁶⁶ Today, however, these methods would infringe existing trade rules.

The global pandemic has accelerated new thinking on economic policies. Indeed, planning is back, and policymakers are rethinking a new mode of capitalism: stakeholder capitalism. Against this backdrop, Latin America needs to find the appropriate balance between economic openness and safety nets to smooth the adjustment process. It also needs to improve the environment in which trade operates, particularly infrastructure, information and communications technologies, transport service, connectivity, and the quality of ports. Customs procedures and border control should be simplified. Much cooperation is needed on regulatory issues, bilateral investment, trade facilitation, and the harmonization of rules of origin (see figure 6). In the same way, growing global concerns about sustainability and deforestation are a reality, and attacking them as undue meddling in internal affairs or as necessarily bad for business—ideas promoted by Brazil's Bolsonaro—are unlikely to help the region. Rather, the focus should lie on how Latin America can use this new global context to its advantage and integrate sustainability into governments' overall economic strategies.

The Pacific Alliance, comprising Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, has signaled its aim to further integration, yet its internal trade ties are currently limited. As for Mercosur, the bloc needs to be reimagined (see figure 7). Dante Sica and Andrés Malamud condemn it as “a zombie [that] favors the stability of the presidents and symbolically pleases the peoples. But it does not create its own markets, it does not gain foreign markets, it does not provide prestige and it does not favor structural

FIGURE 6

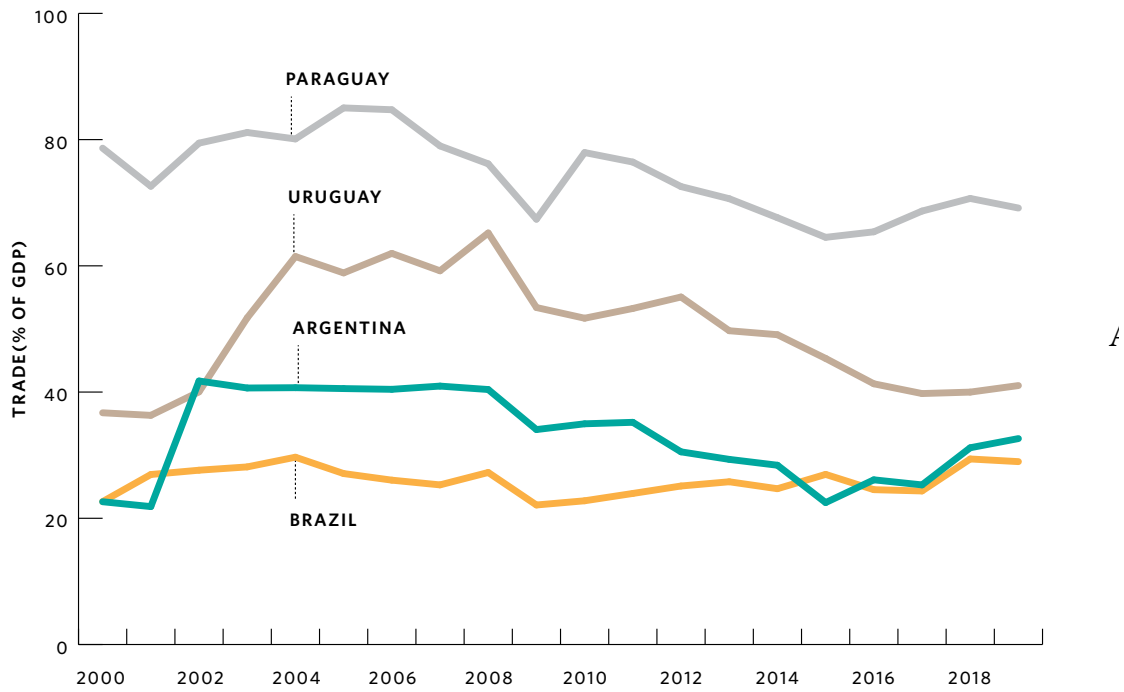
Globalization Index Scores for Select Latin American Countries



SOURCE: KOF Globalisation Index.

FIGURE 7

Trade by MERCOSUR Countries



SOURCE: World Bank.

reforms. It must be transformed or it will sink into irrelevance.”⁶⁷ Brazil and Uruguay are pushing to modify Mercosur’s rules. They would like, if necessary, to be able to sign agreements with third countries independently. “We need to find those flexibilities,” said Ernesto Araujo, Brazil’s former foreign minister, in February 2021.⁶⁸ They also would like to see a gradual reduction of the bloc’s Common External Tariff, an issue that has been long debated within the bloc. True, the common tariff, the cornerstone of a custom union, still is high, contains many exceptions, and undermines the competitiveness of the bloc. Yet trade politics is also domestic politics, and therefore contains much more than an economic rationale. Argentina and Brazil have so far been reluctant to alter entrenched trade-offs between protection, employment, and political support.

Democracy and Human Rights

Why it matters. Democracy and the protection of human rights can promote peace, economic interdependence, and growth, as well their associated benefits. As the Venezuelan case suggests, the erosion of democracy can lead to political unrest, economic insecurity, human rights violations, and migrant flows that will affect neighboring countries. For all its shortcomings and problems, democratic rule has proven indispensable to addressing the manifold socioeconomic challenges and to improving good governance and the rule of law.⁶⁹

The state of cooperation. From the 1990s onward, Latin America developed many new normative arrangements. Human rights and democracy were given priority and were protected and legalized at the regional level, with the OAS and other regional bodies signing democratic instruments. This was a story of convergence and mutually reinforcing patterns of democratization at the national level and cooperation at the regional level to develop democracy support mechanisms. Regional commitments have increased the costs of antidemocratic conduct, thereby serving as a deterrent for potential coup-makers. These commitments have also become venues to socialize ruling elites into democratic norms.

Despite remarkable progress in building a normative framework in the realm of democracy and human rights, the region has not completely translated these principles into concrete and consistent actions to defend and promote democracy. (A partial exception is the Inter-American Human Rights system—made of a commission and a court—which has been a bulwark in the defense of democratic principles.) For a number of reasons, the OAS and other regional bodies have been selective and at times inconsistent in their reactions across democratic crises or human rights violations. First, the region lacks a clear metric to assess democracy, and thus there is no collective agency to monitor progress in this area. The OAS Charter can be more efficient when the interruption in democratic principles is abrupt and clear—a coup, for example—but not when the erosion of the democratic order involves a slow accumulation of antidemocratic decisions. The result has therefore been a low

equilibrium between conceptual ambiguity and low institutional coercion. Existing regional mechanisms therefore have to deal with high levels of uncertainty about the nature and scope of norm violations, as was the case with presidential crises in Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru.

Second, the OAS's biased reaction often has been a function of conflicting member interests. This fragility has to do partly with social pressures and partly with institutional conflicts within democratic regimes, typically between the legislative or judicial branch and the executive branch. In Peru, for example, the instability lies in the relationship of the Congress—empowered by the institution of vacancy—and the executive branch.⁷⁰ All these events were deeply entrenched in the legal and institutional design of the country concerned, which naturally has made any foreign intervention more challenging.

Third, the existence of alternative regional venues has always been an incentive for states to practice “forum shopping,” in which they use the most convenient regional body either to increase external pressure on a target state or to take refuge in the norm of nonintervention. As a result, democratic charters of sorts have evolved more toward so-called anticoup norms that protect incumbents, rather than toward interventionist instruments condemning authoritarian regimes.

Fourth, both the OAS Commission and the Court on Human Rights are primarily reactive organizations, and they take their time to do so. Some cases may take up to ten years to reach the court. Having full-time judges, for example, would be very helpful. The other problem is funding. As an interviewee from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights remarked in December 2020, the court's budget does not exceed \$7 million, and Nordic countries (for instance) contribute more to the OAS than 70 percent of the countries in the region that contribute directly as members.

Finally, in recent years, the OAS human rights agenda has generated even more polarization by introducing into the commission and the court hot-button issues such as *in vitro* fertilization, marriage equality, and the rights of transgender persons. This polarization was present in 2016, when the commission faced its worst financial crisis and several states were willing to let it die. It also could be seen in 2019, when Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Paraguay demanded that the commission intervene less in their internal affairs. Polarization also was apparent in 2020 with the conflict over the reelection of Commission Executive Secretary Paulo Abrao—which was vetoed by Almagro himself.

BOX

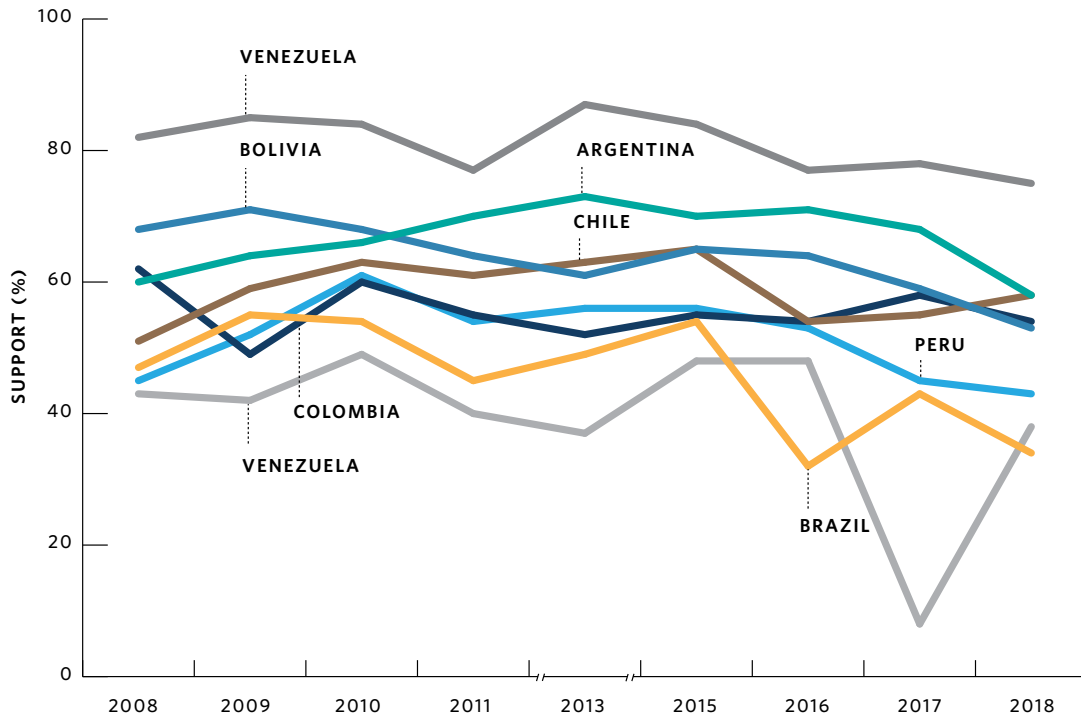
Corruption and Judicial Integration

Over the past ten years, a regional dialogue has been established through judicial bodies dealing with political issues. This dialogue, which is rarely visible, involves national courts, judges, judicial operators, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The result is a piecemeal but useful cooperation among courts, primarily at the technical level. One such case is that of the Brazilian company Odebrecht S.A., which has come to represent arguably the most important case of transnational corruption in South America and led to the Lava Jato investigation. While discredited in Brazil due to violations, investigations continue across the region. Latin America offered another interesting example in implementing the powers of the UN Convention Against Corruption. This convention facilitated direct action by prosecutors or judges without the need to involve governments. With this norm and a major case such as Lava Jato, formal and informal cooperation between judicial actors in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, among countries, took place.

Beyond these trends, courts in the Americas, Africa, and Europe have advanced in a permanent dialogue based on meetings and discussions of jurisprudence that generate reciprocal influences. There is a quiet integration of law, based on shared values, that is moving beyond political dialogue and has shaped the work of the UN, human rights committees, and special rapporteurs. It reveals a pattern: Political dialogue may be absent or polarized, but the technical or middle-management levels cooperate more closely than political radars can detect. State officials, agents of international organizations, and civil society organizations often try to move forward in low-profile, informal ways, seeking alternatives to the lack of concerted action among executives.

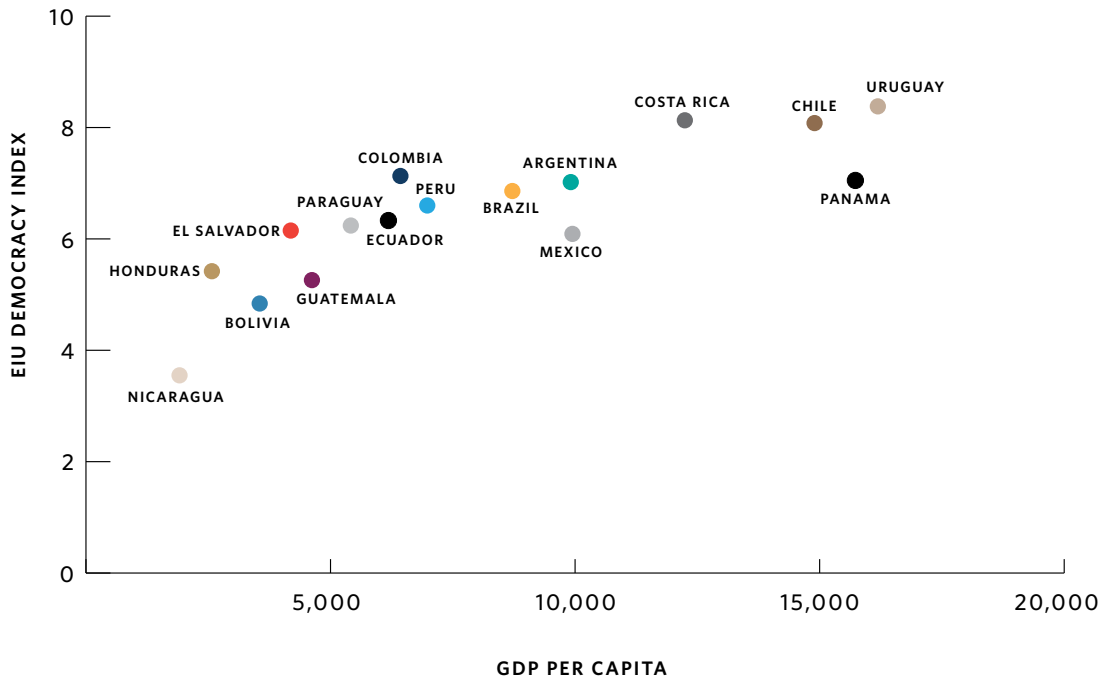
Risks and opportunities ahead. The V-Dem Institute's annual assessment on the state of democracy warns about a worrisome trend toward democratic backsliding around the world.⁷¹ Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit report on the state of democracy worldwide shows that the average global democracy score in 2020 is the worst it has been since 2006.⁷² Latin America has not been immune to these trends (see figure 8). A sentiment of dissatisfaction with democracy has continued to grow. Since the end of the commodity boom in 2014, Latin America's economy has grown at an annual average of merely 0.8 percent.⁷³ Citizens are thus seeing their demands for more education, jobs, healthcare, and quality public transport frustrated while a small part of the population sees their fortunes grow. The pandemic has only increased this frustration. Furthermore, citizens observe their governments' often fruitless struggles to reduce corruption levels. In Peru, the past six presidents have been imprisoned or prosecuted (and one committed suicide) due to corruption cases, almost all of which were linked to the Lava Jato investigation.

FIGURE 8
Support for Democracy in Latin America



SOURCE: Latinobarometro.

FIGURE 9
Democracy and GDP Growth



SOURCE: Economist Intelligence Unit, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/#mkttoForm_anchor.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, the region's overall average score fell for a fifth consecutive year, from 6.13 in 2019 to 6.09 in 2020.⁷⁴ El Salvador ceased to be a “flawed democracy” and became a “hybrid regime.” Venezuela continued its authoritarian drift, and the Andean countries (except for Ecuador) saw their scores drop as well. The general sense is that the health crisis and economic obstacles will bring more polarization and fragmentation, and they will likely bring more outsiders or conflicts between legislators and executives. As Malamud observed, “democratic stability requires a minimum threshold of economic redistribution at the bottom, social access in the middle and political pacts at the top.”⁷⁵

The decline of democracy and the worrisome levels of human rights violations across the region are, of course, domestic problems that regional cooperation cannot address alone. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that regional engagement does not matter. As mentioned above, outside influence occasionally has helped countries protect their democracies—such as in Paraguay in 1996 and 1999, or during the political crisis that shook Bolivia in 2005 when the Media Luna region pushed for secession. Presidential leadership remains essential when democracy is at risk, but a lot can be done to prevent backsliding in the first place.

The international community can play a role in engaging Latin American countries with the goal to lock in key democratic processes and institutions via international institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Mercosur, the OAS (despite its many shortcomings), the WHO, and the World Trade Organization.⁷⁶ None of these institutions are problem free, but they are still better than nothing. Even when antidemocratic leaders find it popular and politically useful to attack them, these institutions remain crucial to shed light on violations that otherwise gain little visibility and help opposition leaders gain a regional platform.

In addition, because international institutions often react only after it is too late, the real bulwark against the decline of democracy in Latin America are the centers that produce knowledge or hold political power: independent media outlets and universities, an independent judiciary, a strong civil society, and an independent legislature. All of these bodies can constrain the executive, which is the greatest threat to democracy today. In countries across the region where democracy is under attack, courageous judges, reporters, academics, activists, and legislators are the backbone of political plurality and respect for human rights. The more these groups can cooperate across the region, the better, exchanging best practices and providing mutual support. The best outside institutions can often do is not to intervene directly—which always carries the risk of being heavy-handed and counterproductive—but to support independent regional networks that can constrain the executive, whether they are women's rights activists, investigative journalists, academics, or judges.

Managing the Return of Great Power Politics

Why it matters. Crafting a response to growing tensions between Washington and Beijing is one of the most complex challenges for foreign ministries around the world. The same is true for Latin America, a region shaped by its geographic proximity to the United States, its growing economic dependence on China, and its aversion to longstanding alliances that limit strategic autonomy. One revealing example involves the issue of 5G technology. After being subject to diplomatic pressure from both the United States and China over the past few years, numerous Latin American governments will have to decide who will build their 5G cellular networks.⁷⁷ In the process, it will be difficult to maintain the neutral posture traditionally preferred by most leaders in the region. Yet the debate around initial 5G building contracts is merely the starting point of a broader standoff. The United States and China are on track to build their respective technological spheres of influence with different technological standards not only for 5G, but also with regard to any technological innovations that follow, such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing. Huawei has filed more standard essential patents for 5G than any other 5G-related company. And China submits more technical documents to the International Telecommunication Union—which serves as the basis for debates about new standards—than any other nation, a move seen as an attempt to internationalize its own standards and make its companies more competitive.⁷⁸ In other areas, too, great powers will jockey for influence in Latin America, as China’s “vaccine diplomacy” across the region has shown.⁷⁹

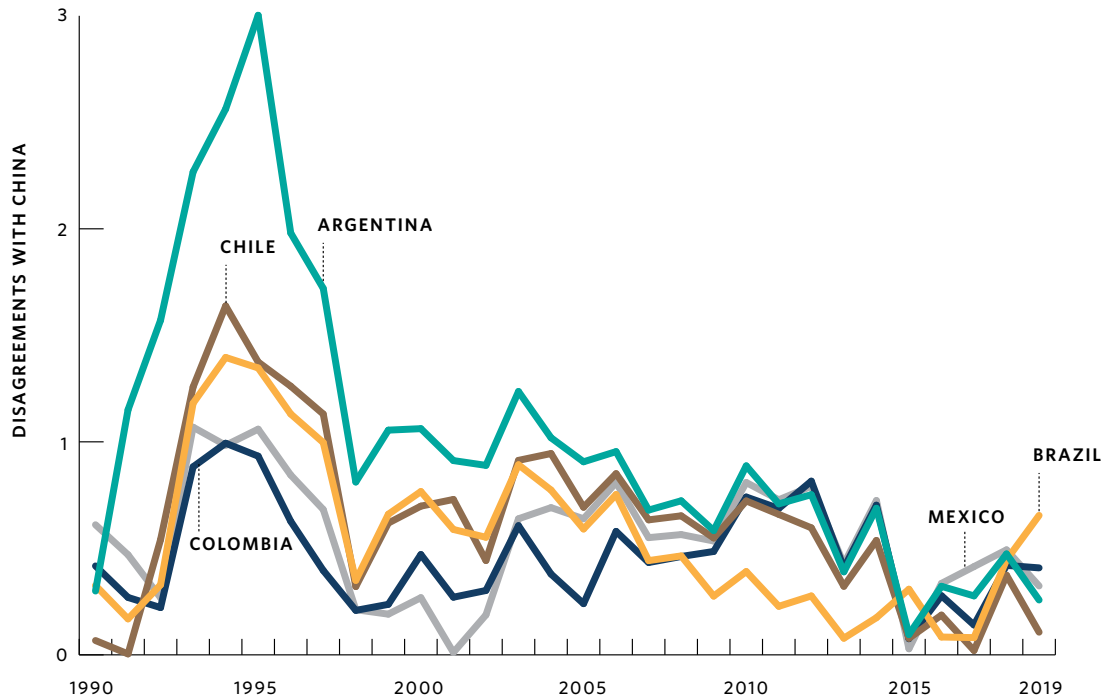
The state of cooperation. There is an increasingly vibrant debate among scholars and diplomatic communities about how the region should react to the return of great power politics in Latin America. Yet particularly in areas such as 5G, the dialogue between governments has been limited. Some governments, such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador, have joined the United States’ Clean Network Initiative, which seeks to isolate the Chinese telecommunications supplier Huawei; however, the majority of nations have chosen not to be so exclusive. In this sense, China has sought to compete with the United States in its own neighborhood.

Risks and opportunities ahead. It is possible that the region’s nations will opt to join different spheres, which could make their technologies largely incompatible further down the line. Latin America has already paid a heavy price for its inability to jointly tackle challenges, as raging transnational crime, refugee crises, and incoherent responses to political crises suggest. Yet the geopolitical toll of diverging 5G decisions could be greater still, creating irreversible obstacles to future regional cooperation. After all, a significant part of the global economy will be tied to new technologies—from autonomous cars and drones used for transport and warfare to communication and global finance—and all of them will be subject to the new rules of the emerging “tech war.”⁸⁰

Overall, it is undeniable—and largely inevitable—that China’s influence in Latin America will grow. In the past four years, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama have formally recognized China. This shift has increased the number of votes that China can obtain for its appointees to international organizations (see figure 10). Beijing has developed strategic partnerships with 10 countries; it has free trade agreements with Chile, Costa Rica, Peru; and it is negotiating another with Panama. It is now a central partner for infrastructure development. Already, nineteen governments across Latin America and the Caribbean have joined Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative, a \$1 trillion trade and infrastructure network. China also seeks to introduce technological standards in regional infrastructure (such as dams, railways, ports, and mobile infrastructure) and thus secure long-term customers.

As U.S. President Joe Biden is poised to reengage with Latin America, the challenges and obstacles from both the United States and the region will keep piling up. It is no secret that Biden’s main concerns will revolve around how to fight COVID-19 and get the economy back on track. When it comes to foreign policy, China will be at the center of this nexus. The emerging conventional wisdom holds that the switch in the United States and China toward more assertive bilateral relationships will be particularly uncomfortable for Latin America.⁸¹ It is starting to divide the globe into competing spheres of influence and undermine the rules of the existing model of globalization.

FIGURE 10
Latin America Disagreement With China in UN Votes



SOURCE: Erik Voeten, Anton Strezhnev, and Michael Bailey, “United Nations General Assembly Voting Data,” Harvard Dataverse, version 28.0, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LEJUQZ>.

Numerous Latin American scholars have contributed to the debate about how the region should react to the return of great power politics. Esteban Actis and Bernabé Malacalza put forward the concept of “liquid autonomy” and attempt to limit outside influence to some extent, cognizant of the fact that the region’s strategic options are limited.⁸² Irrespective of how the debate will evolve, it will be better for it to take place on a regional level, if only to avoid complete regional fragmentation in the coming years. In other words, Latin America should avoid internalizing the widening divide between a rising China and an incumbent United States. The United States may have become less credible to follow, and China may have become too powerful to ignore, yet Latin America needs to find a delicate balance between values and interest. A principled pragmatism might be the best option.

Reimagining Regional Cooperation in Latin America: Ten Potential Ideas

Regional cooperation in Latin America is facing its worst crisis since the wave of democratization in the 1990s. After several decades of remarkable progress, the region is now riven by division and a lack of political will to work together to tackle the numerous challenges that no single country can solve on its own. Current geopolitical trends, such as the tech war between Beijing and Washington, risk creating irreversible obstacles to greater regional cooperation in Latin America in the future. In addition, while some leaders—such as those of Chile, Colombia, and Peru, which are part of the Pacific Alliance—promote debates about how they can adapt to global trends, there is a near-complete absence of broader discussions between heads of state regarding the future of Latin America and its place in the world. The longer this scenario continues, the more difficult it will become to strengthen and promote regional governance and cooperation. Because rising policymakers currently are not being socialized into a regional network, they may well lack the personal contacts abroad necessary to quickly identify opportunities for cooperation.

It would be naive to disregard the numerous existing obstacles. Nevertheless, this paper reveals a series of areas where cooperation continues to function reasonably well in spite of the challenging political scenario. Rather than lament nonexistent cooperation at the very top or develop sweeping proposals that would not work with existing political realities, the best way forward will be to look carefully at the examples of functioning cooperation and apply their lessons to other areas where cooperation is currently lacking. The following 10 concrete ideas may help initiate a constructive dialogue on rekindling regional cooperation in Latin America.

1. *Focus on the technical.* In an age of nationalist populists desperate to talk up international threats, it would be both unrealistic and counterproductive to call for high-level presidential and ministerial diplomacy to promote a broad debate about the future of Latin America. The more that

populist leaders like Bolsonaro have opportunities to become involved in regional cooperation, the greater the risk that they will actively stifle it. High-level summits with presidents posing for photo ops, so common in the 2000s and early 2010s, set the overall tone in favor of cooperation, but such big gatherings will not occur in the foreseeable future, and calling for them plainly ignores political realities. As a consequence, cooperation should mostly take place on the technical level to avoid the populist ire.⁸³

2. *Go subnational when possible.* The debate about regional integration in Latin America needs to “depresidentialize” and focus more on subnational actors. More needs to be done to build structures to institutionalize regional cooperation independent from national governments. After all, if regional cooperation depends only on presidential diplomacy, it will always be vulnerable to the personal characteristics and chemistry of individual presidents, making the entire process inherently fragile, uncertain, and unpredictable. The case of the C40 Initiative, in which the mayors of the world’s forty largest cities have chosen to cooperate on a global level to address climate change, provides a useful example. A regional version of the C40—perhaps an annual meeting of the mayors leading Latin America’s 20 largest cities—could produce similar benefits in discussing challenges like climate change, urban security, transport, migration, 5G, and the future of cities. Several of these mayors are likely to reach higher office later on in their careers and could then leverage their regional network. When populists fail to prioritize regional cooperation or actively work against it, these lower-level administrators could continue to foster the spirit of regional governance and work together on numerous issues. The same holds true for subnational officials such as state governors. If some of these leaders were to adopt concrete measures on any specific issue area, they could easily start a conversation to consider a regional agenda for that issue. Mayors and governors may also be more suited to promote regional cooperation in times of populism because their work tends to be less vulnerable to extreme political polarization. For example, despite highly destructive polarization and the absence of a functional debate on the national level in Brazil, 2020 saw a civilized campaign for mayor of São Paulo, the country’s largest city, with constructive debates about the challenges facing the metropolis.
3. *Save the big hot buttons for later; put brackets on toxic issues.* Efforts to restart multilateral cooperation should begin with less controversial and more actionable issues such as clean energy, coordination around vaccine rollouts, or support for migrants from Venezuela and Central America. Structural issues like the political crisis in Caracas are better postponed until regional institutions regain a minimum of public trust. Although the problems in Venezuela deserve attention, Latin American governments should focus on handling and possibly mitigating its worrisome consequences. Prioritizing efforts to promote democracy in Venezuela inevitably would require the direct involvement of presidents and, equally inevitably, contaminate relations further by bringing up issues where there is no regional consensus at the highest political levels. It is possible that,

once another electoral cycle begins, the regional leadership constellation in Latin America may be different and allow for presidents of countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico to consider controversial topics like authoritarianism in Venezuela, which involve sensitive issues such as human rights, sovereignty, energy, corruption, and the role of outside powers. At this stage, focusing on Venezuela would fail to produce tangible results and also would divert energy from areas where cooperation is possible.

4. *Encourage smart engagement by the United States.* Washington would be wise to reengage and boost regional cooperation in Latin America, even at a time when tensions between Washington and Beijing are having a strong impact on regional affairs. Yet, whenever the U.S. government aims to bolster multilateralism in the Americas, it should not be treated publicly as a means to contain China's influence in Latin America. Such labeling merely strengthens those who seek to dismiss regional institutions as American puppets rather recognize them as institutions working to promote well-being across the Western Hemisphere. Instead, the United States should support regional cooperation out of enlightened self-interest: the successful fight against corruption, organized crime, human trafficking, climate change, deforestation, and poverty in Latin America would produce tangible benefits for the United States. Such efforts must not be framed solely as attempts to limit Chinese influence in the region; however, there is no doubt that, if implemented successfully, they would strengthen the United States's strategic regional influence against China. A critical but easily overlooked factor will involve selecting the optimal U.S. agencies to engage more closely with Latin America, avoiding those with which cooperation may prove costly, controversial, or counterproductive.⁸⁴
5. *Go big on climate change.* Latin America inevitably will be a global flashpoint as the fight against climate change becomes a more prominent issue in global affairs. It will be challenging to avoid a nationalist backlash, particularly with the rise of regional leaders who regard global concern about deforestation as a veiled attempt at foreign domination, but there are opportunities to strengthen regional debate in Latin America about the topic. Numerous existing state and multistate initiatives have approached the problem of deforestation and climate change as a regional problem. In 2019, Colombia's Duque led the signing of the Letícia Pact, an initiative to better coordinate preservation efforts in the Amazon between Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. In the same way, Latin American civil society is highly organized ahead of the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November 2021.
6. *Make great power competition more unifying than divisive.* Latin America needs to avoid framing its strategic predicament as a binary choice between the United States and China. No country in the region can afford to choose sides, nor can it fully commit to the two great powers simultane-

ously. Instead, the region needs to find an appropriate balance between balancing and bandwagoning—namely, hedging.⁸⁵ To do so, Latin America needs to engage in risk-mitigating strategies based on diversified alliances and binding multilateral frameworks. Although Latin American countries have so far addressed this strategic challenge as a national problem, governments and civil society can do more to promote a regional debate about how growing tensions between Washington and Beijing are impacting Latin America and on ways to mitigate risk. The arrival of 5G telecommunication technology, for instance, offers an opportunity for Latin America to rethink its role in a global information environment increasingly shaped by great power competition.

7. *Bridge Latin America's north-south divide.* More concrete steps are needed to overcome the profound disconnect between South America on one hand and Central America and Mexico on the other. Perhaps symbolic of this disconnect, ties between Brazil and Mexico, the region's two largest economies, have been lackluster and shaped by mutual distrust and ignorance. Stronger ties between these two countries would allow them to work together on strategies to tackle regional challenges such as drug and arms trafficking, migration, climate change, and corruption. In some ways, Brazil and Mexico seem to inhabit different planets. Whereas Mexico has largely embraced the U.S.-led economic globalization, Brazil remains suspicious of opening up to trade and is still one of the most protectionist members of the G20. When Mexico joined the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a club of democratic market economies, Brazilian observers concluded that Mexico had sold out to North America and essentially given up its Latin American identity.⁸⁶ Mexico, Central America, and South America will probably never agree on all geopolitical matters, but policymakers across the region should do more to promote transnational ties—not merely through high-level summitry but also in cooperation between bureaucracies and civil society. In an encouraging step, Argentina's Fernández visited his Mexican counterpart López Obrador in early 2020 in an attempt to strengthen bilateral ties.
8. *Address unglamorous but critical hurdles to integration.* Physical and bureaucratic hurdles across the board should be reduced so as to foment deeper integration in many areas. Latin America remains physically fragmented. Its road and rail networks are so underdeveloped that it is often cheaper to transport goods by ship from one country to another. Its air route network remains incipient, in part because of limited demand but also from a lack of incentives that could be coordinated by regional governments. Labor mobility has improved within South America, but the Latin American workforce as a whole remains disintegrated. Professional certification seems particularly critical. In Brazil, for instance, it can take years to recognize a degree from a Mexican university. Highly qualified Venezuelan migrants often cannot exercise their professions because

their qualifications must be accredited. Although some hurdles appear to be secondary—such as mobile phone roaming fees, which have been eliminated in other regions like the European Union—they all help make regional cooperation more difficult.

9. *Favor minilateral over multilateral.* It would be unrealistic to bring together heads of state from all of Latin America or all of South America to take steps to deepen regional integration. Even in far better circumstances than today, there will always be a handful of leaders with authoritarian ambitions or countries where human rights are being threatened. Therefore, minilateral projects of cooperation between only a few countries are likely to be the best way forward at this stage, as are attempts to reduce barriers and deepen integration on the bilateral level. Although this is a second-best option that may produce a confusing array of overlapping circles, aligning these movements at a later date is preferable to inaction in the face of growing regional polarization and nationalism.

10. *Emphasize the nongovernmental dimension.* It is evident that civil society—nongovernmental organizations, the media, and the academic community—plays a far more substantial role in boosting regional integration than is generally recognized.⁸⁷ These groups deserve greater support in their efforts to establish ties between Latin American societies. There are numerous examples of networks between nongovernmental organizations that quietly deepen ties between journalists, activists, and academics across the region. Civil society groups interested in strengthening regional cooperation, both from within and outside of the region, should also seek to socialize emerging policymakers with chances to occupy decisionmaking positions in a regional setting and help them establish personal ties with Latin American counterparts. Regional encounters to discuss joint challenges, discuss best practices, and assess potential for cooperation can all have significant impacts.

These ten steps could lay, against all odds, the foundation for a revival of regional cooperation in Latin America and help mitigate the corrosive impact of populist ideology across the region. As Latin American governments take on the lasting damage wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, effective regional cooperation has never been more important.

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