



COVID-19 and Geopolitics in Latin America and the Caribbean

A Discussion Paper by Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi

Context

Since its origination in Wuhan, China, in November 2019, the speed and reach of COVID-19 has shaken the international community. Given the global transmission of the pandemic and the absence of a vaccine, most of the human population is under different social-isolation regimes. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the pandemic has produced a significant number of cases focused in Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Mexico, while the majority of states have adopted strict quarantine regimes. In the case of Brazil, the lack of coordinated federal policies facilitated the accelerated expansion of the pandemic, whose number of cases is exceeded only by those of the United States.

In international terms, the COVID-19 crisis is not an alteration but rather an acceleration of global geopolitical trends, including geopolitical rivalries between the United States and the People's Republic of China, as well as the United States and the Russian Federation. The intensifying regional security competition in which these countries engage is characterized by the continued multiplication of proxy wars in the Middle East and Eurasia, and the recession of multilateralism and will to engage genuine international cooperation. Taking the place of that cooperation are strategies such as “mask diplomacy.”

Due to the nonexistence of high-intensity armed conflicts and the region's limited significance on the international agenda, the Latin American and the Caribbean region remain marginal to the geopolitical interests of the great powers, especially given the international regression of Brazil. However, geopolitical tensions related to Venezuela's political regime, access to its strategic resources, as well as its contiguity with Colombia's unresolved internal conflict, present major challenges in the post-COVID-19 era. Although the region is peripheral in terms of capacities, it still holds a significant reservoir in terms of normative power

for its sustained contribution to the defense of institutionalized democracy, human rights, and peaceful conflict resolution.

With the exception of border and migration issues in Mexico and Central America's Northern Triangle, the foreign policy agenda of the United States lacks a genuine interest in the region beyond flip-flopping actions toward Venezuela. The consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the next US election will be a key factor in the hemispheric agenda. The link between the weight of the Latino vote in swing states such as Florida and postures toward Venezuela and Cuba could sharpen the Trump administration's coercive actions, especially toward the Nicolás Maduro administration in Caracas.

Despite its delicate relationship with the administration of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Beijing tries to add support to the fight against COVID-19 through knowledge sharing and the shipment of supplies to countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. The public reactions from China's high-ranking diplomats in response to anti-China rhetoric, as seen from political officials in Chile and Brazil, are striking. The rest of the traditional and nontraditional extraregional powers such as the European countries, Russia, and India have limited their actions in the region, given priorities in the domestic sphere.

Latin America and the Caribbean have not been strangers to the consequences of the new international stage. The COVID-19 crisis has also affected a series of regional geopolitical issues, particularly the regional atomization expressed in the lack of collective leadership and projects, the crisis of regionalism manifested in the limited regional responses to technical issues to the collective challenges faced, and the limitation of state resources, both due to the drop in the price of commodities and the generalized decline in leading economic indicators.

COVID-19 has affected a series of transmission channels—or drivers—between global and regional geopolitics. First, it has altered the logic



of international cooperation due to the implementation of unilateral decisions that particularly affect the normal functioning of bilateral relations. In the case of the region, failure to articulate positions in regional forums joins with the interruption of free movement across borders. Furthermore, there are not enough regional leaders capable of proposing concerted action in the current crisis.

In the case of Brazil, the Bolsonaro administration's disinterest in regional institutions is clear. However, it is important to distinguish between those countries that have unilateral attitudes (Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia) from those that propose concerted multilateral actions, such as the successful Mexican initiative presented to the United Nations to ensure global access to supplies and equipment to deal with COVID-19.

Second, we note a more assertive diplomacy of China in terms of international health cooperation and a troubling intervention in internal affairs. Beijing is an exception to the current retraction in the area of international cooperation, both through its provision of donations and sales of medical supplies and its position regarding the COVID-19 vaccine as a global public good.

Finally, the fall in prices (and quantities) of commodities—in agriculture and energy—as a result of the drop in global demand presents a structural challenge to state budgets, which affects the responsiveness and the development of leading socioeconomic indicators. Latin America and the Caribbean will have to face a number of socioeconomic consequences that will impact their economic growth, increase poverty and unemployment, and deepen inequality. At the institutional level, the severe measures that have been imposed can give rise to an authoritarian temptation, permanently affecting individual freedoms and the role of civil society. Between state capacities and the impact of civil society, each country will process the consequences of the crisis differently.

In this context, there are geopolitical risks in three areas: humanitarian, economic, and social. In the case of Venezuela, deficiencies in the health and social security system will deepen the humanitarian crisis, although during the period of social isolation and border closure measures, a considerable reduction in migration

flows is envisaged. In the face of this situation, the repressive tendencies of the Maduro government could deepen, so it is important to underline the need for a negotiated exit from the current institutional and humanitarian crisis. In relation to Cuba and other Caribbean countries (Dominican Republic, Jamaica) the economic impact will be considerably more significant because of the disruption of their main source of foreign exchange, tourism. This situation presents the potential risk of a deep economic crisis with serious social consequences. In countries that had situations of general social protest in 2019, such as Chile and Ecuador, the consequences of COVID-19 could aggravate internal tensions and affect the normal functioning of institutional life.

Recommendations

- Follow up on multilateral initiatives promoted by countries in the region, especially those that emphasize a universalist perspective. In particular, emphasize the need to promote good practices in bilateral/multilateral cooperation in the regional context, based on the detection and spread of successful cases of cooperation during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Support actions to make visible Latin American contributions to the promotion of universal norms such as the defense of human rights, institutionalized democracy, and the peaceful resolution of international disputes.
- Foster the active participation of civil society on the multilateral level within the UN system and within the regional forums.
- Evaluate and monitor the consequences of COVID-19 on the regional level, especially those that could derive from the deepening of humanitarian crises and those that could arise from the destabilization of democratic institutions and the impact on human rights.

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