

South American policy: a sign for Argentine international repositioning

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises some comments and preliminary conclusions of a research project on the Argentine role in South American policy. The starting point is the importance the South American space has gained within the international context, in spite of the fact that it is excluded from the world agenda. One of the fundamental problems of the evolution within this context since the 80s has been the frustration due to the lack of institutionalisation of the different integrationist schemes. In spite of rivalries, differences and mutual distrust, South American countries have organised a co-operation matrix, tightly-knit and significant. This proves that beyond interstate structures and their crises, the idea of South American integration is always in vogue. In this sense, a response based on the preservation of this idea can be given by Argentina by encouraging initiatives and strategies tending to improve co-operation through consensus in intraregional interdependence matters. This would contribute to reducing the influence of foreign factors as well as setting limits to possible hegemonic roles deriving from regional leaderships. In this way, Argentine participation in South American policy can be an effective possible path way towards international repositioning.

Key words: South American policy, Argentina, Integration, Participation, International repositioning.

1. Introduction

When Arturo Frondizi and Janio Quadros, presidents of Argentina and Brazil, agreed on the Statement of Uruguayana on 22 April 1961 that both countries would “orientate their international policies according to the South American condition” what they were in fact doing was representing a regional reality that the Cold War and the Latin American institutional instabilities were denying. Around that reality, which hemispheric times would keep latent, there were hints of a South American policy. These hints had antecedents, such as the ABC project and the talks between the presidents Juan Peron and Getulio Vargas, which were brought to an end. The recognition of the “South American condition” was a proposal by Frondizi that wanted to go further, such as agreeing on a “South American foreign policy”, a topic that was finally erased from the final draft of the statement.

At present, the “South American condition” is still a reality of the region. Obviously, now this is more evident than latent, which proves that the unionist paradigm is present in Latin America¹. In our analysis, the unionist paradigm is just a point of reference and we use the notion of

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¹ Beatriz Kalinsky y Roberto Russell (1986) point at the coexistence of two paradigmatic lines in Latin America: the separationist and the unionist. We have considered many aspects of the theorisation of such paradigms for their application in South America. The paradigmatic unionist values support our notion of unionist politics, whereas the separationist paradigmatic values support our separationist notion.

unionist policy for practical purposes. Mainly, because we highlight that unionist policy comes from integration, a kind of integration that must not be understood in the strict sense of the theory which proposes principles, organisation and integration typical of a process. The meaning we give to integration here derives from unionism in an ideological sense, which- among other things- can comprise the instrumental aspects formulated by theory. But we wish to highlight the flexible sense of the idea of integration, as a South American assumption present in countries and societies of the region, diverse in nature and of diverse loyalties, although persistent.

From our point of view, Argentina has much to do with the idea of regional integration and at these times South American policy is a challenging sign for our country. This work is based on the belief that due to the characteristics of South American policy and its tendencies, Argentina can build international power from the idea of integration and, in this way, it can recover its diplomatic presence in the region and the world.

2. The South American space

To begin with, we believe it is important to point out that considering the South American region does not go against talking about Latin America and what this means in historical terms. Social and cultural factors, for instance, show a Latin American homogeneity, some exceptions notwithstanding. A way of appreciating such distinction is through the profound difference between Latin America and the US and Canada in the American continent. On the other hand, the Latin American territory which is almost a sixth of the total world surface has a Hispanic American identity which, although it has generated ethnic controversy for migratory and other reasons, has undoubtedly given regional identity a permanent sense.

Of course there are many matters that affect and worry Latin America. Precisely, regionalisation of decisions on common matters over the last few years, for example, around defence of democracy and human rights or the consolidation of economic and commercial co-operation have depicted a collective wish of Latin American countries to belong together. In some way what happened was what would have been unusual in previous times: believing in policies and interstate integration instruments at a regional level. Non-state actors who were also present were national businessmen corporations which recognised the value of the regional market, or civil associations which were able to transcend conflicts and interstate agreements by bonding, independent from state power and in favour of their own vindication. But this contemporary regionalisation, which has characteristically combined multiple and different global and local variables, showed a reality that was sometimes minimised and sometimes overrated, namely the difference between the North American and Central American contexts and South America. The inter-hegemonic competition between the US and Great Britain from the end of XIXth century until World War II, as well as the different forms of hemispheric control encouraged by Washington during the Cold War, without Latin America being a diplomatic priority, are some of the aspects through which we could identify the reasons for the differences between the above mentioned contexts.

Apart from these significant antecedents, the difference between North and Central American and South America is related to other elements which have supported it over the last few years. For example, the permanent US influence over Latin America is much more decisive around North and Central America than around South America. Furthermore, the interest of extra continental actors in the Latin American area has been mainly focused on South America. Additionally, and importantly, the South American region has had intraregional co-operation and integration initiators without Washington participation, something that has not happened in other American countries in recent years.

It should be said that Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, for different reasons, have had a particular way of looking at the US². In fact, these countries have a social vision with a perceptive load that praises reference to the US. However, apart from episodic matters of this and other times, while these countries have fluctuated between intensifying their relationships with Washington and mitigating their influence, they have shown, at the same time, a high degree of commitment in themes and problems affecting South America. It should be so. For different reasons, South America has become a regional subsystem recognised as such by many international actors. We can often see that from the point of view of international relations themselves, the South American region is considered to be separate from hemispheric needs and agendas.

One of the features that make South America different from the rest of Latin America is the huge strategic value the Amazonian area has acquired. This geographic space occupies more than 40 per cent of the South American territory and it not only represents a natural resource which must be reserved and used rationally with common environmental policies, but it also represents an area where regional security is at stake. No doubt there exists a strong connection between both matters. But the enclaves of drug trafficking and transnational movements of organised crime have had a considerable influence over the Amazonian area. This is why this reality, which goes well beyond the actions of the Amazon Surveillance System (SIVAM), has increased the number of requests for the reformulation of the Amazonian Co-operation Treaty (OTCA) and of the structure that was created as a result in order to agree on regional security policies which could be shaped within the co-operative scheme.

All the same, this influence has to do objectively with a great difficulty: that of state incapability on the part of most Amazonian countries in order to control “new threats”. This situation has led to the possibility that the US disproportionately increases direct intervention in the area. In this way the sovereignty issue in Amazonian countries comes into question, taking into account the expansion of transnationalised services and globalised technologies.

Precisely, the theme of “new threats” is related to another issue that considerably affects the South American region such as the Washington policy that grants the Triple Border the status of international terrorism zone. Together with diplomatic activity carried out by Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay with the US (3 + 1) referring to the assumption by the Department of State, there is another assumption by South American countries which refers to the possible connection between militarisation in the area by Washington and the creation of conditions favourable to private transnational actors seeking to exploit one of the most important water reservoirs on Earth: the Guarani Aquifer System³.

Another reason for the South American differences is the increasingly important presence of China in the region. Although Peking has laid emphasis on all Latin America, the relationship with Mexico and Central America is not as strong as the one with South America. It must be taken into account that Mexico and Central American countries have a negative trade balance with China, whereas the one of South America (with the exception of Colombia) has a surplus. The Mexican problem is that almost 92 % of total Chinese exports is manufactures, which means the sale of Mexican products in the Asian market, such as electronics and clothing, is embarrassing. Instead, as the third importing country in the world, China buys more and more raw materials and food from South America. Admittedly, exchange between China and South America is still only 4 per cent, but the upward trend is remarkable.

² Historically, Colombia and Ecuador have concentrated their international relations on the US.

³ As it has been often said, South America is the “region which is richest in water in the world” with 26 % of the global hydric resources.

The difference between South America and the rest of Latin America does not only reside in the kind of products the subregion trade with China and the volumes involved, but in the diplomatic policies carried out by Peking in relation to several South American countries. We must take into account that China has practically struck a deal with Bolivia of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and on the other hand, Peking has considerably advanced in negotiations with Chile as regards liberalisation of trade as a preliminary stage in order to negotiate an FTA.

Nevertheless, one of the most representative actions concerning this Chinese policy has been President Hu Jintao's visit to Brazil, Argentina and Chile in November 2004. It is undeniable that the visit was related to the fact that the increase of exports to China has been higher than the increase of imports from the Asian country, mainly through Brazil and Argentina. Although the Asian delegation privileged the increase of business and trade with South American countries, putting pressure on Brazil and Buenos Aires so that both governments accepted that China had a "market economy", we should not forget that within the framework of the Peking diplomatic strategy, the region is important from a military point of view as well as concerning natural resources. For example, during 2004 there were 20 visits by Chinese military men to Latin America, mostly to South American countries and some of them were related to military training.

Of course this must not be analysed from the point of view of the desire of China to become a world power, not only as regards trade but also as an important actor in the international power hierarchy⁴. This is why US concern about China's "diplomatic power" is not incidental. We know that when the American Congress seems concerned about an international affair, that uneasiness goes beyond the short term. The idea that there is a political and economic influence of China over the region has been acknowledged by the American Legislature. This is why American Senator Norm Coleman from the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee has expressed the need to do something in this respect. Going beyond the mechanisms that Washington could use to structure the neutralisation of such influence, we know that different governmental levels of the US are discussing whether China is a threat to American interests in the region or not⁵.

A third feature that makes South American a noteworthy region at the moment is the existence of large petroleum and gas reserves, many of them such as the ones in Bolivia and Peru which have not been exploited yet. Certainly, Mexico, together with Venezuela, are the main petroleum exporters in Latin America, mainly as US providers. But the energetic importance of South America is not only focused on their reserves and exports of petroleum but on the convergence of policies and commitments in order to enhance investments and infrastructure works for regional integration, for the economic growth of countries and the wellbeing of their peoples. This is different from the rest of Latin America.

There is data that suggests that South America practically doubled petroleum production over the last 20 years and their export levels multiplied by five, which is encouraging. The same can be said about other data which shows that in the near future the region will be able to cover part of its petroleum deficit, a deficit that is already heavily affecting the US. It is also significant to see that the G8 Ministers gathered in Moscow (March 2006) confirmed that the new sources of energy will not be able to replace petroleum for decades.

Based on this information it is not difficult to suppose that some South American countries, thank to increased energetic production and the regional export potential, would obtain important benefits in isolation as it has been the case up to now and in similar ways as it happens in different parts of the world. However, for South American countries, energetic integration is an essential axis, on the one hand, for those who need it for national development

⁴ China observes in the Organisation of American States and wants to be so in the Inter-American Development Bank.

⁵ See: Evan Medeiros y M. Taylor Fravel (2003). Peter Hakim (2006).

purposes and their petroleum industry, such as Brazil and Argentina, and, on the other, for those such as Andes economies which must exploit their reserves, ensure transportation through intraregional networks and export to great consumers such as China, Japan and India.

This is why multilateral proposals such as the Initiative for Integration of the South American Regional Infrastructure started by Brazil (2000) and the strategy called Petroamerica proposed by Venezuela in the I Energy Minister Summit of the South American Community of Nations which took place in Caracas in 2005 are clear examples of the integrative value the region confers to the energetic factor. The same can be said about some bilateral undertakings, such as the gasifers between Peru and Chile, Bolivia and Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia, and the “energetic ring” between Mercosur and Chile from the South of Peru. Some of the main actions claimed in 2003 by the Latin American Organisation of Energy to its member states were definitely carried out by the South American region, which caused it to be perceived by the world in a different way, from the political point of view and the one of investments and trade. In fact, the energetic question seeks to transform South America into a territory with two necessary alternatives: the one of producing and exporting hydrocarbs and the one of harmonising regional integration and development.

3. Resuming a necessary path

According to what has been stated, South America is increasingly recognised internationally as a region. Above all, it is a subsystem which tends to integrate as such, as in some aspects it departs significantly from the hemispheric framework. However, South America is outside the world agenda, which can only be puzzling. This can be explained through classical theoretical frameworks in international relations, or through different situations which have to do with the everyday of international life. But in this work we do not seek to analyse this respect, but to instead suggest that the region is not at the centre of world decision-making processes, however, it is an object of power and international interest.

This condition is owing to the expectations generated by South America and the potential struggles that could result, as we have already stated. Naturally, the region shares the problems of Latin America. In this sense, we can mention the well-known relative backward movement that Latin American countries experienced in the so-called “lost decade” in the 80s. Additionally, high levels of economic and social dissatisfaction were caused by following the tenets of the Washington Consensus. At the same time, it is possible to mention external debt and its structural consequences such as high levels of poverty, weakness of public institutions and corruption in the state in different ways. We should also refer to the fact that many of these problems have happened within the framework of political regimes and parties emptied of meaning and thrown into crises and permanent lack of stability.

In spite of the usual problems in Latin America that have been approached by the Rio Group, South America arouses interest in different international actors due to the enormous effort it has made in the diplomatic arena over the last few years. Its intention to loosen tensions between neighbouring countries and to decompress conflict foci, such as the Condor War between Peru and Ecuador in 1995, is one of the cases in which the region sought to commit to peace⁶. We should also point out the end of prior nuclear competition between Argentina and Brazil, which

⁶ In the Comunique of the I South American Summit of Heads of State in Brasilia, at the end of August 2000, governments talked about the objective of a “South American Peace Zone”. It is important to point out that Mercosur, Bolivia and Chile, in the Ushuaia Statement (1998) established a “Peace Zone” that comprised their territories and much earlier, in 1989, the Andean Community of Nations, through the Galapagos Statement, had expressed the aim of reaching several objectives related to the idea of a peace space in this bloc.

took place at the beginning of the 90s. We could mention other cases, such as the deepening of military co-operation between Argentina and Chile, for example during the October 2004 drills. However, what was distinctive was that South American countries have reached consensus as regards multilateral matters in spaces such as the Ministers Summits in the Defence of the Americas, which happened in the VI Conference in Quito (September 2004), going beyond the differences these countries have over which model of security they should adopt for the region.

This attitude has been part of a network of agreements and coincidences between South American countries over diverse matters which make them correlate and depend on each other. But what is diplomatically original in South American history is the density of interstate relations between the countries of the region and the continuity of such relations. This level of understanding has not been sufficiently valued by some central countries because they did not know or did not want to know the past of the region and, comfortably, they blamed South American governments for certain untidiness in external policy which in fact had to do with factors that were not under their command. Anyway, density and continuity in relations between South American countries at present lead to expectations and potential struggles in the future, as we have indicated above.

No doubt multilateralism has been a fundamental tool so that South America sought its objectives and demands through “summit diplomacy”, for example, the Americas summits and the Ibero American Nations Community. This multilateralism gave the region political capabilities, when many of the South American countries were shaken by crisis and institutional instability. An advance in this sense has been the ratification of the aim to have a free trade zone in South America, taking into account that such zone would become the fifth world economic space. However, we believe it is most relevant that most of the South American countries have practically become positive that the region is strategic for their foreign policies and international relations. This notion is reinforced through different bilateral relations between South American governments, many times through “presidents’ diplomacy”. These bilateral relations have led to “strategic alliances” in order to deepen dialogue and co-operation in different thematic areas, such as partnerships between Argentina and Brazil, Argentina and Chile and Brazil and Chile⁷.

But the most important expectations have been related to diplomatic convergence through Mercosur and the Andean Community of Nations. Naturally, the Economic Complementation Agreement between Mercosur and Bolivia (1996), Peru (2003) and Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela (2003), within the framework of the Latin American Association of Integration, were a fundamental antecedent for the coincidence between both blocs in October 2004, with the participation of Chile. This became formal by determining the asymmetries as regards levels of development of countries, preferential trade through tariff adjustments according to products and investments related to physical and infrastructural integration, just to mention a few aspects involved.

It is known that from the economic-commercial point of view one bloc and the other still need to solve essential problems such as co-operation structures and regional integration. However, diplomatic convergence between Mercosur and the CAN was an important in the formation of the South American Community of Nations which took place in Cuzco, in December 2004. The enhancement of “diverse processes” by the Declaration of the III Presidential Summit which created the CSN, such as agreement and political and diplomatic co-ordination, or the integration of different sectors was a wish and the product of good intentions which require lengthy negotiations. But underlying the formation of CSN we can see the political will of taking the region to unionism which went beyond the reductionist logic of commerce in order to go

⁷ It is important to point out that these alliances were ratified at different points in time among the different governments of the three countries in question. It should be highlighted that although discussion over the magnitude and loyalty of such “strategic alliances” remains, they have had a high political value since the three countries have redemocratised. See: José Sombra Saraiva (2004).

towards integration, understood as an idea to be generalised rather than an intergovernmental episode.

4. Influences and separation

In the search for regional integration South American countries have created agreements and mechanisms which committed them to each other, as well as spaces to make each other closer. On some occasions, perhaps the most frequent ones, there was an exaggeration of political will for co-operation and an overestimation of objective conditions in which integrationist initiatives took place. On others, there were significant advances. Certainly, the level of integration achieved by the region at present compared with 20 years ago, is a simple and self-evident example of how much has been done, taking into account that if we consider the whole of Latin America, the unionist policy has not often been transcendent or been here to stay.

Integrationist advances over time have shown that the South American space must be built in a multidimensional fashion, and in this sense, its construction is a painstaking process where different hegemonies appear at different levels while there are always threats of separation.

Over decades, the influence of the US on South American space has played a negative role as regards integration⁸. One of the main challenges of South American countries, probably the most complicated of them all, has been the one of achieving a considerable reduction of North American influence on various matters affecting the region. An example among others has been the one of preventing Washington, by considering the region as an influence zone, from making it a security zone, reproducing in this way a situation that was similar in the Cold War, a conflict that had little to do with the problems and needs of South American countries⁹.

Another level of influence over South American space that could damage integration is when a country which is a leader in the region takes hegemonic roles, structuring its own influence area based on its national interests, underestimating the articulation of such interests with those of integration where the needs of other state actors should be present. For example, Brazil has allegedly taken the role of pivot-state by linking strategic objectives with the North American power in order to solve regional matters. It is obvious that such possibility, among others, would lead to an embarrassing scenario for the region because it would make integration asymmetrical and it would push the region to an alignment scheme or one of confrontation between leader and other countries¹⁰. Something similar could happen if another South American country disproportionately increased their regional influence through strategies of competition for leadership, as Venezuela seems to be doing¹¹.

The South American challenge of decreasing the influence of different hegemonies is related to another one: the risk that the integrationist process could be broken by separatist policies. The history of the region is full of examples of such policies, on some occasions through the direct action of external factors, some others through the power balance model or the one of competition between South American countries, such as the one that dismantled the ABC project under different historical circumstances. Although the separation through direct hegemonic action tends to put South American countries together in a way that could be adverse to the power, intraregional rivalry instead is one of the worst scenarios for the integrationist evolution because it tends to fragment. At the centre of such challenge so that those scenarios do

⁸ See: Luiz Moniz Bandeira (2002).

⁹ On an analysis of the "Bush doctrine" and its relation with the Triple Border, we proposed the existence of a kind of "Cold War" in the region, see: Roberto Miranda (2003).

¹⁰ From the EU, some sectors usually reject the possibility of a Latin American framework based on "asymmetrical regional models".

¹¹ See: Amado Cervo (2001:147).

not appear lies the diplomacy of co-operation, the one that has sustained the integrationist advances in the region.

5. Through different forms of co-operation

In the South American experience, the development of integration policies has been supported on co-operation by consensus as well as on co-operation by hegemony. It is known that the USA is not a leading actor in South American co-operation by hegemony, but is an external factor that can perform positive or negative functions concerning integration, according to their interests as a superpower. Co-operation by hegemony is the one enhanced by a South American country through regional leadership, whenever that does not mean imposing discipline on an influence zone which, instead of being horizontally integrated, it dominates.

It is interesting to point out that the above mentioned experience had a first stage devoted more to co-operation by consensus and then recently another one devoted to co-operation by hegemony. Precisely, the creation of Mercosur has been a consequence of the diplomacy of co-operation by consensus. It is true that this bloc happened within a globalising wave so that transitional actors obtained markets and businesses that were profitable to the detriment of the passive state actors. It is also true that Mercosur could not be a common market due to the disintegration of foreign policies by its major partners, and in this sense it merely had to be an imperfect free trade zone. Additionally, this bloc could not make its commercial dimension compatible with other areas typical of an integrationist process, while in political and academic arenas there was insistence that the European Union was the inevitable model to follow.

In spite of the very important structural differences between countries integrating the Mercosur, of the many complex diplomatic and commercial controversies inside it and the “omission” Argentina and Brazil had with respect to Paraguay and Uruguay, it is undeniable that the bloc from the very beginning and for a long time has represented the regional power that South America has been having in the international sphere.

In some way, the way Mercosur carried out this representation has given the region a certain identity at the hemispheric and world level, making it different from others as regards many questions that have to do with international relations, as it has been said above¹². Undoubtedly, the “strategic alliance” between Argentina and Brazil, forgetting their disagreements in foreign policy, sustained the integrationist spirit in the South American space. The Brazilian reading did not depart from reality and with the I South American Presidents Summit carried out in Brasilia in August 2000, Itamaraty initiated an era of co-operation by hegemony. The analysis of this fact makes it clear that Brazil went on this brave initiative without a major commitment as regards costs and obligations, which suggests the importance of its regional leadership. However, Brazilian diplomacy crowned the above mentioned proposal with the birth of the South American Nations Community.

We should say that the Brazilian initiative around CSN had strategic features for its consolidation as a leader, from the macroeconomic and the geopolitical points of view. The CSN, in the Brazilian scheme, could be the diplomatic-political variable that completed its international positioning, based, among other issues, on the 12th position with respect to population and surface, also in relation to world figures¹³. At the same time, qualitatively, Brazil produced significant differences with reference to the other South American countries, such as having built power through the widening of political autonomy, supported on the diversification of international relations, the reduction of military and technological dependency in some

¹² See: Alcides Costa Vaz (2002:71).

¹³ Besides, it must also be taken into account that Brazil practically represents half the GNP, surface and population of the South American region. See: José Sanahuja (2006).

thematic areas and the strengthening of foreign trade with its main partners, namely, the European Union, the US and Argentina.

6. The role of Argentina

No doubt regional contradictions and weaknesses have been an undeniable reality in South America. The misfortunes and failures of diplomatic initiatives oriented towards co-operation are so many that South American countries at points distrust what they themselves create as political reinforcement of interstate integration. Above all this is due to the frustration of not being able to consolidate integration, such as through institutional mechanisms and spaces that would provide protection, continuity and predictability.

The consequence of this frustration casts light on many matters. One of them, analytical in kind, is the one that discusses the efficacy of emulating a European model when history, contexts and factors are so different. Some other matters are empirical and refer to the political and commercial dimensions, key as regards lack of agreement among South American countries. On the one hand, scarce intraregional trade which does not go above 25 per cent of total foreign trade, the lack of practicality of relations of the region with other countries (India, South Africa, Russia, Egypt, etc) and the diverse obstacles of the “strategic association” with the European Union, were some aspects that caused South American dispersion through TLCs or the attitudes of some countries that, moving in isolation, wanted to take advantage through high value of some attributes, be it commercial, geopolitical or demographic¹⁴.

On the other hand, and probably the most revealing of all matters, is the political inability to sustain and strengthen regional blocs such as CAN and Mercosur. The excessive use of such blocs as an international negotiation tool, sometimes to the benefit of one particular country, went against the essence of these blocs which is the true real effective integrationist variable. This would have implied different issues, such as, for instance, deactivating the persistence and strengthening of asymmetrical regionalisation, or creating the management of multiple interdependencies through one of the assumptions of CSN: political and diplomatic agreement and co-ordination. Peripheral countries have been historically unable to commit to this theme in the way it was done by North American countries.

In spite of integrationist failures, the unionist policy has not disappeared and is present today. No doubt integration demands organisational sophistication such as having collective decision-making centres, or cultural processes which set models and values which are shared by all countries in the region, just to mention two of the many aspects that are often analysed from a theoretical point of view. On the other hand, the expansion of the integrationist idea in South America is still subject to unexpected changes in pace, sometimes not desired. Admittedly, the unionist policy is far from being part of the regional conscience, especially that of the elite¹⁵.

But the tension between co-operation by consensus and co-operation by hegemony that has characterised the diplomatic climate in South America since the 80s is just a display of the currency of such policy, although many times this is only based on intergovernmental understandings. As we have shown in the previous section, the South American experience combined policies of integration based on different agreements and regional institutions, as well as on mechanisms related to what we can call “co-operative leaderships”. With respect to this kind of integration, it is important to point out that it is possible for countries to struggle to go beyond the condition of co-operative leader through the regionalisation of their hegemony,

¹⁴ See: Esteváo Rezende Martins (2004:5-27).

¹⁵ One of the elements that Helio Jaguaribe (2000) highlights as crucial for the South American future is – precisely- “an awareness effort” oriented towards integration.

which could obviously break the institutional rules which are sought to be advocated by all unionist policies.

These temptations are commonplace in international relations, as well as the stagnation of consensus diplomacies. This has proven that the region needs actors and sets of behaviour that tend to articulate the idea of integration in order to get closer to a unionist policy. This is to say, it requires actors that by virtue of their conditions and possibilities reinforce diplomacy by consensus and, at the same time, limit strategies and actions of hegemonic imposition. For different reasons, we consider that Argentina can play this role in South American politics.

One of these reasons is related to the fact that Argentina is, precisely, a country that can reduce different types of hegemonic influence in South America. On the one hand, the “strategic alliance” with Brazil, which is already historical, has given Argentina the negotiating capacity to hinder Brazilian attempts to structure their own influence zone in South America. In this respect, the disagreements around the creation of CSN are not merely anecdotal, as they go back to the I Presidential Summit in 2000, in which President Fernando Cardoso supported “Brazil and the rest of the region”. It is undeniable that Argentina has recognised Brazilian support at moments of external vulnerability and knows that there is a commercial and political need to count on Itamaraty, although it also values that Brasilia increases power if it has the international support of Buenos Aires, such as with the opposition to the original North American project of the Free Trade Zone for the Americas (ALCA).

Parallel to this bilateral reality, Argentina has for many reasons established a special relation with Venezuela that in some respects will transcend Kirchner and Chavez’s presidencies. This relation, which directly or indirectly sensitises the “strategic alliance” with Brazil, in the sense of making relative the asymmetry of power or that of introducing another important actor in the South American game, as it must be taken into account that Caracas has already applied policies with a regional influence. In this sense, Argentina, far from adopting hegemonic roles, can play a relevant role in decompressing the leadership struggle between Brazil and Venezuela, or to enable one or the other to be functional to Washington without being detrimental to South American union and as supporters of separatist policies.

On the other hand, by referring once again to the different kinds of hegemonic influence over South America, and in connection to what has been said before, one of the issues that can characterise bilateral relations between Argentina and the US refers to how both countries handle this relationship in connection to regional integration. One of them seeks to discourage separatist policies. This is related to the remaining aspect to face which would in some way go against this encouragement: Argentina should find their own space in order to be a relevant actor in the dialogue with Washington over matters than involve South America and in which North American power can be negative, as well as in matters in which there are understandings or disagreements between the US and potential regional leaders prone to carry out hegemonic actions.

The matters we are referring to represent another one of the reasons why Argentina can play an important role in South American politics. We are referring here to matters related to the diplomacy of consensus, which, in one way or another, cannot eliminate or reduce adversarial influences in terms of integration, but they can at least circumscribe them through international negotiations. The levels of intraregional interdependency in energy, water, security, war against drug trafficking, human rights and democratic stability, are some of the questions in which Argentina can generate initiatives and develop strategies in order to improve co-operation, which could limit the historical weight that factors external to South America have had, of the potential exaggeration of regional leaderships or the usual application of separatist policies.

7. Some conclusions

The lack of a clear aim in foreign policy has been one of the worst consequences of the 2001 crisis. Since then, the country has tried to overcome its state weakness and its external vulnerability. However, it is still far from abandoning the international slump which it has experienced. This seems more evident as regards the problems Argentina has in integrating to the rest of the world.

Additionally, the international loss of prestige of the country had a clear influence on the position it occupied at a regional level. Argentina had limited diplomatic presence in Latin America in general and South America in particular. The debt restructuring and its relation to the IMF was a very important point in the postcrisis agenda, while the country sought refuge in Mercosur and bilateralism with Brazil. However, in spite of disorientation and difficulties in facing external challenges, Argentina was able to preserve the idea of regional integration.

Because of this and how the South American space evolves, we understand that participation of the country in favour of integration is a true possibility. In some cases, Argentina has developed diplomatic actions tending to minimise hegemonic or separatist strategies. But now it should increase participation as regards attitudes and decisions having to do with multilateral diplomacy and, above all, outlining institutional rules that refer to intraregional relations, as we pointed out in the previous section, in matters of interdependency that greatly exceed the commercial dimension.

This would mean a strengthening of the unionist policy in South America, transforming Argentina into a preservation factor concerning the idea of integration. This path, if state policies support it, can be plausible, which would mean potential future integration of the country in the wider international context. Argentina had its own experience when their diplomatic participation in hemispheric policy was one of the pillars of its international position which characterised and enabled its insertion in the world. Today, if South American integration is sustained, the international lack of prestige could be counteracted.

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