

What are the main objectives and the potential of the union of South American nations (UNASUR)?

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Abstract: The most recent addition to the trend of intergovernmental and regional organisations in South America is the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). The UNASUR is fundamentally different from the other organisations in the region such as Mercosur, as it aims to be much more than just an economic organisation. However, the UNASUR is still in its infancy, therefore it is uncertain what its future holds or what the minds behind it desire it to be. Scholars and academics have begun to analyse the UNASUR, its objectives and potential future, albeit from very different perspectives. This paper provides an overview of the central approaches to the topic by gathering the arguments of various scholars, which can be categorised within three relevant theories of international relations: realist, liberal and regionalist. Since the UNASUR is not the first intergovernmental organisation in South America, it is viewed in its historical context for the purposes of this paper. While the theoretical approach forms the main framework of analysis with regards to the future of the UNASUR, empirical evidence is made use of where appropriate. Exploring the organisation from these theories of international relations offers insight into how the member states might view the UNASUR. Nevertheless these approaches have limitations and cannot fully predict the future of the project.

Keywords: UNASUR, regionalism, integration, supra-nationalism

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Introduction

Regionalism continues to grow as a phenomenon in juxtaposition with globalisation in the twenty-first century. The existence of many trade blocs such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and political unions such as the European Union are a testament to the increasing importance of regionalism. One such organisation that is currently being established is the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). There is already an abundance of literature available about the future of the union and the direction it might take. However, most of it currently remains to be speculation since only time will show how this organisation will progress. This essay aims to identify the possible objectives of the UNASUR and demonstrate its potential to become a powerful and integrated supranational organisation, by assembling the arguments of various different scholars.

A brief history of integration in South America

The ideas of integration and even unification in South America date back to the nineteenth century independence movements in the continent. Most notably, Simón Bolívar and some of his contemporaries are referred to as the champions of an independent and integrated South America. In addition to being the first president of Gran Colombia¹, Bolívar is often associated with the idea of “Patria Grande”² (Spanish: Great Homeland). Although Gran Colombia disintegrated and the idea of a unified South American state was never realised, regional integration survived throughout the history of the continent. There were several initiatives to bring the American states in close cooperation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the USA was also included. These eventually led to the establishment of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 1948 which still exists today.

The OAS consists of all the independent nations of the Americas including the United States and Canada. However, many have lost faith in the OAS and it has been criticised more than once, both by scholars and political figures³, mainly for the influence of the United States within the organisation (Rosnick, 2011). As a result, many South American nations have been

¹ The name historians use to refer to the Republic of Colombia that was established in 1819 which included today’s Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Guyana and northwest Brazil.

² Pan-Hispanic political idea commonly associated with Simón Bolívar. The term was coined by Manuel Ugarte in 1922.

³ Venezuelanalysis.com, 2010. *Venezuelan President Chavez: “The OAS is a like a corpse that must be buried”* venezuelanalysis.com [online] Available at: <<http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/5220>> [Accessed on 25 December 2014].

looking for a way to promote integration and cooperation among themselves without the influence of the US.

The UNASUR is preceded by two important trade organisations: Mercosur and the Andean Community. Mercosur is a customs union and a trade bloc, which consists of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. The Andean Community is a customs union and its members include Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The UNASUR is largely seen as a merger of these two important trade organisations with broader political and social agenda. If the UNASUR follows in the footsteps of the European Union to become a supranational entity, Mercosur and the Andean Community could be compared to the European Economic Community (EEC).

The UNASUR is the latest and the most promising chapter of South American integration in the twenty-first century because it is independent of the US and it is not only an economic union but also a political one. However, before exploring the UNASUR further, there is another organisation that is worth mentioning. It can be argued that the idea of a shared identity is more likely to be accepted by the peoples of South America as opposed to Europe, due to the shared languages and traditions in many nations as well as their history with colonialism. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), as the name suggests, demonstrates that there is a desire for a fully integrated South America. Do the architects of the union desire it to be an instrument of unlimited integration, or even unification, going beyond what the European Union has managed to accomplish so far? Is it simply a platform for cooperation? Or do all the states which participate in it see the UNASUR as an opportunity to increase their power? Arguments can be found for all approaches but none of them are perfect answers since the UNASUR is still in its early stages.

The official objectives of the UNASUR

To what extent the architects of the UNASUR aspire it to be a supranational political entity, or perhaps even a “United States of South America”, like the EU is sometimes accused of moving towards to, is yet unknown. Even if there was such an aim behind the union, it would not be clearly visible. Article two of The Constitutive Treaty of the UNASUR (2008) states the main objective of the union as “...to build... an integration and union among its peoples in the cultural, social, economic and political fields...” The same article also mentions

“strengthening the sovereignty and independence of the States.” At the very least, it can be said that officially, the union respects sovereignty and aims to be an organisation for regional cooperation.

More specifically, the UNASUR has started the creation of electoral monitor teams that could replace the monitors of the OAS, which is one area in which the union might come in conflict with the organisation which also includes the US. Another initiative of the UNASUR is the creation of a single market. To complement the creation of a single market, The Bank of the South will finance economic development projects. Other than economic integration projects, the South American Defence Council signals the beginnings of political integration and military cooperation, similar to what the EU is trying to achieve with its Common Foreign and Security Policy. These ambitious plans suggest that the UNASUR will not simply be a trade union.

Undoubtedly, the UNASUR will extend its jurisdiction further in the near future, yet to what extent the union will become a supranational organisation with great administrative powers is open to discussion. Some of the theories of South American integration, in relation to the UNASUR, will be explained in the next part of the paper.

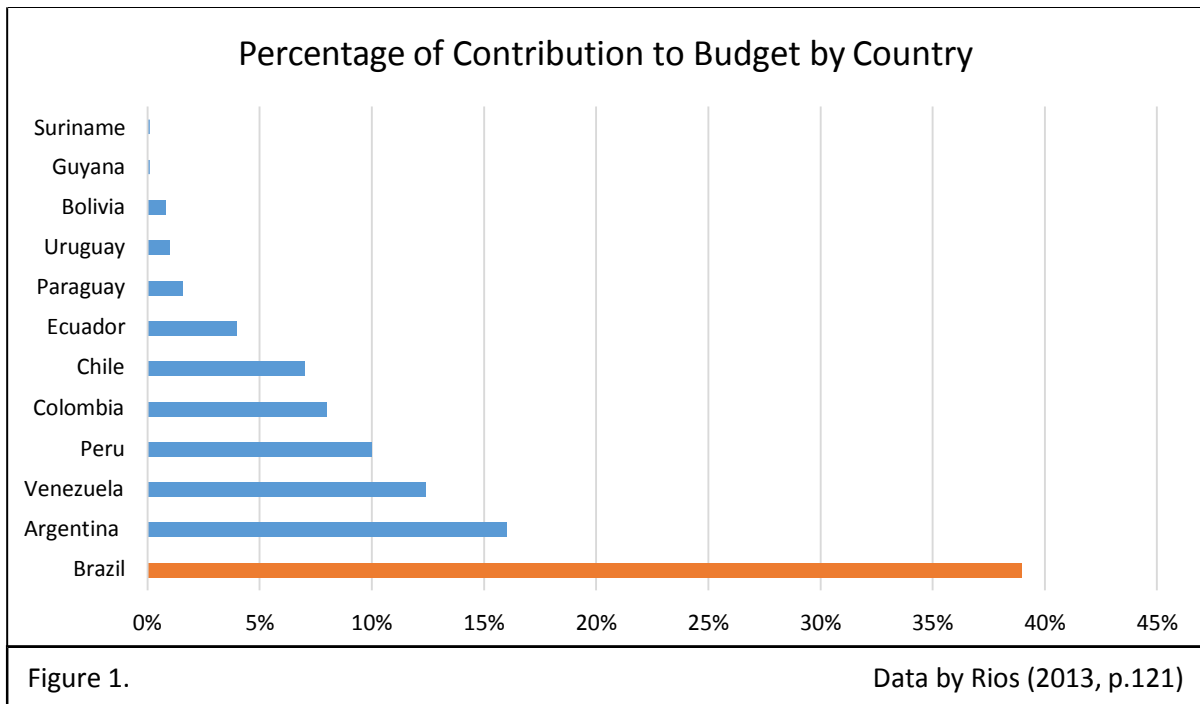
Different approaches and the theories of South American integration

Although a considerable number of theoretical approaches to the UNASUR have already been established, for the sake of this short essay they will be simplified and divided into three major categories: neorealist, liberal and regionalist, corresponding to the theories within the field of international relations.

(Neo-)realist

As it can be expected, the realist approach puts emphasis on the power politics behind the UNASUR and views the union as a political arena for nation-states to assert influence over the region, based on their national interests. The scholars in this category view the UNASUR largely in the context of the major powers in the region. Jose Antonio Sanahuja (2012, p.9) suggests that the “UNASUR is largely a result of a Brazilian geopolitical design...” Brazil, arguably being the most powerful nation in South America, is seen to be likely to attempt to

project its power through regional organisations. Indeed, the organisation has been called “...an essential building block of Brazilian grand strategy” (Tussie, 2009, p.22). While Brazil will consolidate its influence in the region within the UNASUR, other major countries such as Venezuela and Argentina can be expected to emerge as rivals to Brazil which will affect the dynamics of the union. The fact that Brazil finances a third of the budget of the UNASUR (see Figure 1) already indicates that it will have an unprecedented influence within the union.



Observing the UNASUR from the realist point of view, it is difficult to expect the union to become a supranational organisation through cooperation since the competing states would only allow it to have limited authority. Three hypotheses regarding the nature and the future of the UNASUR can be derived from the realist theory:

- a) The UNASUR will be undermined by the “struggle for leadership between Brazil and Venezuela” (Briceño-Ruiz 2010, p.223),
- b) The rivalry between Brazil and Venezuela will be elevated to the level of international organisations: ALBA led by Venezuela, MERCOSUR led by Brazil and the UNASUR as an attempt by Brazil to keep Venezuela in check,
- c) Brazil will seek to take advantage of the UNASUR, trying to create a vibrant market in South America for Brazilian products (Borges cited in Briceño-Ruiz, 2010, p.223).

Overall, the neorealist approach puts great importance on Brazilian ambitions for regional hegemony when analysing the UNASUR.

Liberal

The liberal approach, in accordance with the liberal and institutional theory of international relations, emphasises not only the importance of the nation-states but also the influential factors or groups within them, as well as the mutual benefits of cooperation between nations. In that sense, the UNASUR can be seen as an organisation that will benefit all of its members, which is why they participate in it.

Aside from economic integration, from which many businesses will benefit by gaining access to a greater market, other areas of cooperation will be beneficial, some argue, because the South American nations are already interdependent in many areas: trade, energy and the struggle against drug trafficking (Dabène, 2013). Initiatives such as the Bank of the South and electoral monitors could tackle some of the continent's most problematic issues ranging from poverty, inequality to political instability. From this point of view, it can be argued that the UNASUR is the result of a "new developmentalism" which is gaining momentum in countries "whose democracies are becoming stronger" (Rosales, 2013, p.40).

Secondly, although the South American manoeuvre to achieve autonomy and independence from the US influence can be seen within the traditional context of *realpolitik*, the willingness of South American nations to cooperate and establish an international or even a supranational organisation based on that common goal can prove to be a valuable source to the liberal approach.

To sum up, the neoliberal approach points to the proliferation of regional organisations in South America suggesting that the countries in the continent realise the potential gains of cooperation and integration in political, social and economic areas.

Regionalism

Lastly, the UNASUR must also be viewed from the regionalist point of view. Although the proliferation of international organisations have become a trend, establishment of

supranational organisations are particularly difficult as they require more than just economic incentives. Not everyone agrees that the member states of the European Union share a common identity yet it is not fully denied that there is such a thing as a European identity. That, among others, is one of the primary reasons why the EU has been successfully transforming into a supranational organisation and a political entity of its own. However, the EU has also been facing difficulties, since despite their cooperation, based on the European identity and other factors, is often overshadowed by the member states' national interests. The UNASUR already promises more efficiency due to the shared languages and cultures of the peoples of the continent which can make cooperation certainly more achievable.

The unificatory movements of Bolivar in the nineteenth-century and contemporary organisations such as ALBA are a testament to the existence of a desire for integration or even unification in South America. These factors “provide a shared narrative and a common image of Latin American self-preservation...” (Sanahuja, 2012, p.1). Therefore, the UNASUR already possesses a great amount of potential in terms of being a supranational entity. Eurosceptics often criticise the EU “elites” for creating a supranational entity that diminishes national sovereignty. As mentioned earlier, the official language of the UNASUR is very cautious when it comes to sovereignty. It is difficult to predict the long term intentions of the minds behind the UNASUR, yet an integration based idea certainly exists within the political geography of the region. Hugo Chavez was a self-proclaimed Bolivarian, he even changed the name of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and he praised the UNASUR. Since Chavez's death, the UNASUR has even “taken a step toward creating South American citizenship and freedom of movement” (Robertson, 2014). This “South American narrative” of integration is particularly important since the left wing governments in the region are expected to be ideologically sympathetic to the ideas of integration, cooperation and solidarity.

Conclusion

The process of South American integration is not necessarily limited to the three theories explained in this paper, however they provide the framework for analysis in the majority of the scholarly works in this area. There is, as of now, no single way of analysing the UNASUR, since only time will tell what it can and will become. This essay has attempted to briefly explain the three major theories in analysing the UNASUR and all three have strengths

of their own. However, they also have limitations. The neorealist approach accurately draws on the likely rivalry between Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina within the UNASUR, yet it ignores the fact that the union has been developing at a very fast pace despite these possible rivalries. It can even be said that the potential rivalry between the major players has been exaggerated (Muhr, 2013). The liberal approach offers a valuable explanation of the union through the benefits of economic cooperation for all members, while emphasizing the need to analyse the effect of domestic politics on how each member state develops its policy on UNASUR. The limitation of the liberal approach can perhaps be its undermining the regionalist ambitions behind the UNASUR, as the liberal theory fails to explain why trade has lost its importance on the agenda of the union and initiatives such as the South American Defence Council have become more important (Dabène, 2013). Lastly, regionalism successfully applies the Bolivarian desire that is being implemented by some left-wing governments in the region to the UNASUR. However, to what extent can we realistically expect the UNASUR to become a supranational organisation let alone becoming a United States of South America?

It is likely that the UNASUR will not be a fully supranational organisation in the near future. It will, however, continue to develop at a fast pace. While competition between Brazil and Venezuela will not easily disappear, it will not necessarily hinder the process of integration since the UNASUR can be the platform to mediate between the two powers. Therefore, the analysis and observation of the process of integration in South America, and particularly the UNASUR, should continue from the perspectives of various different theories.

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