UNASUR multilateralism and strategic action: an approach

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Introduction

In the last declaration of the Heads of States and Governments of the UNASUR members in Paramaribo in 2013 reaffirmed “that South American integration and unity must be established in a flexible and gradual manner, within the framework of cooperation, solidarity and respect for pluralism” (UNASUR, 2013a, pp. 69-71). Here again, it is stated clearly what the mutually expected terms of cooperation are in political action of UNASUR: they are based on the principles of multilateralism.

In international politics multilateralism is more and more used as a concept describing the modus operandi in different transnational regimes. Especially in environmental or human security issues, multilateral politics are increasingly dominating cooperation between states. By acknowledging the fact that problems cannot be solved singularly, multilateralism recognizes the necessity of cooperation in distinct policy fields. While Keohane (Keohane, 1986) basically defined multilateralism as policy coordination between more than two states, especially Ruggie (Ruggie, 1992) emphasized that the determining factor is the order of relationships which multilateralism establishes. Both authors proceed from the Liberal Institutionalism.

In the context of rising regionalism, the question of how to combine multilateralism and regional integration, gave reason for academic discussion. Especially in the South American context the establishment of new forms of transnational cooperation mechanisms led to the creation of terms aiming to embody both. “integración multilateral” as well as “multilateralismo cooperativo” are terms which can be found in latest academic discussion (Aravena, 2000). But what does multilateralism mean in the context of regionalism and can we; regarding assumptions of integration theory; still speak of integration, if multilateralism is prevalent as ordering principle.

To approach these questions we will analyze the UNASUR as a tool of multilateralism in South America. Multilateralism describes well the flexible and open way of cooperation South American heads of state and government established in the ambit of the UNASUR. The multilateral way of political action in the name of this regional organization broad up different examples of successful cooperation in the short time of its existence. Even without the constitutional treaty had come into force until 2011 with the formation of Uruguay, the UNASUR
served as mechanism of intra-regional conflict-solving. That emphasizes first the strength of the organization measured by the compliance of its members in certain policy-fields and secondly demonstrates that the organizational flexibility is not at all a hindrance to successful collective action.

Nevertheless, the institutional weakness which characterizes the UNASUR organizational structure had often been reason for criticism. Especially when analyzing the UNASUR as an integration mechanism, scholars tend to justify missing progress with the lack of institutionalization of supranational entities. In contradiction to such criticism, we claim that the UNASUR, giving the organizational and institutional basis for collective action, enabled multilateralism due to the flexibility of this structure. We will show that the member-states have the presidential council at the hand, whenever there is the necessity to act jointly. At least at the presidential level the UNASUR is salient, if there is no regional conflict to solve. This strict intergovernmental character therefore is more a fortress than a weakness of UNASUR.

To give evidence to our arguments we will exemplarily analyze the Colombian participation in multilateral action in the UNASUR. Being a central actor especially in the interstate crises with Ecuador in 2008 and with Venezuela in 2010, we develop a perspective on the Colombian political strategy on the basis of official statements by state representatives or public contestation. Colombia is an interesting case in the UNASUR. It is one of the leading nations in different negotiations. One example is the declaration of the South American Defense Council (CDS) and the “rejection of illegal armed groups” in the Costa do Sauípe Resolution of December 16th of 2008. This compromise could be reached due to the enormous diplomatic efforts of the Colombian president Álvaro Uribe.

There is consent in IR literature that multilateralism is linked to reciprocity. By addressing the question, if UNASUR multilateral action involves a strategic dimension, we ask whether we can speak of what Carporaso (Carporaso, 1992) called “diffuse reciprocity”. The UNASUR as regional organization provides organizational structures to ensure those long term expectations of transnational cooperation, which are a core element to multilateralism.
The UNASUR – what makes a tool of Multilateralism out of it?

The UNASUR and South American Regionalism

In the last decade Latin American regionalism institutionalized in various forms of integration mechanisms, which in part already are important components of national policies of the member states. The scope and intensity of integration schemes nevertheless differs broadly. In the South American subregional context, the most relevant economically oriented integration models are the CAN (Andean Community) and MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) as well as the ALADI (Latin American Integration Association), covering Latin American (Botto, 2011; Pizarro, 2008; Vigevani & Ramanzini Júnior, 2010).

An intensified discussion on Latin American regionalism in scientific research raised in the last years as reaction on new agreements (Birle, 2010, pp. 78-81; Peña, 2010; Riggirozzi, 2010). Firstly the ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) has to be mentioned as a product of the so called Turn to the Left (Castañeda, 2006). Initially being created as cooperation between Venezuela and Cuba in 2004 other decidedly leftist governments, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, joined the alliance. Another regional cooperation with a distinct ideological constituent is the CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), which can be interpreted as response to the US-American aspiration to create an American Free Trade Area (Bizzozero, 2011; Priess, 2010). Being created by the Rio Group and Caribbean states in 2010 it covers the whole American continent, excluding the USA and Canada. With the creation of the CELAC the legitimacy of the 1948 created and by then US dominated OAS (Organization of American States) has been called into question (Feinberg, 2010; Serbin, Martinez, & Ramanzini Júnior, 2012).

The most recent agreement is the Alianza del Pacífico, being created as Free Trade Area between Chile, Colombia, Peru and Mexico. Due to its liberal orientation it is considered as counterpart to the leftist agreements and therefore is suspected to threaten the endeavors for a unified South American region in the ambit of the UNASUR.

Easily to observe by mentioning only those most important integration agreements, regionalism in Latin America got dynamic recently. Traditional forms of integration had been
questioned and hegemonic control of United States rejected. Especially new South American regionalism is directed towards a definition of regional identity and got important in the aspiration towards an autonomous region. The UNASUR, as an integration agreement covering the whole South American continent and being designed as a South American project pursuing political goals of independency, democracy and social rights, plays an important role in this change of paradigms. Moreover it attracted Guayana and Suriname, countries traditionally being attributed a Caribbean context.

Apparently the UNASUR had been constructed as a flexible and presidentially driven organization of strong intergovernmental rationality. The characteristic reinforcing this conclusion is the weak institutionalization. We have the leadership by rotating presidents of member states, while the only organ of supranational character, the secretary, does not have any authority. Finally a own bureaucracy is missing. This organizational structures lead to a focus on presidents. Although there had been strong attempts by the General Secretaries Maria Emma Mejía and the acting Alí Rodríguez Araque. One reason is the strong actor-based perception and actual policy-making of UNASUR policies. In particular during the mandate of the Venezuelan General Secretary Alí Rodríguez Araque (since June 2012) the activities of the secretariat had been noiseless. All the same neither the Peruvian presidency (Ollanta Humala, also since June 2012) nor the Surinamese (Desirée Boterse, since August 2013) did not attract much public attention. The strong focus on presidential policies had been described as typical in Latin American integration mechanisms. In this context the term interpresidentialism (Tussie, 2009, p. 175) had been defined as a characterizing feature of South American integration, describing a strongly presidential led policy-making. Especially in the context of MERCOSUR Malamud described this characteristic of dominance in political action by presidents as presidential diplomacy (Malamud, 2005, 2008a), based on the observation that successful regional policies could be achieved when presidents communicated directly with each other. Particularly Brazil and Argentina made terms directly between the presidents and refrained from establishing institutionalized forms of regulation (Hummel & Lohaus, 2012).
Structurally, Malamud explains this phenomenon through the presidential systems of South American states. Presidents, contradictory to parliamentarian heads of government are not liable to account against their parliaments and therefore relatively free in their action (Malamud, 2008b, p. 153). Equally, the ministers or secretaries are simple “assistants to the presidents” (Malamud, 2008a, p. 127) and hence bound to presidential decision. This concentration of political power contributes to the intergovernmental decision-making in South American integration schemes. Supranational institutions are rarely found and not even aspired.

Supranationality has not been considered as necessary to reach political consent – besides a still existing sensation of distrust in between distinct political elites. Like the MERCOSUR and CAN Secretariats, the UNASUR General Secretary has very limited competences and its function is more of administrative and technical nature. The consensus based decision-making in all councils therefore reinforces the intergovernmental characterization of UNASUR. On presidential level, decisions will be taken not only if no states disagrees, but only if all states confirm. On level of the sectorial councils, consensus is reached simply if no representative disagrees. For the process of decision making the necessary consensus can be understood as actual veto-power, what complicates the negotiation of policies.

Another structural manifestation of this intergovernmentality in integration agreements is the pro-tempore leadership, meaning that the organs are led by the presidents of the member states in rotating chairmanship. The pro-tempore presidency in South America normally is perceived as most important leading factor in the institutional structure of regional organizations. In the ambit of UNASUR policy-making this characteristic is quite important, because the pro-tempore presidency includes presiding all sectorial councils of the organization. Consequently, presiding countries have a special opportunity to influence not only political processes but also institutional developments in this period. A restriction is the ability to provide resources and financing. Two illustrative examples are Suriname and Brazil. While Suriname, being in charge of the UNASUR pro-tempore presidency since August 2013 could not cover all sectorial councils and therefore had to distribute the councils presidencies to other member states, Brazil demonstrates high financial and technical capabilities in the South American process of integration even beyond UNASUR, how Legler mentions:
“Brazil already demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilize resources when it organized and hosted four regional summits simultaneously in December 2008. It has also proved its willingness to assume the costs related with serving as leader of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH)” (Legler, 2012).

This is perceived as something positive by some smaller member, while others, such as Colombia, Peru or Argentina do not support the excessive intention of leadership carried out by Brazil – even less after the changes in Planalto and the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, which from beginning on did not show the same interest in the region as her predecessor, Lula da Silva.

**The UNASUR as flexible institutional system**

Not alone the juridical personality since 2008, but moreover the necessary ratification member states requires the commitment of the South American nations to a minimal level of institutional manifestation. Hence, the interpretation of UNASUR as a dialogue forum is untenable at least since Uruguay’s ratification as ninth state in December 2010. From that point on, the UNASUR fulfilled the main characteristic of an International Organization under the terms of the formal definition of International Public Law. Basically, International Organizations are defined as cooperation between subjects of international law, based on a treaty according to international law (Ruffert & Walter, 2009, p. 3).

Another criterion, equally fulfilled by UNASUR, is that there was established an organ “of distinct will” (Klabbers, 2009, p. 7). With the deployment of the secretary general, this organ came into force. Important to mention is that a distinct will does not imply authority. Supranationality is not intended by this defining criterion. Quite the contrary, International Organizations are evaluated as institutionalized mechanisms of cooperation between states, how Klabbers points clearly:

“International organizations are, as outlined earlier, perhaps the most obvious and typical vehicles for interstate co-operation. It is difficult to think of any organization which is not intended to foster co-operation in some way, although obviously some
organizations provide for larger degrees of co-operation than other” (Klabbers, 2009, p. 25).

Accordingly, we assume the UNASUR’s basic goal to be the enhancement of cooperation and concertation. That means that it can be supposed that states, when engaging in the UNASUR, generally want to cooperate. The scope and direction of this cooperation depends on the political situation of every state and can differ broadly. The intergovernmental structure of UNASUR organs reinforces this dependency. How mentioned before, the secretary general is the only organ not composed by representatives of each member state. The constitutive organs of UNASUR were created in their present form by the Tratado Constitutivo but had already been foreseen by the Declaration of Cochabamba.

The UNASUR was founded in 2008 as International Organization with legal personality succeeding the CSN (Comunidad Suramericana de Naciones). The creation of the CSN meant to install a political forum in which presidents gather to discuss subjects of regional interest. In the declaration of Cuzco from 2004 where presidents declared their intention to create a South American Union, there was no talk of formal or juridical measurements which could indicate binding decision-making. Thus, an independent institutional structure was not scheduled. In the declaration of Cochabamba in 2006 the intention of UNASUR to converge the existing structures of CAN and MERCOSUR was declared explicitly:

“Nos planteamos un nuevo modelo de integración con identidad propia, pluralista, en medio de la diversidad y las diferencias, reconociendo las distintas concepciones políticas e ideológicas, que corresponden a la pluralidad democrática de nuestros países. [...] Se trata de una integración innovadora que incluya todos los logros y lo avanzado por los procesos del MERCOSUR y la CAN, así como la experiencia de Chile, Guyana y Suriname, yendo más allá de la convergencia de los mismos. El objetivo último de este proceso de integración es y será favorecer un desarrollo más equitativo, armónico e integral de América del Sur” (Declaración de Cochabamba, 2006).
Thereby the organization basically is built upon already existing structures of other regional integration schemes (Solca, 2011). Finally, the UNASUR was created with its Tratado Constitutivo in May 2008 (UNASUR, 2008b), referring to the before mentioned declarations. The organs are:

1. The Council of Heads of State and Government (The Presidency *Pro Tempore* is carried out by one of the members of the council in a rotating mode)
2. The Council of Foreign Ministers
3. The Council of Delegates
4. The General Secretary

One important differentiation is that the convergence of MERCOSUR and CAN had been more in focus in the preceding declarations, while the UNASUR gained more independence with its creation as International Organization (Borda, 2011). Another aspect contributing is the strong political agenda focusing on democracy, independence and South American identity.

Besides this ideological component which distinguishes the UNASUR from the subregional mechanisms, an agenda of shared political goals and fields of cooperation developed fast and diverse. Despite the dynamic development of sectorial policies, the UNASUR up to now has difficulties to represent itself as coherent and independent actor. The discussion of UNASUR ranges between the interpretation as a “*etapa de gran dinamismo*” (Cienfuegos & Sanahuja, 2010, p. 13) and the talk of a stagnating process, being explained by missing institutional development and political cooperation (Peña, 2012, pp. 30-33). We claim that this missing institutionalization is at the same time the strength of the organization, allowing their member-states to cooperate and use the UNASUR framework for multilateral action. Nevertheless, the institutionalization as international organization enables states to build on an important strategic perspective, which is connected to a long-term perspective.

We will use the concept of diffuse reciprocity to show how this connection between flexibility and strategic components in the organizational structure benefit multilateralism via the enhancement of structural and political interdependence.
UNASUR as tool of Multilateralism

The concept of diffuse reciprocity

Basic in the concept of diffuse reciprocity is trust. It is interpreted as a necessary feature for effective multilateralism. In the case of UNASUR we can see how the regional organization, although created in a flexible and loose structure, fulfills the conditions for building trust among the South American Nations. One beneficial characteristic is that the UNASUR is strongly driven by presidents and close advisors ie: Marco Aurelio García in Brazil and others minds in the different Foreign Ministries in the region. Interpresidential action is a result of face-to-face communication and is one of the most important factors for trust-building. Presidents knowing each other personally will more easily come to mutual agreement. This fact facilitated the creation of UNASUR in the initial phase due to the sympathy of Lula da Silva, Néstor Kircher, Michelle Bachelet, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa and the charismatic Hugo Chavez. All of them followed a left political orientation and favored a single South American integration.

A strong allegory of this interpresidential action is the summitry. Summits, how already mentioned above, are more and more interpreted as a way of fostering regional as well as international multilateralism and the wish of overcoming barriers to conflict-resolution. Also the UNASUR has predominantly been analyzed along the presidential summits. The organization to some extent can be seen as result of Latin American Summitry: after all the UNASUR (by then still the South American Community of Nations (CSN), see above) finally was founded at the third South American Summit of 2004 in Cuzco. Already before, in 2002, in the second South American Summit the intention of uniting South America as a region was reinforced with the Declaration of Guayaquil.

The first South American Summit 2000 in Brasilia still was of major symbolic meaning. Drawing on the idea of South American unity and integration, here the joined project on infrastructure development was signed by the heads of states and governments. The IIRSA (Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America) still plays an important role in the UNASUR as it is one of the most effectively working sectors. Nevertheless, summitry
or rather presidential meetings by now are only rarely concerned with substantial policies. The attention is mainly on current problems and conflicts\(^2\).

Summitry therefore implies the most distinctive features of face-to-face communication between leaders: it establishes a forum where common problems and, occasionally, crises can be addressed. The interpersonal communication between the heads of state facilitates the cooperation especially in regional settings and – surely the solving of conflicts which might be rising in the regions. The institutionalization as forum where regional concerns are discussed entails a flexible structure of the UNASUR.

If we define multilateralism as cooperative action by states in order to solve common problems (Thérien, Michel, & Grosselin, 1996) and consider the benefits of summitry, we can see that the UNASUR pools forces and leaves out problems. Multilateral organizations often are criticized as ineffective and not able to converge problems of their member-states. Especially overlapping regionalism and the membership in different regional as well as international schemes may lead to divergences and parallel processes. Summitry – besides other aspects – has been a reaction to such ineffectiveness in solving problems and crises. At the same time it is often seen as symbolic and inconclusive mode of communication, widely spreading in sub-regional, regional and international settings and overlapping at the same time. The concern is that summits might keep without any result and the leaders’ statements without concrete implementation.

As we have seen before, the UNASUR arose out of distinct South American Summitry. At the same time the organization step-by-step was able to establish institutional structures and mechanisms. By this skepticism regarding summitry can be rejected. A factor, not to be underestimated, is the limitation to the region of South America: the UNASUR is the only regional organization in South America which is constituted by - and restricted to - all South American nations. Therefore, not only geographic factors, but also historical, political and ideational ones, jointly demarcate the region of UNASUR.

In the following section we will see, how the UNASUR served as an instrument of conflict-resolution. In the presented cases of Andean crises (with emphasis in Colombia) from 2008 to

\(^2\) For further information see: www.iirs.org
2010 interpresidential communication in a liviate organizational structure lead to effective problem solving. We claim that the combination of flexible organizational structures and personal trust between policy-makers led to effective multilateral action and by this to conflict-resolution.

Taking a Colombian perspective we will show, how the Colombian leaders used UNASUR as a policy-instrument. With the establishment as regional organization in form of institutionalized mechanism and structures comes along a strategic perspective on the UNASUR. By looking at official statements we will show how policy-makers draw back on what we define as trust.

Trust is a basic feature of the concept of diffuse reciprocity (Keohane, 1986). In International Relations theory trust is generally defined as the willingness to accept the risk emanating from the others behavior. That means that states do believe that others are trustworthy. In the context of diffuse reciprocity trust therefore means that states are willing to reciprocate mutual relations, based on the belief that others will not take advantage of the cooperation (Teló, 2012, pp. 23-30). For the case of diffuse reciprocity the interconnectedness between states is seen as distinctive characteristic for collective action – and trust. The reasons, though, are not clearly distinguishable. Diffuse reciprocity, in contradiction to a specific one, does not necessarily entail economic and/or security perspectives. Purely rationalist approaches to multilateralism are rejected. It addresses a broader notion of interdependence. Important are ideational factors, such as political culture, social relations, ideology - and trust (Carporaso, 1992; Keohane, 1986). Consequently, the conceptualization of trust correlates to the form of reciprocity.

Trust in the regional context therefore has an implicit strategic component. How put before, the umbrella of a regional organization allows the actors to develop long-term perspectives. At the same time, the flexible structure does not compromise them into a distinct political development. Therefore the UNASUR serves as an instrument for multilateral action in a closed surrounding. Still, to build on the category of trust, it is important for policy-makers to – implicitly or explicitly – relate to characteristics of the same.

We will identify where in the publicly made statements by officials and state representatives’ trust is – implicitly or explicitly – prevalent. By this means we will analyze the creation of some kind of regioness and process learning in the ambit of UNASUR, under consideration of identity. This is strongly connected to mutual assistance of the members. Therefore, analyzed categories
concentrate on factors, first, giving reason to diffuse reciprocity and, second, showing its expression in the regional context. The categories determine a diffuse perception of interdependence – here categorized as ideology. Additionally they take into consideration the regional context – the category here is regioness. To summarize, the categories are the following ones:

*Ideology:* Defined in terms of a strong normative ideal of democracy, the feeling of liberty according to independence from other regions and – connected with this aspect – fraternity.

*Regioness:* belonging to the interpretation as South America as a region. Here again, the feeling of closed regioness in order to achieve independence and the recognition of common interests.

**UNASUR and its role towards Colombia**

UNASUR has a high intergovernmental, inter-presidential and interpersonal character. This represents strength and flexibility, conceived by the South American leaders at the moment of its conception. The affinity between Lula Da Silva, Néstor Kirschner, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa eased the creation and development of this South American new multilateral architecture. We acknowledge that Chavez stamped his own personal seal since the Summit of Isla Margarita in 2007, when the CSN turns into UNASUR (Briceño, 2010a, 2010b), something that some analysts and political sectors consider a “kidnap” of the original idea conceived in Planalto by Lula Da Silva, Celso Amorim and Marco Aurelio García, among others.

In the following, we will see the role of UNASUR during the “Andean Crisis” of 2008-2010. According to the Ecuadorian analyst Michel Levy, this was the “golden age”3 of the organization, with a wide margin of effectiveness, in spite of the typical complexity of South American foreign policy in that moment, when Colombia had a strong alignment with Washington, anyway, Bogotá achieved to impose its wish of rejection towards illegal armed groups and consolidate a multidimensional foreign projection, that kept it close to South America.

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3 Digital interview (Bogotá-Quito). February 6, 2014.
“Operación Fénix” of 2008

On the 23rd of May of 2008 during the signature of the Constitutive Treaty of UNASUR, Brazil’s Defense Minister Nelson Jobim spoke in a radical manner against the skepticism Colombia has shown against the creation of this new organism. In a more diplomatic way the Planalto’s adviser Marco Aurelio García manifested: “We are not proposing the formalization of the Defense Council (…) The issue is being debated, our idea is to hold a reunion in the second semester, here” (AFP, 2008). In effect, on December 16th of 2008 UNASUR communicated through the Declaration of Chiefs of State, in the Costa do Sauípe Resolution of December 16th of 2008, the decision to establish the South American Defense Council (CDS) (UNASUR, 2008a). Thanks to the Colombian lobby the rejection of illegal armed groups was included.

This was considered a success of President Uribe’s foreign policy, how his chancellor Jaime Bermúdez declared: “an achievement of the country’s foreign policy, headed by President Álvaro Uribe (…) it represents that there is backing and support from all the region to a serious concern that Colombia has had historically” (El Tiempo, 2008).

Likewise, he regarded the fact as: “an important political decision” and highlighted Ecuador’s diplomatic role: “we have to award them that recognition, because it was fundamental that that point would be approved in the creation document of the southern security council” (sic) (Caracol Radio, 2008). This decision also thanked by the Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos (Terra, 2008), can be seen as a partial triumph of Colombian diplomacy during that hard moment for Bogotá, because it was one of the proposed items by Colombia’s working team during the creation of the CSD (Prensa Colombia, 2008).

More than the transcendence of this decision, UNASUR’s great answer was the creation of a purely South American Defense Council as a: “consultation, cooperation and coordination court in harmony with the regulations of the Constitutive Treaty in its Articles 3 letter s, Arts. 5 and 6” (UNASUR, 2008a). The birth of this organism shows a certain degree of the organization’s “flexibility”, to include an important aspect to Colombia’s internal security, in spite of the regional sympathy towards FARC, which was made explicit in its time by Colombia’s neighbor presidents. Chávez in early 2008 expressed in front of the National Assembly: “FARC and ELN are no terrorist groups, they are true armies (...) that occupy space in Colombia (...) insurgent
forces that have a political project, that have a Bolivarian project, that is respected here” (sic) (La Nación, 2008).

The Colombian invasion in Ecuadorian territory of 2008 caused a strong regional fracture. Nonetheless, UNASUR’s Constitutive Treaty was signed. Even more this event opened the space for Brazil to lead the creation of the CDS within the frame of the new multilateral organization, that also managed to make itself flexible in order to include the Colombian requirement regarding illegal groups. So, we find a trigger with a “Decision” embodied in a Declaration from the UNASUR presidents (UNASUR, 2008a) halfway through a complicated Andean Outlook, that was cooled down thanks to the typical multilateral action of the organization in that moment.

**The military cooperation agreement of 2009**

The 3rd Ordinary Reunion of the Chiefs of State Council took place August 10th of 2009 in Quito, Ecuador (UNASUR, 2013b). Days before President Uribe had manifested that he would not attend (El Espectador, 2009a, 2009b). Just as we saw President Uribe’s tour to explain the nature of the agreement with Washington, likewise Venezuelan Chancellor Nicolás Maduro presented a “peace proposal” to Peruvian foreign minister José García Belaúnde and to President Evo Morales and his foreign minister David Choquehuanca. Regarding to this, the Colombian foreign minister Jaime Bermúdez was skeptical: “A real peace plan starts with the non-intervention in internal affairs” (Página 12, 2009) and in the same manner he played down the reunion: “General Secretary (Néstor) Kirchner is not going to attend. Many chancellors delegated in their vice-chancellor, and in these days talks I have found that some of them do not consider this reunion convenient” (sic) (Página 12, 2009).

Venezuela, through Bolivia, and with the support of Ecuador and Cuba managed to involve the issue regarding US military presence in Colombia (Infosur hoy, 2009). But a collective rejection agreement towards Colombia was not accomplished nor an open contempt (Reuters, 2009) that for Colombian analyst Alfredo Rangel happened due to the previous success of Uribe in the region (Infosur hoy, 2009). Regarding this, Ecuadorian foreign minister Fénder Falconí manifested: “What has taken place here is an opinion processing about this issue (American bases in Colombia) (sic) (Infobae, 2009). President Chávez manifested in an ironic tone: “(…) Colombia is going to say that they are not military bases, that they are theme parks” (Infobae,
2009) and pointed out: “Now with these Yankee reinforcements the warmongers in Colombian territory are going to feel bolder and supported; and this can start a war even in South America” (sic) (Reuters, 2009). President Morales manifested: “We have to avoid Colombia becoming an Israel” (El Tiempo, 2009).

The Brazilian conciliatory spirit, supported by Argentina, was the one that prevailed in the opposing side. President Lula manifested: “At any moment UNASUR can summon the US government to talk about the issues that interest us in the region (...) This is solved with a conversation, seeing each other face to face” (Reuters, 2009), likewise he said about the organization itself: “We have to agree about the future of UNASUR” (El Tiempo, 2009), President Lugo from Paraguay manifested: “UNASUR has a short life (...) depends on its members to keep building unity” (El Tiempo, 2009), meanwhile President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner added: “a climate of belligerence is being brewed that can generate situations that nobody wants” (Infosur hoy, 2009). The assistant representative of the US State Department Robert Wood told EFE agency: “We have stated clearly that we are not creating or establishing any (military) base in Colombia (...) We are working with our Colombian partner to confront a problem in the region, drug trafficking” (Infosur hoy, 2009).

These debated issues do not appear in the Presidential Declaration of Quito. The document is focused on the economic crisis of that time and its effects on the economy of the emerging countries, which must through their own initiatives encourage a new international financial architecture to confront the crisis (UNASUR, 2009aarts. 1 y 2). It also refers to the necessity of food security and the role that UNASUR must play as: “an actor of regional agreement to overcome that problem” (UNASUR, 2009aart. 3).

Article 6 concentrates on the challenges of the organization. It highlights the necessity to: “deepen and accelerate regional integration and cooperation” and it reiterates: “its objective to build, in a participative and consensual manner, an integration and union space culturally, socially, economically and politically among its peoples, granting priority to political dialogue” (UNASUR, 2009aart. 6). Likewise, reiterated aspects, as we have seen, are fundamental objectives of the organization since its origins: democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, and
energetic and regional integration, with a special emphasis on the introduction of: “alternative renewable energy” (UNASUR, 2009aarts. 7-10).

President Correa manifested: “We did not touch the subject in this reunion (...) we want to see that this is discussed August 24th in the Council of Defense Ministers of UNASUR (that will also take place in Quito)” (sic) (El Tiempo, 2009). He also proposed that the next UNASUR Summit should take place in Argentina, in reaction to President Uribe’s manifestation that considers Ecuador as hostile territory (Reuters, 2009). With respect to this, President Fernández de Kirchner added: “It is essential that we invite President Álvaro Uribe to a place where he does not have the feeling of hostility, what we have to remove are excuses” (El Tiempo, 2009). This is in line with what was manifested by President Fernando Lugo from Paraguay: “What any president (from the member countries of UNASUR) does not want, is to assist to a summit and to be seated on the prosecution bench” (sic) (El Tiempo, 2009). This diplomatic behavior of the presidents strongly enforces the intention of trust-building in their relations.

On Friday August 28th of 2009 finally the Extraordinary Reunion of Chiefs of State from UNASUR took place in San Carlos Bariloche, Argentina. It was attended by presidents Evo Morales, Bolivia; Lula Da Silva, Brazil; Álvaro Uribe, Colombia; Michelle Bachelet, Chile; Rafael Correa, Ecuador; Bharrat Jagdeo, Guyana; Fernando Lugo, Paraguay; Alan García, Peru; Ronald Venetian, Surinam; Hugo Chávez, Venezuela and, Tabaré Vázquez, Uruguay. As it was expected the reunion was marked by high tensions still prevailing from the previous meeting in Quito. Although the final document was a display of South American consensus, it did not address directly the issue of the US-American bases in Colombia (La Nación, 2009).

President Fernández de Kirchner pointed out from the beginning on the central objective of the reunion: “to determine a common doctrine” for the management of critical situations, as that being discussed (La Nación, 2009). Likewise, she put that it was necessary to expose ideas: “with a tone that avoids falling in attributions or name calling” (La Nación, 2009). President Uribe attended with his foreign minister Jaime Bermúdez and had two interventions. In the first one he exposed the importance of the cooperation agreements between Colombia and the US and their necessity in the fight against the scourge of drugs and which: “have been framed fully in the multilateral norms set” (Prensa Colombia, 2009). He also pointed out the common responsibility
that industrialized countries have in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism and indicated Colombia’s historical struggle against narco-terrorism, the country’s advances and challenges in this respect and pointed out the country’s concern with the situation of terrorist groups in the region.

Likewise, President Uribe rejected the proposal from presidents Lula Da Silva, Correa and Fernández de Kirchner about the possibility to request an urgent reunion with President Obama to discuss the agreement: “I do not think that we have to call Obama to give an explanation. That is why the United Nations Assembly exists. One thing is to have a good dialogue and another to call him to give an explanation to the region” (La Nación, 2009).

Subsequently, the objections of the other rulers were presented. President Tabaré Vásquez manifested that Latin America should be a land of peace and sovereignty without foreign military bases (Caracol Radio, 2009b). On his part, President Chávez was more radical in his intervention and from the beginning requested a document about the agreement: “It would be necessary to have it in order to expel some doubts and answer questions, that many of us have” (La Nación, 2009).

With the same President Correa requested an official document from such agreement: “It would be nice, President Uribe, that you sent us the agreement document” (Caracol Radio, 2009a). Likewise, he pointed out that Plan Colombia was a “failure” and that Colombia was responsible for the “scourge” of drug trafficking: “Colombia has the greatest drug crop in the region and both Ecuador and Venezuela are free of crops. These are concentrated in Colombia’s southern limit, in the frontier with Ecuador. So the problem is not us (...) the neighbors” (La Nación, 2009).

Analyzing the final document of UNASUR many conclusions can be taken. Colombia managed to advance its cooperation agreement with the US, although days later it would be declared unconstitutional by the country’s Constitutional Court. Secondly, it reaffirmed towards its neighbors that illegal armed groups should be recognized as narco-terrorists, in the case of FARC, because of their business in the drug market. In third place, the communiqué from UNASUR did not condemn Colombia, it reaffirmed the commitment of the South American
countries with the principles of International Law, in accordance with the UN Charter (UNASUR, 2009b§. 2) and recognized that: “the agreements of military cooperation must be ruled by the strict respect to principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter and the fundamental principles of the Constitutive Treaty of UNASUR” (UNASUR, 2009b§. 3). Likewise, it emphasized that respect for sovereignty, integrity and territorial inviolability of the States, the non-interference in internal affairs and the self-determination of nations: “(…) are essential to consolidate regional integration” (UNASUR, 2009b).

Under the seal of “vocation” of UNASUR for the peaceful resolution of controversies, as well as the dialogue and consensus in defense matters through cooperation, trust and transparency measures (UNASUR, 2009b§. 6) are adopted in six decisions, starting with the one most highlighted by the media and analysts:

“Strengthen South America as a peace zone committing ourselves to establish a mechanism of mutual trust in defense and security matters, upholding our decision to obtain ourselves of resorting to threats or the use of force against the territorial integrity of other UNASUR state” (UNASUR, 2009bart. 1).

Without any doubt this reunion strengthened the consolidation of the CDS. And paradoxically, Colombia more than a belligerent actor, became by default in a promoter of a new kind of South American multilateralism.

This was only one example out of many for how the UNASUR developed into a forum for dialogue for South-American actors. Highly sensitive topics, such as regional security and autonomy had been discussed, on the highest level during certain intense moments of crisis. The diplomatic efforts between different actors lead to consensus of divergent positions, and by this somehow meant and declaration against the US and the rest of the world, that the South American nations are taking care of their own security issues in the region.

The Colombian-Venezuelan crisis of 2010

On July 22nd of 2010 the Extraordinary Reunion of Chancellors from UNASUR was held in Quito, Ecuador, under petition of President Chávez and summoned by the organization’s Pro
Tempore in charge of Ecuador (El Espectador, 2010b). The initial purpose was to create a commission composed by countries of the region to reinforce the political dialogue between Colombia and Venezuela. According to Ecuadorian foreign minister Ricardo Patiño, the purpose was to create “trust measures” in order for: “(…) them to sit down on the table to talk, with the support of the South American countries” (El Espectador, 2010b) and “to come out with the possibility, at least with the hope, that conversations are retaken as soon as possible, between to sister countries that should always be united” (Caracol Radio, 2010).

About the organization he manifested: “UNASUR is a table of brothers and it is possible to recover the trust levels between the members of the Unión and a sample of this is the fact that all the chancellors have decided to come” (…) it is an excellent step” (sic) (El Espectador, 2010b).

Argentinian foreign minister Héctor Timermán manifested that the meeting ratified: “(…) the wish of all UNASUR members that whenever the subject required it, it would be solved in a peaceful way” (sic) (El Nuevo Diario, 2010). Once the encounter started foreign minister Nicolás Maduro presented a peace proposal for Colombia that even implied to resume the dialogue with the insurgency and manifested: “We come to expose, to denounce the aggressions of the outgoing Colombian government and to propose ideas so it can retake the path of peace and (...) build the path of a just peace” (El Nuevo Diario, 2010). Meanwhile, Chancellor Jaime Bermúdez, had manifested before his trip: “A real peace plan starts with non-intervention in the internal affairs of another country, by capturing terrorists (…) We are going to insist that Venezuela commits itself to collaborate in order to impede that guerrilla fighters are sheltered in its territory” and indicated that Colombia did not have to retract itself about anything, just as Caracas demanded it (El Espectador, 2010a) During his arrival he requested UNASUR: “(…) an effective cooperation mechanism so neither FARC nor ELN nor any other criminal group can make presence in Venezuelan territory, with collusion of the local authorities, nor in any other place of the world” (El Nuevo Diario, 2010).

In the midst of high tensions the encounter was developed. Brazilian Vice-chancellor Antonio Patriota issued a five point proposal that started with the declaration of South America as a peace zone (Eje 21, 2010), the commitment to solve disputes by pacific means, the fight against illegal groups linked with drug trafficking (just as we observed it is considered a success of Colombian
strategy), not making statements that can aggravate the situation, and to send the proposal to the Pro-Tempore Presidency with the aim of a new meeting (AVN, 2010). In that Thursday afternoon the Brazilian proposal had the support of Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay (AVN, 2010; Eje 21, 2010).

However, after five hours of work, the Ecuadorian Chancellor Ricardo Patiño manifested: “It has not been possible to produce an official document with the consent from all of them, because this would have implied many hours until adjusting each of the points discussed” (Eje 21, 2010). Likewise, he added that with the “confidence vote” of the chancellors elaborated “a synthesis of the points that we consider can reach to an approaching”, but at the end it was presented an opposition by the Colombian government and other members (Eje 21, 2010).

According to Chancellor Bermúdez, Venezuela opposed the point about rejecting insurgent groups: “at the last minute Venezuela decided that it did not accept that text”, to which Maduro replied: “Chancellor Bermúdez leaves today UNASUR lying” (sic) (BBC Mundo, 2010). Even less possibility had the proposal from Bogotá about guerrilla disarmament in Venezuelan soil, to then prosecute them in Colombia: “with all the guarantees under the frame of the Justicia y Paz (Justice and Peace) Law” (BBC Mundo, 2010).

Facing the difficulty to achieve an institutional and homogeneous advance the personal action with a negotiating spirit from the General Secretary of UNASUR Néstor Kirchner and from President Lula Da Silva was presented, who advanced an active role to alleviate the tension in the midst of the arrival of the new President Santos to Colombia, who took possession on Saturday August 7th of 2010. In this way, President Kirchner had an interview with the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa and President Lula Da Silva himself, before his trip on Thursday 5th to Caracas where he spoke with Chávez and his Chancellor Nicolás Maduro (Folha de São Paulo, 2010) afterwards he would do the same with outgoing and entering presidents in Bogotá, Uribe and Santos respectively (La Gaceta, 2010).

**Conclusion - Weakness or Fortress?**

The beginning of the 21st century brought important political changes for South America. The presidential summity facilitated the creation of an independent South American organization in
the region with the ability to deal with South American sensible topics without the interference of
the USA or rather the OAS. The development initiated in 2005 with the CSN (see above) which
later converted to the UNASUR, strongly imposed by Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan president,
during a meeting of the Energy Council in Isla Margarita in 2007. Once established and still
without being ratified, the organization played an important role in the solution of the Andean
Crises in 2008 and 2010 involving Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

As we have seen alone the UNASUR resolved the crises, which generated the bombardment
of Ecuador by Colombia. Via the political dialogue, being the preferred by the emphatic leaders
of this moment, the harsh diplomatic relationships could be solved. This was not possible in the
ambit of OAS or Rio Group negotiations, which are publicly, disliked mechanisms in South
America due to the strong US influence.

The polemic situation, caused by the failed cooperation agreement between Colombia and the
US in 2009 alerted again the political decision-makers of the region. Although the agreement
never was consolidated due to its anticonstitutional character according to Colombian national
legislation, it worked as a strong precedent of the new strategy of South American defense. In
UNASUR meetings (Bariloche) the member states protested and accused Colombia of allowing
US interference in the region with the presence of military bases in the country. This occasion
fostered the creation of the South American Defense Council (CDS), which had been promoted
by the Brazilian diplomatic elites represented by the president Lula da Silva and his Chancellor
Nelson Jobim. Still, these circumstances allowed that the president Álvaro Uribe and his
chancellor Jaime Bermúdez reached a unanimated rejection towards the insurgent armed groups.
This meant a success considering the sympathy some leaders such as Chavez, Correa and Morals
expressed for the FARC. Again, the OAS was left behind for solve the conflict.

Something similar occurred in the last crisis in 2010, right after Colombia accused Venezuela
of hiding FARC members on its territory, in the ambit of the OAS. Again, the tight diplomatic
relation of the acting presidents, Lula da Silva, Kirchner, Chávez, Correa and Juan Manuel
Santos which took over the mandate in Colombia shorthand before, facilitated the solution of the
crisis in the UNASUR negotiations.
These facts show that the UNASUR constitutes a new generation of South American multilateral tool, working as a forum for political dialogue and contestation. We have seen the role it played during the Andean Crisis it went through 2008 to 2010. It is clear that it was strongly favored by the ideological affinity and media strength of the South American leaders from that time, that has changed in the last years, as something unfavorable to the organization and the region itself.

This new multilateralism can be placed within the principles of diffuse reciprocity and traditional multilateralism of Keohane, Ruggie and the one analyzed by Jorge Heine in relation with Latin America (Heine, 2006). The empirical evidence indicates that the organization worked as a dialogue and agreement space during critical circumstances that involved delicate themes of high politics: borders, sovereignty and possible escalation and spillover of the Colombian internal conflict.

In the same manner, the normative character was important. The diverse statements, although they do not have a binding character they traced the understanding and commitment path that the South American countries followed in relation with the aforementioned crisis. The following performance of UNASUR was defined by a weakening of the ideological affinity of the leaders that replaced the functional members. This opens a space to keep researching the “roadmap” of this organization in the challenging South American political landscape.

It is true, that the organization currently is debilitated. This is because of the minor political dynamism of the actin General Secretary Alí Rodríguez Araque, which is waiting for a successor. Equally, some of the founding fathers of UNASUR are not in mandate anymore, such as Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, and others do not have the same political influence as before, such as Rafael Correa and Evo Morales. Moreover, which is quite paradox, Dilma Rousseff did not give to much attention to the organization and promoted a foreign policy leaving the South American region behind, to strengthen Brazil in the international arena.

It is possible, that the slowdown of the organization is due to its past achievements – there had no further presidential meetings been necessary to solve crises such as the ones presented. Still, it
is necessary to continue the analysis of the organization to understand the new tracks of the South American multilateralism.

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