

The New Right governments' empty chair strategy at UNASUR

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On April 20, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru informed that they would "temporarily" suspend their participation in the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). ***Español***



Meeting of chancellors in the framework of the VIII Summit of the Americas in Lima - Peru (2018). At this summit, six member states of UNASUR agreed to temporarily suspend their participation in the organization. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Some rights reserved. Bolivia assumed the pro tempore presidency of UNASUR on April 18. It started with a slap in the face: two days later, the Bolivian chancellor was formally notified of the decision by the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru to "temporarily" suspend their participation in the organization – a decision adopted a few before during the Summit of the Americas. This decision could take UNASUR either to intensive care or to a terminal stage.

For some media it was a cause for celebration. They argued that the organization is no longer operational, that it is the expression of "Bolivarian", ideology-based foreign policies that should now be left behind, and that UNASUR has stopped being functional for some of its member states' foreign policies, particularly the new right-wing governments, which

prefer the Pacific Alliance as a more pragmatic and effective option. To them, the withdrawal of these countries and the ensuing end of UNASUR would be more than justified.

A more nuanced analysis of this decision reveals, however, that this is not in fact a "withdrawal", nor does its aim at shutting down the organization.

The document sent to the Bolivian presidency mentions the "suspension of the participation in UNASUR activities for an indefinite period of time", which does not imply a denunciation of the international treaty which established UNASUR, nor a definitive parting from it.

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It seems much more like a maneuver aimed at putting pressure on the other member states: it is a new example of the empty chair strategy which was famously used in 1965 by the French government when it temporarily suspended its participation in the European Economic Community in order to recover France's right of veto on decisions which it considered were affecting its national interest.

It is certainly true that today UNASUR is not operational: it does not hold its mandatory annual presidential summit and it is unable to reach an agreement on a new Secretary-General - the only candidate for the post, José Octavio Bordón from Argentina, has been repeatedly vetoed by Bolivia and Venezuela.

In fact, the official document on the suspension of activities by the six governments specifically calls for "concrete results to ensure the functioning of the organization in the coming weeks".

In addition to the appointment of a new Secretary-General, it also demands a revision of the decision-making processes which are currently based on a unanimity rule, and a new course for the organization towards cooperation in specific matters according to its members' national priorities - such as integration of physical infrastructures.

The move is a bold political wager: it could unblock the appointment of the Secretary-General, but it could also aggravate the fracture already existing in the region.

The initiative by the six governments has been presented in a carefully muted way - most of the promoting foreign affairs ministries have not even announced it on their websites - and they are not even trying to justify it just in terms of a better functioning of the organization and the need to unblock decisions.

It requires a broader interpretation - as part of the conservative restoration agenda of the "new right" administrations, aimed at dismantling the legacy of the progressive governments in the region.

This belies the allegedly "pragmatic" nature of these governments' foreign policies and comes to prove that they too have a clearly ideological bend.

But a political twist regarding regional commitments could come at a high price, for it would

clearly show that government changes entail big foreign policy shifts, and that the UNASUR members are unwilling or incapable of defining long-term policies – thus seriously damaging the credibility of the member states and of the region as a whole.

The caricatured image being used to portray UNASUR as an anti-imperialist "Bolivarian" tool is not only inaccurate, but it reveals the intentions of those who try to discredit it. If this had indeed been the case, it is hard to imagine how it could have managed to maintain, as it actually has, the plurality of governments and interests in its midst for ten years.

The organization has a satisfactory record on providing services to the region, generating consensus, enhancing the international presence of its members, effectively managing crises - such as the one that Bolivia went through in 2008 -, and supporting useful cooperation initiatives in fields such as physical infrastructures, public health, defense policies and electoral processes.

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And there is no denying that it is wise to have an organization such as this today as a foreign policy tool in the face of the United States abrasive unilateralism, growing protectionism and rampant nationalism. In a similar vein, the new European Union Strategy for Security and Foreign Policy is also aimed at providing "strategic autonomy" to the EU without undermining the traditional transatlantic bond.

It is true that UNASUR lacks a trade integration dimension due to the opposition of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America - Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA) member countries, and that it has not been effective in offering solutions to Venezuela's entrenched and difficult political crisis.

But it could hardly have done so, considering that decisions at UNASUR require the unanimity of its member states - including the claimants. And it should be borne in mind that the initiatives of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Vatican and other actors - such as Leonel Fernández or José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero – have not been successful either.

UNASUR was created in 2008 in a context full of tensions within the region and this did not prevent it from acting as a platform for dialogue and agreement between governments of different shades.

Ten years later, new tensions and new divergences should not be the pretext to destroy this significant *acquis*.