The Paradoxical Effect of Multipolarity over the South American Security Governance

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THE PARADOXICAL EFFECT OF MULTIPOLARITY OVER THE SOUTH AMERICAN SECURITY GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

South America is far from being a turbulent region and a concern in the international security experts’ minds world-wide. With a relatively low weapon and power concentrations, as well with prolonged periods of regular peace among its states, the region declares itself as a peace zone. How can the study of South American security governance contribute to a better understanding of current international security trends? According to my claim: breaking the enduring idea on security regionalism’s relative isolation, Multipolarity is a global phenomenon with tangible consequences, even for a so-called peace zone. The attempts for an autonomous South American security governance agreement were directly connected with changes in the distribution of power at the international structural level. However, the same force that allowed the rise of the South American Defence Council (SADC) limits the progress towards a more committed agreement. The multipolar paradox lies in the difficulties to make compatible the two faces of one important outcome from multipolarity: national and regional autonomies.

This chapter explains the paradoxical effect of multipolarity over South American security governance through three sections, having the structural realism (neorealism and neoclassical realism) and the regional security complex theory as main theoretical references. The first section is devoted to defining and explaining the South American security governance and the conditions for the SADC emergence. In the second section the nexus between multipolarity and autonomy is exposed, including some quantitative evidence on the multi-polarisation of the international system. In the final section I attempt to shed some light on the multipolar paradox and the tension between national and regional interests driven by the autonomous changes given by multipolarity.
South American security governance

Defining regional security governance (RSG) is a risky task because of its linkage with the European experience. Following the core ideas of Breslin and Croft (2012), I define RSG as the multilateral capacity to rule security issues and cope with threats in a given regional security complex (Buzan and Wæver 2003). The participation of organizations/corporations besides the states depends on the nature of every region. The main objective is to institutionalise common strategies for the unification of regional security agenda. According to Krahmann’s seminal work, the conceptualisation of security governance in the post-Cold War supposes the interaction among traditional state agencies with private actors, such as NGO’s and private security companies (2003). This could be true for the North Atlantic, but it is far from the South American reality. The state in this regional security complex remains the central and dominant actor in many political and economic aspects, including security. As Flements and Radseck said, South American security governance is a matter of states not only because the underdevelopment of private sector vis-à-vis the national state, but because the traditional central role of the armed forces in domestic security issues, beyond national defence (2012, 206; Mares and Martínez 2014; Hunter 1996).

The first and most important attempt of RSG for all South America was the hemispheric security perimeter established by the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Pact), signed in Rio de Janeiro on September 2nd, 1947.1 Chronologically, the Rio Pact preceded any other security institution launched by Washington as part of its post-war foreign and national security policies. The Inter-American System is explained by Ikenberry as the result of a victorious great power’s effort to establish institutional warranties for its hegemony in the coming years (2000, 163-214). Thus, the System was part of a larger geopolitical endeavour to deal with an anticipated US relative decline after World War II. In terms of RSG, the Rio Pact was the institutionalisation through the overwhelming relative capacities and power projection of triumphant superpower in its own region within a settled security perimeter.2

The South American Defence Council (SADC) is the most important intraregional initiative. It was created in Salvador de Bahía on December 2nd, 1947. The Rio Pact included a detailed definition of its borders in its Article 4 (OAS 1947). The coordinates given coincided with the US national security perimeter established by Spykman (2008[1942]) in one of his most policy influential works on geopolitics, published five years before the Rio Pact of 1947.

1 In the next section, on multipolarity, I present quantitative evidence of that asymmetry and its evolution.
16th, 2008, albeit it was ratified in Santiago de Chile on March 10th, 2009. Even though the Venezuelan government and the Brazilian Ministry of Defence had floated the idea of a collective defence project in the region (Mijares 2011), the dominant proposal was less rigid. The opportunity came with the crisis outbreak between Colombia and Ecuador-Venezuela after “Operation Phoenix.” The Brazilian proposal was rapidly taken up by Chilean diplomacy, setting up three principal objectives: 1) Consolidation of a peace zone for democratic stability and development; 2) Construction of a South American defence identity taking account of regional and national particularities; and 3) Generate consensus in order to reinforce regional defence cooperation (UNASUR 2008). Since its formalisation, the SADC’s tendency is to become a more flexible defence agreement, increasing the chances for operability through the diminishing of original high engagement demand.

The US influence and actual military intervention in Latin America had more strength in Central America and the Caribbean basin. Most of South American politics and territories had been historically free of US military direct presence (Mares 2001, 73-83). Due to the geographic proximity, the political instability and the relative weakness, this peripheral area was the primary operation theatre for the superpower military interventions within its large security perimeter. The relative decline of US power in a multipolar world encouraged the formalisation of an autonomous security agreement in the most autonomous zone of Latin America. The SADC’s is a function of Brazilian race for regional representation, the relative US decline vis-à-vis the South American states’ material improvement, and the Washington’s geostrategic over-orientation towards Central Asia, Middle East, and Asia-Pacific. These three factors are manifestations of a new world order in which the path to power diffusion is the paramount trend.

Besides the fact that distribution of power in the international system had hastened the creation of the SADC as the first exclusivity Latin American RSG agreement, other additional factor, related to domestic politics and regional patterns should be considered: concentrationist presidencies. Latin American presidents usually have had important policy tools for agenda setting and executive decision making, not only

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3 “Operation Phoenix,” on March 1st 2008, was the name of the raid over the camp of the main Colombian guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), located in Ecuador, almost two kilometres from the Colombian border. The core fulfilled objective was the elimination of a.k.a. Raul Reyes, the number two in the FARC’s command structure. The operation was delivered with US technical support and without Ecuadorian authorization. Chávez’s Venezuela put pressure on Correa’s Ecuador, generating a diplomatic crisis with the possibility of military escalation.
in domestic politics but also in foreign policy (Malamud 2001, 7-11). Presidential diplomacy is dominant in the region, especially under the rule of presidents with a strong party coalition, personal charisma and transformative governmental programmes. The main South American states were ruled by this kind of presidents during the crucial years of the formalisation of the SADC (2007-2009): LuizInácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, NéstorKichner and Cristina Fernández in Argentina, Álvaro Uribe in Colombia, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. The result was powerful foreign policy executives, who were able to evaluate the opportunities given by the multipolar order and to mobilise material and ideational resources from their societies (Lobell 2009; Duek 2009).

Multipolarity and autonomy

In recent years, multipolarity became truism in international studies. Assumed as a self-evident fact, most authors don’t feel the pressure to demonstrate it with empirical evidence, and almost no one of those who define it did so with quantitative data. The problem behind that attitude is not only epistemological, but also practical, due to the lack of precision in tracing structural changes in international politics. It is a well-known fact that not all multipolarity systems are equals (Kaplan 2005[1957], Mearsheimer 2001). They differ from the number of great powers, but also in power concentration, and also when it comes to the great powers’ geostrategic orientation. Thus, the number of states that are part of the great powers subsystem is only a part of the truth.

The first step to properly define multipolarity is to heuristically establish the existence of a Great Powers Subsystem (GPSs). This could not be assumed as an exclusive system, but as an analytical category to gather in a single group those states that actually or potentially dominate the international system. Defining the size and dominant geostrategic orientations of the GPSs is of primary importance to defining international polarity. This international polarity means the distribution of capabilities within the GPSs (Mansfield 1993). In this chapter, polarity is assessed including those states who concentrate at least half of world power—for the systemic level—or two thirds of any given regional security complex—for the regional level or the Regional Powers Subsystem (RPSs).

Although the proportions in the table below are arbitrarily assigned, they keep an internal logic associated to the nature of both systemic
and regional levels. In the first GPSs, concentration of Half of World Total Capabilities represents a significant amount of state’s available capabilities in a geographically broad system. An important assumption for the systemic level is that any member of the GPS is neither interested nor able to exert actual power in every region at the same time. Since the space, as well as the number of states, is lesser at the regional level, the RPSs represent better the concentration/diffusion dynamics within regions. The assumption is that the actual or potential dominant power(s) should exert influence over all or the major extension of its (their) own region. Thus, multipolarity is an international order with more than three powers within the GPSs, being often accompanied by multipolarisation or the process of ‘power-poles’ rising in different regional security complexes.

**Table no. 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>CINC ≥ Half of World Total Capabilities</th>
<th>Top States in the Great Power Subsystem</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>0.5921345</td>
<td>USA** UKG** RUS* GER*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>0.5240146</td>
<td>USA** SVU* CHN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>0.5647868</td>
<td>USA* UKG* SVU* CHN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>0.6020715</td>
<td>USA** SVU* GER**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>0.5793796</td>
<td>USA** SVU** CHN*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>0.5378079</td>
<td>USA** SVU** CHN* IND*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>0.5507471</td>
<td>USA** SVU** CHN* IND* JPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>0.5265466</td>
<td>USA** SVU** CHN* IND* JPN*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>0.5140296</td>
<td>USA** RUS* CHN* IND* JPN* BRA GER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>0.5033427</td>
<td>USA** RUS* CHN* IND* JPN* GER*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>0.5128115</td>
<td>USA** RUS* CHN* IND* JPN* GER*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*State with relative power projection competence vis-à-vis its regional peers
**State with relative power projection competence vis-à-vis its global peers

Using the Correlates of War Dataset for the Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey 1972) and my own update from 2008 to 2013 (Mijares 2014), I took one year per decade to show one century on the evolution of the GPS in Table no. 1. At least three noticeable facts deserve our attention. First, in the last thirty years the power concentration has been experiencing a non-linear but perceptible reduction, being slightly above the minimum (CINC = 0.5). Second, the number of great powers has been growing since the 60s, as well as the regional power projection’s competences. And third, power diffusion came along with the geographic spread across different continents, creating a multi-polarised multipolarity – or a “multi-multipolarity,” a term used by Friedberg (1993-1994, 5-7).
There is a natural relation between multipolarity and autonomy. I understand autonomy as freedom of action in foreign policy under international law and the rule of generally accepted principles. An autonomous foreign policy means the quest for disengagement from external constraints in the pursuit of national interests. Autonomy can be reached by distance, participation or diversification (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007). Snyder exposed an elaborated an explanation about the problem of commitment within alliances in multipolar systems (1997, 1-39). His work establishes as its main logical principle that in an international environment of power diffusion states have increasing options for multiple foreign agreements. Multipolarity thus expands the chances for insecurity and mistrust (Mijares 2009), but also enhances states’ autonomy, increasing their prospects for asymmetric and selective engagements.

Autonomy through participation was the dominant foreign and national security policy strategy in the establishment of SADC. According to Vigevani and Cepaluni (2007, 1313) in their article about Brazil’s foreign policy during the first period of Lula’s administration—roughly applicable to South American secondary powers and some minor powers, e.g. Ecuador, during SADC’s crucial years of formalisation—autonomy through participation means: “(...)an adherence to international norms and principles by means of South–South alliances, including regional alliances, and through agreements with non-traditional partners [...], trying to reduce asymmetries in external relations with powerful countries.” Thus, in an international system in which power diffusion rapidly advanced, reaching a regional security agreement was the natural strategy, especially when multi-polarisation in the Western hemisphere came along with an US geostrategic over-orientation towards Eurasia. South American states linked multipolarity with post-hegemony, and that with autonomy, making of the latter an integral part of a regional convergent foreign and national security policy strategy.

A multipolar paradox South America

Exceptionally the international system is ordered in a bipolar or unipolar fashion. History teaches us that the usual international configuration is multipolar. This does not mean that all forms of multipolarity are equivalent, but that the fragmentation and the multiple competition are utterly natural trends in world politics. However, the current multi-multipolarity entails an important functional logic, the one related to
multi-polarisation or the rising poles across regions strutted by the upsurge of regional powers. The multi-multipolarity brings a paradox that potentially challenges RSG: *Since that kind of multipolar order increases the chances for larger autonomy in foreign and national security policies, and regional powers are able to promote autonomous regional initiatives, RSG agreements can be reached. Nevertheless, a recurrent effect of any kind of multipolar order is national autonomy as opportunities for the diversification of foreign ties increase, albeit these encourage doctrines of selective engagement and losing the forms of security treaties within regions.* The multipolar paradox reveals that the same encouraging force towards regional security cohesion is also a potential source for defusing the functional operability of ambitious endeavours in RSG.

The keystone to understanding the multipolar paradox lies in the difference between national and regional autonomy. The already given definition of autonomy applies for national policies, in others words, is related to the interactions between domestic and international factors, typically connected to foreign and national security policy decision making (Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman 2009; Putnam 1988; Escudé 1992). My definition, autonomy is a gradual condition that encompasses strategic freedom of action. Consequently, foreign and national security policies’ autonomy is a circumstance in which an international actor can pursue own interests, while maximising the gains and reducing risks. The problem with chasing of autonomy is founded on the same kind of problem when it comes to rational choice behaviour: how to get collective goods? Thus, as well as national autonomy is a problem of policy making, regional autonomy is one related to the rational dilemma called “tragedy of the commons” (Harding 1968), but also to its version in our field, the “security dilemma” (Herz 1951; Jervis 1978).

As regional security is a prime collective good in multi-multipolar international order, in 2008 the majority of the most regionally relevant South American states were convinced about the timing to establish an agreement which RSG proposes. The structural condition of power diffusion encouraged regional autonomy in security issues since the dominant interpretation was that multipolarity and the rise of regional poles were not only an emerging condition, but an ideal state for world order (Cantanhêde 2005; ABC 2005; PRB Venezuela 2007, 2013; TeleSur 2009; Newman 2009). As is shown in Graph no. 1, the gap between the US and the South American material capabilities has been progressively bridged since World War II. That gap reduction, and
the US geostrategic over-focus on Eurasia and Asia-Pacific, were the ringing bell for a regional balancing policy, close to terms portrayed by Snyder in collective goods and balance of power (1997, 50-52). On Map no. 1 we can see the concentration of power by regional security complexes in 2008. A high concentration in Asia-Pacific explains the American balancing policy from then on, as well as the structural reasons for relative neglect of South America, increasing the chances for national and regional autonomy.

**Graph no.1**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power Ratio</td>
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Source: Calculated by the author.

**Map no. 1**

During the crucial years of SADC’s formalisation, the region exhibited enough growing power to develop security autonomy, although not sufficient to be an interesting (or threatening) region for the US geostrategy in a multipolar world. These conditions helped the emergence of the UNASUR’s defence council as the seal of a RSG project. Nonetheless, the lack of a common threat and the weakness of Brazilian leadership as the major regional power (Malamud 2011) restricted the possibility of a most tight collective engagement. Considering the impossibility of laying down an ambitious single regional security and defence agenda, the SADC had to settle for be a regional agreement for transparency, encouraging the publication of white papers on defence expenditure and military systems (UNASUR 2011) as well as promoting bilateral confidence and security-building measures (CDS 2010).

The multipolar paradox has been forcing the contraction from original thinking on the framework for South American security governance structure. Clashes among national and regional autonomies prompted an autonomy dilemma inclined to undermining the regional efforts for the SADC. This dilemma expressed itself as initial tensions about definition and real range of the agreement. While Venezuela proposed a full collective defence alliance against the US, Brazil and Argentina were inclined towards a regional dissuasive block—aiming their strategic interests over the South Atlantic. Colombia, the South American US ally, was opposed to the SADC, ceding only to afterwards pressures in light of the Operation Phoenix’s crisis. Meanwhile, Chile—the diplomatic mastermind behind the final treaty—looked for a diplomatic solution focused on transparency that would be able to defuse bilateral tensions and latent conflict, but excluding constraints of a full engagement agreement. Even when the regional security institutionalisation made progress, the structural conditions in the international system are still pushing towards a multi-multipolarisation, threatening to keep this loose equilibrium of flexible regionalism in the South American security governance.

**Conclusion**

This chapter can be taken as a case study for regional security governance, and the SADC’s emergence as an outcome from multipolarity and multipolarisation. But it also addressed why and how multi-multipolarity challenges the security governance performance. Connecting global and regional structures, it explained part of the consequences of power
diffusion in a region usually considered as one with low security appeal. The study case, as part of a broader and ambitious research agenda, opens chances for observations, further specifications and criticism, but also for reorientations in the analysis of global security environment in the early 21st century.

The multipolar paradox is a detected result in South America because of the region’s conditions. However, taking a look at other regions and security governance agreements (in a wide-ranging sense), the paradox effect may not appear. For instance, in Southeast Asia the regional security ties tend to get strengthened since there multipolarity means China’s rise and the US naval deployment as a power projection policy from an offshore balancer. Another case is the Persian/Arabic Gulf region, where ties are also strengthened because of the increasing Iran’s regional influence, while the US presence is slowly fading away. Both examples deserve more attention within the international security studies, taking the structural analysis of power concentration/diffusion as portable framework. Meanwhile, the South American security governance looks stable in its loose commitment agreement. Only dramatic transformations in the regional power structure—as a change in Brazilian foreign policy or a major military crisis in the neighbourhood—may unsettle the current situation, and those changes do not look likely in short or medium terms.

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