Latin America on the geopolitical chessboard of the global transition

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Isaiah Berlin, following the Greek poet Archilochus, used to say that writers, thinkers, and human beings altogether, were divided into two types: hedgehogs and foxes. Hedgehogs relied on a single central vision, on a more or less coherent or articulated system, an organizing principle that made sense for everything. Foxes, on the other hand, knew many things and pursued multiple, often unrelated or contradictory objectives, their thinking being scattered, with no intention of fitting the pieces together.

In this paper we elaborate on the idea that the current crisis and global transition is revealing the "personality" of countries, focusing on the Latin American case, sometimes discovering them as hedgehog countries, which are usually the eagles of global or regional politics, with a hegemonic or dominant desire, and in other cases as fox countries, which usually activist countries, roadrunners, lacking much clarity about where they are going, sometimes serving as the bishops of the strongest. We add that there is also a third type of countries, sloths, which do not move from their comfort zone, satisfied with what they have, even if they are mired in a stationary situation. The extreme version of these are the rhea countries, which hide their heads and do not want to see what is happening, self-absorbed in their internal confrontations, as if

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geopolitical disorientation amidst tipping points did not have high costs. Here, the “personality” of elites and countries refers to the clarity of their goals, and the will to achieve them.

The thing is that these last two types of countries, the sloths and the rheas, are the most common in Latin America (LA) and, on top of that, regional integration, which gave some global protagonism to the region, has been weakened. This could relegate Latin America, from a non-hegemonic region on the global chessboard, to a heavily subordinated region, modeled after the interests of others. The passive scenario to which Latin America could be heading, with obvious exceptions, is that of a region of neo-extractivist countries, institutionally weak, with bogged down governments, populations with little capacities, large brain drains and limited rights. Given that we are all facing a similar challenge, which is the establishment of a new "global regime", the "personalities" and pathways of the region and their countries could allow us to foresee the outcome scenarios.

The order we will follow to foreshadow these likely outcome scenarios for Latin America will be, first, a review of the challenge posed by the current crisis and global transition, then an assessment of the region and its countries’ performance in the previous years, and finally an identification of the first signs of possible gambles and scenarios.

1. Challenge: crisis and the long term

We are upon an exceptional moment of global crisis and transition. But it is not the first time that humanity has experienced these tipping points. It happened with the Protestant Reformation, the European conquests of the 16th century, the Enlightenment movement, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the 1930 crisis, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and other periods of change. What is unique about this crisis of the old order and evolution towards another stage, that Latin America and the countries of the Global South should be aware of for the design and implementation of their policies? Is it the same as previous crises and transitions?

Polycrisis and drivers

The realist school of international relations focuses the analysis of these moments on the power relations between states, relations that are reinstated with these displacements. They focus only on the triangle between the United States, China and Russia. Certainly the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the tensions over Taiwan, the diversity of reactions in the Arab world to the Israeli conflict with Palestine, the economic rise of China and its trade war with the US, the dissent in the European Union, the enlargement of the BRICS, are all shaping each country's weight in the future world order. But what is new is that the future scenarios now appear as an output of the intertwining of multiple vectors and not of one in particular, which would be the state-military. That is why the geopolitics we need must go beyond the classic version of spaces and territories (Kelly, 2006; Cabrera L., 2018).

Instead, what characterizes the current transition is the fact that it superposes, mixes, overlaps and interrelates several mega-transitions. The latter have different time horizons, but all of them strongly affect humanity on the long run. They are located in Ferdinand Braudel's "long duration" (1979), on an even larger scale. That is why the current global transition is not just another mutation, resembling the previous ones.

One of the current mega-transitions calls into question the sustainability of "the common home", the planet, as ecologism and all its variants have shown. The planet's resources are not infinite, and growth has its limits, as has been warned thousands of times by all scientists since the Meadows report to the Club of Rome (Meadows D.H., 1972). (Meadows D.H., 1972). Another mega-transition modifies the very nature of the capitalist system by opening the era of economies anchored to artificial intelligence, which comprises a leap beyond the previous three scientific revolutions by totally reconfiguring the production of value and its appropriation mechanisms. We will have value without requiring human labor, locating at the antipodes of industrial society. A third one alters the hegemony of the world powers in the 21st century, leaving behind the times of unipolarity and devising a meeting between civilizations on unwritten terms, an opportunity that has not occurred since the conquests of the 16th century, when the West set off ahead as the leading civilization. Finally, the mutations also have an impact on human nature itself, opening up what Foucault (1999) announced as biohistory and that Lovelock (2021) understood to be the genesis of the biotechnological man. This mutation is expressed in the advanced medicine of our time and in the amazing things to come regarding treatments for today incurable diseases and the increase of life expectancy.

On this, the dominant understanding of the crisis and desirable future policies in Latin America is limited, because it focuses on the short term and moves within the planning versus free market antinomy (Bresser-Pereyra, 2007; Borón, 2003; Sader and Gentili, 2003). The decline of neoliberalism is true, but this global turn is not a simple wobble of humanity from Friedman to Keynes or post-Keynesianism, it is a leap forward of the capitalist system, which seeks to get out of the trap of the first globalization, and a challenge to humanity in regards to its own existence, therefore a rethinking of the terrain in dispute, which absorbs and resignifies the terms of the previous polarization in the first globalization.

The problem then is how can Latin America or its countries face this complex transition or whether they will have a traditional one-dimensional reading of it, either on the state-military or economic side. Naturally, there will be different formulas in Latin America because there are fourth types of countries: emerging powers, developing countries, underdeveloped countries and failed countries. However, whatever the starting point, all will have to take into account that the dimensions or aspects of this transition are strongly interconnected and the development of countries and the region as a whole will depend on the management of the feedback within all the transitions.

This multidimensional nature of the crisis and transition has led Morin (2006), Tooze (2022), Lawrence (2022) and others to call it "polycrisis", trying to differentiate it from those that come from a single cause or dimension, because polycrisis arise from the simultaneous action of three or more drivers. In these cases, the different crises are tied together and feed back on each other. This reveals the limitations of characterizing the global transition we are living by approaching it from just one of its aspects, be it from only the angle of the ongoing scientific-technological revolution (Schwab, 2017; Perez, 2010), or the end of the liberal global order (Babic, 2020; Ikenberry, 2015), or even the environmental crisis and the end of the anthropocene (Ross & Stiegler, 2020; Benner S, Lax G, Crutzen P. et al, 2021; Latour, 2007). All of them are present but intertwined. And some of them function as "drivers of drivers", driving the other engines. For now, these drivers of drivers seem to be globally digital innovation and war.

The global regime

On the other hand, the recent shifts in global society show that we have not yet reached the stage in which the crisis will give us a glimpse of the characteristics of its successor. We are at the very moment where the future is being shaped and there are several possible futures.

This great uncertainty, this great unpredictability, makes the medium and long term not visible. We do know that artificial intelligence will be irreversible, but do we know what kind of society, economy and culture will emerge as a result of its impact? We know that global power will henceforth be multipolar, but will this only be a transition to a new Chinese or Chinese-Russian unipolarity, or will it be bipolar, or will a stage of equilibrium between the powers be inaugurated, a sort of Westphalian peace of the 21st century? Will there be a new world war or not, or will the hegemonic replacement be expressed militarily in localized wars? We know that the environmental damage has already been done, that there will no longer be a return to the stages of wild, full of beauty, nature, the one that forces us to stop and look at the landscapes, but can anyone claim that we will be able to stop the march towards collapse?

The great paradox of this time is that the previous "global regime" has already been eroded, but we are on a journey towards another regime which we know little about. By "global regime" we refer to the particular combination of a dominant bloc of countries, a dominant global economic policy, a dominant political and cultural narrative, a model of governance or real democracy, a type of global institutional framework, a level of tolerance to social inequality, and a level of social protection and vulnerability. All of these together characterize a given period.

The "global regime" of the first globalization was already an obstacle to move forward. We had to look for another combination and other weights. We had moved on to what Stagliano (2022) calls "gigacapitalism", a stage in which the world's greatest fortunes had reached dimensions incompatible with the proper functioning of democracy. It is visible that changes have been taking place, in a short period of time, and these no longer match with each other. Artificial intelligence allows for super-competitiveness but undermines employment. Without jobs there is no income and without income there is no survival. Should there be now a universal basic income? Extreme inequality generates a global malaise that can no longer be represented because of its changeability. On the other hand, the world plutocracy created in the last 30 years is less and less regulable by the States. Someone has to fix the puzzle again.

This situation in which we still do not have a light at the end of the tunnel has not been an obstacle for everyone to start gambling on a future. In these circumstances, the diagnosis does not precede the policy and the plan, but on the contrary, to gamble is to exist, complying with the Gramscian aphorism that to predict the future is to do what one wants to happen. That is why world powers, large corporations, governments of active countries, institutions with strategic responsibility, intellectuals and academics with a sense of history, feel the need to place a bet on a medium-term scenario, to adhere to some organizing message of a future, despite the scarce visibility of its realization.

Hence the alignment of the major players in the last two years with some power or blocs of powers. As soon as the invasion of Ukraine took place, European and American companies left Russia, and then China, despite the losses that this caused them. Europe had been having serious disagreements with the United States, but in the context of the questioning of the entire West as the leading civilization, they have aligned themselves with the United States and Israel. China does not have the same role as Russia in the conflict with the West, but in this circumstance it has made its alignment with Putin, who is now the leader of the revisionist group. The alignment of more and more countries with the BRICS goes in the same direction (Mahrenbach, 2019).

That is why Latin America and the Latin American countries have to gamble. Either Latin America and its countries play their own game now, in the midst of the geopolitical game of the whole world, or they will turn out to be mere pieces in the great strategies of this new era. Because Latin America is today in dispute.

Relative autonomy

One of the main differences between this transition and previous ones is that the change of hegemony is not being decided only within the Western world. Previously, the baton was passed "at home", from the Netherlands to Spain, then to England and finally to the United States. The entire planet has been under the command of the West since the 16th century. In those transitions, Latin America was always the rearguard or bishop of a leading country. Peru was for a long time the bishop of Spain; the South and Central American dictatorships of the 70s and 80s were almost embassies of the United States. But this current transition is, in this aspect, of greater depth, because it moves tectonic floors and expresses the relative decline of the West and its equilibrium with the East, which gives a greater margin to the South and Latin America, regarding Europe and North America.

This possibility of greater autonomy can no longer be interpreted in terms of national liberation, in a completely interdependent world, but it could provide an opportunity for the Latino peoples, the majority of whom are Indo-American, to make their specific contribution in the structuring of the new world order. So far, the meaning of multilateralism refers to China, Russia, India and the Arab countries, but it is still not clear in which direction the Latin American countries are heading. Are they part of the old liberal order, or are they joining the multicolored emerging world? The two questions posed by Estenssoro (2023) are therefore pertinent. Who will sit at the table of power in this new multipolar order once it is consolidated? What will be the situation of Latin America in this new order?

Latin America's two emerging powers, Brazil and Mexico, have so far different roles on the international chessboard. Brazil plays an active role in the BRICS but without South America behind and Mexico is too close to the United States (Rodríguez Sumano, 2019) and has chosen to maintain its autonomy without applying to join the BRICS+. All of this happening in a context of weakening Latin American and South American integration.

2. Performance: the stakeholder baseline

The phenomenon of the last twenty years is the rise of Asia, not Latin America or any other region in the world. China is itself a large market because of the disappearance of poverty (down from 97% to 1% between 1981 and 2020), because of the expansion of the middle classes and the policy of reducing its exposure to the world and rather increasing that of the world to Chinese products (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). Meanwhile, Europe has chosen to be the niche of cultural and luxury industries and

Biden strives to turn the United States into an industrial and technological power, favoring the return of the industrial facilities of globalized firms, while the American neoconservatives pursue a return to American unipolarity (Kagan, 2008) Russia is for now more of a war machine and energy source.

Latin America is out of the strategic game, in the back seat. Some say it does not have the backbone to compete, but neither does it have the will to break new ground. That is why its resources are the ones being disputed today. In which direction the needles of this great transition will move in the coming years, no one can know. But everyone is placing their bets, except Latin America, which continues its tradition of being a relatively absent region on the international scene, a lazy region with eagle hiccups, generally non-disruptive even when there are pink or crimson red electoral triumphs.

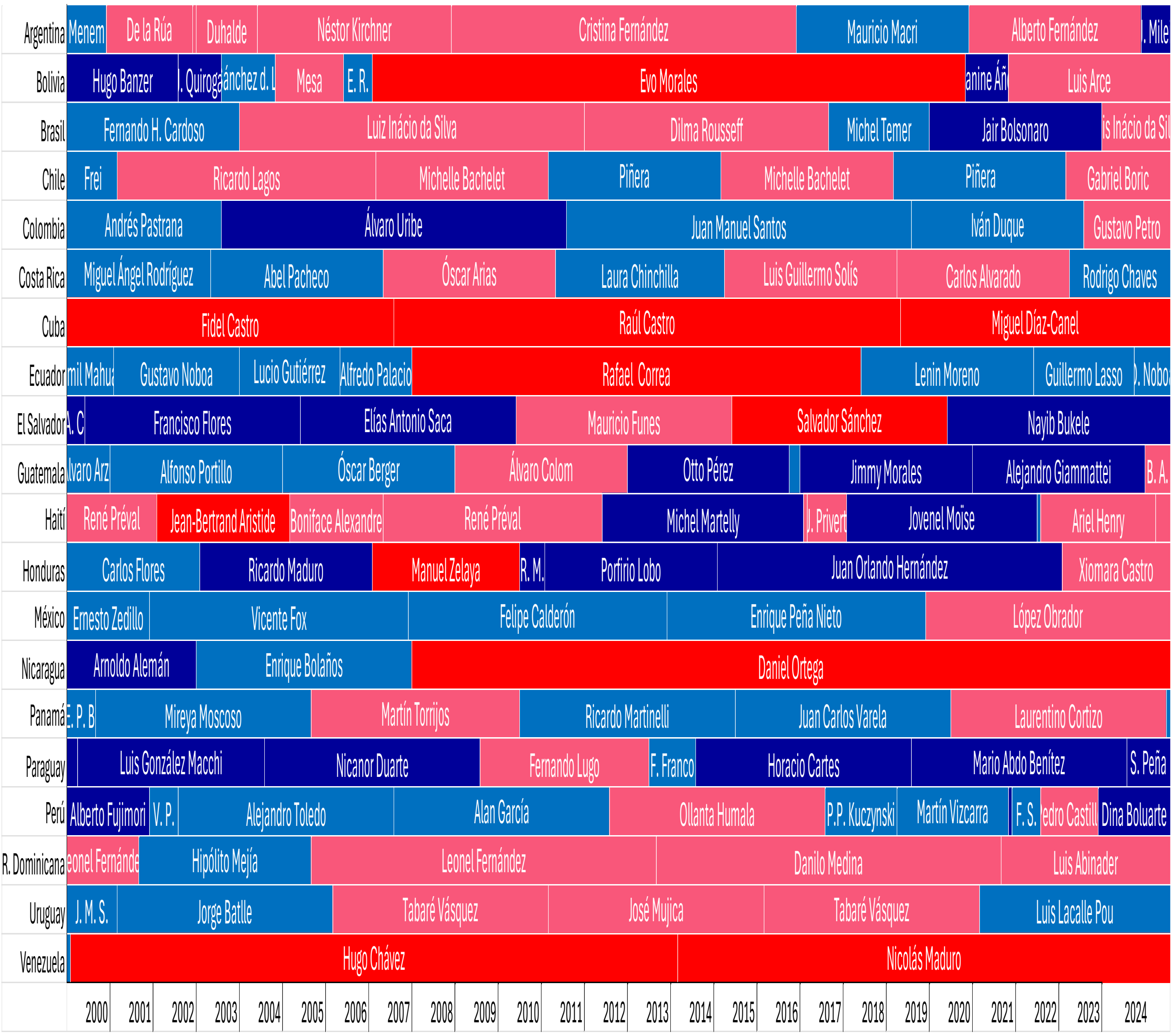
Blue waves and pink tides

This type of regional "personality" has been preserved with different nuances throughout the Latin American electoral waves. Zovatto spoke of "electoral super cycles” (2022) and indeed, in Latin America, electoral voting occurs in cycles and "waves" to one side or the other of the spectrum. These waves have been referred to as "blue waves", or neoliberal, and "pink tides", to the left or center-left (Trudeau, 2018; Calderón, 2020; Emerson, 2018). In the 1990s and 2000s, both waves have occurred, interspersed, but they have also been mixed, with one becoming a majority and the other a minority and vice versa. The pink tide was the majority in the middle of the two decades of the new century, between 2004 and 2014, then the blue wave became the majority for a few years, and finally the mass mobilizations of 2019 brought back the left and center-left to the governments, starting a stage of political fragmentation due to the presence of blue wave governments as well.

The blue or conservative wave has included in these two decades of the new century the two governments of Piñera in Chile, those of Fox, Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico, those of Álvaro Uribe, Juan Manuel Santos and Iván Duque in Colombia, Macri in Argentina, Alan García and Kuczynski in Peru, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Lacalle in Uruguay, Lasso in Ecuador and Jeanine Añez in Bolivia. Here we must differentiate between right-wing governments and radical right or new right governments, which have been replacing the old liberal right (Laborde, 2023; Rovira, 2023).

The pink tide has included, since the triumph of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, the presidencies of Tabaré Vázquez and José Mujica between 2005 and 2015 in Uruguay; the governments of Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet between 2000 and 2010 in Chile; Luiz Inácio da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in the years 2002 to 2016 in Brazil; Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández between 2003 and 2015 in Argentina; the two terms of Rafael Correa from 2007 to 2016 in Ecuador; the governments of Evo Morales between 2005 and 2019 in Bolivia; and Paraguay with Fernando Lugo in the period 2008-2012. Here we must also differentiate between left-wing and center-left governments, as Castañeda did (2006) distinguishing two currents in the pink tide, according to his opinion: a modern, open and reformist left in Chile, Uruguay and Brazil; and another nationalist, strident and enclosed left represented in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, placing Argentina in an intermediate position.

Figure 1. Blue waves and pink tides in Latin America, 2000-2024



Source: Author's work

Evidently, there have been differences between the blue waves and the pink tides, which have been extensively studied. Right-wing governments are supporters of the Washington consensus and left-wing governments are critical of it. Some are more open for trade and others more protectionist; some accompany democracies with lobbies and media management, others believe in participatory democracies and rely on public squares; right-wing governments accept foreign investment by favoring it, left-wing governments renegotiate signed contracts and impose more conditions; the former acknowledge social inequality, the latter see it as a social construct that needs be leveled; the former are supporters of the free market, but practice mercantilism, while the latter rely on a strong State; the former believe that growth by itself solves the issue of poverty, the latter believe in social policies as well. This duality has become even more polarized in recent years, with the emergence of a new radical right, which supports denialism and a heavy hand, militant in anti-politics, supremacist, in direct conflict with human rights.

Be that as it may, the balance of the last twenty years has not meant a noticeable change in the situation of Latin America, expressed in a qualitatively different level of development or a different relationship with the rest of the planet.

The positive balance could be summarized in some important changes so far this century: the growth of GDP and GDP per capita, the notorious decline in regional poverty, the increase in regional integration through greater trade between Latin countries and the promotion of integration bodies. These changes occurred more noticeably with the pink tide, between 2004 and 2014, with the emphasis of progressive or left and center-left governments on anti-poverty social policies, although without structural changes as promised when it was an electoral left. The social policies of the 2000s onwards were made under a rights-based approach, although they did not cease to be massive social assistance programs. (Barrientos, 2012). At the same time, this was the peak of regional integration as a leverage for overcoming underdevelopment in the region with the founding of ALBA in 2004, UNASUR in 2008, CELAC in 2010 and the Pacific Alliance in 2011 on the side of blue wave governments (Emerson, 2018). (Emerson, 2018, p. 156).

Today we find ourselves in a heterogeneous moment, neither clearly pink nor clearly conservative, but rather liminal, as Álvaro García Linera would say (2021), in which one time is coming to an end and another has not yet been born. The global transition is advancing at great speed, but many Latin American governments are busy with domestic affairs, plagued by corruption or trapped in the polarization between the executives and their congresses, which foreshadows an unclear horizon in the region.

Setback and/or stagnation

Schenoni and Malamud (2021) assess that over the last century, the region lost positions in all available indicators of relevance: proportion of the world population, strategic weight, trade volume, military projection and diplomatic capacity. We would be facing the challenge of this transition alongside this meager baseline.

We are rather inclined to think that Latin America has been stationary and contained in the last forty years, in a context that strongly incorporated new regions and countries into the world arena, due to decolonization. Asia Pacific, India, Africa and the Middle East joined the "official world" in the mid-twentieth century, which until then comprised only Europe, the United States and Latin America. Today there are more global players, but until the middle of the last century the Latin American region was considered the junior partner of the Europe-United States axis because it was the only former colony. It was therefore disputed by Ibero-Americanism and Pan-Americanism. All of the remaining South was the colonial world. Statistics therefore did not integrate their numbers. It is, therefore, natural that since then the population indicators and the strategic chessboard have moved.

Therefore, in the European mindset of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, Latin America was an exotic place for the frequent travelers of the time. That is the image conveyed by the travel books of 19th century Europeans or the stories of Hemingway and Saint-Exupéry´s novels in the 20th century or Freud's interest in Latin American culture. García Márquez knew how to express this special relationship between Latin America and Europe in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech when he characterized Latin America as "that immense homeland of hallucinated men and historical women, whose endless stubbornness is confused with legend", wondering "why the originality that is unreservedly admitted to us in literature is denied to us with all sorts of suspicions in our attempts at social change" (translated by author) (1983). The “*real maravilloso* latino” was not to be considered incompatible with mobilization against social injustice. The elites of the oligarchic time mostly did not want to be eagles because they were doing well as sloths, but their hardworking workers did give birth to broods of eagles with a broader gaze that generated popular social movements, some of them later part of the classic or first-generation national populisms. However, this cost bloody dictatorships to Latin America.

But it is true that this is no longer the current situation, and that Latin America has not been able to reposition itself in this last stretch of time. In this last interim 1990 - 2024 Latin America and its countries had ups and downs. If it were possible to synthesize the Latin American socio-economic performance of the last three decades we could summarize them in a stationary performance in global GDP, in a significant decrease in poverty from 2000 until the pandemic of 2020, in the boom and then weakening of intraregional integration since 2014, the deterioration of the institutional framework of the countries especially in the last 10 years, in the extension of informality and the crime economy, in a very unequal insertion in the digital economy, and in the final configuration of four types of countries: emerging powers, developing countries, underdeveloped countries and failed countries. The underdeveloped countries, those that are regressing, those that have worsening conditions from their baselines, are no longer spoken of. Not all countries of the Global South are "developing", there are also those that are underdeveloped. The concept of underdevelopment must be revisited.

The problem of Latin America is not that, in general, it is in a very bad condition, or that it is a region with almost no future as pessimistic views claim, but, in the comparison with other regions, it always has a mediocre performance and is very unequal, with 21 billionaires at the top of the Forbes ranking this year (2024) and at the bottom 181 million people living in poverty, who are having a very bad time (ECLAC, 2024). From Rio Bravo, on the border with the United States, to Patagonia, 669 million people live today and suffer these ups and downs and this general preference, with exceptions, for limited and inconclusive movements. Populations wage wars of movements, like the great mobilizations of 2019 (Colombia, Chile, Ecuador), but governments wage mini-wars of positions. We shall see what happens now with the New Right on a war of movements.

For this reason, the economic behavior of the region's GDP has been relatively stationary in the last forty years compared to world GDP. South American GDP decreased between 1980 and 2023 from 5.2% of world GDP to 4.0%, while Central American GDP, excluding Mexico, moved slightly from 0.3% to 0.5%. The Caribbean countries went from 0.2% to 0.1% in the same period 1980-2023. If we compare Latin America with other regions of the world, in 2023 the regions with the highest contributions to world GDP were Asia Pacific (35.1%), North America (30%) and Europe (24.3%). Africa barely contributed with 2.7% and the Middle East with 3.2%. Latin America was at 6.3% (IMF, 2024). This is the picture of world economic power by region.

When looking at the evolution of Latin America in the world’s GDP, it is observed that it was on the rise during the 2004-2014 pink tide period, peaking at 8% between 2011 and 2012. It then declined with the pandemic in 2020 and is currently close to 6%, due to a slight rebound after the pandemic. The entire economic upswing allowed the region to reduce poverty significantly, from 45.6% in 2003 to 29.2% in 2022. Extreme poverty stayed the same over the last 20 years, having been 12% in 2001 and 11.7% in 2022.

It can be observed that it is not a homogeneous region, like no other, and in Latin America there are three groups of countries according to GDP size. The relatively large economies, which refer to Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, which represent 65% of Latin American GDP; the intermediate economies, made up of Colombia, Chile and Peru, which account for 15.2% of Latin America's GDP; and the rest of the smaller economies, which account for the remaining 15.42% (IMF, 2023).

The degree of regional integration, measured by the percentage of regional exports and imports regarding global exports and imports, had a low starting point in 1980, with 12.9%, and then rose to two peaks, in 1996 and 2010, with 17.9% and 18.2%, respectively. However, since 2010 intraregional trade has been declining until reaching 11.3% in 2020 and 12.1% in 2021 (ALADI, 2022). Integration is not at its best.

In general, there are “extroverted” countries, with a higher weight of international trade in their gross products (Honduras 111.1%, Nicaragua 115.2%, El Salvador 86.8%, Costa Rica 79.7%), and “introverted countries”, with proportionally smaller international trade (Argentina 31.7%, Brazil 39.3%, Colombia 48.4%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Evolution of the weight of foreign trade relative to GDP of 19 selected countries, 2000-2022.

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2020	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Argentina	22.6	21.9	41.8	40.6	40.7	40.6	40.4	40.9	40.4	34.1	35.0	35.2	30.5	29.3	28.4	22.5	26.1	25.3	30.8	32.6	30.2	32.9	31.7
Bolivia	45.6	45.2	49.4	52.0	57.5	67.6	74.5	76.1	82.9	68.6	75.5	82.5	84.9	81.2	85.3	67.9	56.4	56.7	57.1	56.4	45.5	59.0	67.8
Brazil	22.6	26.9	27.6	28.1	29.7	27.1	26.0	25.3	27.3	22.1	22.8	23.9	25.1	25.8	24.7	27.0	24.5	24.3	28.9	28.9	32.3	38.2	39.3
Chile	58.7	62.1	62.5	65.7	69.9	72.1	73.7	77.0	80.7	66.7	69.7	72.5	68.2	65.1	65.6	59.3	56.1	56.0	58.2	57.5	58.1	64.7	75.0
Colombia	32.7	33.9	33.0	36.5	35.9	37.4	39.6	37.1	39.2	35.2	34.3	39.5	38.8	38.0	37.5	38.4	36.2	35.3	36.5	37.6	34.1	40.2	48.4
Costa Rica	86.5	80.9	80.4	83.3	85.3	89.2	89.8	86.5	86.4	69.8	67.5	68.6	67.0	64.1	65.2	60.8	62.2	65.1	66.9	65.8	60.1	70.8	79.7
Cuba	31.1	29.4	24.7	26.6	31.3	39.4	37.2	38.0	44.9	32.9	40.3	47.0	45.9	44.3	39.3	31.6	27.3	26.2	27.1	22.8	15.7	80.0	88.8
Dominican Republic	79.3	70.5	68.7	84.4	81.4	61.7	63.8	61.9	61.4	50.6	56.0	59.0	58.4	56.7	55.5	52.2	51.6	50.2	52.1	51.0	44.3	52.7	54.2
Ecuador	59.5	50.7	49.4	47.2	50.7	56.1	59.7	62.6	68.1	52.1	60.3	64.5	61.8	59.6	57.7	45.2	38.5	42.4	46.4	46.1	41.4	51.4	57.7
Guatemala	49.1	70.7	67.1	67.0	70.2	67.1	67.9	69.0	65.2	58.0	63.1	65.0	62.0	56.7	55.1	49.9	46.4	46.1	47.0	45.5	41.1	49.5	54.7
Honduras	120.4	115.9	118.0	122.2	135.5	136.5	133.1	135.1	135.7	96.9	109.4	122.2	121.2	116.3	113.0	107.3	99.8	101.8	103.6	98.0	85.6	101.6	111.1
Haiti	27.2	27.6	24.9	37.2	33.8	35.0	37.1	34.3	36.1	33.1	44.7	44.2	40.3	40.3	42.4	41.9	41.4	42.1	45.1	44.6	34.5	37.2	36.5
Jamaica	89.5	84.8	81.8	88.2	89.3	90.5	100.7	101.2	113.6	86.9	80.9	83.8	82.0	83.3	84.7	76.1	76.5	83.5	90.0	90.1			
Mexico	49.9	44.7	45.2	48.7	52.0	52.6	54.5	55.3	56.4	54.6	59.3	62.2	64.3	62.7	64.1	70.4	75.7	77.0	80.2	77.4	76.9	83.3	88.1
Nicaragua	61.3	58.0	58.1	62.2	67.2	71.6	87.3	93.0	96.8	87.0	100.4	111.8	115.2	111.0	106.7	98.2	93.8	96.4	94.0	94.0	88.9	106.7	115.2
Panama	134.0	130.1	121.9	114.7	123.7	135.7	137.9	149.6	166.7	139.0	148.3	162.5	158.1	137.6	119.1	99.9	87.4	87.4					
Peru	35.5	35.1	35.2	37.6	41.9	47.4	51.8	55.7	58.4	48.1	51.7	56.0	52.6	49.8	46.9	45.2	45.4	47.5	48.6	46.9	43.8	56.0	58.4
El Salvador	68.7	65.9	65.9	68.2	69.8	69.7	73.5	77.6	80.7	66.1	73.5	79.3	77.6	80.5	78.1	76.6	72.8	74.3	75.6	76.0	66.1	80.8	86.8
Uruguay	36.7	36.3	40.0	51.8	61.5	58.9	62.0	59.2	65.2	53.4	51.7	53.2	55.1	49.7	49.1	45.3	48.5	46.4	47.9	49.6	46.0	54.4	57.2
Latin America & Caribbean	38.6	38.7	41.2	43.2	45.4	45.4	46.0	46.0	47.8	41.0	43.6	46.1	45.6	44.9	44.0	44.3	44.3	44.6	47.7	47.0	46.8	53.8	57.0

Source: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files

But the introversion or extroversion of Latino economies depends on national development policies. Some countries opted early on for international trade, such as Chile, which has a strong weight of international trade in relation to its GDP (75%). Another group of countries has preferred the inertial combination of the development of their export sectors with some protectionist policies.

Similarly, data on the percentage of population in Latin American countries using the Internet reveals the same pattern of three groups of countries: those with relatively high digitalization (Chile 90.1%, Uruguay 90.07%, Argentina 87.1%), those with intermediate digitalization (Brazil 80.6%, Mexico 75.6%, Colombia 73.03%) and those with relatively low digitalization (Honduras 48.08%, Guatemala 50.8%, Nicaragua 57.1%) (World Bank, 2024).

The greatest Latin American social profit of the first two decades has been the significant reduction of poverty, as we have pointed out, but a serious threat to the future of Latin America is the growth of informality in the period 2000-2022, which, in the last year, was 84.92% of total employment in Bolivia, 74.36% in Peru, 57.16% in Colombia, 56.6% in Mexico, 51.20% in Argentina, 38.5% in Brazil, 27.4% in Chile and 22.14% in Uruguay (ILO, 2023).

Since 2017 Latin America entered the ups and downs originated by institutional instability, political polarization and conflict.

3. Probable scenarios

The uniqueness of Latin America today is that it can live the "curse of natural resources" or "paradox of abundance" in the midst of a global scarcity of natural resources, that is, in the midst of a commodity boom. The countries of Latin America do not wish to live boxed in as mere links in the supply chain of others, but those others are willing to pay very well for the enclosure. Are we facing an opportunity or a disadvantage?

<u>Resource curse</u>?

In the mid-twentieth century, the region believed in the ECLAC allegations of endogenous development, and almost at the same time the greatest integrationist efforts were made. From the 1990s onwards, most countries jumped to the extractivist and anti-industrial agenda of the heyday of the free market approach, which tended to a new focus on the raw materials of the countries. Today we are living the inertial moment of such policies. Simultaneously, Latin America is looking, in the new century, for an alternative path. The cyclical "pink tide" vote is an expression of this regional feeling of being in a subordinate place in the international division of labor, which promotes an economic scheme that has little expansionary effect on employment. However, at the same time, the also cyclical voting for the "blue wave" expresses the unrest for inappropriate solutions, many times worse than the disease. Venezuela missed its great opportunity to turn the oil boom into productive restructuring. Most Latin American countries converted the boom of 2004-2013 into redistribution but did not undertake a productive restructuring towards a more sustainable model. Today, in many cases, the primary-export sector continues to be the backbone. In short, the region always comes up against the same obstacle: it has a strength that can also be its weakness.

Some time ago Sachs and Warner (1995) began a debate on the negative effects of natural abundance on economic growth and the institutional framework of countries, pointing out the weakening of competitiveness and the tendency to inefficient and corrupt institutions. Previously, there had already been concern about the so-called "Dutch disease", in which the abundance of foreign exchange leads to distortions in the economy if it is not well managed (Corden & Neary, 1982).

The fact that Latin America is stagnating in its share of global GDP (6.3%) makes it clear that previous regional development efforts failed to meet their objectives. But today it once again has great capital in its hands, which Stott characterizes as "its best chance in a generation" (2024). Latin America has 40% of the world's copper reserves and 45% of the food trade, two thirds of the lithium reserves, the largest lung of the planet with the Amazon rainforests, 31% of the world's fresh water and many sources of clean energy, which means, it has the basis to become a stronger region in the global concert, with more development for its populations.

It is no accident that the United States is concerned about the growing Chinese presence in LA. General Laura Richardson (2022), commander of the U.S. Southern Command, has outlined to the U.S. Congress the need to reverse China's economic, diplomatic, technological, informational and military advance in the region. LA's annual trade with the United States represents US$740 billion, but it is no longer the main destination for Latin American exports or the largest foreign direct investment. According to the World Economic Forum, trade between China and the Latin American and Caribbean region increased 26-fold between 2000 and 2020, from US$12.28 billion to US$310 billion. Chinese investments in the region increased visibly: they were 12 percent of total foreign investment in 2014 and reached 21 percent in 2017. This is why O'Neil (2024) argues that the United States is losing an opportunity in Latin America by upholding dependence on Asia for its own supply chain, which makes it vulnerable and not reverse this. Latin America is thus in the middle of the global geopolitical confrontation for its resources. In this situation, Latin America will neither take advantage of its comparative advantages nor develop the new competitive advantages of the digital era, if it does not wield intelligent geopolitics that exploits its attractiveness for the poles and the main global geopolitical actors, for its own benefit.

Extroverted and introverted countries

Actually, the options available for Latin American countries in the current international context will depend on how they govern a "formula" of several "factors" or combined functions:

a) the *baseline* with which they have entered this transition;

b) the *type of international economic situation*, expansive or not, and its impact on its economic and social structure;

c) the "*open or protectionist policy*" or its mixtures, the one they have opted for, according to their development models;

d) its *foreign policy, whether of neutrality, or alignment* with one of the poles in dispute, or integration in the BRICS as a counterweight to unipolarity;

e) the *political will and clarity of their elites*, which grant their "personality" to the countries, giving them the appearance of eagle countries, road-runner countries or lazy countries.

The "baseline" is given by the "more or less inclusive structures" of the countries. There are countries that have socially included a third of their population, with large majorities excluded (Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay); countries with two thirds included, with a cushion of middle classes around the vertex (Peru, Colombia, Brazil); and countries with a predominant inclusion, in which there is a small group in poverty (Chile, Uruguay). The dividing line in the countries between formality and informality is an important part of this baseline. Likewise, the dividing lines within countries regarding digitally connected and disconnected groups. The response to the challenge of the global crisis will progressively or regressively modify the proportions between these three bands, depending also on other factors such as development policy and foreign policy.

The "type of international economic situation", depending on whether it is an expansionary or recessionary situation, or one of moderate growth, is a relevant factor for the region. Global upswings, such as the one experienced since 2004 with the Chinese expansion, were a window of opportunity. In these expansions, the populations of the modern groups of the countries, more in contact with globalization, which range from 30% to 80% of our economies, depending on the case, benefit more directly. These are generally the formal sectors. Depending on the size of these sectors within each country, the rebound effect of the expansive international situation will be greater or lesser, which differentiates Bolivia (84.9%) at one extreme and Uruguay (22.1%) and Chile (27.35%) at the other. We are now in an international situation of very moderate growth but with leading sectors that require our natural resources. Therefore, there is an opportunity to develop the countries, integrate excluded populations and improve the quality of life, depending on an adequate management of the boom by the countries.

In addition to these two factors (structure and economic situation), there is a third factor, the "open or protectionist policy" or mixtures thereof, which countries have opted for, depending on their development models. There are extroverted and introverted countries and all the possible degrees of these. The introverted have little weight of international trade regarding GDP; the extroverted have a powerful international trade (Table 1). Some engage in international trade behind a world pole; others seek a multiple and competitive insertion in the global world, with everyone, without much insertion within Latin America; there are countries with policies to promote and take advantage of some subregional endogeny (Andean countries) or that generate a South American endogeny with intraregional trade, as it was thought with the integration bodies; others seek global insertion or a little bit of all of these, which is what was expressed in the multiple options that emerged in Latin America as bloc projects up to 2014 (FTAs, UNASUR, ALBA, APEC, CAN, MERCOSUR) (Figure 2). In the current context, world trade has shifted from the Atlantic basin to the Pacific basin and the possibility of taking advantage of a policy of multiple competitive insertion, with all of them, is open. And this is a geopolitical option as well. For the most extroverted countries, with a heavier weight of international trade regarding their GDPs (Honduras, Nicaragua, México, El Salvador, Chile), this would not be a turn, but for the most introverted countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia), it would.

We would have wished that this second commodity upswing so far in the 21st century would have found us with different structures, more inclusive, and with less informality and poverty, more economically integrated, with stronger institutions, more diversified regarding their primary-export sectors, but that is not the reality here and now. The risks of the “curse of abundant resources” and the “Dutch disease” are present, but we have no choice but to face them.

Missed opportunities scenario and Good start scenario

There are two other factors that will influence the outcome scenarios for the region and each country: the foreign policy of the countries and the political will of the elites, their “personality”, which in the end are key in the configuration of the countries as eagle countries, roadrunner countries or sloth countries.

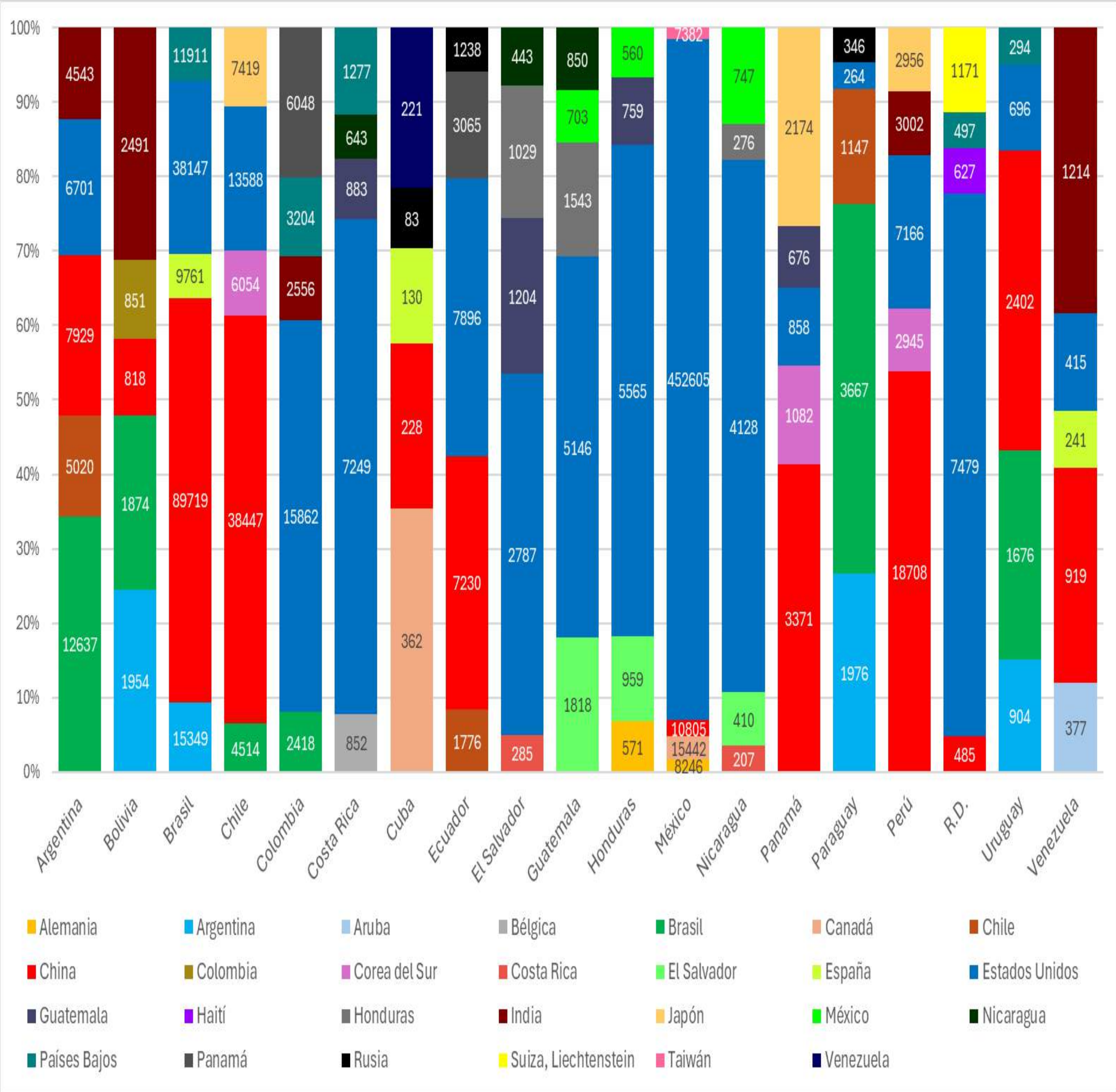
Latin America is today the most peaceful region on the planet and is being considered by Fortín, Heine and Ominami (2021) that the best use of the global transition will depend on its management of a policy of active non-alignment. If some countries were to actively align behind some of the confronting poles, they argue, Latin America would lose opportunities for growth and development in the region. The authors suggest opting for non-alignment rather than seeking to insert themselves into the middle of the global conflict.

But there is certainly not just one alternative but three possible policies: active alignment behind one of the world poles, non-alignment, and integration into the BRICS as a counterweight in favor of the creation of a multilateral order.

Latin American pacifism for now guarantees a suitable environment to reverse the still present effects of the pandemic and to continue the path interrupted from 2014-2017 when improvements slowed down, and political turbulence began. This pacifist foreign policy, which could come from a non-aligned stance or from the position of BRICS member countries, would be led by the experienced regional diplomacy, which if it cannot act in a coordinated way should at least act in a convergent way. The experience in dispute resolution and the know-how to make Latin American interests endure would enable negotiation efforts with the warmongering powers (Rodríguez & Mendenhall, 2022; Long, 2015), always aiming at the end of global hostility.

Non-Alignment or integration into the BRICS and Pacifism should not, however, be interpreted as not taking a stance on the Israeli aggression in Gaza or as favoring authoritarian models in the region because of the increase in trade with China (Weiss, 2019). China's investment in Latin America and the region's trade with China have multiplied, but this does not mean a change in the Latin American democratic model, with all its imperfections. China is already the main trading partner of several countries, such as Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay, and the Asian giant has also deployed gigantic investments in the region, such as the mega-port of Chancay in Peru, in search of a global and regional reconfiguration.

Figure 2. Top five export destinations of Latin American countries (2022), in millions of dollars



Compilation based on United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)
https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/GeneralProfile/en-GB/004/index.html

This "serene foreign policy in the face of an intemperate world" seems to have been fully understood by Latin American diplomacy, since its vote in the United Nations General Assembly between 2001 and 2023 has been with the United States and the European Union on human rights issues and with China on resolutions referring to economic interests (Talbi & Leiva, 2024).

But much of the future of the region and the Latin countries will also be decided by another critical variable, their political will, leadership and the vision of their leaders, which we have summarized as their "personality", whether they are eagles, foxes or sloths. The statesmen or eagles are usually ahead of their time and lead the way for their nations; the foxes or roadrunners wander from crisis to crisis, without a roadmap for their countries, and are generally caudillos without a project (Matus, 2008). The sloths do not govern but administer what is in progress, under the maxim that problems are either solved by themselves or never get solved. Countries led by lazy or sloth leaders will be completely reformatted by the context. Here applies the rule of the less agency, the more over-determination of the environment.

It would be desirable for the Latin American region to act jointly, as this would give it greater global preeminence and backbone in international negotiations. But the Latin American region today is fragmented and is unable to establish a clear political line with the outside world, as happened with the previous pink tide. The radical extremism of the new Argentine government divides the region and reduces its negotiating capacity. Differences between the right and the left have rarely been conducted in such a tone in Latin America. A Latin American majority would allow for greater recognition, all the more so in the midst of the greater prominence of the new emerging countries located in Africa, the Middle East and mainly in Asia.

But we are no longer in that situation, which could give rise to the "status incongruity" explained by Adins (2021) based on Ward (2013), that is, the failure to obtain respect and prestige in the international environment. According to Ward, in some cases the lack of international recognition has led countries to revisionist policies of the liberal global order. This was the case of Germany after World War I and Russia after the collapse of the USSR. But in the case of Latin America, it has no hegemonic pretensions, it only seeks respect and non-interference in its sovereignty.

There could therefore be three types of scenarios: the pessimistic or predatory scenario, the conformist or lost opportunities scenario, and the optimistic or scenario of a good entry into the 21st century. There are blurred boundaries between the pessimistic and conformist scenarios.

In Estenssoro's terms (2023) the pessimistic scenario is that of the Absolute South, which he explains is that of countries in a "permanent state of "developing". But the worst scenario for LA or its countries would be that they become the scene of warlike confrontation, thus suffering the consequences of a reckless alignment bringing war to the continent. But so far the main trend is that the world economic conflict, if it were to occur, will not take place in Latin America. What already exists is the dispute for our resources between China and the United States and if it is not handled independently by each country, according to its own benefit, the countries and the region could end up in a pessimistic scenario.

The characteristics of the pessimistic scenario would be the depredation of resources without much of a rebound effect of this extraction on employment and wages; the subordination of governments to the needs of extractive industries and the impairment of their sovereignty; the even greater neglect of institutions and the development of human capital (health and education) because they are considered second-order priorities; and the permissiveness and encouragement of informality and crime, since the accumulation regime is also based on them.

At the end of the slope of the "underdeveloped" or perpetually "developing" countries, we reach the "quasi-failed", ungovernable countries. That is, lazy policies lead to backward scenarios, in this case, of lost opportunities. The future of countries with sloth or rhea elites are passive or inertial scenarios. In these cases, the elites accompany and encourage the depredation of their countries, both of their resources and their populations. The deinstitutionalization they foster serves these purposes. As explained by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), "extractive political and economic institutions create a general trend of internal strife." When the extractive logic is installed the incentive is not primarily the production of value but its simple appropriation. This is the All Against All Scenario within countries or Missed Opportunities.

At the other extreme of these pessimistic or conformist scenarios is the possibility of optimistic scenarios. But these will not appear automatically. One thing is the desirable scenario and another the probable scenario. For the optimistic scenario to be at the same time the probable scenario, it is necessary to understand where we are going, the vision and the program, and how we will get there, the strategy. Given the existence today of a type of international economic situation that is to some extent favorable and different baselines in each country, with greater or lesser gaps between the formal/informal, poor/non-poor, connected/disconnected groups, it will depend on the political will of the countries and their elites, on what we have called their "personality", on their inclusive or extractive character, depending on whether they are eagles, roadrunners or sloths, to activate the latent capacities for development of Latin America and its countries.

The Latin American region will probably not be constituted as a collective actor, but the vast natural resources existing in each country should allow each one to open up commercial and diplomatic ground at the international level. What is new is that development today is decided in domestic politics but also in adequate geopolitics of development, especially in a pre-war and/or war scenario.

In the optimal scenario, countries take advantage of the export boom to promote levels of productive diversification, so as to reduce dependence on international cycles; foreign ministries will appropriately manage the dispute between world poles for our resources; states should recover their levels of institutionality, manage higher revenues to promote higher levels of investment and redistribution through social policies; the capacities developed from health and education should allow us to take better advantage of opportunities from inside and outside, making small investments of MSMEs and SMEs less perishable; in the end, there will be a better context to slow down and stop the "drain" of brains, to develop science and technology and defend Latino ecological diversity; among other concatenation of improvements. This is the XXI Century Good Entry Scenario.

It can be deduced from all of this that the question of the profile of countries and regions as hegemons or not depends not only on their desire for power in the game of international relations, but also on the trajectories and conditions that allow regions or countries to play this role. Moreover, it is not a dichotomous variable, given the multiple existing degrees and modes of hegemony. It is therefore necessary to move out of the third row, but it is likely that locating far ahead of one’s own capabilities will backfire. In the current circumstances of open world polarization and warlike conflicts, the attempt to move to the front could block the leeway for international association to grow and develop. A "serene foreign policy in the face of an intemperate world" could be the international relations umbrella that is needed. Like China, which heading far, but slowly, Latin America has to work on a gradual, autonomous repositioning, without pause but without haste, with the patience of ancient peoples who already know that leaving one sphere of influence does not mean transferring to another.

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