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From issue: **Latin America Goes Global** (Spring 2013)

### ■ AQ FEATURE

# Ask the Experts: Going Global

BY [Cynthia J. Arnson](#), [Flavio Darío Espinal](#), [Howard J. Wiarda](#) and  
[Pablo E. Guidotti](#)

# What role will Latin America have in world affairs?

## Cynthia J. Arnson answers:

Political and economic integration schemes have long been a staple of Latin American foreign policy. But changes in the regional and global economy since the early 2000s have created new incentives for the reform of global governance mechanisms to reflect the new constellations of political and economic power. South American countries benefited from soaring Chinese demand for commodities, energy and agricultural products, put their fiscal houses in order after years of painful adjustment, and implemented social programs that lifted tens of millions of people out of poverty and reduced inequality. The United States and Europe, meanwhile, remain mired in recession, leading prominent Latin American intellectuals to speak of historic power shifts from West to East.

While the prediction may be premature and exaggerated, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Latin America and Asia were the two powerhouses of the world economy. Commercial relations had deepened with China, India, South Korea and others. The opportunities represented by multiple options for global economic insertion were spurred by the political incentives arising from the post-9/11 unilateralism of U.S. foreign policy, widely rejected in the region.



The region as a whole appears united in demanding that post–World War II governance bodies such as the UN Security Council and Bretton Woods institutions such as the IMF change to accommodate the growing clout of emerging powers. But although three Latin American countries are now included in the G20, other global governance reform efforts have been frustrated. As a result, South-South contacts and consultation mechanisms have proliferated, a trend

that will continue unless existing institutions are able to adapt. At the political level, however, there is much disagreement over what norms and procedures will govern international behavior, let alone who will bear the responsibility and costs of upholding them.

## Flavio Darío Espinal answers:

Latin America experiences a kind of paradox: on the one hand, the region has dealt better than others with the difficulties of the international financial crisis—many of its countries have performed well economically over the past few years—and there has not been the type of political turmoil that characterized previous decades. On the other hand, the region has not been able to act with strength and common purpose in world affairs. Its influence, therefore, has been and most likely will continue to be limited in the decision-making processes concerning the great challenges facing the world.

Fragmentation is a permanent and seemingly insurmountable feature of Latin America. Even though there is a process of building a regional bloc among Latin American and Caribbean countries, the tensions and divisions within the region are pervasive and difficult to overcome. Some countries are more integrated—economically, politically and socially—with the United States, while others have a more antagonistic position toward the U.S. and have strengthened relations with other parts of the world. Some countries, such as Brazil and Mexico, compete to play a larger role in world affairs, but none has been able to exercise effective leadership within the region.

At the same time, the region seems to be a victim of its own success. The fact that Latin America does not

experience the type of severe conflicts that affect other regions of the world and is not a source of major threats to international security may explain the lack of interest of the U.S. and other world powers. This does not mean that Latin America is irrelevant in world affairs; on the contrary—its ever-expanding economy, the success of some of its countries, and its capacity to establish relations with different parts of the world give Latin America an important place in the configuration of inter-regional and global affairs.

### **Howard J. Wiarda answers:**

The world is shifting even faster than we can analyze and write about. The United States, by several metrics, is in decline, and largely ignores Latin America. However, before we overstate the declinism theme, let us remember that U.S. GNP is still three times that of China, Japan or Germany, and its global reach strategically is unmatched by any other current or aspiring power.

Latin America, drawing from the tenets of dependency theory and from its own self-interest, is breaking out of its historic subservience. It is becoming more independent and less isolated and plays a greater role on the world stage. Yet the institutions, real or potential, of this greater independence—the OAS, Mercosur, ALBA, CELAC, the Alliance of the Pacific, etc.—are weak, lack central direction, and may be pulling apart. Like development itself, Latin America's greater independence and assertiveness may be a two or three generations project. Nor has Latin America quite decided whether its greater independence, primarily from the U.S., is ideological or based on national self-interest. In the absence of hemisphere-wide institutional coherence, it is the emerging countries of the area that mainly count: Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Peru.

Meanwhile, Russia and Europe have declined in importance while East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have increased. Where does Latin America, other than Brazil, fit into this shifting kaleidoscope? No one knows, not even in Latin America.

Given Latin America's proximity as well as its interdependence with the U.S., I have been advocating an opportunity-based foreign policy rather than a threat-based one. But that has few takers in the U.S. government or among the public. The result is that Latin America's future prospects are uncertain and the U.S. lacks the intellectual and bureaucratic tools to understand and adapt.

### **Pablo E. Guidotti answers:**

Despite the global financial crisis and the ongoing challenges facing the advanced economies, a significant portion of Latin America has been able to maintain macroeconomic stability and a healthy rate of economic growth. The resilience of emerging market economies to the global economic crisis stemmed, in large part, from sounder macroeconomic policies and stronger institutions. This combination of better policy and better institutions means that today Latin America has the opportunity to become a larger and more significant player in international affairs and global governance.

But Latin America still faces important challenges as a region. First, while there has been notable progress in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Uruguay, there has also been a clear deterioration in institutions and policies in some important economies of the region—notably, Argentina and Venezuela. As a result, Latin America today is a region split in two, reflecting a growing ideological and policy divide. Moreover, although performance has been favorable, the region still faces important economic challenges ahead. In particular, the recovery of the advanced economies may likely lead to an abrupt end of near-zero world interest rates in a few years.

As long as the divide continues to exist and large economies such as Argentina and Venezuela extend their populist model, the region will continue to struggle in its search for a common view that can be more influential in terms of economic policy, trade, diplomacy and, more generally, world affairs and global governance.

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