

UNASUR: Should Chile Become a Member?

UNASUR could help to strengthen Chile's relationship with its neighbour countries. Our country could enter this new organism while stating certain conditions. Chile must insist upon principles such as respect for human rights and an open economy and, above all, it is essential to defend democracy in the region, including the legitimacy of origin and exercise of the governments.

In the light of this week's visit from former Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, Secretary General of UNASUR, the discussion concerning Chile's participation in this new process of regional integration, has been reopened.

The Constitutive Treaty of the Union of South American Nations, UNASUR, signed in Brasilia on May 23rd, 2008, was approved by the Chamber of Deputies and its ratification by the Senate is pending. Here, it has the support of the Concertación, but it generates uneasiness among the congressmen of the Alianza.

This organism, which only has been ratified by the Parliaments of half of its twelve Member States, has been polemical since its very beginning. On the one hand, there are the

critics who do not see the need for a new organism with little institutional capacity, and which also repeats the consensual basis organization of the Organization of American States (OAS). On the other hand, there are those who support it as a body for building a true Latin American identity, which would strengthen – they say – the political dialog in the region.

The challenges concerning this type of treaties are evident. In view of the economical, political and ideological fragmentation to achieve agreements in the region, a reasonable doubt has been raised with regard to Chile's incorporation.

What is UNASUR?

This organism was born with another name. It was created through the Cusco Declaration, on December 8th, 2004, under the name of *Comunidad Sudamericana de Naciones* (South American Community of Nations). A conglomerate strongly promoted by Brazil, whose purpose was to foster the integration among the twelve countries of the region. An association which covers 17.7 millions km², with a population of 377 millions inhabitants.

After two presidential summits and several meetings of the Council of Delegates, and in the scope of the I South American Energy Summit, held on April 2007, the Presidents decided to adopt the name of UNASUR. Additionally, they established its permanent headquarters in Quito (Ecuador) and the drafting of its Constitutive Treaty was decided, whose proposal was to be presented for deliberation of the Heads of States and Governments during 2008.

Finally, a Constitutive Treaty was agreed, in addition to two executive decision proposals: one regarding the provisional operation of the General Secretariat, and another about the general outline for UNASUR's action plan 2008-2009. These documents were approved on May 23rd, 2008 at the Summit of Brasilia, by the Heads of States and Governments.

The document, which is a result of the consensus among the countries, was subscribed by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela.

It establishes that the Presidents of UNASUR shall meet once a year and their Ministers of Foreign Affairs, twice. The entity's regulations shall be approved by consensus and the Pro Tempore Presidency is held for a year and rotates by alphabetical order among its Member States.

On May 23rd, 2008, Chile, headed by President Michelle Bachelet, became the first country to assume the Pro Tempore Presidency, which is currently headed by the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa.

On the other hand, there is also the inheritance of the integration mechanisms: a General Secretariat and the mechanism of Sectoral Groups. Furthermore, it considers stipulating a South American parliamentary space and probably, over time, solution mechanisms for permanent-nature differences¹.

The main objective of this institution is to build a space of integration and union among its people in the cultural, social, economical and political fields, within the framework of sovereignty and independence of the States (Article 1 and 2).

A specific central objective of UNASUR is to strengthen the political dialog among the Member States which guarantees the regional stability, and supports the preservation of the democratic values and the promotion of human rights (Article 3,a and Article 14).ⁱⁱ

Moreover, it declares itself as an open group. In this sense, the rest of the Latin American and Caribbean countries shall be able to participate in UNASUR, initially as associated members and, within five years, it shall be decided if they may become Member States.

A Difficult Integration Process

The regional integration processes have had dissimilar results in the region. In spite of the optimism of the Brazilian President and other devoted promoters of this initiative, there are many sceptics concerning the actual results of pertaining to this organism, which had problems since the beginning.

We must not forget the bilateral differences of opinion among some of the countries of the region and the resignation of the Colombian President to the Pro Tempore Presidency. The Secretary General, former Ecuadorian President, Rodrigo Borja, who declared to have “substantial disagreements with the integration model”, also resigned. Among other things, he believes that UNASUR will become a political forum and not an institutional organization that defends the interests of the region.ⁱⁱⁱ

In September 2008, this organism played a relatively successful political role when violence increased in Bolivia between the government and the autonomist leaders. Also, at the beginning of 2009, when there was a conflict between Colombia, on one side, and Venezuela and Ecuador on the other. It also tried to act in the crisis of Honduras, but with no positive results, when Washington’s politics was imposed by recognizing the elected government after the de facto government.^{iv}

Nevertheless, in spite of some achievements in the field of regional politics, UNASUR has been unable to advance in the organizational and institutional affairs in order to consolidate the project. Until now, only six countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Venezuela) have ratified the foundational treaty, but it is necessary to count on the affirmative vote of nine of its twelve members, so that it may operate effectively and have a full juridical recognition.

In the first place, UNASUR must overcome the ratification process in the congresses of its countries. But this is not the main challenge. To build the South American integration means, not only to articulate the different current processes, but also to build a regional capacity to face the problems of several of its members and the tensions existing among them.^v

This was demonstrated in September 2009 in Quito, when the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence failed to achieve a common position regarding the military agreement signed by the United States and Colombia, which reflects that it will not be an easy process to reach agreements, especially if there are unresolved conflicts among its members.

Another deficit in institutional matters was the election of the Secretary General of the Organization, which was the result of several months of negotiations, after the refusal of Colombia, Peru and Uruguay to the

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nomination of former Argentine President, Néstor Kirchner. It was considered then that this election had to be unanimous and, therefore, it was delayed for almost two years. Now it is accepted that the unanimity be a consensus only (where there is no adverse opinion).

The strange thing is that Kirchner's election on May of this year, as Secretary General of UNASUR, did not modify its priority for the Argentine domestic politic. This charge, due to its relevance, should be of exclusive dedication. The former President, however, did not resign to his National Deputy seat and is still the leader of the Justicialist Party.

Besides, it is presumed that his nomination is strongly related with his desire of presenting himself again as a candidate for Argentine president in 2011, which does not add much to the idea of regional integration.

Finally, the fact that integration prevails over fragmentation shall depend, among other factors, on the transformations that are taking effect in the different countries of the region, and of the leaderships that may appear.

The Challenges and Obstacles of UNASUR

It is highly significant that governments of a region like South America, which barely maintained formal diplomatic relationships, but was rather burdened with apprehensions and perceptions of conflict, have been able to define an ambitious horizon in less than a decade.^{vi}

Nevertheless, these progresses are faced with obstacles that may difficult and even frustrate a real integration process. Let us identify some of them:

- This regional integrating initiative has been created considering political criteria, unlike the treaties with commercial and economical purposes where there have been some successful regional experiences. Its members have rather dissimilar objectives. The weight of the ideological alliances, the geopolitical projects and the nationalistic and populist leaderships may hinder the regional convergences.

As Deustua (2008) states “we arrive at UNASUR in the middle of a political and ideological fragmentation. With failed belligerent States (Bolivia), expansionist authoritarian States (Venezuela) and amid a full reversion of the liberal communitarian principles that were consolidated just a decade ago” .^{vii}

- The Constitutive Treaty is a bad institutional proposal which duplicates other institutions that have existed in the region for decades. There is CAN and MERCOSUR which deal with economical integration matters. The most important subjects of hemispheric security are protected by the collective security mechanisms of the UN, and to solve commercial controversies, financial arrangements or to build infrastructure works, it should be enough to sign multilateral agreements.
- The creation of UNASUR is considered the political weakening of the OAS, because it excludes Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, some of its members have formally stated a strong anti-American sentiment. In this sense, as Ferro (2008) points out, it preoccupies that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez intended to present the new organism as “a defeat for the United States”, giving UNASUR an absurd and extemporaneous Cold War spirit.^{viii}

Therefore, it is necessary to condition UNASUR’s role as a complement of OAS’s decisions. Additionally, it should seek to integrate Mexico and the Central American countries which were excluded from this integration initiative.

- Considering that the organism’s mission is to be a political forum, it should establish efficient mechanisms for defending democracy in the region. Along these lines, congressmen of the Alianza have declared that the Treaty should contain a separate paragraph that aims at guaranteeing the democratic state and the freedom of speech in their Member Countries. A position similar to that of MERCOSUR and the OAS. This subject was picked up by President

Piñera, who proposed it to Kirchner in his visit to La Moneda, as Secretary General of UNASUR.

- The Peruvian President, in the frame of UNASUR, has pointed out the need to start an integration process with the purpose of creating the conditions for a common currency and regional citizenship, as it exists in the European Union (EU). We believe that this idea, which has stroked certain responsive political cord, is highly risky, due to the fact that the countries' economies are not prepared for a monetary union, and we are far from demonstrating that this kind of unions are advantageous for its members, as the situation of the countries that have adopted the Euro is demonstrating.

Conclusion

The possible value of this effort, as a space of integration and political dialog in the region, is subject to discussion for several reasons.

It has to demonstrate that, in the difficult regional political scenario, UNASUR will not be used as a platform for promoting populist ideas which have grown under the protection of the Member Countries of ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), that are close to the Socialism of the XXI century.

UNASUR is an integration scheme that could help to strengthen Chile's relationship with its neighbour countries. Our country could enter this new organism while stating certain conditions. Chile must insist upon principles such as respect for human rights and an open economy and, above all, it is essential to defend democracy in the region, including the legitimacy of origin and exercise of the governments. It should also ensure that it will not become a costly bureaucracy with little benefit for the Member Countries.

ⁱ Cardona, Diego (2008): "El ABC de UNASUR: Doce preguntas y respuestas", Revista de la Integración, N° 2 – July 2008: Pp. 23.

ⁱⁱ Bulletin N° 6035-10. Informe de la Comisión de RR.EE., Asuntos Interparlamentarios e Integración Latinoamericana sobre el Proyecto Aprobatorio del Tratado Constitutivo de la Unión de Naciones, May 23rd, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Visca, Paola: "El lanzamiento de UNASUR en el tablero del poder". Obtained electronically in: <http://www.integracionsur.com/sudamerica/ViscaUnasurBrasiliaAnalisis.htm>

^{iv} Fraga, Rosendo: "La Cumbre de UNASUR y Kirchner", Nueva Mayoría, May 4th, 2010.

^v Ramírez, Socorro: "El acercamiento suramericano y la construcción de UNASUR", Lecture of the Congress of Political Science, Asociación Colombiana de Ciencias Políticas.

^{vi} Ramírez, Socorro: "El acercamiento suramericano y la construcción de UNASUR", Lecture of the Congress of Political Science, Asociación Colombiana de Ciencias Políticas.

^{vii} Deustua, Alejandro: "Un conejo de la galera regional", El Comercio, May 24th, 2008. Obtained electronically in: <http://elcomercio.pe/edicionimpresa/Html/2008-05-24/bachelet-posterga-propuesta-crear-conejo-defensa-sudamericano.html>

^{viii} Ferro, Raúl: "UNASUR: Y aquí vamos de nuevo", CADAL, May 26th, 2008.