

From Autonomy to Alignment: The Rise of Subordinated Governance in South American Regionalism, the Cases of Brazil and Colombia

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ABSTRACT. Objective/context: This article examines the transformation of South American regional governance in the 2010s, distinguishing between autonomist and subordinate governance. **Methodology:** The paper proposes a causal analytical model linking the political-ideological orientation of governments (independent variable) to the type of regional governance (dependent variable), with foreign policy orientation toward regionalism as an intervening variable. The model is operationalized through three dimensions: ideology, institutions, and geopolitical identity. Methodologically, the study uses Anckar's (2008) Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) to comparatively analyze the cases of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's government and Colombia under Iván Duque's government. **Conclusions:** The article argues that the rise of conservative and neo-patriotic right-wing governments spurred a shift toward subordinate governance, characterized by foreign policies that prioritized alignment with the United States and rejected post-hegemonic regionalism. **Originality:** By introducing subordinate governance as an analytical category, the article contributes to debates on regional governance, South American regionalism, and foreign policy analysis and offers an analytical framework for explaining the region's recent geopolitical transformations.

KEYWORDS: Brazil; Colombia; regionalism; South America; regional governance; neo-patriotic right.

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De la autonomía a la alineación: el auge de la gobernanza subordinada en el regionalismo sudamericano, los casos de Brasil y Colombia

RESUMEN. Objetivo/contexto: Este artículo examina la transformación de la gobernanza regional sudamericana durante la década de 2010 a partir de la distinción entre gobernanza autonomista y gobernanza subordinada. **Metodología:** El trabajo propone un modelo analítico causal que vincula la orientación político-ideológica de los gobiernos (variable independiente) con el tipo de gobernanza regional (variable dependiente), considerando la orientación de la política exterior hacia el regionalismo como variable interviniente. El modelo se operacionaliza a través de tres dimensiones: ideología, instituciones e identidad geopolítica. Metodológicamente, el estudio adopta el diseño comparado *Most Different Systems Design* (MDSD) de Ankar (2008) para analizar comparativamente los casos de Brasil bajo el gobierno de Jair Bolsonaro y de Colombia bajo el gobierno de Iván Duque. **Conclusiones:** El artículo sostiene que el ascenso de gobiernos conservadores y de la derecha neopatriota impulsó una transición hacia una gobernanza subordinada mediante políticas exteriores caracterizadas por el alineamiento preferencial con Estados Unidos y el rechazo al regionalismo poshegemónico. **Originalidad:** Al introducir la gobernanza subordinada como categoría analítica, el artículo contribuye a los debates sobre gobernanza regional, regionalismo sudamericano y análisis de política exterior, al ofrecer un marco analítico para explicar las recientes transformaciones geopolíticas de la región.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Brasil; Colombia; regionalismo; América del Sur; gobernanza regional; derecha neopatriota.

Do autonomismo ao alinhamento: a ascensão da governança subordinada no regionalismo sul-americano. Os casos do Brasil e da Colômbia

RESUMO. Objetivo/contexto: Este artigo examina a transformação da governança regional sul-americana durante a década de 2010 a partir da distinção entre governança autonomista e governança subordinada. **Metodologia:** O trabalho propõe um modelo analítico causal que relaciona a orientação político-ideológica dos governos (variável independente) ao tipo de governança regional (variável dependente), considerando a orientação da política externa em relação ao regionalismo como variável interviniente. O modelo é operacionalizado por meio de três dimensões: ideologia, instituições e identidade geopolítica. Metodologicamente, o estudo adota o desenho comparativo *Most Different Systems Design* (MDSD), de Ankar (2008), para analisar comparativamente os casos do Brasil sob o governo de Jair Bolsonaro e da Colômbia sob o governo de Iván Duque. **Conclusões:** O artigo sustenta que a ascensão de governos conservadores e da direita neopatriota impulsionou uma transição para uma governança subordinada por meio de políticas externas caracterizadas pelo alinhamento preferencial aos Estados Unidos e pela rejeição ao regionalismo pós-hegemônico. **Originalidade:** Ao introduzir

a governança subordinada como categoria analítica, o artigo contribui para os debates sobre governança regional, regionalismo sul-americano e análise de política externa, ao oferecer um marco analítico para explicar as recentes transformações geopolíticas da região.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Brasil; Colômbia; regionalismo; América do Sul; governança regional; direita neopatriota.

Introduction

The unraveling of the mechanisms and institutions of post-hegemonic regionalism (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012) by the governments that marked the end of the progressive cycle in South America during the 2010s highlights a central characteristic of regionalist dynamics in the subcontinent: these processes are deeply connected to the political-ideological forces that assume power in national governments during each historical period.

Discontinuity constitutes a permanent feature of South American regionalisms and provides the analytical background for understanding the transformations of the 2010s, marked by the weakening of initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR; *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*), attempts to fragment existing regional mechanisms, and the emergence of new institutional arrangements with different geopolitical orientations. This characteristic challenges the application of models derived from Eurocentric integration theories, since the creation of highly institutionalized organizations or the transfer of sovereignty are not the main causal drivers of South American regionalism. Instead, regional initiatives have historically been linked to the strengthening of states' capacities and their collective strategies for addressing domestic development challenges and external pressures (Casas 2007; Briceño Ruiz 2018).

The idea of region in Latin America—particularly in South America—is historically rooted in struggles for independence, sovereignty, and resistance to external intervention (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2018). Unlike the European integration experience, whose foundational rationale was tied to the construction of peace after World War II, South American regionalism has been shaped by the search for autonomy and collective agency within an asymmetric international order. Consequently, regionalism in the subcontinent is not merely an institutional process but also an ideational and geopolitical project grounded in shared political identities and interpretations of the region's role in the international system (Briceño Ruiz 2018).

This perspective challenges analytical approaches that evaluate regionalism primarily through the lenses of supranationalism and intergovernmentalism. Such frameworks often overlook the specificities of non-European regional processes, where integration does not necessarily seek to transcend the nation-state but rather to strengthen states' capacities through regional cooperation. Therefore, understanding South American regionalism requires attention to the political projects, identities, and foreign policy orientations that shape regional institutions and practices.

Building on this debate, this article argues that regional governance is a central analytical category for understanding the transformations of South American regionalism over the past two decades. It proposes a conceptual distinction between autonomist governance and subordinate governance to capture the distinct geopolitical orientations of regional projects. Autonomist governance refers to regional arrangements that aim to expand collective decision-making capacity, strengthen regional institutions, and increase autonomy vis-à-vis extra-regional powers. Conversely, subordinate governance describes regional configurations characterized by preferential alignment with external strategic interests, institutional weakening, and reduced regional autonomy.

The central hypothesis is that the rise of conservative and neo-patriot right-wing governments in South America contributed to the emergence of subordinate regional governance, as reflected in foreign policies that aligned with the United States and rejected post-hegemonic regionalism. The transition from autonomist to subordinate governance was not merely an institutional reconfiguration but a broader geopolitical shift associated with the transformation of political forces in power: the decline of left and center-left governments after 2014, the rise of liberal-conservative administrations, and, subsequently, the consolidation of neo-patriot governments (Sanahuja and López Burian 2019).

To explain this process, the article develops a causal analytical model linking governments' political-ideological orientation (independent variable) to the type of regional governance (dependent variable), with foreign policy orientation toward regionalism serving as the intervening causal mechanism. The model is operationalized through three analytical dimensions—ideology, institutions, and geopolitical identity—and empirical indicators that identify autonomist and subordinate governance patterns. This framework derives from an inductive process of concept formation grounded in the literature on governance (Rosenau 2000; Nolte 2016; Herz 2014), autonomy (Puig 1986), and regionalism (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012; Briceño Ruiz 2018), as well as empirical evidence from states' regional actions and foreign policies.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative research design based on Anckar's (2008) Most Different Systems Design (MDSD), comparing Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Colombia under Iván Duque (2018–2022). Although these cases differ in structural characteristics and foreign policy traditions, they share a common explanatory variable—the conservative and neo-patriot political orientation of their governments—and the same outcome: subordinate regional governance. By incorporating foreign policy as an intervening mechanism, the article avoids a deterministic relationship between ideology and regional outcomes.

The article contributes to three interconnected debates. First, it advances the literature on regional governance by proposing a conceptual distinction between autonomist and subordinate governance based on geopolitical orientation. Second, it contributes to studies of South American regionalism by demonstrating how changes in political forces reshape regional institutions, cooperation patterns, and regional identities. Third, it bridges foreign policy analysis and comparative regionalism by identifying foreign policy as the mechanism linking domestic political change to transformations in regional governance.

1. Analytical Framework: Causal Model and Governance Typology

The following section presents the article's central argument: that the 2010s marked a transition from autonomist governance, associated with post-hegemonic regionalism, to subordinate governance, associated with right-wing regionalism. This relationship is grounded in empirical evidence from the regional projects developed during each period. Based on their institutional characteristics, policy orientations, and patterns of collective action, these regional arrangements are directly associated with distinct types of regional governance.

To explain the emergence of each type of regional governance, the article proposes an analytical model that establishes a causal relationship between governments' political-ideological orientation and the resulting configuration of regional governance. This framework is operationalized through three analytical dimensions—ideology, institutions, and geopolitical identity—each linked to a set of empirical indicators that enable identification of autonomist or subordinate governance in the selected cases. Within this framework, foreign policy is conceived as the intervening variable linking governments' political-ideological preferences (independent variable) to the regional strategy they pursue, thereby shaping both the pattern of regionalism and the corresponding type of

governance (dependent variable). Table 1 summarizes the causal logic underpinning the analysis.

Table 1. Causal Model of Regional Governance Types

Causal model	Dimension and empirical indicators
Political-ideological orientation of the government (<i>Independent variable</i>)	Ideology: Left/center-left × conservative/ neo-patriot governments; governmental discourse; development model
↓	
Foreign policy orientation toward regionalism (<i>Intervening variable</i>)	Institutions: Creation, strengthening, weakening, or withdrawal from South American regional institutions; regional leadership; policy coordination; regional diplomatic initiatives
↓	
Type of regional governance (<i>Dependent variable</i>) autonomist or subordinate	Geopolitical identity: Conception of South America as an autonomous geopolitical space; degree of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the United States; regional strategic coordination; acceptance or rejection of extra-regional influence

Source: Own elaboration.

The proposed analytical model is grounded in the well-established literature on the influence of governments’ political-ideological preferences on the orientation of foreign policy (Holsti 1982; Hermann 1990; Lima 2000; Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007; Cervo 2008; Milani and Pinheiro, 2013, 2017), as well as on the relationship between foreign policy orientation and the patterns of regionalism adopted in different historical periods (Saraiva 2010; Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012; Sanahuja 2012, 2019; Sanahuja and Comini, 2018).

This article adopts Rosenau’s (2000) understanding of governance as a system of order sustained by shared intersubjective meanings, common goals, and formally established rules and institutions. Building on this perspective, regional governance offers the most suitable analytical framework for capturing the diversity of regionalisms and how regions organize their interactions within the international system. Rather than being static, regional governance is dynamic and changes in response to political and institutional transformations (Nolte 2016).

Similarly, Riggirozzi (2012) conceptualizes regional governance as the set of institutional arrangements, norms, and practices through which regional actors

construct distinct models of regional order. Drawing on these contributions, this article proposes an analytical model of South American regional governance that emphasizes the geopolitical function of governance arrangements. Specifically, it examines how formal and informal institutions reflect varying degrees of alignment with autonomous or subordinate regional projects, thereby shaping the region's capacity for collective action and its strategic positioning in the international system.

The concept of autonomist governance is proposed to capture the institutional and multidimensional regional architecture that emerged in South America during the 2000s. As a political project, it was grounded in principles of limiting extra-regional interference, strengthening regional cooperation, and enhancing the collective capacity of South American countries to expand their decision-making autonomy within the international system. To characterize this governance model theoretically, the article draws on Puig's (1986) concept of autonomy,¹ understood as states' capacity to make independent decisions based on strategically defined collective objectives.

For Puig (1986), autonomy is not an inherent outcome of regional integration but depends on shared political projects that can transform integration into an instrument for expanding states' margins of maneuver. Building on dependency theory, he argues that regional cooperation can reduce external dependence when guided by common political, economic, and social objectives. In Puig's work, autonomy and dependency are treated as correlated elements within peripheral countries' political strategies. As Perrotta and Porcelli (2019) emphasize, regional integration acquires an autonomist character only when governments deliberately orient it toward this strategic purpose. In other words, according to Puig (1986), the autonomist potential of regional integration depends on the objectives of those who occupy state power and on whether they project these goals into the integrationist mechanisms. The possibility of autonomy depends on the juncture, power resources, and the absence of functional elites (Puig 1986).

Subordinate governance is conceptualized as the opposite of autonomist governance. While the latter seeks to expand the region's strategic autonomy, the former is characterized by greater alignment with the geopolitical preferences of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States. In the South American context, the extent to which regional projects converge with or distance themselves

1 The concept of autonomy is widely regarded as one of the most significant and original South American theoretical contributions to understanding the international relations of peripheral countries within the international system. Developed through intense discussion in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept's primary exponents are the Argentine Juan Carlos Puig and the Brazilian Hélio Jaguaribe.

from U.S. foreign policy is a key indicator for assessing whether a governance arrangement is autonomist or subordinate (Bianculli 2016; Neves and Honório 2019). From this perspective, the article argues that the concept of qualified regional governance, operationalized through the distinction between autonomist and subordinate governance, provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the geopolitical strategies underpinning South American regionalisms across different historical periods.

2. From Autonomist Governance to Subordinated Governance (to the United States)

The period from 2003 to 2010 was marked by a strong politicization of the sub-regional space and the institutionalization of the idea of South America as a geopolitical *locus* (Pedroso 2014). Characterized by the leadership of the governments at the time, the consensus regarding the region's direction was decisive for the outcomes of South American regionalisms during this period, namely: 1) the end of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations at the Mar del Plata Summit in 2005, a position forged since 2003 in the Buenos Aires Consensus; 2) the multidimensional expansion of the regional integration agenda, with an emphasis on development-related themes; 3) the social turn and the creation of mechanisms to reduce asymmetries within the scope of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR; *Mercado Común del Sur*); and 4) the creation of UNASUR. Among these governments, categorized within the political spectrum as left or center-left, those that stood out in terms of regional activism were the Brazilian administration under the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), and the Argentine government under the presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Kirchner (2007-2015).

Broadly speaking, the construction of South American governance through regional multilateral mechanisms during this period was based on accommodating Venezuelan and Brazilian regionalisms, with Brazilian proposals predominating (Briceño Ruiz 2010; Pedroso 2014). Such accommodation took place through sub-regional summits on diverse themes, bilateral cooperation, and the creation of intergovernmental multilateral decision-making spaces. These mechanisms allowed South American countries to resolve conflicts among themselves without interference from extra-regional actors, most notably the United States.

The period was marked by the establishment of sub-regional initiatives across various areas of cooperation and a strong anti-hegemonic ethos, with

varying degrees of adherence to these initiatives (Lima 2014). Ramanzini and Mariano (2018) note that this period marked the start of a trajectory of expanding Brazil's capacity for action and persuasion within the subcontinent.

The Brazilian government's high-profile activism and the strong geographically oriented component of its foreign policy toward the region (Honório 2021) reflected the administration's view that the global order was transitioning toward multipolar contours. In this sense, South America could emerge as a potential new pole. Its strategic resources, lack of inter-regional conflicts, and the relative stability of its national institutions, compared with other regions of the Global South, supported this interpretation (Lima 2018). From this perspective, South America would be not only a space for inter-regional relations but also an agent in the ongoing process of global transformation of the international order (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012; Desiderá Neto 2018). This idea is essential because it explains the rationale behind autonomist governance. It shows that the region was not just integrating for its own sake, but as a strategic move to gain global agency.

The accommodation of Venezuelan and Brazilian proposals for South America from the mid-2000s onward can be interpreted through the creation of UNASUR. UNASUR was an intergovernmental institution with a high political profile but low institutionalization; through its multidimensional agenda, it progressively managed to unify countries' behavior across sectoral themes and became the primary channel for multilateral action and the space for governance in the region (Saraiva 2010).

The UNASUR agenda incorporated the main themes that gained prominence in South America starting in 2000: regional security, infrastructure, economy, culture, health, and social participation. Through the South American Councils in each area, members debated and promoted regional political proposals. One of the primary bodies created within the UNASUR framework was the South American Defense Council (SADC), established in 2009. Through the SADC, countries intervened in internal crises and bilateral conflicts in the region without interference from extra-regional actors or the Organization of American States (OAS). Examples include the resolution of the political crisis in Bolivia in 2008 and the crisis between Ecuador and Colombia in 2010.

Thus, from 2003 to 2010, South America became not only a space for unprecedented multilateral regional governance but also a space where an identity was incorporated into the international projection of the foreign policies of the subcontinent's countries. The specialized literature uses a wide range of concepts to categorize this moment of South American regionalism: structural regionalism (Lima and Coutinho 2007), strategic regionalism (Briceño Ruiz 2007), post-liberal

regionalism (Da Motta Veiga and Ríos 2008; Sanahuja 2012), and post-hegemonic regionalism (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012).

Perrotta and Porcelli (2016) emphasize that this “adjectivized regionalism” in South America marked a period of intense, proactive government leadership, as well as disputes over the direction of integration mechanisms and agendas. These different labels (structural, strategic, post-liberal, and post-hegemonic) show that although scholars disagree on the *name*, they agree that this period represented a distinct and autonomous phase of regional organization.

Despite the existence, as previously noted, of competing regional projects, the period was marked by broad political-ideological convergence among the region’s governments. This convergence enabled the creation of spaces that promoted regional consensus on various themes, such as the need to develop regional infrastructure or to think collectively about regional security.

In this context, the categories of autonomy and development in the South American regionalisms of the 2000s must be understood as a collective stance by the countries to seek greater prominence in international political spaces based on a South American identity. This included the emergence of developmental themes on the regional agenda (infrastructure, economy, reduction of asymmetries) that implied strong state engagement, an anti-hegemonic posture toward the United States’s role in the region, and the choice of integration mechanisms that recognized South American countries as relevant actors in international arenas.

Building on this idea, the concept of autonomist governance, established in this article to characterize post-hegemonic regionalism, has as its central points: 1) the perception among the period’s political and economic elites that regional political convergence is an instrument of political power against extra-regional actors; 2) the construction of multi-thematic regional decision-making and convergence spaces based on a collective projection of the countries on themes and issues; and 3) the institutionalization of South America as a geopolitical space through a regional governance architecture and as a driving force for the decision-making leeway of individual countries on the international stage.

From the mid-2010s onward, new governments in the region’s main countries began to challenge the institutions of South American post-hegemonic regionalism, whether through elections or through term interruptions.² Briceño Ruiz (2018) refers to this period as a new stage of post-hegemonic regionalism, marked by the abrupt fall in commodities on the international stage (termed the

2 For a structured discussion of the processes by which elected governments in South America were interrupted in the 2000s, see Sposito (2023).

“commodity crisis,” starting in 2014) and its impact on the prices of the main products exported by the region’s countries; the slowdown of South American economies that were regional engines in the previous decade, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela; and a new political landscape marked by the strengthening of conservative and right-wing sectors across the regional political spectrum.

Notably, post-hegemonic regionalism is, to some extent, related to the developmental models of that period’s governments, as evidenced by the return of developmentalist content and principles in economic and political programs. The crisis of the neo-developmental models³—a concept that synthesizes the adaptation of developmentalism to the limits imposed by capitalism in its neo-liberal phase in South America—also signaled the crisis of the regional policy sustained by this model: in other words, the crisis of post-hegemonic regionalism. At this point, the article argues that autonomist regionalism did not collapse solely due to “political will,” but because its material base (the neo-developmental model and commodity resources) collapsed. This explains why the emerging new governance (the subordinated one) assumes a liberal-conservative character aligned with the United States and seeks new axes of economic sustainability.

The signs of the weakening of post-hegemonic regionalism were accentuated in the political sphere by the 2012 coup against Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013, Lula’s departure from the Brazilian presidency in 2010, the election of Mauricio Macri in Argentina in 2015, and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016. The new foreign ministers of these countries, except Venezuela, rejected the regionalist legacy of previous governments, calling it “ideologized” and “inoperant.” From then on, a systematic hollowing out of the multilateral institutions created in the previous period and the emergence of new spaces—or the reactivation of inter-American organizations—to address subcontinental issues were observed.

Examples of institutions created to replace organizations from the previous period include the Lima Group, an *ad hoc* discussion forum established in 2017 to address the crisis in Venezuela. It comprised countries from South America (Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, and Colombia), Central America (Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Panama), and North America (Canada and Mexico) opposed to the Nicolás Maduro government. The South American countries of the Lima Group chose to discuss the Venezuelan situation in a new body rather than through UNASUR’s Defense and Security Council. This shift deepened the institution’s crisis and led most countries to abandon it progressively, culminating in its

3 For a discussion of neo-developmentalism, see Berringer and Boito Jr. (2014).

deactivation starting in 2019. This new moment of subcontinental regional projects is defined by Mariano, Luciano, and Bressan (2021) as “Liquid Regionalism,” characterized by the creation of regional initiatives with limited institutional design, forming ideological alliances that did not seek to deepen the regional agenda.

According to Sanahuja and López Burian (2020), the political forces that took over South American governments during this period (2012–2017) are characterized as representatives of the liberal-conservative right. Liberal-conservatives advocate for global economic integration and align with the technocratic visions of multilateral economic organizations (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020). Examples of liberal-conservative governments include Chile under Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014 and 2018–2022), Mauricio Macri in Argentina (2015–2019), Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru (2016–2018), Enrique Peña Nieto in Mexico (2012–2018), and Michel Temer in Brazil (2016–2018) (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020).

One of the earliest proposals opposing the precepts of post-hegemonic regionalism in South America, in the economic sphere, was the Pacific Alliance (PA), proposed by the Chilean government in 2012. The PA is based on establishing a free-trade area among member countries with a clear inclination toward trade with Asia; its members include Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Costa Rica. The initiative’s launch was marked by its oppositional stance toward the integration proposal represented by MERCOSUR, which was viewed by the Chilean president at the time, Sebastián Piñera, as retrograde and protectionist.

Leaders of this period were not opposed to regional integration itself, but rather to the models implemented by progressive governments. Regional institutions were created to replace previous ones, as with the Lima Group, and institutions under U.S. leadership, such as the OAS, were reactivated. This period saw the gradual abandonment of organizations like UNASUR and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC; *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*), though the rhetoric regarding the importance of regional concertation and integration remained—now, obviously, under the principles and interests of the liberal-conservative forces in power.

According to Mariano and Ribeiro (2020, 42), there is a redirection of the interests and agendas of regionalisms; however, the prevailing assessment among these governments remains that regional integration is relevant as a national strategy. A notable shift is the abandonment of the idea of autonomy as the guiding axis of collective regional action by liberal-conservative governments that took office starting in the 2010s. They reoriented regional policy around the United States and its guidelines and inter-American concertation institutions as a benchmark. As noted above, this alignment represented the abandonment

and weakening of the institutions of post-hegemonic regionalism and South American autonomist governance, in proportion to the strengthening of spaces hegemonized by or aligned with the United States.

From Donald Trump's election in the United States in 2017 to the global rise of nationalist far-right forces in Europe and Asia, Latin America experienced a gradual shift in hegemony from liberal-conservative political forces to the neo-patriotic right (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020). This transformation is situated within a global trend of strengthening these political forces, characterized by rejection of multilateralism, extreme nationalism, questioning of liberal democracy, and challenges to globalization, the prevailing international order, and international norms and multilateralism, along with alignment with the United States (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020).

Latin American neo-patriotic rights resonated with the views of the global far-right, as evidenced by governments and political movements that displayed ultranationalist, sovereignist profiles and strong anti-globalist rhetoric. They rejected cultural, ethnic, and sexual diversity and reinforced religious rhetoric as a political tool (Sanahuja and López Burian 2020). It can be argued, therefore, that a shift occurred within the broader right-wing spectrum in South America during the 2010s, moving from the liberal-conservative right to those classified as representatives of the neo-patriotic right.

During this process of "power exchange" from the liberal-conservative to the neo-patriotic right, regional integration and the autonomist governance spaces across diverse themes were progressively dismantled and even replaced—exemplified by the creation in 2019 of the Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR; *Foro para el Progreso de América del Sur*) by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, and Peru. Another notable event was the 2019 election of a United States citizen as president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the first time in its history.

As Juan Gabriel Tokatlian (Stefanoni 2019) argues, by strengthening its own process of disintegration, the region has condemned itself to international irrelevance. The power vacuum left by the former regional governance architecture was subsequently filled by extra-regional powers, namely China⁴ and the United States, which undertook political efforts to establish closer ties with the countries of the region on various issues.

Sanahuja and López Burian (2020) noted that the neo-patriotic right, even before coming to power, dominated political narratives across various South

4 Latin America was incorporated into China's Belt and Road Initiative, starting in 2017.

American countries, thereby strengthening their anti-globalist and anti-progressive agendas and influencing the domestic and foreign agendas of national societies. The concept of subordinate governance proposed in this article builds on Sanahuja and López Burian's notion of the neo-patriotic right by examining how these political forces reshape regionalism once in government. More specifically, it identifies the distinctive pattern of regional governance that emerges from their foreign policy orientation and regional strategy.

In this context, regionalism began to align with U.S. policy in the region, establishing a relationship of subordination to these positions. Therefore, the idea of governance subordinated to U.S. governance is introduced to explain the functioning of regionalism during this period, whose main characteristics were: 1) ideological opposition to the previous period's agenda and adherence to the global ultra-liberal and neo-conservative right-wing agenda; 2) reactivation of the institutions of the inter-American system (OAS) and the creation of initiatives in line with U.S. policy; 3) the destruction of South America as a geopolitical pole, bilateralism, and alignment with the United States.

Thus, Table 2 synthesizes the main characteristics of the two types of governance mobilized in this analysis to indicate the transformations in South American regionalism identified during the period.

Table 2. Analytical Dimensions and Empirical Indicators of Regional Governance Types

Analytical dimension	Empirical indicators	Autonomist governance	Subordinate governance
Ideology	Political orientation of governments; governmental discourse; development model and economic strategy	Left and center-left governments; neo-developmentalism; reduction of regional asymmetries; regional autonomy as a political objective	Conservative and neo-patriot governments; ultra-liberalism; global market integration; alignment with U.S. strategic priorities
Institutions	Creation, strengthening, weakening, or withdrawal from regional organizations; regional coordination; security and defense arrangements; role of the state	Strengthening of UNASUR, CELAC, and the SADC; multidimensional regional cooperation; active state leadership; social participation	Weakening or dismantling of UNASUR; promotion of PROSUR, the Lima Group, the OAS, and the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR; <i>Tratado Interamericano de Asistencia Recíproca</i>); flexible institutional arrangements; technocratic governance

Analytical dimension	Empirical indicators	Autonomist governance	Subordinate governance
Geopolitical identity	Conception of South America; degree of strategic autonomy; relationship with extra-regional powers; regional strategic priorities	South America conceived as an autonomous geopolitical pole; intra-bloc cooperation; strategic autonomy; non-interference by extra-regional powers	South America conceived as part of the Western hemisphere under U.S. leadership; bilateralism; alignment with U.S. foreign policy; acceptance of extra-regional influence; fragmentation of the regional political space

Source: Own elaboration.

Subsequently, to consolidate the hypothesis addressed in this article—concerning the correlation between the construction of subordinated governance in the 2010s and the rise of leaders whose foreign policies are subordinated to the United States within the regional sphere—the following sections briefly examine the regional policies of Jair Messias in Brazil and Iván Duque in Colombia.

3. Most Different Systems Design and Case Selection: Brazil and Colombia

To test the hypothesis advanced in this article—that right-wing governments tend to foster a pattern of subordinated regional governance, a phenomenon that became particularly evident in South American regionalism during the 2010s—we selected Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and Colombia under Iván Duque as the comparative cases. This case selection follows the logic of the Most Different Systems Design (MDSD).

Anckar (2008) conceives of the MDSD not merely as a case-selection technique but as a comparative strategy of control designed to identify common causal factors across cases that vary considerably in their contextual and structural characteristics. The underlying logic of the MDSD is that when analytically distinct cases converge on the same outcome, the most convincing explanation lies in the explanatory condition(s) they share rather than in the structural differences that distinguish them.

Brazil and Colombia offer a suitable comparison because they display marked differences in territorial size, economic capabilities, regional influence, state capacity, and foreign policy traditions. Whereas Brazil has historically pursued a strategy of regional autonomy and leadership in South America, Colombia has long been characterized by its *Respice Polum* (Tokatlian 2000) orientation and

close strategic alignment with the United States. Table 3 summarizes the comparative logic underpinning the case selection.

Table 3. Main Structural Differences of Brazil and Colombia (MDSD)

Brazil	Colombia
Regional power	Secondary regional power
Diversified economy	More externally dependent economy
Tradition of seeking regional autonomy	Historical alignment with the United States (<i>Respite Polum</i>)
Greater state capacity	Lower state capacity

Source: Own elaboration based on Anckar’s (2008) MDSD model.

Despite these structural and historical differences, both countries converged—albeit to different degrees—toward the same outcome: subordinated regional governance. This convergence is explained here by a shared ideological shift toward right-wing governments, with Bolsonaro representing the far right (neo-patriotic right) and Duque embodying a more traditional conservative right. The article further argues that this ideological realignment affected regional governance by reorienting foreign policy, which serves as the intervening mechanism linking domestic political change to the transition from autonomist to subordinated regional governance.

Against this backdrop, and to operationalize the empirical evidence on subordinated governance in the two selected cases, the article applies the three dimensions of the proposed analytical model—ideology, institutions, and geopolitical identity—to analyze the regional policies of the Bolsonaro and Duque administrations.

4. Brazilian Regional Policy under the Jair Bolsonaro Government

a. Ideology

The subordination and alignment of Brazilian foreign policy during the Bolsonaro government can be understood through an analogy that speaks directly to the president’s primary political inspiration: Donald Trump. Bolsonaro’s admiration for the U.S. president rested mainly on an affinity for Trumpist far-right ideology; this identification was so strong that the U.S. press itself began referring to the Brazilian president as the “Tropical Trump” (Winter 2019). Bolsonaro shared with his American counterpart a tendency toward post-truth, such as denying global

warming, the Brazilian dictatorship, or the COVID-19 pandemic. This tendency characterized Jair Bolsonaro's neo-fascist and personalist pro-activism (Hirst and Maciel 2022).

The diplomatic alliance between Bolsonaro's Brazil and Trump's United States on the international stage can be understood as part of an effort during that period to create a global articulation of the right. Sanahuja and López Burian (2020) pointed out that the international agenda began to be driven by values and principles hegemonized by ultra-nationalist right-wing forces, marked by strong conservative-religious, anti-systemic, and anti-multilateralist content.

Bolsonaro's foreign policy echoed these values and adopted an "anti-globalism" paradigm as the central guideline for its actions in the international arena. According to Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro's foreign minister, globalism generally signifies the corruption of conservative and religious values by "pseudo-values" that were transformed into ideology and disseminated throughout post-Cold War international society, such as human rights, tolerance, and environmental protection (Araújo 2017, 5).

According to the former minister, the concept of globalism is closely linked to communist and Marxist values that occupied liberal society from within (*sic*). Therefore, it stems from the dissemination of cultural Marxism, the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, and "Gramscism" (*sic*), which define the principles and values of the post-Cold War international order, leading to the abandonment of conservative thought and the Christian faith as central values of liberal democracies (Araújo 2017, 4). This explains why subordinated governance is not merely a political choice, but a "moral crusade" against the established international order.

The government's international actions in this field served as a symbolic glue to consolidate Brazil's political coalitions with other conservative countries and far-right governments and to sustain anti-globalist stances ideologically.

Beyond the clear ideological element and the opposition to initiatives present in the foreign policy of the Workers' Party (PT; *Partido dos Trabalhadores*) governments, Bolsonaro's foreign policy transcended merely reactive political logics, as argued by Hirst and Maciel (2022). The authors identify three pillars that sustained Bolsonaro's foreign policy and Brazil's international insertion: 1) Political-ideological pillar: rapprochement with right-wing governments in the region, such as Sebastián Piñera in Chile, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, and Iván Duque in Colombia; alignment with U.S. policy for Latin America; confrontation and escalation of the diplomatic narrative against the Venezuelan government, both unilaterally and via the Lima Group; and the deconstruction of Latin American progressive initiatives, projects, and commitments; 2) Liberal-conservative economic policy pillar: sought to preserve Latin American and

South American markets with the lowest possible level of reciprocity commitments, institutional obligations, or responsibility; used MERCOSUR as a tool to achieve economic objectives, primarily to avoid creating obstacles to the consolidation of the agreement with the European Union; and 3) Security and defense pillar: abandonment of South American cooperation in the field of defense, with Brazil's withdrawal from UNASUR and the South American Defense Council; alignment with U.S. security policy for the region; a high degree of permissiveness regarding the increased presence of U.S. military personnel in the region; and the militarization of the Amazon as a consequence of the crisis in Venezuela (Hirst and Maciel 2022).

The three analytical frameworks selected by the authors to understand Bolsonaro's foreign policy toward South America highlight what we consider the main characteristics that contribute to Brazil's subordinated position—that is, in direct opposition to Puig's (1986) idea of autonomy in the subcontinent: 1) the abandonment of political leadership in regionalism and the absence of a clear agenda and strategy for Latin America, specifically for South America, within Brazil's foreign policy; and 2) the choice to align with the United States, based on a posture of non-reciprocity and a lack of clarity regarding the gains for Brazil from such actions.

Thus, Bolsonarist foreign policy exhibits numerous actions that move toward a subservient alliance with the United States, directly connected to the strengthening of the far-right in international politics. Here, it can be argued that the subcontinent is read—much like during the Lula governments—as a platform for Brazil's political projection on the international stage; however, such projection now occurs precisely through absence and abandonment. Or, in the words of Ernesto Araújo (2017), as an “international pariah.” The alignment with the United States in the region was understood as political capital to strengthen Brazil's role as an exponent of far-right governments and the fight against globalism.

b. Institutions and Geopolitical Identity

Within this analytical framework, regionalism—viewed as a form of “globalist” multilateralism—also had to be combated. Therefore, the destruction of South American regionalism and Brazil's withdrawal from regional concertation spaces found its rationale in the global positioning goals of Bolsonarist foreign policy. We understand this as the primary nexus for comprehending Bolsonaro's (non) regional policy. In this sense, one of the Bolsonaro government's first gestures toward the United States at the start of its mandate was ending the *Mais Médicos* (More Doctors) program and expelling Cuban doctors from Brazil; it also

adopted a diplomatic discourse condemning the Nicolás Maduro government in Venezuela. In June 2019, the Brazilian government announced the end of visa requirements for U.S. citizens entering Brazil, a decision for which the United States provided no reciprocity.

The Venezuelan crisis, as will also be observed in Colombian foreign policy, was the primary driver of the alignment of South American far-right governments with the United States. It served as the main lens for observing the dismantling of autonomist governance spaces in favor of inter-American mechanisms hegemonized by the superpower, such as the OAS—in other words, the strengthening of governance subordinated to the North American country.

The central articulating axis of Jair Bolsonaro's international relations program was rooted in the idea that Brazil could not "become Venezuela." As we will see, for both Brazil and Colombia, Venezuela was not merely a neighborhood problem but also the ideological justification for abandoning autonomist regionalism, returning to the OAS (under U.S. leadership), and legitimizing domestic security policies and the repression of "communism."

Regarding the regional governance spaces created in the previous decade, the Brazilian government denounced the UNASUR treaty in 2019 and officially withdrew from the institution. To replace UNASUR, PROSUR was created alongside Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, and Uruguay. PROSUR should be understood more as an ideologically reactive response by right-wing forces in the region concerning regionalism than as an institutionally solid proposal with a clear agenda.

MERCOSUR also lost relevance as a political actor during this period. The government adopted a stance favoring the bloc's "flexibilization" early in the mandate, largely driven by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes. Throughout the government, this position was revised after recognizing the commercial and economic complexity MERCOSUR represents for the Brazilian economy. As a result, the bloc began to be treated as purely commercial, with a focus on concluding the MERCOSUR-European Union agreement, which was finalized in June 2019.

Brazil's lack of interest in the bloc's multidimensional importance is evident in the country's 2019 withdrawal from the MERCOSUR Educational Sector (SEM; *Sector Educativo del MERCOSUR*). Another sign of the bloc's diminished importance was Brazil's embarrassing participation in the Meeting of MERCOSUR Presidents celebrating its 30th anniversary. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was held remotely; Bolsonaro left immediately after his speech.

The political dismantling of sub-regional mechanisms was accompanied at the hemispheric level by the strengthening of U.S. positions in inter-American institutions. For the first time in history, an American president, Mauricio

Claver-Carone, was elected to the IDB in 2020. Brazil had its own candidate for the position but withdrew that candidacy in favor of the U.S. candidate. Brazil's decision to field its own candidate and then withdraw it to support an American—breaking a decades-long tradition of Latin American presidents at the bank—can be understood as empirical evidence of subordinated governance.

Based on the analysis of the Bolsonaro government's actions in the regional dimension, the main guideline was alignment with United States positions to seek a “special partner” status in the region. This orientation consolidated the subordination and adaptation of the Brazilian agenda to the interests of the hemispheric power, Brazil's absence as a relevant political actor in the region, and the dismantling of the autonomist governance spaces of the previous period.

The following section analyzes Colombia's regional policy under the Iván Duque government. While Bolsonaro's Brazil marked a rupture with prior autonomy, Duque's Colombia represented the deepening of a historical alliance with the United States, now under a new ideological guise.

5. Colombian Regional Policy under the Iván Duque Government

Unlike Brazil, where the Bolsonaro administration marked a significant departure from a long-standing foreign policy tradition centered on regional autonomy, the Duque administration combined elements of continuity with change. While it reversed the more autonomous, regionally oriented foreign policy pursued under Juan Manuel Santos, it also reactivated Colombia's historical pattern of close strategic alignment with the United States, traditionally associated with the doctrine of *Respecte Polum* (Tokatlian 2000). Consequently, subordinated governance in Colombia should not be understood as a complete rupture but rather as the ideological deepening and regional rearticulation of an existing foreign policy orientation in the new context of the global conservative wave.

a. Ideology

Iván Duque's election in Colombia in 2018 also took place in a highly polarized domestic context. As in Brazil, the rise of the global far-right and Donald Trump's election in the United States strengthened Duque's reactionary and conservative political rhetoric. During the electoral campaign, the accusation that his rival, Gustavo Petro, supported Cuba and Venezuela—and Petro's ideological proximity to Fidel Castro and Nicolás Maduro—became a primary axis of Duque's political construction as an alternative.

Unlike most South American countries, Colombia did not elect a left or center-left government during the “progressive wave” of the 2000s, nor is it classified among the countries that actively built the institutions of post-hegemonic regionalism. Álvaro Uribe governed Colombia from 2002 to 2010 and represented the country’s liberal-conservative right. Although his administration did not belong to the so-called Pink Tide governments, it joined and supported UNASUR’s creation. Nevertheless, his foreign policy prioritized the relationship with the United States, with regional policy largely subordinated to that strategic partnership. Within UNASUR, Colombia focused on issues it considered pragmatic, such as infrastructure and economic cooperation, while tensions with left-wing governments within the bloc—notably Ecuador and Venezuela—were not uncommon.

Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe’s successor and president of Colombia from 2010 to 2018, also positioned within the Colombian liberal-conservative right and maintained the country’s strategic relationship with the United States. However, he sought to expand Colombia’s diplomatic autonomy by re-engaging with its South American and Caribbean neighbors, strengthening regional multilateralism, and using foreign policy as a tool to support the peace process, assigning greater importance to regional institutions such as UNASUR and CELAC (Ramírez 2011)

Duque’s foreign policy must be understood, much like Bolsonaro’s in relation to the PT’s foreign policy, largely as an opposition to the guidelines of the Santos government. One of the main disruptive points of Colombian Foreign Policy (CFP) during Juan Manuel Santos’s term was the reduction of extreme subordination to the United States in the commercial, military, and political spheres (Pastrana Buelvas, Villota Hernández, and Burgos Giraldo 2021). This transformation did not mean a loss of the United States’ importance in the CFP, but rather the construction of Colombia’s own agenda with this partner—an important point of distinction from the CFP of Uribe, Duque’s ally and political mentor, with whom Duque shared foreign policy visions. During his administration, Uribe was responsible for consolidating Plan Colombia and deepening the security dimension of cooperation with the United States.

Santos’s CFP can be understood, regarding the partnership with the United States, as a rupture in the pattern of those relations. Generally, Santos’s CFP had the following characteristics: diversification of themes and partnerships; normalization of relations with Ecuador and Venezuela; rapprochement with Brazil; valuing the South American space as an identity within the CFP; and what became known as “Diplomacy for Peace,” supported by four principles: to de-narcotize, de-securitize, and de-terrorize the CFP. Juan Manuel Santos’s government

was also responsible for ending the conflict with the FARC; during his mandate, the peace accords were negotiated, including political recognition and the possibility for former members to engage in official politics (Pastrana Buelvas, Villota Hernández, and Burgos Giraldo 2021).

Thus, one of the first guidelines of Duque's CFP was a break with his predecessor's lines, especially regarding multilateralism, diversification of partnerships, the peace accords with the FARC, and the pursuit of a better image of the country on the international stage. Duque replaced Santos's "Diplomacy for Peace" with a "Diplomacy for Legality," which sought to re-evaluate the peace accords' legality. The themes of drug trafficking and security returned as salient issues on the Colombian international agenda, viewed through a securitized lens. In contrast to Santos, this period saw a "re-narcotization" and "re-securitization" of foreign policy (Pastrana Buelvas, Villota Hernández, and Burgos Giraldo 2021).

By "re-narcotizing" the agenda, Duque returned the United States to the role of "tutor" of Colombian domestic policy. If the issue reverts to being solely about drugs and security (rather than development or peace), Colombia once again becomes dependent on military and financial aid from Washington, thereby consolidating what this article defines as subordinated governance.

b. Institutions and Geopolitical Identity

Specifically on regional policy, Pastrana Buelvas, Villota Hernández, and Burgos Giraldo (2021) argue that Duque's CFP sought a "new Americanization" of its position on the continent through military and diplomatic realignment with the Trump administration. At his first press conference on foreign policy, Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo emphasized the need to relaunch and strengthen the OAS and the Inter-American System (Sánchez 2021, 379). Duque's Colombia sought to build a "special partner" relationship with Trump's United States; the Colombian president worked to establish Colombian leadership as the South American representative of U.S. regional interests, as Sánchez (2021) notes. Duque intended to transform Colombia into a regional stabilizer; notably, the axis of this strategy ran directly through Venezuela.

Pastrana Buelvas, Villota Hernández, and Burgos Giraldo (2021) note that the "Venezuelanization"⁵ of the CFP can be considered the central axis of Colombia's relationship with the United States. Duque used the Venezuelan

5 Another important factor shaping Colombia's regional policy during this period was the substantial influx of Venezuelan migrants resulting from the humanitarian crisis in the neighboring country, which further reinforced the centrality of Venezuela in the Duque administration's foreign policy agenda.

crisis to validate his position as a special partner of the regional hegemony. This positioning is evident in Colombian leadership within the Lima Group, the invocation of the TIAR (Río Treaty) against its neighbor in 2019, and the event known as the “diplomacy of the absurd,” when the Colombian president requested the extradition of former senator Aida Merlano from Juan Guaidó. Much like Bolsonaro, Iván Duque anchored his regional policy in alignment with the United States. However, Duque played an active regional role, whereas Bolsonaro maintained very little regional relevance, prioritizing U.S. actions. In this vein, the idea that the CFP’s regional guidelines were subordinated during this period to inter-American policy reinforces the idea of the subordinated governance of South American regionalism at the time.

The empirical evidence from the foreign policies of the Bolsonaro and Duque administrations suggests that, in Brazil (2019–2022) and Colombia (2018–2022), the rise of conservative and neo-patriotic right-wing governments was the common explanatory variable. Through foreign policies oriented toward preferential alignment with the United States and rejection of post-hegemonic regionalism, these governments contributed to the emergence of a pattern of subordinate regional governance. Accordingly, drawing on the analytical model presented earlier in this article, the summary table below (Table 4) illustrates the proposed hypothesis.

Table 4. Subordinate Governance Patterns in Brazil and Colombia

Case	Political-ideological orientation of the government (independent variable)	Foreign policy orientation toward regionalism (intervening variable)	Regional governance (dependent variable)
Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro)	Neo-patriotic right	Preferential alignment with the United States; withdrawal from UNASUR; creation and support for PROSUR; criticism of post-hegemonic regionalism	Subordinate governance
Colombia (Iván Duque)	Liberal-conservative right	Preferential alignment with the United States; withdrawal from UNASUR; leadership in the creation of PROSUR; closer ties with the OAS and hemispheric agendas	Subordinate governance

Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the transformation of South American regionalism in the 2010s cannot be understood solely through changes in institutional design or fluctuations in interstate cooperation. Rather, it reflects a broader reconfiguration of regional governance, driven by shifts in the political-ideological orientation of governments and materialized in changes in foreign policy. Drawing on Rosenau's (2000) conception of governance as a system of order and on Nolte's (2016) understanding of regional governance as an analytical framework for capturing variations in regional projects, the article proposed a distinction between autonomist governance and subordinate governance. It further grounded the concept of autonomist governance in Puig's (1986) notion of autonomy as the expansion of states' decision-making capacity through collective regional action, whereas subordinate governance refers to regional projects more closely aligned with the strategic preferences of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States.

The comparative analysis of Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and of Colombia under Iván Duque supports the article's central hypothesis. Despite their different structural characteristics and foreign policy traditions, both governments pursued foreign policy strategies marked by preferential alignment with the United States, rejection of post-hegemonic regionalism, weakening of autonomous regional institutions, and promotion of alternative arrangements such as PROSUR. These common patterns demonstrate that foreign policy is the causal mechanism through which governments' political-ideological orientations shape the prevailing type of regional governance.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it advances the debate on regional governance by clarifying the concept through a distinction between autonomist and subordinate governance, thereby integrating the geopolitical orientation of regional projects into the analysis. Second, it bridges foreign policy analysis and comparative regionalism by showing how shifts in governments' political-ideological preferences translate into distinct patterns of regional governance through foreign policy. Third, it offers an analytical model operationalized through the dimensions of ideology, institutions, and geopolitical identity, providing a systematic framework for identifying and comparing governance patterns across historical periods and regional contexts.

Although developed from the South American experience, the analytical framework proposed here has broader comparative value. Future research may apply it to other regions or periods of regional transformation to assess how shifts in domestic political coalitions reshape regional governance. More broadly, the findings suggest that regional governance should be understood not merely as an

institutional arrangement but as the geopolitical expression of competing projects of autonomy, development, and international insertion.

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