

Regional Cooperation in the Americas

Dr. Anthony Pereira, Dr. Gabriela Hoberman, Martín Redrado and Gustavo Martínez

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INTRODUCTION

The Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC) at FIU's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs convened on November 11, 2024 at the T20 summit in Rio de Janeiro. LACC organized a panel of experts and scholars from Latin American and U.S. think tanks to engage in a lively discussion regarding regional cooperation in the Americas. How can the foreign policies of states in the Americas converge to address common challenges and what role can diplomacy play in this process? At this conference, members of foreign policy think tanks in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the United States, addressed these questions. Think tanks represented included the Argentine Council on International Relations (CARI), Buenos Aires, Argentina; and the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

The panel, moderated by Professor Carlos Milani of CEBRI's Nucleo Multilateralismo and the Institute of Social and Political Studies at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (IESP-UERJ), addressed the following themes as discussed by the respective panelists: Dr. Gabriela Hoberman, Director of Academic Programs at LACC and professor at FIU, environmental security and disaster risk reduction; former President of the Central Bank of Argentina and a visiting fellow in LACC at FIU Martín Redrado, the energy transition; Public Affairs and Managing Director of CARI, Gustavo Martínez, cooperation amongst think tanks; and LACC Director Dr. Anthony Pereira, coordination in the defence and deepening of democracy.

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE AMERICAS

This policy paper focuses on regional cooperation in the Americas as discussed in the aforementioned panel. While there has been notable economic integration in North America and parts of South America, mechanisms for collective resolutions are notably absent. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) has struggled to advance its agenda. Brazil and Mexico, two major players in the region, have confronted comparable domestic issues yet lack a regional strategy in their respective foreign policies. In addition, the Americas seem to be splintering under the weight of domestic political polarization and geopolitical tension. The 2024 reelection of Donald Trump in the US initiated a move away from multilateralism by the global hegemon. After Professor Milani's opening remarks, the respective panelists offered the following insights in their interventions.

Dr. Gabriela Hoberman, Director of Academic Programs at LACC and professor at FIU, argued that the Americas face escalating environmental and disaster risks that transcend national boundaries, requiring coordinated regional responses to address systemic vulnerabilities. With more than 50% of cities with 500,000 inhabitants living in high-vulnerability contexts, the region confronts a growing disconnect between risk governance and development processes. The traditional state-centric approach has proven insufficient, as evidenced by reactive policies, low budget allocations, high government turnover, and limited participation from civil society. She added that systemic risks create cascading regional and global

effects through interconnected infrastructure, supply chains, and urbanization patterns that no single country can address alone.

Dr. Hoberman also noted stark infrastructural disparities within the Americas. High-income countries have per capita infrastructure values of \$200,000 compared to just \$3,000 in low-income countries. She added that there are significant opportunities for regional partnerships to leverage untapped private institutional capital, of which only 1.6% is currently invested in infrastructure. The region's position presents a window of opportunity where relatively modest investments could dramatically improve resilience in small, high-risk countries.

Finally, Dr. Hoberman argued that regional cooperation in the Americas can be significantly enhanced through multi-stakeholder platforms that integrate disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation measures into development strategies. Universities are particularly important international actors with their own strategies and capacity to build bridges where formal government contacts may be difficult. This academic dimension of regional cooperation can facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and awareness campaigns at local and national levels, while helping to mainstream transformative adaptation approaches that prioritize vulnerable communities.

Martín Redrado, former President of the Central Bank of Argentina and a visiting fellow in LACC at FIU identified nuclear energy as an emerging area of strategic competition between China and the U.S. in Latin America, with significant implications for regional energy cooperation. Currently, nuclear power contributes about 2% of the region's electricity mix, with seven operational plants across Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. However, nuclear capacity is to more than double by 2050, particularly through small modular reactors (SMRs). Redrado argued that the U.S. could leverage its nuclear technology expertise by supporting SMR development across the Americas using its technology. This would not only create business opportunities for U.S. companies but also help secure the energy supply for artificial intelligence projects.

He noted that nearshoring trends could particularly benefit renewable energy, and he emphasized the strategic importance of critical minerals like lithium. In Argentina alone, China has invested \$3.2 billion in mining between 2020-2023, including seven lithium operations. The U.S. could promote "America First" Critical Minerals Bilateral Deals with countries like Argentina (lithium), Chile (copper), and Brazil (niobium), which would include provisions for processing raw materials locally and improve the investment environment.

Redrado also advocated for a "selective engagement" approach that would allow Latin American countries to maintain economic diversification while making strategic commitments on key security issues. This framework could facilitate regional cooperation on energy transition projects by providing a stable political foundation for long-term investments. Successful energy cooperation, he argued, requires not just financial incentives but also capacity building, improved regulatory frameworks, and enhanced cybersecurity for critical infrastructure. Such cooperation would better serve both U.S. strategic interests and Latin America's development needs compared to purely competitive or confrontational approaches to China's growing regional presence.

Gustavo Martínez, Public Affairs and Managing Director of CARI argued that cooperation amongst think tanks can enhance regional cooperation in the Americas by fostering structured knowledge exchange and evidence-based policy development. Think tanks across the region can establish collaborative networks that mirror the recommended approach of building trust, accountability, and inclusion in multilateral institutions. Martínez argued that by creating regular fora for dialogue and sharing research findings, think tanks can help bridge ideological and political divides between countries, providing neutral ground for discussing complex regional challenges such as migration, trade integration, climate adaptation, and democratic governance. This collaborative approach enables the development of shared analytical frameworks and policy recommendations that transcend national boundaries, creating a foundation for more coherent regional responses to transnational issues.

He also noted that think tank cooperation can strengthen regional governance by enhancing the participation of diverse stakeholders and developing new metrics for measuring progress beyond traditional economic indicators. Think tanks can facilitate engagement between civil society organizations, local governments, academic institutions, and private sector actors across the Americas. They can also collaborate on developing region-specific wellbeing metrics that account for the unique social, environmental, and cultural contexts of the Americas, providing policymakers with better tools for assessing the effectiveness of regional integration efforts and ensuring that cooperation initiatives deliver tangible benefits to citizens throughout the hemisphere.

Dr. Anthony Pereira, Director of the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center and professor at FIU reflected on the implications of Trump's second administration in the Americas. He argued that the new administration has learned from its previous term, surrounded itself with loyalists and enjoys support from powerful tech entrepreneurs and nationalist leaders abroad. As in other countries in the region, this analysis suggests that defending democracy requires understanding the enhanced capacity for institutional capture and the systematic nature of the current threat.

Dr. Pereira also noted how Trump's policies and rhetoric undermine democratic cooperation both domestically and internationally. The White House's immediate withdrawal from international agreements like the Paris Climate Accord and WHO and use of expansionist rhetoric demonstrate a rejection of multilateral cooperation and institutional norms that are essential for democratic governance.

He also identified significant challenges for democratic coordination in the Americas. He argued that the Lula government in Brazil will find itself increasingly isolated from U.S. partnership on key democratic initiatives including climate action, workers' rights, and global governance reform. Trump's administration may actively work against Brazilian democratic institutions through economic sanctions and by emboldening supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro. This dynamic suggests that defending and deepening democracy in the Americas will require alternative forms of regional coordination that bypass or counteract U.S. influence, as traditional hemispheric cooperation mechanisms may be compromised under Trump's leadership.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussions such as the aforementioned panel at the T20 summit underscore the urgent need for innovative approaches to regional cooperation in the Americas, particularly as traditional mechanisms face increasing strain from domestic polarization and shifting geopolitical dynamics. The panelists' insights reveal that while the region confronts multifaceted challenges—from environmental disasters and energy transitions to democratic backsliding—these very challenges also present opportunities for deeper collaboration. The convergence of expert perspectives from leading think tanks across the hemisphere demonstrates that sustainable regional cooperation must transcend conventional state-centric frameworks and embrace multi-stakeholder engagement that includes civil society, academic institutions, and subnational actors.

Environmental security should be a critical catalyst for regional integration. Systemic risks create cascading effects that no single country can address independently. The untapped potential of private institutional capital suggests that academic networks and innovative financing mechanisms can compensate for gaps in formal governmental cooperation, particularly when political challenges impede traditional governance channels.

The energy transition also presents both strategic opportunities and competitive pressures that require careful navigation. Selective engagement offers a practical path for Latin American countries to maintain economic diversification while making strategic commitments on key security issues. This approach, combined with bilateral deals for critical minerals processing, could create win-win scenarios that advance both U.S. strategic interests and Latin American development goals. However, the success of such initiatives depends on building robust regulatory frameworks, enhancing cybersecurity capabilities, and ensuring that cooperation mechanisms can withstand political volatility.

The deteriorating democratic landscape, particularly under the second Trump administration, poses fundamental challenges to traditional hemispheric cooperation mechanisms that cannot be ignored. Defending and deepening democracy in the Americas will require alternative forms of regional coordination that may need to bypass or counteract U.S. influence when necessary. In this context, cooperation between think tanks is critical, as these institutions can provide the neutral ground and analytical frameworks necessary for maintaining dialogue across political divides. The path forward requires a combination of pragmatic bilateralism, innovative multilateral platforms, and strengthened civil society networks that can sustain cooperation even when formal governmental relationships are strained. Novel and resilient approaches can help foster the collaborative capacity needed to address shared challenges while preserving democratic values and promoting long-term development.