

POLICY BRIEF

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Interregionalism in a Multipolar World: Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and the MENA region

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Introduction: From Backyard to Multipolar Arena

For most of the twentieth century, LAC's foreign policy was analyzed mainly through the prism of its relationship with Washington. The region was conceived as the US strategic backyard, its external vectors constrained by the logic of the Monroe Doctrine and, during the Cold War, the imperatives of anti-communist containment. Even Latin American participation in the Non-Alignment Movement, with the notable exception of Cuba, has been modest compared to that of Africa and Asia. LAC's relations with the Middle East and North Africa remained peripheral, episodic, and largely subordinated to US preferences. The same applies to the rest of the African continent.

Two structural transformations have altered this equation. First, the emergence of a multipolar international order—accelerated by the 2003 Iraq invasion, the 2008 global financial crisis, and the rise of BRICS—has created new margins of maneuver for Global South actors. Second, the return of a muscular Monroe Doctrine under the Trump administration, including the military operation of January 3, 2026 that ousted Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, has intensified the urgency of foreign policy diversification across LAC. The response has not been passive: LAC governments

1 Maresca, A. (2026). The Impact of the Second Trump Administration on Latin American Foreign Policy. *GIES Occasional Paper*. <https://unu.edu/cris/journal-article/impact-second-trump-administration-latin-american-foreign-policy>. The Trump administration defines its foreign policy toward LAC as the 'Donroe Doctrine'.

Highlights

The return of the Monroe Doctrine under the Trump administration and the 2026 CELAC Summits with China, the African Union, and the EU have accelerated a structural transformation in Latin American foreign policy. Faced with an assertive Washington and an insufficiently responsive EU, governments in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are deepening strategic ties with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, alongside the African Continent. This policy brief synthesizes theoretical, empirical, and conjunctural evidence to argue that Latin America–MENA interregionalism represents a durable, ideology-driven foreign policy strategy rooted in multipolar autonomy. It examines the historical foundations of this relationship, current drivers including the CELAC process and Gulf state engagement and proposes concrete policy recommendations for deepening institutional interregionalism between both regions.

have accelerated South-South engagement with Africa, Asia, and, particularly, the MENA region as a structural strategy to reduce dependency on a volatile Washington.

Theoretical Framework: Multipolar Autonomy and Interregionalism

The concept of autonomy is foundational to Latin American International Relations theory. Articulated by prominent intellectuals such as Hélio Jaguaribe and Juan Carlos Puig, autonomy refers to a peripheral State's capacity to act in the international system without succumbing to external coercion. In the current multipolar context, autonomy is best understood through diversification: the proactive expansion of diplomatic, commercial, and political relationships across multiple regions and partners, rather than dependence on a single hegemon.

Concept: Multipolar autonomy refers to the proactive diversification of diplomatic, economic, and political relations by Global South states across multiple regions and partners, enabled by the fragmentation of the international order and driven by ideological opposition to hegemonic alignment. It is measured through three observable dimensions: diplomatic intensity, economic diversification, and rhetorical positioning vis-à-vis Global South causes.

This research advances the concept of multipolar autonomy as a distinct analytical framework. Unlike Active Non-Alignment, which largely frames LAC foreign policy as a balancing act between the US and China in a Cold War fashion, multipolar autonomy foregrounds the agency of progressive political leadership and the ideological dimension of foreign policy orientations. In this sense, Latin American progressivism should not be seen as a reproduction of European social democracy. To the contrary, Latin American

2 See: Jaguaribe, H. (1979). *Autonomía periférica y hegemonía céntrica*. *Estudios Internacionales*, 12(46), 91–130. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-3769.1979.16458>. It is worth mentioning that unlike Jaguaribe and Puig, Amorim is a diplomat and historic foreign policy advisor to the Lula government in Brazil.

3 Fortin, C., Heine, J., & Ominami, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Latin American Foreign Policies in the New World Order: The Active Non-Alignment Option*. Anthem Press.

progressivism is enshrined in the Bolivarianism of the former Venezuelan President Hugó Chávez and the policies of other 'Pink Tide' leaders, such as Argentina's Néstor Kirchner, Brazil's Lula, and Ecuador's Correa. The 'Pink Tide' refers to a set of leftist presidents that emerged, particularly in South America, opposing the neoliberal paradigm of privatization and free trade in favor of the State's return to the economy. Most relevantly, in foreign policy, ideological progressivism is linked to the idea of diversifying away from the US to gain international autonomy. It also moves beyond the structural limitations of Dependency Theory to show how peripheral states can leverage multipolarity to expand their international presence. Specifically, Dependency Theory explained why LAC economies were dependent on exporting raw materials to the Global North in exchange for value-added products. Nevertheless, being proper to the prior century, Dependency Theory did not address the changes

brought about by globalization or the comparative advantage that those very commodities can offer Latin American countries when combined with autonomous foreign policies.

Furthermore, interregionalism can serve as a conceptual tool for analyzing Latin American foreign policies toward the Global South. In this context, it refers to institutionalized or quasi-institutionalized relations between two geographically distinct regional groupings. The

Latin America–MENA interregional vector has historically operated through bi-regional summits—most notably the South America–Arab Countries (ASPA) process inaugurated in Brasília in 2005—as well as through bilateral presidential diplomacy, trade agreements, and rhetorical solidarity around shared causes such as Palestinian statehood and Western Sahara. Historically, Venezuela's foundational membership in OPEC and its energy diplomacy with Arab oil exporters date to the 1960s and 1970s. Brazil's Arab diaspora has long provided a social basis for diplomatic ties. Argentina's significant Lebanese and Syrian communities similarly created early bridges to the Levant. However, the 'Pink Tide' leaders transformed what had been scattered bilateral ties into a more coherent South-South strategy. It is worth highlighting

4 Garavini, G. (2021). *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press.

that one of the prominent features of ‘Pink Tide’ presidents was the increase in foreign policy partnerships across the Global South in opposition to US hegemony. The ASPA Summit of 2005 in Brasília, convened under Lula’s presidency, constituted the first truly institutionalized multilateral forum between South American and Arab governments. Chávez’s Venezuela actively cultivated relations with Iran, Libya, Syria, and the Gulf states as instruments of counter-hegemonic foreign policy. Néstor Kirchner’s Argentina leveraged its soybean exports to deepen commercial ties with Arab markets while maintaining a rhetorical distance from US-aligned positions in the MENA region.

Current Dynamics: Diversification through CELAC toward Africa and MENA

CELAC as Ideological Arena and Interregional Broker

In recent years, CELAC has convened high-level meetings with China, the European Union, and the African Union, demonstrating a growing external profile that contrasts sharply with the bloc’s persistent internal polarization. This exogenous dynamism—CELAC finding it easier to engage external partners than to build internal consensus—is itself a significant indicator of multipolar autonomy at the regional level. The 2026 Bogotá Declaration reveals a structural fault line within the bloc. Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago entered reservations on multiple paragraphs, most notably Paragraph 7 on Cuba, signaling a preference for alignment with the Trump administration over regional solidarity. By contrast, under the leadership of Presidents Lula and Petro, CELAC has effectively become an alternative multilateral platform to US-led hemispheric governance mechanisms, including the Organization of American States. From this perspective, it is worth noting that President Petro’s progressive ideology was essential in bringing together CELAC and the African Union for the first time, under a diversified portfolio that included Ghana-Colombia logistics cooperation and diplomatic projects on reparations.

For the LAC-MENA vector specifically, a more cohesive and externally active CELAC offers a potential institutional

5 Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2026). “Colombia y Ghana firman memorando para impulsar la cooperación portuaria y abrir nuevas rutas comerciales entre América Latina y África”. <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/colombia-ghana-firman-memorando-impulsar-cooperacion-portuaria-abrir-nuevas-rutas>.

interlocutor for bi-regional dialogue. The ASPA format, which fell into disuse in the 2010s, could be revitalized through CELAC’s growing multilateral profile, particularly given the African Union Summit’s demonstration that the bloc can sustain ambitious external engagement. Nevertheless, it is also essential to acknowledge that the current crisis in the Middle East can severely affect pre-existing trade and initiatives proposed by Gulf States in Latin America. As an example, Argentina and Brazil are highly reliant on fertilizers from the MENA region for their agricultural production, with rising prices and logistical bottlenecks severely harming production and hence exports from the Southern Cone.

CELAC as Ideological Arena and Interregional Broker

GCC countries—particularly the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—have emerged as the most dynamic MENA actors in LAC over the past two decades. Their engagement extends well beyond the commodity trade that characterized earlier interactions. The UAE’s DP World holds a \$760 million MOU with the Dominican Republic for port expansion at Caucedo; Abu Dhabi is financing short-distance rail networks in Paraguay; and Brazil’s Lula traveled to Abu Dhabi to accelerate a Mercosur-UAE trade agreement, signaling South America’s appetite for commercial diversification independent of the EU track. The 2026 World Governments Summit in Dubai, sponsored by the UAE, attracted the presidents of Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay—countries not conventionally associated with South-South foreign policy orientations. This multilateral format allows Gulf states to engage LAC counterparts in a business-friendly, geopolitically non-threatening framework, reducing the reputational costs that bilateral meetings with Washington’s adversaries might entail for conservative LAC governments. The Gulf-LAC rapprochement is thus ideologically plural, encompassing both progressive and conservative governments, and is driven primarily by the rationales of infrastructure investment, food security, and financial diversification. The main challenge for LAC governments will now be to avoid losing the progress made in relations with the MENA region, given the likely defense and regional priorities the Gulf will face as a result of the Iran conflict.

6 Botta, P. (2026). The Economic Impact of the Conflict in Iran on Latin America. *Trends Research & Advisory*. <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-economic-impact-of-the-conflict-in-iran-on-latin-america/>.

7 Maresca, A. (2026). America Latina e i Caraibi e Medio Oriente: una relazione strategica attraverso l’autonomia. *Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/america-latina-e-i-caraibi-e-medio-oriente-una-relazione-strategica-attraverso-lautonomia/>.

Policy Implications

The evidence presented above supports four analytical conclusions with direct policy implications. First, LAC-MENA interregionalism is structurally durable. It is not solely a function of commodity prices, leftist governments, or conjunctural opposition to US hegemony. It reflects a deep structural logic: peripheral economies with export-dependent profiles share material interests and political incentives to diversify their international insertion beyond traditional Western partners. Second, the Gulf states represent the most dynamic and institutionally tractable MENA interlocutors for LAC. Their willingness to engage conservative and progressive LAC governments alike makes them strategically well-positioned as bridge actors within a broader interregional architecture. Third, CELAC's growing external legitimacy—evidenced by its 2026 summits with China, the EU, and the African Union—creates an opportunity to revitalize the ASPA mechanism or develop an analogous CELAC-Arab League or CELAC-Gulf Cooperation Council format. Fourth, the current conjuncture—characterized by Trump's aggressive Monroe Doctrine revival—is paradoxically an enabling condition for LAC-MENA rapprochement. At the same time, the conflict in the Middle East poses a real challenge to foreign policy diversification toward the MENA region, while the conservative turn currently underway in much of Latin America can constrain foreign policy automatic alignment toward Washington.

Policy Recommendations

1. Revitalize the ASPA mechanism under CELAC auspices, transforming it from a South American-Arab format into a broader LAC-Arab dialogue that includes Caribbean states, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's engagement with CARICOM.
2. Negotiate a CELAC-Gulf Cooperation Council Framework Agreement on infrastructure investment, food security, and energy diversification, building on the bilateral MoU models established between the UAE and the Dominican Republic and Paraguay.
3. Leverage CELAC's 2026 African Union Summit as a model for formalizing similar high-level meetings with the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, where participation from Head of States will be essential.

Conclusion

The relationship between LAC and the MENA region has entered a new phase—one defined less by ideological solidarity and more by strategic pragmatism in a multipolar world. The Trump administration's revival of the Monroe Doctrine has not driven LAC governments toward submission; it has accelerated their diversification. CELAC's growing external activism, the Gulf states' emergence as infrastructure investors, and the resilience of Venezuelan, Cuban, and Colombian ties to MENA partners all point to a structural deepening of interregional relations. The theoretical framework of multipolar autonomy provides the most analytically adequate lens for understanding this dynamic. It captures the constitutive role of political leadership and ideology without reducing foreign policy to material conditions, and it locates LAC-MENA interregionalism within the broader transformation of a world order no longer organized around Western hegemony.

For policymakers in both regions, the current moment presents a window of opportunity. The institutional infrastructure—CELAC, ASPA, bilateral MoU frameworks—exists in embryonic form. What is required is the political will to transform episodic summits and bilateral deals into a durable interregional architecture capable of translating shared interests in autonomy, development, and multipolar governance into concrete institutional forms. LAC governments are now called upon to maintain active ties with MENA and Africa and not to divert their attention to Washington, in a context where the Iran conflict can shift priorities to a perilous extent.

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