



# Interview with Sean Burges

*Carleton University and Council on Hemispheric Affairs*

**Today's global discussion goes around the idea that multilateralism is in decline, both at the global and at the regional level. What is your opinion about the way South America is dealing with this trend, both within and outside the region?**

We need to start an answer to this question with a structural power recognition. South America lacks the power in terms of money or military might necessary to impose its vision and priorities on the international system.

What the region instead has to rely on is a capacity to articulate ideas and build consensus around reasonable solutions. In other words, regional policy makers have to be multilateralist in outlook and approach because it is usually their only option for having an influence on global affairs. A quick look around the continent can give the sense that South American leaders are turning away from multilateralism, particularly the regional grouping UNASUR. This begs the question of what we think regional organizations were intended to do.

Was it to create a counter-hegemonic bloc to resist American Empire, as the ALBA wing would have it? Was it to create a regional free trade area as the Cepalistas argued in the last century? Or, was the idea to create a pattern of coordination and conversation to avoid surprises and seek a space for intra-regional self-reliance for issue management?

The striking thing is that there has not been a lot of attention given to why the regionalization trend was pursued beyond the high-level policy statements issued by leaders. We, consequently, critique the many failings of groupings such as UNASUR and MERCOSUR without stopping to think about what else they may be delivering.

Here, I think, is the key: regional groupings in South America are the mortar that holds together the concept of *Concertación* that the Professor Merke has eloquently elaborated to explain inter-American relations. The multilateral regional space is what creates and habitualizes the inter-personal contacts at a leader and desk officer level that allow maintenance and regeneration of consensus, and from that, provides assurances of stability.

Interestingly, on a global level the turn to South American multilateralism may become even more important as the liberal world order strains through a transformative stage and a number of regional countries deal with political and economic crisis. External actors have a lamentable tendency to lump all of South America into one bucket. This means that regional management and coordination is critical in order to present a shared outward face of seriousness and reliability. It also means that the ability to impact the evolution of global regimes and institutions will, to a fairly large extent, require coordination of a broadly regional consensus position.

For most of the last twenty-five years, Brazil has taken on the role of engineering this, a task that the country is not able to fulfill effectively at the moment (October 2018), due to internal political uncertainty and the resultant external credibility gap.

The question is then how do regional countries coordinate positions and approaches absent an ideas leader. One viable answer I see is a retasking of UNASUR, something that might be heralded by Brazil's quiet re-

engagement with the grouping over the last few months as Venezuela has firmly pushed itself outside the margins of acceptable conduct.

On an operational and practical level I can thus see groupings like Mercosur and Unasur becoming increasingly important as talk shops. But, on an optics level, this may not translate into the high profile deliverables and statements we have become accustomed to because the underlying reality is that these groupings do need a functional re-design and none of the members have the spare political or economic capital to comprehensively engage in this process. That said, dramatic degradation of the liberal international order might change the calculus and drive a bit of a regional institution engineering renaissance.

