
REGIONAL COHESION OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES

Vladimir A. Goliney

*Institute of Latin American Studies Russian Academy of Science,
Moscow*

The present article analyzes the cooperation between seven Central American countries based on the methodology of New Regionalism Approach and the theory of Comparative Regionalism. The present study offers an attempt to analyze the trade, economic, political and military indicators of the countries in order to identify the level of regional cohesion between states. In addition, the study determines the geopolitical potential of each Central American state for its status of a regional leader. The author also suggests several options for regional leadership, each affecting the policy of regionalism due to high influence of non-regional players in Central America.

Keywords: *regionness, regional cohesion, regional system, regional leadership, geopolitical potential, Central America.*

Introduction

The modern regional studies have wide conceptual and theoretical basis, which is linked with both classical scientific directions, such as the theory of International Relations (Katzenstein 2002) and new scientific schools. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the main discourse of regional studies bases on the theory of Comparative Regionalism (Börzel and Risse 2016) and the New Regionalism Approach (NRA) (Söderbaum 2016). Both these scientific schools actualize such concepts as ‘regionness’ (through the interpretation of internal and regional cohesion), regionalization (as a global process), the regional system and the regionalism, as a policy that forms a particular system.

The NRA theoretical ideas base on constructivism, so the concept of ‘regionness’, like an analytical tool, is aimed at understanding ‘how regionalisation is socially constructed, why some regions develop into higher levels of regionness while others do not, and what are the world order implications’ (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 458). At the same time, it is important to note that regionalization is ‘a process of fragmentation of the world, its virtual division into large self-sufficient economic and political segments’ (Ilyin and Leonova 2017: 78), while regionalism is a policy, ‘a project [that] presupposes eventual linkages between state and non-state actors, [as well as] cooperation across regions creating an interlocking network of regional governance structures’ (Farrell *et al.* 2005: 24). Therefore, regionalism can have many different forms, including the form of regional integration. All these forms of regionalism, as a regionalization process, interconnect with globalization because they spread all around the world but put

into practice with some local (regional) peculiarities. Thus, regionalization and globalization ‘are not completely compatible but neither are they totally incompatible’ (Smit 2015: 26).

Moreover, both regionalism and regionalization play a dual and complex role for any regional system. On the one hand, the regional system, which is the subject of international relations on the world arena and is represented by any regional integration association, can be built ‘from above’. On the other hand, according to the NRA, the regional system is also an independent actor in international relations, but it is created ‘from the bottom’. What does this mean?

The construction strategy of regional system ‘from above’ comes from the global system itself, that is regional associations are built according to the rules that are shared and common for the whole world system (Mazarr *et al.* 2016). For example, political interaction will confirm the core United Nation resolutions and charter; economic institutions and rules in a regional association will coincide with the rules of the GATT and the WTO; financial instruments will operate on the model of the IMF and the World Bank; the judicial system will be based on the rules of the International Court of Justice and international generally accepted practice, *etc.* An important role in such a model of relations will be played by the global center of power and regional leaders, who share the ‘rules of the game’ and support the established global system.

The construction strategy of regional system ‘from the bottom’, on the contrary, gives rise to regional leaders who seek to create a regional system with their own rules of the ‘game’ and their own regionalism practice. If such a leader is strong enough and is able to rally other states of the region around him, then eventually, having gained power, such a system can challenge the existing global system. This leads to the process of global competition and struggle with the hegemon for existing of alternative regionalism and global view.

Nowadays regionalism has a huge amount of types, for example:

1) Old regionalism and new regionalism. Fredrik Söderbaum described the detailed comparison in the table below.

Table 1

Old, New, and Comparative Regionalism

	Old regionalism	New regionalism	Comparative regionalism
World order context	Bipolar world Cold War	Post-Cold War context Globalization and neo-liberalism	Multipolar & ‘Multiplex’ world order War on terror Financial crisis Rise of BRIC/Emerging Powers
Links between national, regional, and global modes of governance	Taming nationalism (in Europe) or Advancing nationalism (in South)	Resisting, taming or advancing economic globalization	Regional Worlds Post-hegemonic, post-neoliberal, heterodox regionalism Regions part of multi-level global governance

Table 1 continued

	Old regionalism	New regionalism	Comparative regionalism
Sectors, actors & forms of organization	Sector specific State-centric Formal regionalism Hard regionalism	Multi-sectoral State vs. non-state actors Regionalism vs. regionalization Formal vs. informal Hard vs. soft	Both multi-sectoral & sector-specific State & non-state Multiple forms of organization & designs
Ontology	Regional integration Regional organizations (& subsystems) Clear regional boundary lines	Ontological pluralism, confusion and disagreement Regionalism Regionalization Regional organizations	Porous & overlapping regions Conceptual pluralism – but not confusion Ontological pluralism Regions, regionalism, regional networks, regional governance
Epistemology	Dominance of positivism & rationalism & materialism (and some structuralism in the South)	Rationalism vs. constructivism vs. critical theory Materialism vs. ideas/identities Epistemological conflict	Epistemological pluralism Emerging dialogues
Methodology	Europe-focused Rigid comparison	Regional specialization (parochialism) vs. false universalism (Eurocentrism) Comparison as parallel case studies or quantitative studies Little dialogue between EU studies and IR/IPE regionalism	Increasing comparison Emergence of non-Eurocentric comparative regionalism (better contextual sensitivity and less conceptual rigidity)

Source: Söderbaum 2015: 23.

2) Interregionalism is an approach that can be defined as a policy or program of action through which some regions interact with each other at the supranational (regional) level. More often interregionalism is considered between ‘two clearly identifiable regional organizations within an institutional framework’ (Baert *et al.* 2014: 5).

3) Transregionalism, according to Jürgen Rüländ, ‘refers to a dialogue process with a more diffuse membership. It does not necessarily only include regional organizations but also member states from more than two regions and participants without membership in a regional grouping’ (Rüländ 2014: 16). At the same time, transregional interaction happens within non-governmental organizations' regional policy.

4) quasi-interregionalism is a type of regionalism, where regional organization interacts with one or more countries from another region, for example, ‘the security cooperation between France and ECOWAS’ (Pirozzi and Godsäter 2017: 19), BRICS+ or ASEAN+ format (Kawai and Wignaraja 2007).

5) Other different types of regionalism: post-hegemonic regionalism (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012), post-neoliberal regionalism (Riggirozzi 2012), heterodox regionalism

(Vivares 2013), regional worlds (Acharya 2014), beyond regionalism approach (Harders and Legrenzi 2008) and so on.

As we can see, regionalism expanded from the study of one regional policy to many regionalisms, which required some structuring in the further study of the concept of region. Thus, a Theory of Comparative Regionalism appeared, complementing the NRA by making possible to compare different types of regionalism within the global world order system.

To do this, researchers analyze the main areas of cooperation between countries: trade, economic, military and political cooperation. This analysis reveals the strength of the relations between the countries in any region, as well as whether the achievement of a certain level of cohesion and cooperation leads to the creation of a regional system.

This study will focus not only on regionalization and regionalism, but it will try to determine whether regional cooperation in Central America leads to the cohesion (regionness) and the creation of a system. Cultural and historical ties between the states of this region are not enough to identify regional cohesion, so this paper will use a comparative approach to the main types of cooperation between countries (trade, economic, military and political), since 'the system comes into existence when constant interaction develops between political units' (Tsygankov 2013: 4). It will be possible to determine the level of regional cohesion, comparing the above-mentioned areas of cooperation.

The study also will use a model for determining the countries' geopolitical potential, which allows considering the hierarchy in the regional system (through its global scale) and identifying the regional leader and candidates for this status.

Methodology

There are many studies in which scholars try to measure different indicators of countries: compare them with each other in the 'vertical' dimension, that is a hierarchy, to identify leaders and other participants; and in 'horizontal' dimension, that is to define how closely connected the countries are.

We can find the attempts of such analysis in the field of geopolitics, for example, Alfred Mahan (Mahan 1896: 33–79) or Nicholas Spykman (Spykman 2007: 15–26) revealed the criteria which made it possible to compare the weight of the warring countries and thus, to predict the possible outcome of the collision between rivals. Continuation of this kind of research can be found in the framework of theories of international relations, for example, in works of Hans Morgenthau (Morgenthau 1967: 80–108) and John Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer 2001: 55–86), who dealt with the essential and quantitative aspects of the concept of power. The most relevant and close to us are researches linked with systematic approach, mathematics and modeling.

Comparative studies of this nature have begun since the 1980s and covered both the entire international system in general and individual regions in particular. The most popular projects are the 'World Power Assessment' project by Ray Steiner Cline (Cline 1977) and the 'Composite Index of National Capability' (CINC) by David Singer (Jensen 1974). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Russian researchers from the Military and Russian Academies of Sciences developed a model for determining the geopolitical status and potential of countries in the world (Platonov *et al.* 2013: 85). Their research bases on the experience of the most common methodological studies, thus, it is accumulating all

necessary indicators of states making a simplified formula for comparative analysis. We extrapolated this formula on the Central American region, analyzing seven countries of this area through the ‘vertical’ dimension. This analysis allows us to identify candidates for the status of a regional leader and their geopolitical potential.

The proposed model consists of several indicators that are used in the formula (Akaev *et al.* 2011: 91–92): $G(t) = 0,5(1 + X_M^{0,43})X_T^{0,11}X_D^{0,19}X_E^{0,27}$,

- demography (XD),
- economy (XE),
- territory (XT),
- military (XM);

in which the mentioned indicators mean the following: XD – the country's population (UN 2020), XE – the country's GDP at purchasing power parity (IMF 2020), XT – the area of the state's territory (CIA N.d.), XM – the amount of military expenditures and the number of armed forces (SIPRI N.d.). Each of the indicators is calculated for the period from 1980 to 2019 in relative form that is a reflection of the share of a country. The total results of all countries in the world are taken for 100 per cent, from which the share of each of the seven studied countries is derived.

As for the horizontal dimension, here it is necessary to characterize three main indicators:

- trade and economic cooperation (within and outside the region);
- political cooperation between the countries (density of cooperation within the framework of integration associations); and
- military cooperation (joint military exercises and defense organizations within or outside the region).

Trade and economic cooperation is considered in dynamics over a certain period. The current study selects the period from 1980 to 2019. This type of cooperation includes the share of the Central American countries in mutual exports and imports between them and other countries in the world that allows determining the vector of interaction. Such analysis also helps to see the density of links between countries. We can assume that if cooperation reaches 30 per cent or more of the total trade, then the relations between countries are deep and systemic. If less than 10 per cent of the total trade, the level of cooperation is low.

The table below shows an example of calculations for one of the countries – Costa Rica. We take into account the share of its annual imports and exports with other countries of the world that are grouped into regional groups (Asia, Africa, Europe – all countries; North America: USA and Canada (Mexico is included in Latin America); the Middle East (with Egypt and Turkey); Oceania: all independent and depended countries of the Pacific Ocean, excluding Indonesia, which is in Asia group). Latin America is also considered as a space of several sub-regions (Caribbean: 13 States and 18 dependent territories; Mexico; Central America; South America, which in its turn is divided into two groups: Ando – Pacific area – Colombia, Peru, Chile and Ecuador, and Continental area – other eight countries). Then the share of each regional group is summed up (both in imports and exports) and divided by 40, which allows determine the average

annual value of trade cooperation between the country and the regional group. The trade statistics is available at IMF database (as well as GDP PPP) (IMF 2020).

Table 2

**Share of annual imports and exports for Costa Rica
with other regions of the world for 1995**

Regions	Import (%)	Export (%)
Asia	8.26	3.43
Africa	0.12	0.22
Europe	13.1	33.11
Latin America (with Mexico)	31.4	21.09
North America	46.7	41.49
Middle East	0.26	0.52
Oceania	0.16	0.14
TOTAL	100	100

Source: IMF 2020; the figures with trade were complete by author.

Political cooperation between countries and their military cooperation implies a degree of solidarity and trust between the states of the region. The interaction between political leaders within the framework of various regional associations allows coordinating ones' stances and development of a common agenda. All this also indirectly allows identifying the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the system.

While military cooperation identifies solidarity between countries. It is also necessary to take into account the existence of alliances, a military-political organization that is responsible for the security of the system, joint military exercises and operations (the number and frequency of their conduct).

In the present paper we separately include Mexico and its level of interaction with the neighboring region, since researchers often combine Central America and Mexico into Mesoamerica.

Research Results

Considering the geopolitical potential of Central American countries, we can identify the leading country – Guatemala, and the state closing the hierarchy – Belize. Figure 1 shows that the remaining states are in a tight group, competing with each other for the status of the second power in terms of their potential. While in 1980 Nicaragua was such a challenger for the status, in 1987/88 it was replaced by Honduras, which in its turn was caught up by Panama by 2013, a state that reached the second place in the following 2014.

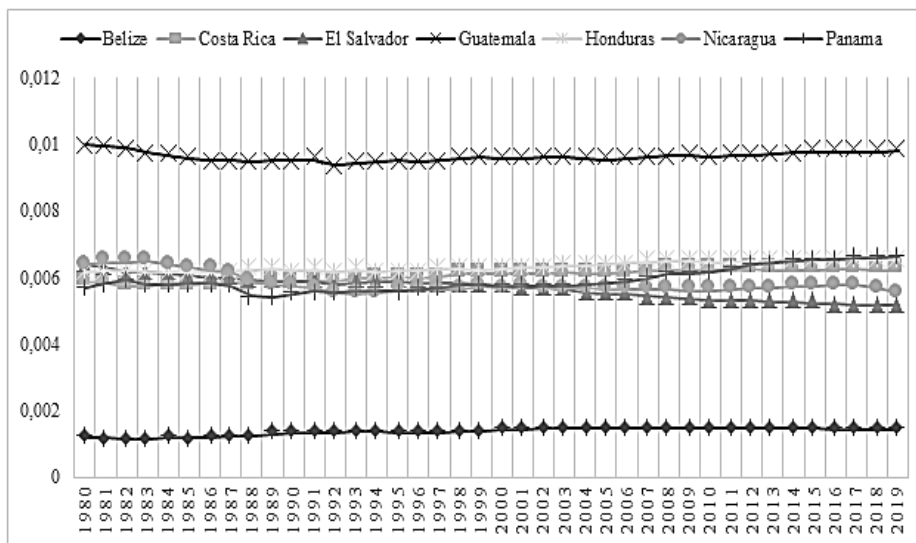


Fig. 1. Geopolitical potential of Central American countries

Of course, the case of Guatemala's leadership should be considered mostly through its statistics. In reality, it is hard to name this country as a regional leader due to its 'persistently high rates of poverty and inequality' (World Bank 2020a). Thus, we must point out that without an internal regional leader Central America can hardly be considered as a self-sufficient regional system.

However, if we continue to analyze the geopolitical potential, especially the gap between Guatemala and its closest 'challengers' in the recent years – Honduras and Panama, – we can see that Guatemala exceeds its neighbors by almost by one-and-a-half times. The smallest gap with Honduras was 1.483 times in 2008, with Panama – 1.481 times in 2018; the largest with Honduras – 1.602 times in 1980 and with Panama – 1.749 times in 1989. The gap between Panama and Guatemala increased in 1989 because of the US intervention in Panama aimed at preventing the transfer of the control over the Panama Canal from the USA to the government of Panama. To realize that shadow reason, the USA would conduct 'Operation Just Cause' (Cole 1995). The 'tradition' of the American intervention into Panama's affairs was quite long. From 1856 to 1903, fourteen interventions were conducted which ended with the creation of the state of Panama (Conniff 2012: 34). The USA followed their economic interest and proposed Colombia to provide them permission to create a canal in Panama. They followed the Hay-Herran Treaty presupposed the USA to pay Colombia 'for the duration of the 99-year canal lease. In return, the USA would control a six-mile wide canal zone in Panama' (TR Center N.d.). However, Colombia has not ratified it and the President of the USA, Theodor Roosevelt, 'switched from preventing Panama's separation from Colombia to encouraging it' (McPherson 2016: 57). Thus, Panama received its 'independence' under the control of the USA. Panamanians tried to unburden themselves several times, however, unsuccessfully. For example, in 1959 an anti-American demonstration, which came to the territory of the Panama Canal, was dispersed (Meditz and Hanratty 1989: 36).

Nevertheless, after 2008 we can see the growth of Panama's potential (see Figure 1). It happened due to an increase in its economic performance from 1980 to 2019 (1.11 times, which is the second value among the countries under study). If we talk about an increase in the absolute value of GDP by PPP, this country also became the second, increasing its economy by 15.83 times in 2019 compared to 1980. In the first place in the economic indicators of geopolitical potential was Belize, which increased its GDP by PPP by 16.22 times over the specified period and the indicator itself by 1.12 times.

It is important to note that among Central American states only Nicaragua and El Salvador have trends to reduce their geopolitical potential, while the rest have a trend to increase their geopolitical status. Taking into account the global COVID-19 pestilence that began in 2019–2020 it is necessary to understand that the potential of all countries in the world, including Central American countries, will undergo significant changes. The presented model shows trends based on the dynamics of past events up to the beginning of 2020 (due to the statistics up to this period is much clear and is revealed by UN and authorities).

Moving to the results of Central American horizontal dimension it is necessary to start with trade and economic cooperation.

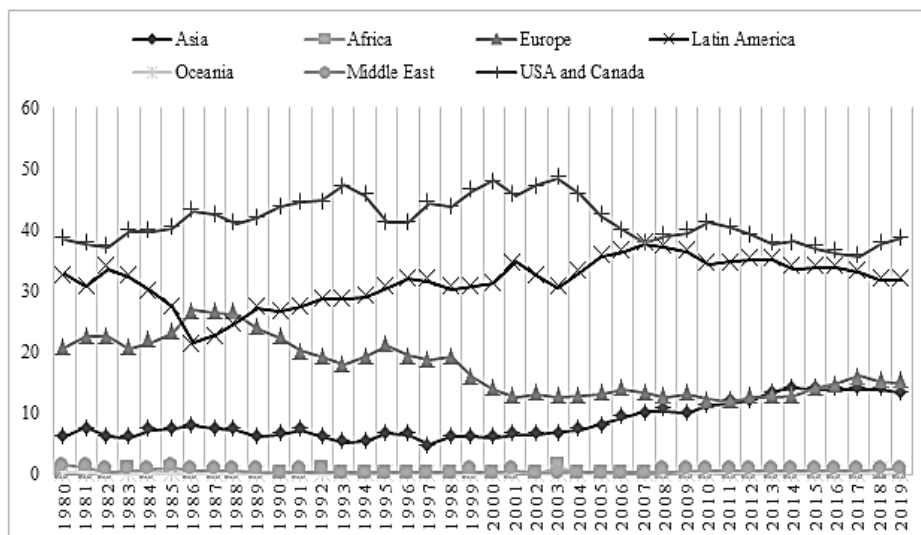


Fig. 2. Central American trade with regional groups

Based on Figure 2, we can see that the main trade and economic vector of the Central American countries is the United States and Canada for the entire selected period. The average annual share of trade in this direction is 41.55 per cent, with a peak of 48.49 per cent in 2003 and the lowest value of 35.69 per cent in 2017. The second most important destination is Latin America, which has been directly correlated with North America since 2000, reaching a peak of 37.8 per cent in 2007.

The European direction has been 'competing' with the Asian one since 2011, periodically returning to the third place. This trend peaked in 1986, when Central American

countries experienced a significant decline in trade with Latin America. Other directions have a small share throughout the selected period.

If we take Latin America as a combination of sub-regions (Figure 3), we can see that the Central American countries trade most with each other, having an average intraregional cooperation, showing an average share of 16.53 per cent of mutual trade per year over a 40-year period. The period of growth is 1986–2007, with four short-term periods of decline in 1990, 1994, 1998, and 2002, and a peak of 21.02 per cent in 2007.

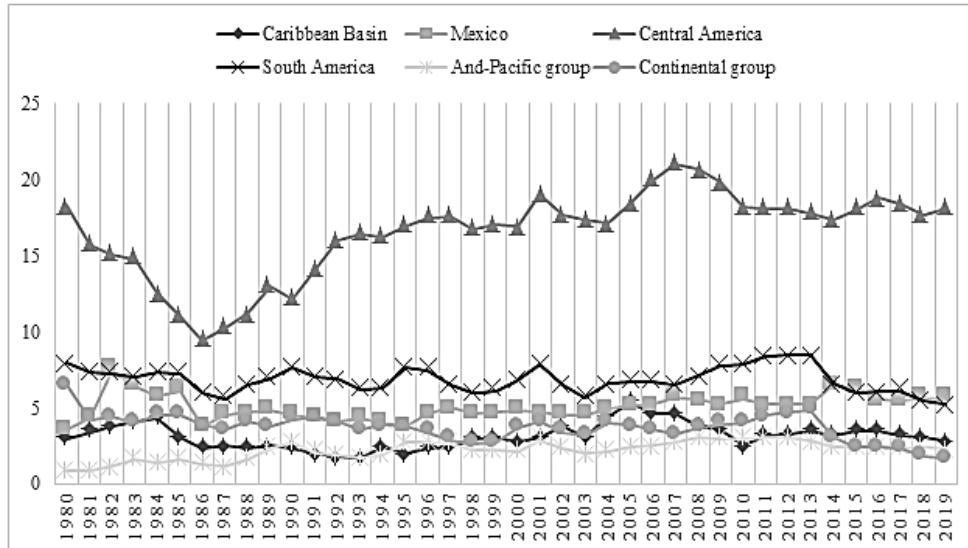


Fig. 3. Central American trade with Latin American sub-regions

It is clear that trade with South America is in the second place (6.86 per cent on average per year), which has been periodically overtaken by Mexico since 2014. At the same time, trade with Mexico for Central American countries has an average annual share of 5.06 per cent, with a peak of 7.47 per cent in 1982. We remind that South America can be divided into Continental and Ando-Pacific areas. The Central American trade with Continental area has fallen significantly since 2014, allowing the Ando-Pacific area to surpass it in trade with Central American countries. Moreover, we should note that the decline in the trade share of the Continental area countries happened due to a reduction in mutual trade between the countries of the region and Venezuela.

Returning to trade with Mexico, one should note that trade with this country for seven Central American countries differs in density (on average per year for the period 1980–2019): Belize – 7.91 per cent (with an average annual share of 11.64 per cent for the period 1980–1989); Costa Rica – 4.04 per cent (with a peak of 5.52 per cent in 1981); El Salvador – 4.22 per cent (with a peak of 5.24 per cent in 2019); Guatemala – 6.41 per cent (with the average most stable share 7.93 per cent for the period 2010–2019, and a peak of 8.47 per cent in 2012); Honduras – 3.49 per cent (with a peak of 5.37 per cent in 2010); Nicaragua – 5.94 per cent (with peaks of 12.64 per cent in 1982 and 11.27 per cent in 2015); Panama – 3.4 per cent (with a peak of 5.34 per cent in 1982).

For Mexico itself, the trade with Central American countries is even more insignificant, as Figure 4 shows it.

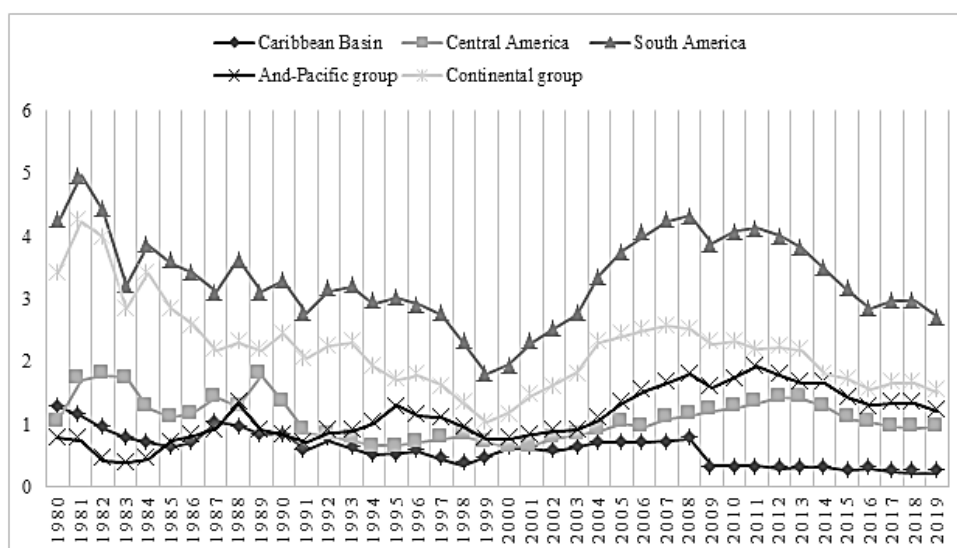


Fig. 4. Mexico's trade with sub-regions of Latin America

The share of exports and imports of Central American countries for Mexico itself per year for the selected period is at the level of statistical error – 1.09 per cent, with a minimum value of 0.66 per cent in 1995 and a maximum of 1.784 per cent in 1989. At the same time, the share of trade for Mexico with the whole Latin America is even less than the share of trade for Central America with Mexico itself, since it is 5.02 per cent share on average per year. Thus, in reality, one can hardly speak about the Mesoamerican system. Mexico minimally intertwines in trade with Central America and such mutual economic relations do not have a sufficient level of regional cohesion.

Origins of Political Cooperation in Central America

Turning to the issue of political cooperation between the countries of this region, we must go back to history. The fact is that the initiatives to unite the former Spanish colonies in Central America into one territorial entity date back to the first quarter of the nineteenth century. At that time, a state called the United Provinces of Central America appeared on the world map. This Association did not last long, breaking up as a result into several separate republics (Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and El Salvador [Taracena Arriola 1995]), which faced the question of choosing their further development: to create their own separate identity and nationality ('patria nacional') or, after overcoming the adversity, to continue creating a single Central American Fatherland ('patria centroamericana') (Vázquez Vicente 2011: 265). In such a swing, Central America existed until the 1950s, when at least eight attempts were made by various forces to re-unite the disparate republics, which is clearly shown in the work of Costa Rican Professor Willy Soto Acosta (Soto Acosta and Suarez Ulloa 2014: 59–61).

The integration initiatives were fully implemented in practice only in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, in 1951, in order to streamline the economic integration, which ‘must go hand in hand with a certain degree of political integration’ (Villalta Vizcarra 2013: 451), the Organization of Central American States (Organización de los Estados Centroamericanos, ODECA) was created. A bit later, it became the basis for the Central American Common Market (Mercado Común Centroamericano, MCCA). MCCA activities were interrupted in 1969 by the ‘Football war’ between Honduras and El Salvador, but recovered in 1991, transforming into the Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, SICA), which is supplemented by the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN). Its main goal is ‘to establish and complement activities that support understanding and cooperation with institutional structures that will make possible to strengthen the dialogue, the common development, democracy and pluralism as fundamental elements for peace in the region and for the integration of Central America’ (SICA N.d.).

These institutions were created because of the need to fix the existing relations, their systemic nature, vectors and dynamics of development, as well as to become an instrument of intraregional cooperation to prevent conflicts, which previously were the main reason for the failure of integration initiatives.

The Conflicts in Central America vs. the Union

Since independence, the main characteristic of all Central American countries has been military confrontations between countries and constant civil wars. During such upheavals, Central American countries also faced dozens of United States' interventions. The USA interfered in the Central American conflicts directly or indirectly through the second half of the nineteenth century until nowadays more often than in any other countries of the Western Hemisphere. One of the first interventional actions was the filibuster attack on Nicaragua in 1855, when William Walker seized the power in this country and received the support from the United States (he was recognized by the US president of those times). By seizing power in Nicaragua and bringing back the slave trade, ‘Walker conceived that by such a policy he would promote the welfare of his native no less than of his adopted country’ (Walker 1860: 268–269).

However, the Central American republics temporarily forgot about their feuds and began a war against the Walker government, which in the eyes of other Spanish American countries was a common war, a war against the US aggression, a war that could unite not only Central Americans but also all Spanish Americans. Specifically these events influenced Colombian politician and poet José María Torres Caicedo to use for the first time in Spanish America the notion of Latin America in the poem ‘Las dos Américas’. The common Spanish language, shared post-colonial history and culture as well as close-knit ethnicity contributed to the creation of joint mentality for both Central America and Latin America, which replaced Central American Fatherland to the Latin-American Fatherland. Interventions of the US continued more frequently during 1898–1930s and helped to strengthen Central American unity. This period of the world history is known as ‘Banana Wars’, when the USA used Big Stick Policy trying to get the control over the Central America and the Caribbean. One of the latest US influential action happened in Honduras in 2009, when they used the Organization of American

States as a tool to withdrawal Honduras from the member states and delegitimize the oust President Manuel Zelaya. At those years, Zelaya wanted to join the ALBA project, the countries of which have anti-US policy in the region.

The second time when Central American conflicts helped to strengthen the Latin American and regional unity was in the 1970–80s. During this period, there were constant military coups d'état and protracted paramilitary conflicts in the Central American republics, for example:

- ‘the civil war lasted for 36 years (1960–1996)’ in Guatemala (Kalashnikov 2013: 5);
- the Sandinista revolution of 1979 took place in Nicaragua, followed by the civil war of 1981–1990, where special forces called ‘contras’ (Platoshkin 2015: 505) were used which were supported by the United States;

- in El Salvador ‘in the context of the conflict escalation in Central America, conducted by the Ronald Reagan's administration policy of “rollback the communism” [in this country] and the beginning of the liberalization of the military regime, the struggle resulted in a protracted civil war’ (Kalashnikov 2010: 7), which lasted from 1979 to 1992.

‘In this context, the foreign Ministers of Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela began the negotiation process on the Panamanian island of Contador in January 1983’ (Páez Montalbán 2013: 64), creating the so-called Contador group, whose goal was to resolve these conflicts in Central America and create conditions for a peace process. Later, other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina and Costa Rica, joined this group. Costa Rica despite its small size in comparison with the regional giants joined the group, and ‘played an important role as a peacemaker in the settlement of the Central American armed conflict, marked by the Nobel peace prize (1987) awarded to the country's President Oscar Arias Sánchez’ (Kalashnikov 2014: 9).

Due to its expansion with new members, the Contador group exceeded its framework of a peaceful settlement of Central American conflicts and transformed in 1986 into the Rio Group. ‘One of the main goals [of this Group] was to conduct a process of regular consultations on issues affecting or of interest to the member countries of the mechanism, in order to achieve greater unity of the countries of whole Latin America’ (Diéguez 1994: 153). As the result, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños, CELAC), appeared in 2010 with the aim to unite all Latin American countries and reduce the influence of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United States in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, the internal conflicts in Central America and external interference of the USA can be considered as one of the important elements that contributed to the development of a similar political mentality in Central America as well as to intensification of the unification of the countries of this sub-region and Latin America in general.

As we can see, on the one hand, there are developed and well-established institutional forms of cooperation and regular meetings of the Central American heads of state on the sidelines of the previously mentioned organizations since the 2000s. However, on the other hand, the socio-economic conditions in the countries of the region are still unstable. Central America is unlikely to be able to solve them independently without an external help (as in the case of the Contador group), so the countries depend on assistance from external powers. For example, in 2014, the United States launched the Alliance for the Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, which implements a special plan for

assistance (IDB N.d.). Moreover, since 2017, it has been holding the Conference for Prosperity and Security in Central America, which is aimed at combating crime and illegal drug traffics, coordinating national security activities, as well as creating conditions for economic development within countries and favorable working conditions for their population.

The European Union also regularly allocates funds to Central America for improving parliamentary and democratic policies, as well as food security programs (from 2014 to 2020, the region received more than 1 billion euros in technical and financial assistance provided by the EU to Central American countries [Kalashnikov 2015: 79]).

Based on this, we can say that an important system-forming element for the Central American regional system is non-regional powers, primarily the United States, which determine the policy of regionalism not only in Central America, but also in the entire Western Hemisphere. Partly as a result of this, the nineteenth century concept of ‘*patria centroamericana*’ gradually changed to the *Patria Grande* of Latin America, as part of the Western Hemisphere.

Military Cooperation

When speaking about military cooperation as an additional characteristic of the regional system of Central American countries, one should point out its three directions. The first is the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance of 1947, known as the Rio Pact, which is common to the Western Hemisphere. All Central American countries are participants of this Treaty, with the exception of Belize, which did not sign it, and the Republic of Nicaragua, which left the Treaty in 2012.

The second direction relates to the bilateral initiatives and joint activities of the Central American military forces with the United States. For example, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), which has been operating since 2008 with USA financial support ‘to strengthen the long-term capacities of Central American governments to address security challenges and the underlying social and political factors that contribute to them’ (Meyer and Ribando Seelke 2015: ii).

The countries also interact in the framework of the Central American Security Conference (CENTSEC), held jointly with the US Southern Command. In 2020, the main cooperation was ‘focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and countering transnational criminal organizations’ (WJPC N.d.). This conference allows coordinating joint actions of the military of Mexico and Central America in the fight against drug cartels.

In addition, since 1995, special Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA) has been holding meetings, where high Command and the Ministries of Defense of Latin America exchange experience between each other. All seven Central American countries participate in the Conferences. This direction also includes another form of cooperation – System of cooperation among the American Air Forces.

The third direction relates to internal forces and independent internal financing of the Central American countries. In this vein, the Central American Conference of Military Forces (Conferencia de las Fuerzas Armadas Centroamericanas, CFAC) has been operating since 1997. It is extremely important to note that all the armies of Central America relate to civil defense and security, participating in rescue operations, helping

the police. Belize also conducts regular joint exercises with the United Kingdom, supported by the remnants of the British Army Training Support Unit Belize (BATSUB).

According to the Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina (RESDAL) (Donadio 2016: 84), there are four main regular programs for joint military exercises, where Central American countries participate: Tradewins (including the forces of Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize), Panamax Allied Forces (excluded only Honduras), Command Forces (all Central American states are involved), FANUM (Humanitarian Allied Forces) (all Central American states are involved).

Conclusion

Summing up a comparative analysis of the horizontal and vertical dimension of states and their internal cohesion, we can mark out a number of important points:

1) The Central American countries have a certain system of trade, political and military cooperation; so their relations are not sporadic and correspond to an average level of regionness (regional systematic cohesion). At the same time, to be a fully complemented regional system, it is not enough to have well-established ties, regional economic and military associations. There also must be a regional leader, which fulfil the regionalism policy. Guatemala does not have any regionalism practice as a leader, notwithstanding its geopolitical potential. In this respect, Central America cannot be considered as a full-fledged regional self-sufficient system. The example of Central America clearly proves the thesis: ‘the regionalism realized by the collective institutional design via regional organizations ... depend on the conditions and constrains of individual sovereign member states’ (Kim 2013: 29).

2) On the other hand, despite the absence of an internal leader in the region, we can see one feature that is critically important for the creation of a system. This feature considers the presence of an external player, a non-regional leader who is able to ‘pull’ other Central American countries to become an implementer of the regionalism policy in this region. In other words, an external player acts as one of the system-forming elements in the Central American regional system. In this case, we can specify several possible ways, based on the strategies of possible non-regional leaders.

The first strategy implies the United States as a non-regional leader. The USA has a Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which includes all Central American countries with the exception of Belize and Panama (USTR 2018). There was also another regional project – the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) that United States promoted in the 1990s and early 2000s. The project was to be based on the WTO rules, which six out of seven Central American countries fully shared (except Nicaragua) and were ready to implement. However, the United States encountered opposition from Brazil and Venezuela, which managed to convince the countries of the region.

The United States is also a key state in the field of defense and security for the countries of Central America. Most of the joint exercises, exchange of experience and training of military staff from the countries of the region take place at the expense of the United States and with the direct participation of their armed forces. The Central American republics also depend on financial support from the US programs and remittances from migrants who succeeded to settle in the United States.

The second strategy is Venezuela as a non-regional leader. Venezuela and Cuba are coordinating the activities of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), a regional association, which has become an alternative to the FTAA project. Thus, Venezuela has a regional project that could unite 'from the bottom' some countries under the auspices of this state. Nevertheless, this strategy is highly improbable nowadays. The main instrument of unification of the member-states is Venezuelan oil. The development of the association itself directly depends on the socio-economic well-being and stability in Venezuela. After the death of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's contacts with the ALBA member countries significantly decreased. The initial success of Venezuela in expanding the ALBA and increasing its influence in the hemisphere was replaced by an economic and political crisis. In 2019, Juan Guaido, President of the National Assembly of Venezuela, declared himself as an acting President. He attempted to circumvent the existing official authorities in Venezuela to bring the country back under the institutions of the Inter-American system (*e.g.*, back to the Rio Pact) (TeleSUR 2019). Later on, the Lima Group appeared to push the socialist forces out of the country. This Group was organized with the approval of the United States. It consists of fourteen States in the Latin America and does not support the initiatives of Nicolas Maduro's government (Gop.pe N.d.). Due to the active information coverage of these events in media, Venezuela has become associated among other countries around the world as a negative and unsuccessful example of development. Previously, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, Latin America witnessed some events that researchers call 'Pink tide'. 'From 1998 to 2014, the region experienced a turn to the left' (Pyatakov 2015: 66), when the left-wing radical or moderate politicians came to power. Now, with the negative image of the leftist, the Venezuela politicians from the right-wing political camp call to negative arguments during the elections against their left-wing opponents, using primarily the image of a crisis-ridden Venezuela. These processes have led to a 'right turn' (Shishkov 2017) in Latin America and dramatic exclusion of Venezuela from any leadership within regionalism policy in both Latin and Central America.

The third strategy is Mexico as a non-regional leader. This country claims the status of a regional leader in Latin America in terms of its geopolitical weight. However, in terms of Central America, as we saw in the example of trade cooperation, Mexico does not have any regional projects that could unite the countries of Central America under its auspices. Despite this fact, Mexico could increase its influence in Central America regarding the significance of the migration problem and global illegal drug trafficking. In addition, Mexico can implement some infrastructure projects, for example, the Pueblo-Panama Plan (Proyecto Mesoamérica N.d.), cross-border communication hubs, telecommunications and roads affecting the southern states of Mexico; possible participation in the Nicaraguan Canal building; a logistics platform on the territory of Honduras and El Salvador. These infrastructure projects contribute to the creation of jobs and lead to the well-being of the population in Central America. At the same time, the creation of jobs in these sub-regions would help reduce the instability caused by the caravans of migrants traveling through Mexico to the United States. In 2019, the USA government prevented the caravans to cross the border, so Mexico found itself in a situation when a large num-

ber of people arrived at its territory and did not want to stay there. As a result, migrant-related violence and crime rates have increased in this country. ‘Experts in the field of migration draw attention to the evidence that criminal organizations in Mexico have established links with criminal groups in several areas of Central America for joint activities against migrants’ (Vershina 2016: 116–117). Taking into account the fact that ‘Central American criminal groups play a supporting role in drug trafficking, since the transit of drugs to the US is controlled by large Mexican drug cartels’ (Shishkov 2018: 63), it cannot be excluded that some part of the caravans was also used to transport drugs. Mexico is interested in solving these problems.

At the same time, some experts consider migrants as one of the key element for Central American common identity due to their common views and huge influence on the economies of some countries in this region. The table below shows that four out of seven Central American countries depend from remittance flows (mostly from the USA). Nevertheless, the migration processes in Central America have another impact. According to the World Bank experts 2014 statistics show that Central American countries lost approx. 80 billion dollars per year due to the ‘migration of mind flows and repatriation of illegal migrants’ (Dan López 2014), while for example, for the whole 2019 remittance flows gave Central America only 24.6 billion dollars. Thus, migrant caravans in reality cause damage to economies of Central America.

Table 3

Share of migrant remittances in GDP, 2019

Country	Remittance flows, millions of US\$	Share of the flows in GDP, %
Belize	97	5.8
Costa Rica	553	0.9
El Salvador	5,656	22.6
Guatemala	10,656	14.4
Honduras	5,401	21.5
Nicaragua	1,686	13.6
Panama	581	1

Source: World Bank 2020b.

After the election of the new President of the United States, the topic of migrants again becoming relevant for Mexico, as Joe Biden intends to soften the migration policy (Biden 2020), which will contribute to the legalization of migrants from Central America in the United States and their further influx. This has already led to the movement of a new caravan (approximately 9,000 people) from Honduras towards the United States through Guatemala and Mexico, on the border of which there were clashes in January 2021 (TeleSUR 2021).

Based on this, the most likely scenario is a strategy according to which the regional system of Central American countries will have the United States as the regional leader and its development will be more determined by the assistance, projects and initiatives

of the Northern neighbor, rather than internal forces. This means the language of NRA that Central American regional system is constructed ‘from above’ and will coincide with the USA regionalism practice in the Western Hemisphere and the whole world.

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