

Out of the Ashes of Ideology: Regional System, Borders, and Inter-State Conflicts in Latin America

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Abstract

This essay offers a brief overview of postwar inter-State conflicts that confirms an historically pacific trend in the region and identifies some of the more prevalent factors that appear to have influenced this path. Causal factors include the ascendancy of the United States, Latin America's relative detachment from the nerve centers of the international system and the presence of a battery of regional organizations with an extensive track record in arbitrating inter-State conflicts. Against this backdrop, the discussion turns to the future of this peaceful tradition in light of the crisis of U.S. hegemony on the one hand, and Latin America's increasing insertion in the international system on the other, all within a panorama once again fraught with ideological differences, competition for regional leadership and the potential loss of legitimacy of collective security organs.

The main argument presented throughout this work is that border disputes continue to have enormous potential to erupt into interstate wars and that threat is growing stronger in function of two trends: the intensification of social conflicts in border areas with little government presence and the weakened capacity for arbitration by collective organs as the ideological wedge between political regimes grows wider.

The course of regional conflicts and changes in the Inter-American system are examined through this lens, with particular attention to the role of the Organization of the American States (OAS) as a pacifying agency. This is followed by a discussion of two interwoven processes: the "Latinamericanization" of the foreign policies of Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela, and the receding and waning influence of the United States in the region. These developments have led to the emergence of blocs formed around political affinities and divergent views concerning the priorities on the North American agenda in areas such as free trade, the fight against drug trafficking, military bases or collective security issues. Moving beyond the temporal context of the current protagonists—the United States and its preferred partner, Colombia, on the one hand,

and Venezuela and its closest allies on the other—this essay attempts to pinpoint the root cause of this antagonism and its significance in relation to the topic at hand. The renewed importance of the Caribbean and Central America is explored in the current context of ideological polarization and the potential destabilizing effect of border conflicts, taking into account that improved economic integration has not, to date, led to the establishment of a collective defense system that might replace the system established under the Rio Treaty. While the presence of democratic governments has facilitated the resolution of several disputes between Latin American countries in recent decades, the Kantian theory that democratic States do not fight among themselves is belied by the numerous cases in which the decision to use force was not tempered by this variable. The essay concludes by stressing the urgency of containing an ideological wave that is gaining impetus at both ends of the spectrum, in order to ensure that collective entities for conciliation and security do not forfeit the legitimacy and effectiveness they require when it comes time to arbitrate conflicts.