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One's loss, another's gain

Frustrated by the political strings attached to trade agreements by the Global North, Latin America is increasingly engaging with the Middle East

Diversification is the key word to describe the needs of Latin America. The region is looking for partners outside the Global North, which makes the Middle East a natural attraction. Meanwhile, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Türkiye – if we consider the latter as part of the Middle East – are continuously seeking to increase their presence in Latin America. The interactions between the two regions are concrete proof of today's multipolar world.

In its paranoia about China, the US perceives Latin America merely as a secure provider of raw materials and a counterweight to the Chinese influence. For the EU, Mario Draghi's recent report on European competitiveness asserted the strategic scope of European foreign policy: seeking energy and natural resources. China's plans, meanwhile, are still unclear. As Latin American governments are refusing the political mandates or clauses that the countries of the Global North have usually imposed as part of economic partnerships, the Middle East is asserting itself as the only force capable of approaching Latin America respectfully, offering fair trade and commercial agreements with little conditionality to its Latin American peers.

Iran, UAE and Saudi Arabia

For a region with an estimated slow growth rate of 2.1 per cent and a strong dependence on commodity prices, diversification is vital. If these conditions are generally true for Latin America as a whole, there are country-specific characteristics that make some Middle Eastern nations more suitable partners than others.

Western sanctions against Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, for instance, are the essence of Iran's presence in Latin America. After 1979, when the Iranian Revolution and the Sandinista uprising in Nicaragua coincided, Tehran began providing oil and energy-related resources to Cuba and

Nicaragua as an alternative scheme to the US sanctions. Since Hugo Chávez's 1999 mandate in Venezuela, the Ayatollahs have also been preparing military and commercial projects for Caracas, which have taken on added significance in light of Washington's current sanctions against Venezuela. While US and European governments are in detrimental relations with these countries, to which we can add Bolivia, Iran has been organising continuous high-level visits centred on energy cooperation, trade and defence. One only has to look at the US and EU reactions to the controversial Venezuelan elections to understand why Caracas, which holds most of the natural resources Draghi so desperately seeks, favours ties with Iran instead.

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Perhaps an even more striking example comes from the United Arab Emirates. Unlike Iran, whose Latin American agenda dates back to the founding of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with Venezuela, the UAE had no real eye on the Americas until the Lula-led Summit of South American-Arab Countries in 2005. Today, following the South-South cooperation advocated by Colombian President Gustavo Petro, the UAE has signed a balanced and significant economic agreement with both Colombia and Costa Rica.

The UAE's ability to convince not only the Colombian and Costa Rican authorities but also the local people, who are aware of the history of trade agreements backfiring, is not just luck. Colombia, a US and NATO ally, is still suffering from the adverse effects of its free trade agreement with Washington and is willing to renegotiate it. More generally, many Latin American countries are still struggling with trade disputes with US enterprises due to unbalanced free trade agreements and significant power imbalances with multinationals. Free trade agreements tend to favour US exports in Latin American markets, rather than facilitating access for Latin American goods in North America. For Costa Rica, the CAFTA-DR – a package of supposed tariff agreements between the US and Central America – has caused significant import-export deficits in the country's economy.

BRICS represents a prospective multilateral safeguard for Latin America's links with the Middle East. From Cuba to Bolivia, several countries seem interested in joining BRICS. For the one that is already present in the bloc – Brazil – the appeal of Saudi Arabia's membership is one of the motivations for Saudi-South American ties. Initially, the Kingdom set its feet across the Caribbean through a joint summit with

CARICOM, a regional organisation led by the English-speaking islands. Subsequently, Lula strengthened the beneficial relationship with Riyadh to the current point where Brazil and Saudi Arabia have a combined trade value of $2 billion, if we include mutual exports and imports.

Türkiye and the West

The impactful presence of Middle Eastern actors in South America should be a wake-up call for the EU. Mercosur, a regional organisation that includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela (although suspended), has been demanding a famous trade agreement with the EU for over 20 years. Despite a recent visit to Brazil by French President Emmanuel Macron, a variety of issues, such as the EU's clauses, domestic politics or a mixture of the two, have led the agreement into a stalemate on the European side. As a result, Mercosur members have clearly signalled the end of their patience with the transatlantic project by opting, under Brazil's leadership, to take the same proposal to the UAE.

Finally, Türkiye's efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean deserve special attention. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Mexico, Colombia and Cuba in 2015, after which the Turkish president and his ministries of foreign affairs continued to travel to the region, opening new embassies and cultural institutes. However, Türkiye's engagement with Latin American countries has taken a different form from that of the Gulf States or Iran.

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Türkiye is not inclined to offer Latin America military cooperation, nor does it appear to be involved in free trade agreements or major infrastructure developments. Instead, the Ottoman country seeks business relationships, diplomatic smiles and purely commercial insight, and Ankara's soft power is driving the advancement of its capacities in Latin America. Turkish Airlines is the main bridge for Latin American travellers to Africa and the Middle East. At the same time, Turkish telenovelas have sparked interest among young people in learning more about the culture and language of geographically distant Türkiye. One of the latest Turkish initiatives, following the already active broadcasts from Russia and Iran, is the Spanish version of its *TRT* news website.

The US and the EU may finally begin to understand that Latin America is no longer their 'backyard' or a 'supermarket for raw materials'. Nor is the region simply a potential 'Chinese or Russian colony', but a continent seeking autonomous and rightful diversification. Western discourse on Latin American diversification tends to emphasise the dangers of Chinese or Russian imperialism, militarism or the risks of increased indebtedness to Beijing. Such thinking overlooks the fact that Latin American nations also have *national* interests. China, Russia or Middle Eastern actors are merely additional partners for the legitimate goals of Latin American governments.

Insisting on democracy, human rights or abstract clauses won't lead to strategic partnerships with Latin America. Firstly, because history teaches us that the same clauses have constantly been violated against Latin American states when the Global North had other geopolitical or commercial interests (think of the Cold War). And secondly, because the (very few) existing agreements with the US and the EU have simply proven unsuccessful. Latin America is therefore looking horizontally, allowing Middle Eastern states to make their best offer for its precious resources.



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