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Debunking Interregionalism: Concepts, Types and Critique – With a Transatlantic Focus

Gian Luca Gardini

University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

Andrés Malamud

IPRI and University of Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Interregionalism means region-to-region relations. Its relevance lies on two assumptions: that regionalism is a significant mechanism of governance and that regions are outward looking. The fact that both assumptions are contested confers the concept of interregionalism a structural fuzziness. In this paper we seek to grasp the phenomenon by following a sequential path: we first deal with definitions, types and theory, only then to look into the empirical evidence in search of correspondence between names and facts. By looking into transatlantic interregionalism, we find it as a large umbrella that brings together very diverse groupings of countries under a same, moderately inconsequential, working mechanism: summitry.

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ATLANTIC FUTURE WORKING PAPER

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1. Introduction

On 11 June 2015, 61 chiefs of states or their representatives plus the highest EU officials met in Brussels. The occasion brought together one third of the world countries and was the second EU-CELAC (or 8th EU-LAC) summit, the largest gathering of world regions ever. Yet the standing of the two partners could not be more asymmetric. The European Union (EU) is a treaty-based regional organization that makes binding decisions, adjudicates conflicts through legal procedures, commands a millionaire budget, boasts huge headquarters in several countries and employs thousands of people. In contrast, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) lacks legal personality, decision-making capacities, headquarters, a budget, and any staff. While the EU has a single trade policy and advances towards bringing borders down and unifying its currency, the Latin American countries are fierce defenders of national sovereignty. The fact that this meeting is considered the pinnacle of interregionalism testifies to the elusiveness of the concept.

Interregional relations differ from conventional interstate relations in two respects. First, the nature of the actors cannot be taken for granted. Not just states but also regional organizations and civil society generally participate in the process. Issues of representation and coordination are problematic too. Whereas states need to refer to their internal structures and proceedings only sporadically and mainly through established procedures when negotiating a deal internationally, regional organizations need to have recourse to internal consultation frequently and through tortuous and less than formalized mechanisms. Furthermore, as interregional relations are usually asymmetric – since they tend to involve regions with different degrees of complexity such as the EU vis-à-vis most developing regional groupings – explicit support for further integration and the transfer of integration technologies tend to be a key part of the agreements.

Second, the scope of interregionalism is usually limited to ‘low politics:’ regional organizations typically engage in negotiations on economic or social issues rather than security or military matters. This said, most interregional agreements do proclaim larger political goals and are garnished with verbose rhetoric. Some interregional summits end up by issuing presidential communiqués that mention geopolitical issues and envisage the establishment of ‘strategic alliances,’ whatever that means. However, these statements rarely reflect or produce concrete results.

Several studies have analyzed the nature, types and prospects of interregional relations (*América Latina Hoy* 2005; Baert, Scaramagli and Söderbaum 2014; Doidge

2011; Hänggi 2000; Hänggi, Rüland and Roloff 2006; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000). Their conclusions are tentative, mostly agreeing on that the multidimensionality of the phenomenon requires the combination of different analytical approaches. Initially, interregionalism – as regionalism before it (Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Gamble and Payne 1996) – was amply regarded as a step towards global governance. Lately, however, arguments have raised that consider regionalism and interregionalism as a hindrance for global governance (Higgott and Phillips 2000; Kacowicz 2015). Although interregionalism has been defined as “institutionalized relations between world regions” (Hänggi et al 2006: 3), all the elements in this description remain controversial. Some authors deem interregionalism unavoidable and irreversible, as regional integration itself, while others are more skeptical. Few go beyond mostly descriptive or normative accounts. This paper takes critical stock of the debate before diving into the shape that interregionalism has assumed across the Atlantic Ocean. By resorting to participant observation and original interviewing with top diplomats, we map the real world of trans-Atlantic relations as defined by its most discernible manifestation – summitry. We further argue that, as regionalism recedes and multipolarity consolidates, there is little more to expect from interregionalism.

2. Identifying, classifying and theorizing interregionalism

Region-to-region relations, albeit in a loose form, can be traced back to the Lomé Convention, a trade and aid agreement between the European Community and 71 African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries signed in 1975 in Togo (Söderbaum 2012). It was replaced by the Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000 in Benin by the EU with 78 ACP countries. Although its principles stated the equality of partners and the ownership of development strategies, an ironic reminiscence of later day South-South cooperation, fact is that the ACP countries never constituted a region per se but an artificial grouping brought and kept together by an external organization. Later on, the EU engaged in interregional cooperation with independent regional organizations, beginning with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and gradually spreading towards most regional blocs in the developing world.

Interregionalism is thus a fuzzy concept. This should not come unexpected given interregionalism's root concept – regionalism (Malamud 2013). Unlike pioneering masterpieces on regionalism such as those by Nye (1968), Claude (1971) or Lindberg (1963), too many contemporary studies suffer from conceptual stretching or fuzziness or both. Although authors usually provide some kind of definition for the phenomenon

they analyze, few do so in a satisfactory manner. Most definitions are either vague or ambiguous. Take, for example, the influential characterization by Hettne and Söderbaum (1998:7): “New regionalism is a comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process, implying the change of a particular region from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity with regard to a number of dimensions, the most important being culture, security, economic policies and political regimes”. In this definition, analytical categories are explicitly non-exhaustive, implicitly non-exclusive, and lacking on precedence or hierarchy. This cannot plausibly produce measurable indicators and testable hypotheses. Hettne and Söderbaum (1998: 9) further define regionalization as “increasing levels of ‘regionness’, namely the process whereby a geographical *region* is transformed from a passive object to a subject with a capacity to articulate the interests of the emerging *region*” (emphasis added). Here, the word *region* is used simultaneously to connote objective geography and subjective interests, as well as an existing object and an emerging entity.

A way out of conceptual stretching consists of understanding contemporary regionalism as an umbrella expression that covers a multiplicity of phenomena. Andrew Hurrell (1995) enumerates five of these, arguing that none should be given the exclusive rights to use the term: (a) regionalization, (b) regional awareness and identity, (c) regional interstate cooperation, (d) state-promoted regional integration, and (e) regional cohesion. The first – regionalization – can be understood as social or economic interdependence, which is usually the outcome of market-driven processes. The second – regional identity – conveys a cultural rather than a political or economic notion. The common feature of both phenomena is that neither is necessarily purposeful but is brought about by decentered factors – such as increasing trade flows or common historical roots. The following three subtypes respond to a different logic: they are either the outcome of formal state decisions – cooperation and integration – or a consequence of such decisions – regional cohesion. While cooperation entails voluntary compliance, integration requires some degree of sovereignty transfer, which discourages unilateral withdrawal and raises the costs of process reversion. In these subtypes, Hurrell (1995: 44) claims, “the *region* plays a defining role in the relations between the states (and other major actors) of that *region* and the rest of the world”, while constituting “the organizing basis for policy within the *region* across a range of issues” (emphasis added). This definition uses the same concept simultaneously for an actor and an arena. Tautologically, the *region* “plays a role” regarding “policy within the *region*”. Confusing wording is arguably rooted in the nominalization of the adjective *regional*. The latter should rather be conveyed by a noun, which can either be a

process (integration) or an entity (organization). To give an example, *Europe* is an intelligibly but highly ambiguous noun that should not be collapsed with European integration or with the European Union. In these two expressions, “integration” and “union” are nouns while “European” becomes an adjective that delimits the particular range of an otherwise general phenomenon. Yet, most literature on regionalism uses “Europe” and “the EU” interchangeably. This is a source of contagious confusion, as similar interchangeability between a geographic area and an international organization is assumed everywhere else – wrongly.

The confusion between regional geography – a set of contiguous countries – and regional politics – an organization of contiguous countries – is not just conceptual. Real existing cases of interregionalism also come in different configurations. This is the reason why the world of interregionalism cannot be understood without splitting it into subtypes.

In a pioneering article, Hänggi (2000) developed a typology of interregional arrangements to account for existing cases. He distinguished three types:

a) pure interregionalism, that is relations between regional groupings (such as EU-ASEAN or EU-Mercosur);

b) transregionalism, that is arrangements where states participate in an individual capacity, as in APEC, the Trans-Pacific Partnership or EU-Latin America and the Caribbean before the establishment of CELAC; and

c) hybrid interregionalism, that is relations between regional groupings and single powers (such as the so-called strategic partnerships of the EU with several regional powers, including the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership currently under negotiation).

Hänggi’s types have been dissected, and applied empirically, in a special issue of the *Journal of European Integration* devoted to the EU as a global actor and the role of interregionalism (Söderbaum and Van Langhenove 2005).

Hänggi’s second type merits special analysis. Take the case of the South Atlantic Zone of Peace and Cooperation (ZOPACAS). This organization was created in 1986 through a UN general assembly resolution – after a Brazilian initiative – and brings together three Latin American and twenty-one African states. Although it may look like a biregional phenomenon, in practice it is not an agreement between two preexistent organizations but between individual states. Such transregional character is even more apparent in the case of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which brings together countries from North America, South America, Asia and Oceania. In fact, these basin-

based agreements erode existing land-based regional organizations rather than bringing them together. This centrifugal dynamics has been labeled cross-regionalism and is retaken below.

A bizarre but ever more frequent type of interregionalism is the one developed between overlapping regions, that is, regional organizations that share members. In these cases, some states sit at both sides of the table. An illustrative case is the relationship between Mercosur and UNASUR, whose summit meetings are sometimes conflated thus making it difficult to disentangle whose logic or regulations apply. We have discussed this issue elsewhere (Malamud and Gardini 2012; Gardini and Ayuso 2015) and will not develop it further here, but the articulation of segmented and overlapping regionalism has multiplied to the extent that it now falls into the folder of interregionalism (Malamud 2013; Hulse, Stapel and Striebinger 2015). It resembles a multidimensional chessboard, with intra- and inter-level interactions, rather than a matrioska, in which inner objects just fit into but do not interact with outer objects.

If overlapping interregionalism becomes a fourth type within Hänggi's typology, we suggest that stealth interregionalism might become the fifth one. The paramount case is currency integration between several African states and the Euro zone. As it happens, the West African CFA franc (the official currency in eight countries), the Central African CFA franc (likewise for six other countries), the Comorian franc, the Cape Verdean escudo and the São Tomé and Príncipe dobra are all pegged to the euro through bilateral agreements, totaling seventeen independent African states whose monetary policy is decided in Frankfurt.¹ This makes for one third of the African continent! To the best of our knowledge, studies of interregionalism have never included this phenomenon as worth analyzing, although it also takes place in other regions such as the Caribbean.

2.1 A modest typological proposal

Formal region-to-region relations, Hänggi's first type, are a logical and chronological aftermath of prior regional integration. Afterwards, they can be supportive of regional integration along two dimensions. The first one regards the type of involvement of the senior partner – provided there is one, which occurs more often than not. Involvement may be active and focused or passive and dispersed. The second criterion concerns

¹ See http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/euro/world/other_currencies/index_en.htm, last accessed November 4, 2014.

the dimension in which the interaction takes place. This may be either politico-institutional or socio-economic. By combining the two criteria, four ideal-typical patterns of interregional relations emerge: leadership, emulation, cooperation, and exchange (Table 1).

Table 1
Patterns of Formal Region-to-Region Relations

		Senior partner's role	
		Active	Passive (or equal)
Main dimension of interaction	Politico-institutional (polity-related)	Leadership	Emulation
	Socio-economic (policy-related)	Cooperation (aid)	Exchange (trade)

Leadership means that the senior region (usually a regional organization) takes most of the responsibility for establishing the goals, monitoring the course, and supporting the instruments required by the junior region (not always an organization) to carry out the undertakings agreed upon. A historical example is the role played by the United States in the reconstruction of Europe after World War II and its support to the processes of cooperation, coordination and integration – albeit, in this case, the United States was a single country and not a regional bloc. The US also fostered the creation and early institutionalization of the Central American Common Market (CACM) through financial and institutional support; the crisis of the bloc started precisely when the US lost interest in its development and ceased to supply leadership. A different kind of leadership may be exerted through conditioned inclusion, whereby a regional bloc offers full or limited access to neighboring countries (which may until then have belonged to another bloc) in exchange for domestic reform. The EU provides the best example of this mechanism through its enlargement policies towards EFTA first, Southern and Northern European countries later, and Eastern European and Mediterranean countries more recently.

Emulation is the strategy by which an emergent regional bloc replicates the institutional structure or the integrating strategy of successful brethren. This was the path initially followed by the Andean Community, as it undertook the creation of an early supranational structure that reproduced the European Union's (Saldías 2010).

Some authors contend that mimicry was also at the roots of Mercosur and its institutional evolution (Medeiros 2000; Rüländ and Bechle 2014).

Cooperation stands usually as a euphemism for economic aid. Under this label, the senior region does not necessarily participate in the establishment of the junior region's goals, but instead provides it with technological, financial, or economic assistance. This is the type of relationship that links the European Union to poorer regions such as the one bringing together the ACP (Africa-Caribbean-Pacific) countries.

Lastly, *exchange* is arguably the least demanding type of relationship, as it involves mostly negative policies – thus easier to pass and implement – such as tariff removal and free access to regional markets. This is the case of the ongoing EU-Mercosur negotiations. The negotiation of this kind of agreements is being progressively upgraded by additional requirements such as investment guarantees, intellectual property rights, environmental and labor regulations, and common standards. Yet, free trade agreements (FTAs) concern chiefly economic matters, and trade partners are formally on an equal footing – in contrast to cooperation agreements.

The role of the EU in the development of interregionalism has been studied as a case of diffusion. In exploring the extent to which the EU has sought to promote regional integration beyond its borders, Börzel and Risse (2009) analyzed what “the EU seeks to export and how it has used its external relations and foreign policy to foster cooperation between regions (inter-regionalism), on the one hand, and regional cooperation among third countries, on the other.” While it is conceivable that other world regions might spontaneously imitate the EU institutions, argues Schmitter (2010), the EU “has dedicated considerable resources to efforts to clone itself and meets regularly with its ‘counter-parts’ in Asia, Latin America and Africa.” In these approaches, the EU acts as external federator (Santander 2010) and interregionalism is considered a driver of further regionalism rather than its consequence.

The Atlantic Future project has produced seven papers dealing with different interregional interactions in the Atlantic area. Most of them arrives to similar diagnosis: “serious limitations of actorness” on the part of the engaging regions (Mattheis 2015), large asymmetries or “imbalance in the degree of regionalization”/institutionalization (Alcaro and Reilly 2015; Pirozzi and Godsäter 2015), and low priority conferred to interregional relations (Ayuso, Villar, Pastor and Fuentes 2015; Kotsopoulos and Goerg 2015). They also classify most cases into Hänggi's hybrid or quasi-interregional

category, and those that deal with the EU accept that it has led a leading role (our left column on Table 1) except when dealing with the North American region (lower right cell on Table 1). More distressing are the conclusions by Isbell and Nolan García (2015), who claim that “new ocean basin regionalisms” are substituting traditional land-based regions, therefore changing the nature of interregional relations. This is consistent with the emerging phenomenon of cross-regionalism, which defines the simultaneous participation in various trade agreements irrespective of geographic location. Tovas (2008: 4) argues that, by engaging in this strategy, states “strive to escape their initial uncomfortable status of so-called ‘spoke’ by signing agreements with more than one ‘hub’”. The ascendancy of cross-regionalism – and the parallel decay of regionalism – stems from the emergence of multipolarity in the international system and does not bode well for the standard types of interregionalism.

Regardless of the form, purpose and organizational feature that interregionalism may assume, most varieties tend to reach a pinnacle in interregional summits. Whether relations take place between two regional intergovernmental organizations or between “two or more regions that are dispersed and porous, and where neither region negotiates as a region” (Söderbaum, 2012:1200), exchange and dialogue at the highest political level are defining moments. In this sense, like many gatherings, conferences and meetings at the international level, interregionalism can be understood – at least in part – as an exercise in summitry. This means that one of the central expressions of interregionalism offers the same assets but also suffers from the same limitations as international summitry, respectively resilience and toothless proliferation.

3. Interregionalism as summitry exercise

Interregionalism across the Atlantic is characterized by an increasing number of summits between national and regional leaders. Only in the last three years, heads of state and/or government, diplomatic corps, and business and civil society representatives from the four shores of the Atlantic engaged in a multitude of events, including – among the most significant – two Summits of the Americas (2012 and 2015), a South American-Arab Countries Summit (2012), two EU-Latin America and Caribbean Summits (2013 and 2015), an Africa-South America Summit (2013), an Africa-EU Summit (2014), an Arab-US Policymakers Conference (2014), and a US-Africa Leaders Summit (2014). Regardless the interest, value, and results of each of these events, proliferation tends to decrease the marginal returns for all stakeholders

of huge international assemblies. There is a risk that “too many summits kill the summits” (Gahr Store, 2012).

The “summit fatigue” is by now a well-documented problem in all fields and at all latitudes of international activity. For instance, the intensity of the G-20 process since the beginning of the crisis in 2008 pushed the Obama administration to call for a rationalization of the process and to reject hosting candidatures and new proposals for more and more events (Coope, 2010). If the argument is valid for major gatherings on topical issues, it is even stronger for specialized events, such as the World Summit on Information Society or the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In these cases the required presence and use of specific technical expertise as well as political representativeness cause strain on state leadership and bureaucracies as well as on civil society stakeholders who intend to attend the summit or to participate in the process before, during or after the core event (O’Siochru, 2004; Peake, 2002).

This overcrowded scenario inevitably affects regionalism and interregionalism too in their summitry dimension. The increase in the number of leaders summits at the European level has raised concern and brought about a number of critiques of summit inflation in regionalist processes (Melissen 2003). Interregional summits are obviously affected too. They have to compete for human and financial resources against a large and expanding number of other international – including regional – and national commitments. As an illustrative example, it is worth remembering how one EU-Latin American and Caribbean Summit had to be postponed for over six months because of the congested international agenda. Initially scheduled for June 2012, it clashed with another three high-profile international meetings the same month: the G-20 in Mexico, the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development and the Euro Area Summit in Brussels. The summit was eventually celebrated at the end of January 2013.

3.1 Problems and challenges of interregional summitry

So what are the key problems of interregionalism as a summitry exercise caused by the excessive use of this instrument and the congestion of the international agenda? What kind of difficulties and challenges characterize the process? And why, in spite of these acknowledged limitations, do interregional summits remain widely used in international diplomacy? The type of shortcomings can be understood with reference firstly to the nature of the problem and secondly to the categories of actors affected. The resilience of interregional summits can be explained with arguments stemming from both theory and practice of international affairs.

The first problem affecting interregionalism in its summit form is the clarity of their aims and purposes. This refers to the expectations and the benefits it generates. This in turn leads to a discussion of the parameters used to assess success or failure. What are interregional summits for? What outcomes is it legitimate and realistic to expect? Whose expectations count most? It seems that significant doubts and uncertainties about the process exist (Caetano, 2010). This is valid both for the direct participants and the stakeholders broadly understood. Interregional summits more than anything else are about dialogue and whether or not they are successful is perhaps not the right way to pose the question (FCO 1, 2013). Instead it would be more useful to identify what their purpose and benefits are, and to realize that most of the benefits are difficult to measure and quantify and they are to be found at the margins of the summits (ibid.). This is a case in which exclusion costs are higher than participation's.

A particular aspect of this discussion on purpose concerns the involvement of civil society. Its participation in interregional summits is more and more common and it often involves the presentation of position papers to ministerial or head of states assemblies. Now, it is quite difficult to assess the exact expectations of governments and state actors in these mega events. It is even more difficult to evaluate civil society's, because of the varied nature of its components but also, and especially, for the limited understanding stakeholders seem to have of summit procedures and outcomes. In these cases, clarity of roles and expectations is especially problematic. However this is true for a number of civil society consultation mechanism at the international level. As the EU DG Trade-Civil Society Dialogue suggests, while the objectives of wide consultation, improved transparency, and address civil society concerns can be satisfactorily met, more uncertainty exists about policy improvement; after all, civil society's role is to participate, not to deliberate, and engagement is based on the principle "one voice not one vote", which is often blurred or misunderstood (Ecorys, 2006).

Another problem that affects interregional summits is time. The organization of such high-profile events requires a large amount of time and dedicated teams. This is true for the host country, of which a massive logistic and organizational effort is required. It is also true for participant countries, which have to contribute to the drafting of the final declaration, discuss and agree on the agenda of the summit itself and that of their delegations. The latter always engage in other activities and visits on the fringes of the summit in order to maximize the use of time. There is also the issue of timing in the calendar year to avoid congested periods or clashes with other international or national events where leaders and technical and support teams, not

least the security ones, may have to participate. Finally, the generally short duration of the summit itself gives in fact little time for substantial discussion, and most of the work has to be prepared by state bureaucracies in advance.

A related problem is the opportunity cost. Participation in an interregional summit means that leaders and key state officials, as well as civil society delegations, cannot deal with other issues for a few days. With the increasing density of international forums and commitments, the decision to send top leaders or high-level representatives to interregional summits is a delicate one, precisely because returns may not be immediately obvious. Other events and activities may in fact gain more political reward or media exposure, and national priorities may just prevail over loose international commitments and lengthy speeches and travels. Only 34 heads of State out of possible 61 made it to the 2013 EU-Latin American and Caribbean summit, which “was met with almost total indifference in Latin America as well as in Europe” (Sberro 2013:1). Conversely a failure or a scandal at the summit may give unwanted media exposure to leaders. The UK delegation considered a success that the same event was not hijacked by radical Latin American leaders and that the Falkland-Malvinas issue was not raised at any stage (FCO 1, 2013). But the UK had not sent either the Head of State or Government or the Foreign Minister, which indicates a quite low political interest in the interregional summit. Where a strategic value is clearly detectable participation of leaders is high. This was the case at the 2009 5th Summit of the Americas where President Obama for the first time introduced himself to the other leaders of the Americas. These saw the advantage of participation and no country sent representatives of lower status than Head of State or Government. In the absence of clear gains or strategic priorities, interregional summits struggle to attract top participants, who may find other venues and activities more convenient according to political or economic calculation.

Interregional summits are expensive exercises. The organization, logistics, communication, transportation and accommodation involved are a burden for taxpayers and state finance. Indeed the high cost of interregional summits is particularly evident when measured against the uncertainty or even the paucity of the results and benefits produced (Whitehead and Barahona de Brito 2005). If one considers that most of the costs are often bore by the host country, and that for the duty of reciprocity these kind of events often take place in developing countries, one may wonder if that money could be better spent otherwise. It is estimated that the 2012 Summit of the Americas held in Cartagena, Colombia, cost about 30 million USD, that the 2008 EU-Latin America and the Caribbean Summit in Lima, Peru, cost around 35

million USD, and that, by comparison, the 2012 G-20 in Mexico cost 80 million USD (MinRel 1, 2012). To this, one has to add the costs for the participants. In times of crisis and media watch of public expenses, significant investments in interregional summits organization and participation ought to be subject to scrutiny and rethinking.

Swollen and diluted agendas also constitute a limitation of interregional summits. A final declaration of countless points and observations is hardly a credible commitment and doubtfully a selection of real priorities for cooperation, action or even discussion. It certainly presents significant challenges for follow-up and implementation. As an example the final declaration of the 2014 EU-Africa Summit counted on 63 items, while the 2013 final declaration of the EU-Latin America and the Caribbean Summit was composed of 48 points, a significant reduction when compared to the record 104 points of the 2004 Guadalajara Declaration. Furthermore, at times the contents and provisions of interregional summit declarations and action plans “can at best be regarded as optimistic assumptions” (Eyinla 2004:176). Yet, understandably, agendas and final declarations are a compromise between a large number of countries, even if the summit is supposedly between two regional organizations. In addition, with a view to interregional summits, coordination mechanisms within regional organizations are at times cumbersome, little efficient, or non-existent. This results in the host country having to deal with an accumulation of items to be added to the agenda so that this can be acceptable to all participants. While this may ensure a level of consensus, it makes the achievement of tangible results, and their communication to stakeholders, extremely difficult.

The most problematic aspect of interregional summits is their limited capacity to produce practical results. While a specific definition of what practical results means may be elusive, there seems to be a quite widespread dissatisfaction at policy decision and implementation as well as at the paucity of common actions undertaken as a direct result of these summits. This is a preoccupation for both policy-makers and academics (MinRel 2 & 3, 2012; MAE 2012; Maihold 2010; Whitehead and Barahona de Brito 2005). A first difficulty is the limited capacity of follow-up and implementation of the decisions taken and the priorities identified during the summits (Maihold 2010). In interregional summits where the EU is involved this aspect generally falls under the competence of the EU Commission but the results have been perceived as dissatisfactory (FCO 2, 2012; MAE 2012). A second aspect concerns the inability of these interregional summits to produce actual effects on the international system, and in particular to promote or advance the international position of the participants, especially the party perceived as the weaker (Maihold 2010). Thirdly, one may wonder

if this instrument is in fact inadequate to the new global context (Peña, 2010). Recent changes at the regional level too, such as the creation of new regional groupings or the emergence of new international powers and aggregations, make the rethinking of the current interregionalist schemes a necessity.

The final point to discuss is who is affected by the proliferation of interregional summits. Obviously political leaders have to select between competing commitments. They have to justify and balance their choices about participation in national and international events in front of the demands and pressure from government branches, political parties, opposition, the media, lobby groups, and civil society. State bureaucracies are also highly affected as they have to prepare the travels, assess and draft documents, liaise with partners and the organizers, and they often struggle with shortage of staff, especially in less advanced countries. Also civil society and business who intend to participate in interregional summits find proliferation problematic due to their limited resources and expertise, costs and opportunity costs. Sometimes the real hope for civil society is to have a few minutes with key politicians to campaign for their cause rather than give a substantive contribution to the summit itself or to one of the collateral events (MAE 2012). Both national and transnational civil society organizations require increasing funding and expertise to contribute proactively to these processes.

3.2 Explaining the resilience and proliferation of interregional summits

In spite of these critiques and apparent lack of tangible results, interregional summits are inescapable instruments of international diplomacy. A number of theoretical and empirical reasons have been proposed to explain this resilience. From a theoretical perspective, a first explanation is offered by the very processes of regionalization and globalization, which by limiting the control of nation states on their own policy choices, in fact encourage states to engage in regional and interregional cooperation (Roloff 1998). This reasoning is broadly adaptable to fit major International Relations theories. It fits realist and neo-realist approaches as nation states attempt to balance-off regionalist challenges from and alliances of other world regions through interregionalism; and it also fits a liberal-institutionalist approach as interregionalism can be understood as a joint attempt by nation states to manage the complexity of global interdependence (Hänggi 2000).

Another theoretical approach may explain more specifically why, in spite of all documented shortcomings and skepticism by policy-makers, interregionalism survives

and in fact proliferates. Rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig 2003) suggests that rhetorical commitments produce actual effects. That is to say that when a rhetoric and narrative exercise is repeated through time and widely accepted, this shapes political interests, values and legitimacy and therefore it determines policy actions and choices too. Applied to interregionalism, this means that commitment to the process expressed in final declarations and convenient political statements and media coverage end up perpetuating a system in which few actually do believe. This is consistent with the observation that in international affairs the institutionalisation of norms produces patterns of behaviour that are hard to alter in the absence of significantly changed circumstances (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).

Perhaps the most convincing theoretical explanation is provided by the multi-bilateralism approach (Hill and Smith 2011: 401; Le Gloannec 2004). The proliferation of international forums and gatherings at least makes multilateral events convenient venues to take forward bilateral affairs and agendas. Participants have the opportunity to meet the partners in which they are interested and to conduct bilateral talks as well as to form ad hoc alliances, not necessarily related to the topic under discussion in the multilateral venue. Policy-makers too embrace this explanation (MAE 2012). They see in interregional summits an opportunity to maximize time to meet with their key bilateral partners in certain geographic or issue areas. In fact, according to a participant in the 2013 EU-Latin America and Caribbean Summit, this occasioned good personal links, a chance to take forward the national agenda in the region and to be seen by strategic partners (FCO 1, 2013). It seems that conceptual distinctions between pure interregionalism and more hybrid forms (Hänggi 2000) are in fact blurring in the diplomatic practice and the hectic pace of today's international summitry.

In addition to theoretical explanations, there are very practical and pragmatic reasons for the resilience and flourishing of interregional summits. Firstly, they provide a forum for discussion and political direction in interregional relations. This top-level dialogue seems not only indispensable but also genuinely functional to the process if this has to have any meaningful purpose. Furthermore, change and results in these cases are not to be assessed in the short period but over the long run. Secondly, with the increase and diversification of regional organizations and the reconfiguration of regional spaces and aggregations, as well as power dynamics and distribution in various parts of the world, interregionalism is a logical step to connect new regional actors, powers and agendas. Thirdly, most of the shortcomings identified by the literature and the policy-makers can be addressed. For instance time and money, as well as human resources, can be saved by the use of "virtual summits". The summitry

process is perhaps not ideal but it is perfectible and no obvious alternative is available. Fourthly, in spite of constant complains at exclusion and at the waste of resources, civil society demand for more weight in international decision-making often materializes in the quest for more summits, with more space for social actors and NGOs within them. For all these reasons, the summitry exercise is a resilient aspect of regionalism and interregionalism. These processes can take many forms and evolve institutionally, but dialogue and direction at the highest political level remain key to any international political process.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of interregionalism varies widely from studies that focus on causes through those that highlight processes to those that investigate effects. This variation sometimes hinders comparison and should be taken into account when conducting further research. Additionally, it raises the question of relevance: is interregionalism important because it brings about novel developments or is it simply a (perhaps unavoidable but) inconsequential by-product of regionalism? Furthermore, could it simply be a product of EU foreign policy activism that might fade away together with the EU? After all, “theorizing on interregionalism has always been intrinsically linked to, and indeed dominated by, the study of the European Union” (Doidge 2014:37). This is one of the issues the Atlantic Project was set to elucidate. The conclusion is that the theoretical focus on the EU does not denote eurocentrism as much as the real developments on the ground: were it not for the EU, we would most probably not be talking of interregionalism as much as we do.

Although there has been progress regarding conceptualization, identification of cases and typologies of actors that engage in interregional relations, there is still a long way ahead before sound theorizing can take off. In order to define the substance of what constitutes an actor of an interregional relation, we could paraphrase Kissinger and ask, say, what’s the phone number of Latin America? (for that matter, Asia, the ACP or UNASUR). Phone number may stand for an autonomous secretariat or any other manifestation of regional institutionalization, without which it is conceivable to speak of a forum or arena but not of an international actor (Fabbrini and Malamud 2013). The threshold between one and the other has not yet been clearly drawn – but it should eventually. An alternative could be not to think of thresholds but of degrees of actorhood, in a similar vein to what has been proposed for regionhood. Measuring degrees may provide a better description of empirical variation; on the other hand,

setting thresholds would allow for the formulation of explicative hypotheses, e.g. accounting for spillover effects.

In the available literature, the link between regionalism and interregionalism is often unclear – apart from the logic assumption that the latter is somehow derived from the former. But, contrary to inter-state relations, regions engage in interregional relations sometimes and with some selected others, though not all the time or with all other regions. So, what pushes a region to relate to some – but not all – others, or to sometimes relate to states instead of regions? What defines the timing? Looking from the reverse angle, is interregionalism able to promote regionalism? If such were the case, how far and under what conditions? Finally, there is the question of mimicry, resemblance and emulation, which are categories usually utilized to describe regionalism: do they also apply to interregionalism?

There has also been growing interest regarding the relation between culture and identity, on the one hand, and regional and interregional processes on the other. Neofunctionalism as much as liberal intergovernmentalism contends that interests rather than identity drive regional integration, although identity conflicts may hinder it. However, cultural variables are sometimes used in order to explain the differential performance of diverse interregional processes. Embryonic knowledge and imprecise connections ask for more research in this area.

Throughout the recent literature on regional and interregional affairs, and due to much ado about informal processes, there is less and less questioning about the centrality of the state. Earlier analyses predicting the demise (or at least definitive decline) of the state have lost the argument against more ‘realistic’, empirically-grounded approaches that bring the state back in. As welcome as this outcome may be for political scientists, this news could backfire into our subject matter: if states do not matter less, regions might not matter more – and neither might interregionalism.

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