

# A Study of Latin American Integration: Current Status, Challenges and Causes

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## Abstract

**Latin America and the Caribbean, as the first region among developing countries to practice integration, have shown a segmented development trend due to specific historical contexts. In the post-pandemic era, the development of Latin America has been severely impacted by the pandemic. The development model, where individual nations prioritize national interests over regional ones, has caused stagnation or even regression in Latin American integration. This paper will analyze the current state of Latin American integration from three perspectives: economic, political, and social. Economically, the recovery pace in Latin America lags behind other regions globally. Although there has been some economic rebound, the recovery remains weak, and economic growth continues to slow. Politically, several countries are holding elections this year. Despite the dominance of left-wing forces, right-wing forces are showing signs of gaining momentum, leading to intense struggles between left and right, impacting political stability. Socially, the poverty rate in Latin America remains high, compounded by new issues such as population aging and social stability. In the context of globalization, regional cooperation is a crucial means for countries to promote coordinated economic development and reduce development gaps among member states. It aids in the development of member states and enhances international competitiveness. Actively promoting Latin American integration is beneficial for the region's economic recovery.**

## Keywords

**Regional Integration, Latin American Integration, Regional Cooperation.**

## 1. Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) were the first among developing countries to implement integration, greatly promoting the economic development of the region. As early as the 19th century, Simón Bolívar proposed the establishment of the American League to unite Latin American countries and jointly resist Spanish colonial invasion. Bolívar's dream of creating a "Latin America for Latin Americans" provided ideological and theoretical foundations for the Latin American integration movement, inspiring the people of Latin America to continuously advance this movement [1]. The development of integration in the Latin American region has been closely tied to regional characteristics, displaying a segmented development pattern. This means that during certain periods, the integration process makes significant progress, with a series of treaties signed to promote cooperation and exchange among the contracting countries. However, once the initial enthusiasm fades, the progress of Latin American integration slows down or even stalls, with many countries beginning to take a passive approach towards the treaty commitments.

Over time, the Latin American region has experienced four waves of integration [2]. The first wave occurred from the 1950s to the 1970s, when post-World War II integration efforts began to shift from idealism to reality. On one hand, Latin American countries sought to escape the

control of the US-dominated Pan American Union. On the other hand, export-oriented countries with underdeveloped industrial sectors sought to promote regional industrial development through integration. This period saw the establishment of several regional economic organizations, such as the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA), the Organization of Central American States (OCAS), and the Central American Common Market (CACM).

The second wave took place during the 1970s and 1980s, with some progress but overall insufficient momentum. This was partly due to the impact of the Cold War, with some southern Latin American countries favoring close ties with the United States for military protection. Additionally, the 1982 debt crisis hindered the integration process. However, some Latin American countries still engaged in cooperation to address the debt crisis, and Europe's efforts to promote its integration model in Latin America also spurred progress. This period saw the revival and revision of previous integration organizations, such as the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA) replacing the stalled LAFTA.

The third wave occurred in the 1990s, dominated by right-leaning politics and trade-centered neoliberalism. Open regionalism prevailed, with active cooperation with the US and the EU creating an illusion of a hemispheric alliance. Political and economic reforms within the region injected new vitality into the integration process. In 1991, the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) was established, becoming a key force in promoting regional economic integration.

The fourth wave began in the early 21st century, characterized by a left-leaning political shift emphasizing resistance to hegemony and strengthening national democratic independence and governance autonomy. Economic crises negatively impacted regional development, prompting integration efforts to extend beyond economic and trade cooperation to education, defense, and cultural collaboration. The establishment of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) in 2004 and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2010 marked a new stage in Latin American integration.

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In the post-pandemic era, Latin American integration faces new challenges and opportunities within the context of globalization [3]. Overall, Latin American integration has stagnated. The economic recession caused by the pandemic has exacerbated poverty and inequality, leading to political turmoil and social instability. These challenges have caused individual countries to focus more on their national development rather than regional development. However, it must be acknowledged that the pandemic has also provided new opportunities for revitalizing Latin American integration. Regional integration can help Latin American countries overcome the losses caused by the pandemic. In the new context of globalization, regional cooperation in Latin America needs to adjust its goals according to the actual situation to adapt to the global wave, aiding the region in navigating the crisis. As an important member of the emerging economies, the development of the Latin American region is closely related to the global economic recovery. This paper will analyze the current state of Latin American integration and examine the political, economic, and social factors that hinder its progress.

## 2. Theoretical Review

Regional integration is defined as the process of progressively strengthening economic cooperation ties between partner countries, combining them into a larger regional economic

entity. Depending on the stage of development, integration can be classified into types such as free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union, and monetary union [4]. Specifically, it involves establishing cooperation mechanisms among geographically adjacent countries or regions, lowering tariffs, breaking down trade barriers, promoting the flow of resources and factors, and enhancing economic, political, social, and cultural interactions and coordination to achieve various forms of integration and joint action. This cooperation typically aims to promote trade, investment, labor mobility, infrastructure development, policy coordination, and other areas among member countries to achieve common interests and goals. Regional integration can be divided into economic integration and political integration based on the perspective of the study, but the distinction between the two is often quite blurred. It is challenging to purely categorize a specific integration development as either economic or political integration. Many organizations are initially established to gain economic benefits and promote national economic development, so they typically begin as economic cooperation organizations. As cooperation deepens, countries gradually move towards political integration. However, political integration faces numerous uncontrollable factors, heavily influenced by the positions of ruling parties and the specific national conditions of each country, which can affect the cooperation process. Therefore, many scholars prefer to study integration from an economic perspective, giving integration an economic meaning, and thus equating regional integration with regional economic integration.

Regional integration experienced unprecedented development after World War II, with the Cold War serving as a watershed moment [5]. The changing global power structure was a major driving force behind the transformation of integration models. During the Cold War, the US-Soviet rivalry forced countries to align with one of the two superpowers, leading to severe bipolarization. Regional integration primarily revolved around these two superpowers, significantly limiting the spontaneity of regional integration development and the effectiveness of multilateral negotiations. Representative examples include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949 by the US and Western European countries, and the Warsaw Pact, established in 1951 by the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. Both were formed to counterbalance each other politically and militarily.

After the Cold War, the world saw an unstoppable trend toward multipolarity, prompting countries to seek new international systems. This shift in the geopolitical environment brought new opportunities and challenges for international cooperation and competition. The rise of emerging economies profoundly changed the global landscape, heralding the era of economic globalization [6]. In this new era, with the blending of multilateralism, liberalism, and other ideologies, new regional integration concepts emerged. The scope and depth of regional integration underwent significant transformations, presenting new characteristics and bringing new opportunities and challenges for further cooperation within regional integration organizations. Specifically, this is reflected in two main aspects: Firstly, the diversity of countries participating in integration increased. Regional integration was no longer limited to developed countries, as many third-world countries began to explore regional integration cooperation to promote regional development. For instance, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), established in 2010, aims to enhance unity and cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean. Secondly, the areas of cooperation became more diverse, extending beyond economic and political fields to include environmental protection, education, and cultural exchanges. An example is the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (ACTO) signed in 1978, which aims to promote cooperation among Amazon Basin countries in environmental protection, sustainable development, and shared resource utilization to improve the living conditions of residents.

Regional integration has significantly enhanced the flow of products, services, capital, and talent between countries, playing a crucial role in mitigating the economic growth impediments

caused by resource shortages, particularly impacting developing countries more prominently. In an era where global deficits in peace, development, security, and governance are intensifying, whether to choose cooperation or confrontation, openness or isolation, is a critical test for human society. At the same time, regional cooperation faces new opportunities and challenges. Regional integration greatly promoted the economic growth of both developed and developing countries in the latter half of the 20th century, lifting millions out of poverty. However, since the early 21st century, the process of regional integration has slowed down or even stagnated. In the post-crisis era, the slowdown in trade reforms, the rise of protectionism, and the risk of further reversals are harming trade, productivity, and income growth. History tells us that cooperation brings mutual benefits, while confrontation leads to mutual harm. Strengthening regional cooperation helps countries jointly promote regional economic and social development through win-win collaboration.

### 3. Current Status

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Latin America's development, causing overall stagnation in regional integration. On one hand, in the face of the severe consequences brought by the pandemic, the Latin American region did not choose to collectively address the challenges through regional cooperation. The pandemic has severely hit the global economy, and Latin America has been particularly affected due to a lack of regional coordination capabilities among its countries. Long-standing structural problems, combined with poor regional coordination, have made the region's healthcare systems more fragile and economic recovery more difficult.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, other regional groups such as the African Union and the European Union actively coordinated their members' response plans and vaccine negotiations, seeking multilateral cooperation to overcome the crisis rather than relying solely on bilateral cooperation. In contrast, Latin America faced a decline in regional political capacity and tended to adopt temporary national measures, halting the process of regional integration. On the other hand, the Latin American integration process did not advance with the resurgence of the pink tide in the region. After the "super electoral cycle" of 2021-2022, the political landscape in Latin America returned to collective left-wing governance [11]. However, differing visions of regional integration among countries have limited further regional integration. The left may be making a comeback in Latin America, but this time regional cooperation may not follow suit. Although some countries, such as Brazil and Chile, are looking to strengthen regional cooperation (e.g., Brazil announced in April 2023 that it would rejoin the Union of South American Nations (UNASUL) as a formal member), more countries are taking nationalist and anti-globalization stances. For example, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been pushing for Mexico's self-sufficient energy policies and strengthening economic sovereignty. Venezuelan President Maduro and Nicaraguan President Ortega have shown similar tendencies. After the Argentine government criticized Nicaragua for human rights violations, Daniel Ortega refused to support Argentina's bid for the two-year presidency of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) regional forum. Both Maduro and Ortega did not attend the recent CELAC meeting in Buenos Aires, indicating that there is no leftist model for Latin American regional integration. Internal political differences within the new pink tide have limited the prospects for deepening regional integration.

### 4. Challenges

Latin American regional integration exhibits a pattern of segmented development, characterized by periods of vigorous growth followed by rapid cooling. Throughout its historical development, regional integration in Latin America has primarily taken two forms of

regional cooperation. The first is cooperation among the countries within Latin America. Under this banner, multiple initiatives have been launched, and various organizations have been established. The second form is hemispheric cooperation across the entire Western Hemisphere, primarily characterized by Pan-Americanism or the Pan-American system. This cooperation has focused more on the political sphere and has largely been led by the United States. Since 1889, it has been sponsored by the Pan-American Conferences, aiming to promote hemispheric cooperation through multilateral institutions that address issues of regional cooperation, trade, development, human rights, democracy, and security [7].

The European Union has long served as a practical example of regional integration for Latin America. Both cooperation models exhibit their unique characteristics, with Latin American integration demonstrating the distinct features of regional integration in developing countries. The successful implementation and continuous expansion of the EU are largely attributed to the strong homogeneity among its member states. EU member countries share a high degree of similarity in terms of economic development levels, political ideologies, and social lifestyles, which helps to reduce differences in political, economic, and cultural matters. This similarity facilitates communication and cooperation among member states, making it easier to reach consensus and promote development. In contrast, the uneven development levels of the economies, political systems, and socioeconomic structures among member states in Latin American regional integration organizations are the main reasons for the fluctuating progress of Latin American integration [8]. The significant differences among group members often imply a non-uniformity in the interest structures of the group. During the process of regional cooperation, each country seeks different benefits based on its own development needs. This leads to an imbalance of gains and losses, often accompanied by a mindset where national interests are prioritized over collective interests. Moreover, the ultimate goal of group cooperation is to maximize self-interest, and the varying actual benefits sought and obtained by member states create numerous conflicts during cooperation. These conflicts intensify and hinder the development of integration to a larger scale and deeper level.

The main stagnation periods in the development of Latin American integration can be divided into five stages [9].

**First Phase: Late 1960s to Early 1970s.** The first oil crisis became a trigger for the stagnation of Latin American integration. During this period, the Latin American Free Trade Association (LAFTA) was established in 1960, aiming to promote trade among member countries by gradually eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers. However, by 1969, LAFTA had failed to achieve its goals, and the association suffered a significant setback due to economic disparities among member countries and protectionist policies that led to stalled progress.

**Second Phase: 1980s.** The debt crisis of the 1980s, coupled with the second oil crisis, had a substantial negative impact on the process of Latin American integration. Latin American countries faced severe economic difficulties due to excessive borrowing and a global economic downturn, leading them to focus more on domestic economic stability and recovery rather than regional cooperation. This period is known as Latin America's "lost decade," where governments prioritized economic adjustment and structural reforms, sidelining the integration agenda.

**Third Phase: 1990s.** Despite some progress with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Andean Community in the 1990s, the emergence of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) posed new challenges to Latin American integration. APEC and NAFTA attracted the attention of some Latin American countries, further complicating the internal cooperation process within the region.

Fourth Phase: 2000s. Characterized by political differences and economic diversification. In the early 21st century, Latin American countries experienced significant divergences in political and economic policies. Some countries, like Venezuela and Bolivia, adopted leftist populism, while others, like Colombia and Chile, adhered to market-oriented economic policies. These differences made regional cooperation more complex. Additionally, under the wave of globalization, Latin American countries strengthened economic ties with other regions (such as China and the European Union), diverting attention from regional integration.

Fifth Phase: Recent Years. In recent years, marked by the inefficiency of multilateral institutions. In recent years, the integration process in Latin America has faced issues related to the inefficiency of multilateral institutions. Organizations like the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) have struggled with internal conflicts and ineffective operations, making substantial progress in regional cooperation difficult. Internal political turmoil and economic problems in some countries have also negatively affected regional cooperation [10].

## 5. Causes

In the analysis of the stagnation in the Latin American integration process, some viewpoints attribute this phenomenon primarily to external factors. However, fundamentally, the causes still originate from within the Latin American region, manifesting mainly in economic, political, and social aspects. This section will analyze the deep-rooted reasons for the challenges facing Latin American regional integration from these three perspectives: economic, political, and social.

### 5.1. Economic Aspect

The economic downturn in Latin America is primarily influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. From a global economic perspective, the recovery of major developed economies has fallen significantly short of expectations, and the slowdown in global trade volume growth has weakened external demand for Latin America. On one hand, the continued sluggish economic growth of developed economies and the severe tightening of the global financial environment have posed challenges [12]. Although the U.S. economy is expected to achieve a "soft landing" in 2024, Europe remains in a state of stagnation. Additionally, China, as Latin America's largest market, is experiencing slower economic growth, which will reduce its demand for imports from the region [13]. On the other hand, persistently weak commodity prices reflect global demand sluggishness. Global economic activity has been affected by reduced import demand and falling commodity prices, hindering Latin American export trade development. Furthermore, geopolitical conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic have caused significant price fluctuations for Latin American commodities. Influenced by the Ukraine crisis, the prices of major export commodities in Latin America surged in the first half of 2022 but then reversed, leading to a sharp decline in export demand and prices. In 2023, the value of Latin American goods exports decreased by 2.2% after growing by 17% in 2022, creating great uncertainty regarding the region's potential recovery timeframe and intensity [14].

From an internal regional environment perspective, the primary influences are the region's macro fiscal and monetary policies. In terms of monetary policy, Latin America's implementation of tight monetary policies has further impeded economic growth. Although overall inflation and core inflation in the region have decreased, with the inflation rate dropping from 6.5% in January 2023 to 5.1% in January 2024, the decline has been slow. Major central banks in the region have cautiously lowered interest rates to prevent inflation from rising again. Meanwhile, although inflation rates in developed countries are expected to return to normal, they continue to tighten monetary policy, keeping interest rates high. This results in higher financing costs for emerging countries, negatively impacting capital flows and exchange rates.

In terms of fiscal policy, economic growth sluggishness and declining international commodity prices have led to reduced fiscal revenues. Lower fiscal revenues limit governments' ability to meet citizens' needs and improve public services, while public spending has increased again after two years of contraction. In 2023, fiscal revenues in Latin America fell from 19% in 2022 to 18.3%. At the same time, a slight increase in capital and interest expenditures raised total spending from 21.5% of GDP in 2022 to 21.8%. Public debt, although on a downward trend, remains at a high level. In 2023, the total public debt as a percentage of GDP in Latin America was 49.8%, significantly lower than the 56.0% during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but still high. The average debt level in the region decreased mainly due to declines in the debt ratios of countries like Colombia, Honduras, and Panama, while debt levels in Argentina and Brazil increased. Despite the overall decline in average debt levels in Latin America, debt stocks have risen in some countries due to exchange rate fluctuations and interest rate changes. For example, in Colombia, while the debt ratio decreased due to exchange rate appreciation, the accumulation of public debt increased debt service costs, eroding fiscal balance and undermining the sustainability of public finances in the medium term.

## 5.2. Political Aspect

Political instability in Latin American countries will reduce the likelihood of reaching political consensus. In 2024, six regions (El Salvador, Panama, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Uruguay, and Venezuela) will hold elections. The election results will determine the political direction of Latin America and significantly impact the regional integration process and the effectiveness of mechanisms for resolving regional disputes. Among the countries holding elections, some leaders are likely to be re-elected, while others will change, leading to policy shifts. Policy discontinuity is one of the main obstacles to the progress of Latin American integration. Of the six regions holding elections, public attention is particularly focused on Mexico. This is due to the unprecedented situation in Mexican history where two female presidential candidates are running, advancing the process of female political participation. Regardless of the outcome, this election is expected to drive changes in the status of women in Mexico, affecting both social issues and political affairs.

Regional cooperation is progressing slowly, while external cooperation is thriving. Latin America is set to resume cooperation with the European Union. In July 2023, the EU's 27 countries and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States' 33 countries held their first bilateral summit in Brussels in eight years, injecting new momentum into their partnership. Despite some differences at the summit, it demonstrated the potential for cooperation. The summit discussed various issues, including enhancing cooperation in multilateral forums, global peace and stability, trade and investment, economic recovery, climate change, research and innovation, and citizen safety and justice. It aimed to encourage coordination and mutual support among member states in addressing global issues.

At the same time, Latin America has strengthened its cooperation with Asia. Brazil, one of the most economically active countries in the region, is a member of the BRICS group and maintains close ties with Asia and other regions. In 2024, Brazil will officially hold the rotating presidency of the G20, focusing on three key areas: combating hunger, poverty, and inequality; promoting sustainable development; and reforming global governance. Brazil plans to engage in deeper cooperation with Asia and other regions in these areas.

## 5.3. Social Aspect

In addition to the long-standing structural issues, Latin America's social problems now include two new characteristics: an aging labor market and increasing social instability. These new characteristics will further complicate the region's social issues.

Firstly, the poverty rate remains high, and severe income inequality increases social risks. According to World Bank data, in 2022, the proportion of people living in poverty in Latin America decreased to 29%, down 1.2% from pre-pandemic levels, and the extreme poverty rate fell to 11.2%. Despite this decline, over 180 million people in the region still have incomes insufficient to meet their basic needs, with nearly one-third of the population living in poverty, and the poverty rate among children and adolescents reaching 42.5%. This situation leads to widespread protests and political instability, further exacerbating the already high levels of crime and drug trafficking. Employment in Latin America and the Caribbean has recovered from the negative growth experienced during the pandemic to positive figures. However, the employment growth rate is declining, from 7.6% in the first half of 2022 to 7.0% in the second half, and to 2.0% in the first half of 2023. This has several implications: Impact on Women in the Labor Market. The gender gap in labor participation has narrowed post-pandemic, primarily due to a decline in male labor market participation. Nevertheless, a significant gender disparity remains. Statistics show that 50% of women in Latin America are not in the labor market, while male labor participation exceeds 75%. Women's significant time investment in child-rearing and household chores affects their education and access to high-paying jobs, thereby impacting the region's economic recovery. On the other hand, increasing income inequality. Income inequality, already persistent due to intergenerational factors, has worsened with the pandemic. According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Latin American countries generally have high Gini coefficients, most ranging from 40% to 50%, with some countries exceeding 50%. The consistently high Gini coefficient indicates significant income disparity, with the average income of the top 10% being 12 times that of the poorest. One in five people lives in poverty. In countries like Colombia, Chile, and Uruguay, about 1% of the population controls 37% to 40% of total wealth, while the poorest half controls only one-tenth of the wealth.

Secondly, the aging population is increasing. Labor force aging poses new challenges to economic growth, fiscal stability, and family structures, primarily due to declining fertility rates and waves of migration. The birth rate in Latin America is decreasing while the average lifespan is increasing. According to data released by ECLAC in 2022, between 2000 and 2050, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over in Cuba will rise from 10% to nearly 27%, and in Brazil, from 5% to 18%. Additionally, a large number of young people emigrating to the United States and Mexico has exacerbated the aging problem in Latin America. The region is currently experiencing its most severe migration crisis in history. Beyond the traditional migration flows from Central America and Mexico to the United States, there has been significant emigration from Venezuela and Haiti. Since 2015, more than 7.5 million Venezuelans and 1.7 million Haitians have left their countries, with an additional 2 million internally displaced persons. Moreover, the increasing demand for pensions and healthcare for the elderly will place further pressure on government finances to fund public pension and healthcare systems. Lastly, caring for the elderly will place new burdens on families, especially women. Studies show that women in the region spend two to three times more time on unpaid household and caregiving work than men. As the primary caregivers in families, this likely reduces their participation in the labor market.

Thirdly, violent incidents are rampant in Latin America. People in Latin American countries have protested against the social instability caused by violence (such as crime, organized gangs, and the presence of the mafia, and drug trafficking) to varying degrees, but with minimal success. As presidential elections approach, many terrorist attacks have begun to escalate in the region. According to an Associated Press report on May 17, 2024, a shooting occurred in the Mexican town of Huehuetla. A few days earlier, armed individuals in two cars fired into a nearby store, killing eight men who had gathered to drink beer after watching a soccer game. Many Mexican criminal groups view elections as opportunities to seize power, having targeted over



100 candidates expected to run for local offices, using intimidation tactics against innocent residents in communities like Huehuetla to secure electoral advantages. This severely undermines local social cohesion and negatively impacts economic recovery. Social cohesion in Latin America is a necessary condition for achieving genuine integration, rather than merely relying on market liberalization and unification.

## 6. Conclusion

In today's world, openness, cooperation, and mutual benefit are always the eternal themes of humanity. Currently, Latin America is facing the dilemma of stalled regional integration, with the causes mainly reflected in economic, political, and social aspects. Economically, the region struggles with development difficulties, and its recovery rate is far below that of other parts of the world. Politically, there are divisions, and countries are more inclined to seek help from external allies rather than cooperate regionally. Socially, there is turmoil, with the emergence of two new issues: an aging population and an exacerbating social crisis. These three aspects are interrelated; economic prosperity promotes political stability and social peace, and changes in one aspect will lead to changes in the others. Therefore, strengthening economic recovery, stabilizing the political situation, and resolving social problems are urgent tasks for Latin America. In the post-pandemic era, the rise of nationalism and isolationism in the region will only deepen its developmental challenges. Strengthening regional cooperation and jointly combating the impacts of the pandemic are essential for overcoming the economic crisis. Looking to the future, successful cooperation between China and Latin America will inject new vitality into the region's integration efforts. Strengthening regional integration in Latin America is of profound significance for both the world and the region itself.

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