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MERCOSUR as a political project: the features of integration and the prospects for evolution

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the Common Market of South American Countries (MERCOSUR). With the help of the subject-institutional, geopolitical, historical-philosophical approaches, synthesized with the methods of the predictive, strategic, and situational analysis, the author verified the integration impulses of MERCOSUR, as well as predicted the direction of development of that intergovernmental organization. By means of a case study method and the principle of unity of the logical and the historical, the author identified the political integration impulses (footholds) and outlined the strategic development prospects (points of growth) of MERCOSUR, which contributed to the strengthening of the bloc as a self-sufficient geopolitical unit. In particular, the author proves that the integration impulses of the MERCOSUR project are the processes of “Bipolarization”, “Pacification”, “Interregionalization”, “Democratization” and “Autonomization”. At the same time, the author predicts that the direction of the development of this organization will be based on the concepts of “Nearshoring” and “Friendshoring”, contributing to the structuring of new logistics routes and the optimization of the existing supply chains, which will be adjusted for the territorial proximity and the political loyalty of the independent MERCOSUR member countries.

Keywords: MERCOSUR, Latin America, nearshoring, friendshoring, globalization

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МЕРКОСУР как политический проект: особенности интеграции и перспективы эволюции

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению проекта «Общего рынка стран Южной Америки – МЕРКОСУР». Корпус субъектно-институционального, геополитического и историко-философского подходов, синтезированный с методами прогностического, стратегического и ситуационного анализа, способствовали как определению интеграционных импульсов блока МЕРКОСУР, так и прогнозированию вектора развития этой межправительственной организации. При помощи метода кейс-стади и принципа единства логического и исторического были определены политические особенности интеграции («точки опоры») и обозначены стратегические перспективы развития («точки роста») блока МЕРКОСУР, способствующие укреплению последнего в статусе самодостаточной геополитической единицы. В частности, доказывается, что интеграционными импульсами проекта МЕРКОСУР выступают процессы «биполяризации», «пацификации», «межрегионализации», «демократизации» и «автономизации». Наравне с этим прогнозируется, что вектор развития этой организации будет опираться на концепции «ниаршоринга» и «френдшоринга», способствуя структуризации новых логистических маршрутов и оптимизации ныне действующих цепочек поставок, выстроенных с поправкой на территориальную близость и политическую лояльность независимых стран-участниц МЕРКОСУР.

Ключевые слова: МЕРКОСУР, Латинская Америка, ниршоринг, френдшоринг, глобализация

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Introduction

The collapse of the Import Substitution Industrialization model (*ISI*), which was triggered by the Latin American debt crisis of the 1970s, encouraged most South American countries to choose a different experimental path for economic growth, involving the removal of trade barriers and the promotion of competitive exports through the

adaptation of world-class technologies [Briceño-Ruiz 2013, pp. 9–39]. The initial reaction to the growing global crisis was the introduction of prescriptions for Economic stabilization, Structural adjustment programs (*SAPs*) and Shock therapy, which prescribed the transition of States to an export-oriented development model. At this crucial moment, the MERCOSUR project was modeled as a platform for sub-regional trade and economic liberalization, which helps its member countries to consistently open up to the emerging global market, preempt the regional crisis and adapt to a new form of collective security [Velasco e Cruz 2022, pp. 189–209].

MERCOSUR: the emergence and formation of a political unit

The project of the Common Market of the South (Span. – *Mercado Común del Sur: MERCOSUR*) was created in 1991 during the ratification of the Treaty of Asunción (Span. – *Tratado de Asunción*¹) by the Presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, which provides for the gradual leveling of trade barriers, the consistent introduction of a single external tariff and the methodical coordination of macroeconomic policies of the alliance members [Esteradeordal, Goto, Saez 2001, pp. 180–202]. The successful completion of the first “transit phase”, which symbolized the process of the bloc’s evolution from a “Free trade Zone” to a “Customs Union” [Molle 1994, pp. 10–12], was recorded on December 17, 1994, during the signing of the Protocol of Ouro Preto (Span. – *Protocolo de Ouro Preto*²) by officials of four Latin American states. Since then, MERCOSUR has acquired a formal institutional structure, gaining the status of an international legal entity [Seitenfus, Ventura 2003], an intergovernmental organization with no supranational governing bodies [Carranza 2011, pp. 27–62].

As of May 2025, the Argentine Republic, the Federative Republic of Brazil, the Republic of Paraguay and the Oriental Republic of Uruguay are full participants and the main “concessionaires” (financial guarantors) MERCOSUR (which ratified the decision on its creation in

¹ Mercosur. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/documentos-y-normativa/normativa/> (дата обращения 12.05.2025).

² Protocolo de Ouro Preto (Adicional al Tratado de Asunción sobre la Estructura Institucional del MERCOSUR), de 17 de diciembre de 1994. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/documento/protocolo-ouro-preto-adicional-tratado-asuncion-estructura-institucional-mercrosur/> (дата обращения 12.05.2025).

March 1991)³. The fifth full member of the association, whose participation has been suspended since 2016 (in accordance with the provisions of the second paragraph of Article No. 5 of the Ushuaia Protocol⁴), is the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

The Plurinational State of Bolivia is the sixth full member of MERCOSUR. The integration of Bolivia began in 2012, and the protocol on its accession was signed in 2015 and required ratification by the parliaments of all member countries of the bloc. The upper house (Federal Senate) of the National Congress of Brazil (which remained the last country not to do so) approved Bolivia's accession at the end of November 2023. The law on joining MERCOSUR was submitted to the Plurinational Legislative Assembly on December 15, 2023, and on June 14, 2024, the document was approved by the Chamber of Deputies (Span. – *Cámara de Diputados*), and on July 3, 2024, by the Chamber of Senators (Span. – *Cámara de Senadores*). After the protocol was approved by a unanimous vote of lawmakers, the law was promulgated on July 7, 2024 by President Luis Alberto Arce. After the process of handing over the Instrument of ratification of the Protocol on Accession to MERCOSUR, Bolivia committed itself to adopt the entire package of regulatory measures of the bloc within a four-year period and consolidate free mutual trade with its full participants. However, it should be added that, along with full members, the associated members of MERCOSUR are the Republic of Chile, the Republic of Colombia, the Republic of Ecuador, the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, the Republic of Peru, the Republic of Suriname (see Figure No. 1).

Nowadays, the MERCOSUR project is a symbol of the “New [Söderbaum 2003, pp. 1–2]” / “Strategic [Axline 1999, pp. 11–74]” regionalism, which is at the next stage (according to W. Molle’s classification) of its development, characterized by a movement from the “Customs Union” to the “Common Market” [Molle 1994, pp. 10–12]. However, before assessing the degree of reactivity in moving along a given route, it is necessary to establish the true foundations for the consolidation of the MERCOSUR bloc itself, which go beyond the boundaries of trade and market cooperation of Latin American countries (outlined by economism).

³ Mercosur. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/en/about-mercossur/mercossur-countries/> (дата обращения 12.05.2025).

⁴ Protocolo de Ushuaia sobre Compromiso Democrático en el MERCOSUR, la Republica de Bolivia y la Republica de Chile, de 27 de junio de 1992. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/documento/protocolo-ushuaia-compromiso-democratico-mercossur-bolivia-chile/> (дата обращения 28.08.2024).



*Fig. 1. MERCOSUR Project Participant Card
(according to statistics for 2025).*

Source: CFR.org Editors. Mercosur:

South America's Fractious Trade Bloc. – 12 December 2024.

URL: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mercosur-south-americas-fractious-trade-bloc#chapter-title-0-3> (дата обращения 12.05.2025)

Political integration impulses (footholds) of MERCOSUR

Agreeing with the opinion of a number of foreign researchers [Fer rer 2000, pp. 39–44], we note that the emergence of the MERCOSUR project, which now operates on the principle of collective fortification from the entrepreneurial activity of other countries, was facilitated by compelling political and geostrategic reasons [Peña 2011, p. 108]. Let us briefly describe the main ones. So, the first impulse for the integration of

MERCOSUR was the process of reducing the degree of conflict in the region, through the “Pacification” of relations between the two Great Latin American powers. The process of ending the historical antagonism between Argentina and Brazil was initiated in 1986 through the ratification of the Programme for Integration and Economic Cooperation (*PICE*), based on strengthening mutual trust in the field of nuclear energy, as well as on the diversification of bilateral trade. It should be added that both countries, which had experienced the negative impact of military regimes on their economic performance, needed a new development paradigm that would include industrial modernization, renewed investment, and macroeconomic stabilization focused on combating inflation. The main hopes for achieving these goals were pinned on the bilateral partnership. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the key precedent for integration in the so-called “authoritarian times” was the tripartite agreement on integration in the hydropower sector, concluded in 1979 between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay [Pose, Bizzozero 2019, p. 253]. Four years later, continuing the procedure of calibrating the balance of power with the help of the *detente* policy, the presidents of the two countries (C. Menem and F. Collor de Mello), signed the Buenos Aires Act, which provides not only for partnership customs and tariff regulation and market consolidation of the two countries (by 1994), but also projects international institutional integration (by 2000). The strengthening “allied axis” soon stimulated the strategic interest of neighboring States (Paraguay and Uruguay), which entered the phases of bilateral and quadrilateral negotiations on the potential of the common economic space in 1991 [Gonçalves 2013, pp. 33–60]. Ultimately, the stage of tactical debate culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Asunción which legally constituted the MERCOSUR project [Palmieri et al. 2024, pp. 1–12].

The second incentive for the consolidation of MERCOSUR, which has a political character, is the so-called Democratic transition, which became relevant at the end of the era of bureaucratic-military authoritarian regimes in Latin American countries [Robinson 2004, pp. 135–153]. Similarly, “Democratization” as a constant function of regionalization was an additional factor in the creation of the MERCOSUR project [Gardini 2010]. The wave of democratization in South America, driven by the process of regionalization, has consistently affected all members of the potential cooperative space (MERCOSUR). For example, in Argentina, the last leader of the military dictatorship, L. Galtieri, resigned due to the defeat in the Falklands War, announcing the elections in which R. Alfonsín was elected (in 1983). In Brazil, the process of democratization began in 1985 due to the election of T. Neves as head of state. However, the sudden death of the head of state opened the

way for his successor J. Sarney, whose government was formed through institutional reforms and the adoption of a new Constitution in 1988 [Vigevani, Cepaluni 2016]. Paraguay entered the process of re-democratization after the Coup d'état in 1989, carried out by A. Rodriguez (a former associate of the last leader of the right-wing dictatorial regime A. Stroessner), who was elected president after the revolutionary cataclysms in the country. In the 1985 presidential elections in Uruguay, J.M. Sanguinetti won a convincing democratic victory. Along with the rotation of political systems in each of the above-mentioned states, the principle of democracy was officially approved at the collective (inter-governmental) level. Thus, the thesis of recognizing democratic values as a basic component for the successful development of MERCOSUR was enshrined in the Las Leñas Presidential Declaration of 27 June 1992⁵. Subsequently, unconditional commitment to the ideal of democracy acquired a more pronounced legislative force, codified by the Ushuaia Protocol (Span. – *Protocolo de Ushuaia*⁶), ratified in 1998. Due to violations of the democratic rules declared by this legal document, Venezuela's participation as a full member of MERCOSUR was suspended in 2016 [Corrales, Penfold 2020]. Consequently, the act of expelling a participant for non-compliance with the regulated principle of democracy confirms its strategic importance (as a specific form of ostracism), especially for the sustainability of the program platform of the regional integration association.

The third organizational impulse, associated with the emergence of the so-called "regional bipolar structure [Axline 1999, pp. 11–74]" correlates with the trade and economic "Bipolarization" of America. This is a process in which the MERCOSUR project acted as a tool designed to curb the interregional expansion of the NAFTA bloc (the pole of geopolitical gravity) [Wordliczek 2021, p. 294], rather than as a link focused on tactical attachment to North American Free Trade Agreement [Buscaglia, Long 1998, pp. 52–79]. Thus, MERCOSUR acted as a module of the system of checks and balances and retained a certain degree of political independence, even contrary to the statutory protocol of the ideology of neoliberal globalism, which prescribes subordinated adherence to the course of "open regionalism" coordinated by the principles

⁵ MERCOSUR 30 Años: 1991–2021. Edición Conmemorativa. 2021. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/documento/mercosur-30-anos-1991-2021-edicion-conmemorativa/> (дата обращения 12.05.2025).

⁶ Protocolo de Ushuaia sobre Compromiso Democrático en el MERCOSUR, la Republica de Bolivia y la Republica de Chile, de 27 de junio de 1992. URL: <https://www.mercosur.int/documento/protocolo-ushuaia-compromiso-democratico-mercosur-bolivia-chile/> (дата обращения 12.05.2025).

of the Washington Consensus (a similar conclusion “runs counter” to the prevailing opinion in the scientific community about MERCOSUR as a purely derivative project from the Washington Consensus [Kellogg 2007, p. 194].

The procedure of increasing the level of “Autonomization”, as the fourth guideline contributing to the consolidation of MERCOSUR, was transformed into an attempt to transition the bloc from the “American-centrist model of globalization [Riggiorozzi, Tussie 2012, pp. 1–16]” to a more equitable, in terms of rights and opportunities, a political project of a multipolar world. In this regard, the crystallizing strategy of a new version of regionalism (“post-liberal [Sanahuja 2009, pp. 11–54]”, “post-hegemonic [Riggiorozzi, Tussie 2012, pp. 1–16]”, “continental [Bizzozero 2014, pp. 57–78]”, “21st century [Zelicovich 2016, pp. 1–27]”) was presented as an alterglobalist reaction to the “uprising of Pan-Americanism [Velasco e Cruz 2022, pp. 189–209]”, supervised by the national interests of the United States.

The 2000s commodities boom provoked by the intensification of demand in China, methodically reinforced the upward trend towards strengthening the sovereignty of the MERCOSUR member countries, which successfully overcame the catastrophic processes from 1999 to 2003 [Nolte, Correa 2021, pp. 87–122]. During this period, MERCOSUR experienced an internal and external crisis due to the devaluation of the Brazilian real (*BRL*) in 1999 and Argentina’s default on its debt obligations in 2001 [Giacalone 2024, p. 103]. An additional component that consolidated the autonomy of the MERCOSUR bloc in those years was the political triumph of the so-called “new left [Rodriguez-Garavito 2008, pp. 129–157]” in the Latin American region, whose agenda, characterized by the exchange rate specificity of “post-neoliberal governments [Flores-Macias 2010, pp. 414–415]” was based on protectionization, sovereignization, nationalization, socialization, and the redistribution of various forms of capital.

The MERCOSUR project, having successfully entered the post-crisis phase of development, refocused on the process of “Interregionization” as the fifth strategic impulse consolidating the alliance. The prioritization of foreign economic cooperation, variably developing along two alternative tracks (Atlantic and Asia-Pacific), contributed to the positional shift of the bloc from the so-called Western Triangle (USA – European Union – MERCOSUR) towards the Eastern Quadrangle (USA – European Union – MERCOSUR – China). Today, China is the largest trade and economic partner of the MERCOSUR bloc, which is several times ahead of the United States and the EU in terms of export and import operations (see table 1). The reconfiguration of the strategic partnership matrix along the “South-South tra-

jectory", through the successful incorporation of the new "socialist" variable (China), testified to the transformation of the global market environment through a tectonic pole shift in the international trade and economic system, which jeopardized the historically established Euro-Atlantic orientation of the MERCOSUR.

Table 1

MERCOSUR's main foreign trade partners
(calculated as a percentage)

Partner		2001	2005	2009	2014	2019	2022
Export	UE	19,8	17,4	16,8	15,4	14,5	14,3
	USA	27,7	24,2	7,3	16,3	11	10,2
	China	2,8	4,7	9,2	15	23,7	22,5
Import	UE	24,1	20,6	19,0	18,4	17,7	16,0
	USA	22,9	18,5	16,7	16,1	16,3	17,4
	China	3,2	6,6	12,6	16,5	19,5	21,9

Source: [Caetano, Pose 2023, p. 227].

*Strategic development prospects
(points of growth) of MERCOSUR*

The identified rates of geo-economic drift of MERCOSUR, intensified by the "Second Edition of the left turn [Ивановский 2024, с. 229–230]" in the Latin American region, indicative inform about the growing "crisis of globalization [Sanahuja 2019, pp. 60–94]", foreshadowing the approaching culmination of the "unipolar moment [Krauthammer 1990, p. 23]". However, despite the weakening hegemony of the United States, which retains effective tools of soft coercion in its arsenal (such as Weaponize interdependence [Farrell, Newman 2019, p. 45]), most countries on the periphery of imitation capitalism are inertly adhering to the tactics of hedging geopolitical risks, implemented despite the anti-colonial and counter-hegemonic rhetoric of their officials, discursively inspired by the principle of Emancipatory multipolarity [Pieterse 2011, p. 28]. Thus, according to M.V. Alvarez (professor at the National University of Rosario), MERCOSUR participants use a similar strategy of "prudent/flexible neutrality" due to fears of open involvement in the current con-

frontation between Superpowers (the United States and China), threatening Latin American countries with the loss of preferential positions in the global trade and economic system. Taking into account the pragmatic and utilitarian incentive to maintain the status quo, in the light of a stable prospect of strategic uncertainty, the course of further development of MERCOSUR will be based on a combination of two organizational principles: 1) Nearshoring (reducing the distance / chain links between the production, processing and consumption of goods and services according to the territorial and geographical principle [Capello, Dellisanti 2024, pp. 4225–4249] and 2) Friendshoring (building a production chain with contractors from friendly countries [Caetano, Pose 2023, p. 224]). The conceptual mix of modified outsourcing versions, in our opinion, contributes to the construction of new logistics routes and optimization of existing supply chains, adjusted for such geopolitical factors as territorial proximity and political loyalty. The chosen synthetic trajectory, which takes into account Carl Schmitt's "friend-enemy dichotomy", favors a new impetus for MERCOSUR consolidation along both regional and interregional tracks, while allowing it to avoid the ever-increasing "globalization of risks [Actis 2022, pp. 91–111]" in the context of "securitization of state economic policies and economization of national roadmaps [Roberts, Moraes, Ferguson 2019, p. 655]".

Conclusion

In the process of defining and describing the stages of the genesis and evolution of the MERCOSUR project, we verified the political and geostrategic foundations for the consolidation of the bloc. At the same time, the specific "Footholds" and "Points of growth" of the bloc (see fig. 2) are steadily transcending the boundaries of market cooperation in Latin American countries outlined by economism. In particular, it was identified that the integration impulses of MERCOSUR are the processes of "Bipolarization", "Pacification", "Interregionalization", "Democratization" and "Autonomization". At the same time, we verified predicts that the direction of development of this organization will be based on the concepts of "Nearshoring" and "Friendshoring". The combination of modified outsourcing versions, in our opinion, contributes to the formation of new logistics routes and optimization of existing supply chains, taking into account factors such as territorial proximity and political loyalty. In the long run, the chosen trajectory favors the consolidation of the MERCOSUR bloc along both regional and interregional tracks, while allowing it to avoid the increasing globalization of risks and localization of uncertainty.

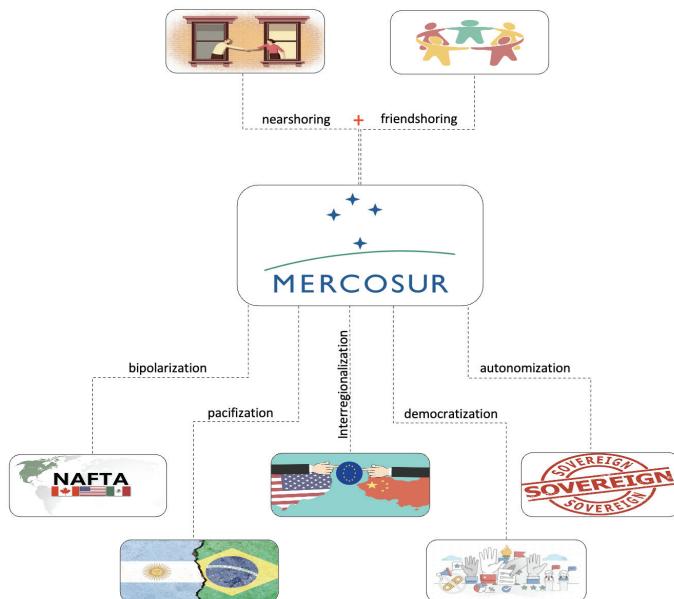


Fig. 2. The MERCOSUR project:
political integration impulses (footholds) and strategic
development prospects (points of growth).

Note: Compiled by the author

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