

Regionalism in Latin America: Cooperation, Fragmentation, and the Politics of Drug Control

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ABSTRACT

In Latin America, regionalism was spreading as a seemingly defensive tactic against what seemed to be political, economic, and security problems the region faced. Latin American states' engagement with cooperative institutions and multilateral mechanisms for promoting regional economic development, political stability, and collective security has been growing consistently, strengthening the process of regional integration. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) aspired to increased cooperation within the region through the creation of regional organisations and agreements to improve the governance and political and economic connectivity of the region since the end of the 20th century. But the diverse nature and the swift development of transnational drug trafficking networks have made it more difficult to pursue these regional aspirations. Drug trafficking is today one of the region's most critical security challenges, equating narcotics control to one of the region's most critical security issues. As a result, regionalism in Latin America has been promoted and has connected with the politics of drug control, in such a way that cooperation, fragmentation, and sovereignty were mixed (Bianculli, 2022). Budding regional integration in Latin America is exemplified by the development of regional organisations like the Organisation of American States and the Southern Common Market. They were established with a mandate to facilitate economic cooperation and political dialogue, but eventually made their way to security cooperation, counter-narcotics efforts, etc. The rise of transnational organized crime and narcotics trafficking revealed that the country's internal security agencies were not enough to handle the situation. Cooperation was therefore gaining momentum in the field of sharing information and experiences, identifying and coordinating the security of the border, as well as in joint law enforcement operations and cross-border cooperation in the fight against narcotics trafficking and organized crime groups (Quiliconi, 2020). Latin America is a key area in the global narcotics economy due to its role in trafficking, consumption, cultivation, and production. Traditionally, Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru have been significant producers of cocaine and cocaine base, and some new states, such as Mexico and Brazil, are becoming key transit or consumer states in the region's drug economy. From its inception to these days, the global spread of drug trafficking networks has been linked to increased violence, corruption in institutions and government, political unrest, and major human rights issues across the region. To this, different forms of governance have implemented various policies, including a militarist model of enforcement, which emphasizes force and coercion, and involves, at least, building drug-control facilities and sending police to support them, and a public health and developmental approach to drug control, which focuses primarily on prevention and therapeutic interventions (Garzón & Rueda, 2020). Although there are regional cooperation mechanisms, anti-drug cooperation in Latin America is very fragmented, both because of divisions in ideas and views on how to approach the issue, because of national interests, and because of other parties' political positioning. There have been other suggestions, especially from governments under the guidance of leftist political beliefs, that decriminalization and social development, intervention of public health, and harm reduction policies should be followed. In other states, anti-drug policies and policies of security and law enforcement have remained staples of prohibitionism. Such ideological differences have played an important role in hindering the formation of a regional drug policy. In addition, the impact of the United States as a policymaker of anti-drug policies, with the use of military assistance, bilateral security agreements, and interventionist strategies in shaping policies, has led to tensions in terms of regional autonomy and national sovereignty (Petersen & Schulz, 2018). The politics of drug control in Latin America aligns with the debate on governance, democracy, and human rights. Militarized anti-drug operations have often led to claims of police brutality, violations of human rights, forced displacement, and infringement on civil freedoms. These developments have reinforced the complexity of the cooperation on the regional level and further added to the fragmentation of the collective response to drug trafficking and gang activities (Francis & Mauser, 2011). The goal of this study is to identify the effects of regionalism in Latin America on drug control policies, focusing on Latin American cooperation but also Latin American disintegration. The work investigates how far regional institutions can contribute to regional responses to transnational narcotics trafficking and examines tensions in the political-ideological field that hamper regional integration. The study also explores the nuances of national interest, external influence, concern over sovereignty, and regional governance of security in the context of regionalism in Latin America. The study uses a qualitative analytical methodology, offering a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities for drug governance and regional cooperation in LATAM (Vivares, 2021).

Keywords: Regionalism, Latin America, Drug Control, Cooperation, Fragmentation, Sovereignty, Security.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In Latin America, regionalism was spreading as a seemingly defensive tactic against what seemed to be political, economic, and security problems the region faced. Latin American states' engagement with cooperative institutions and multilateral mechanisms for promoting regional economic development, political stability, and collective security has been growing consistently, strengthening the process of regional integration. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) aspired to increased cooperation within the region through the creation of regional organisations and agreements to improve the governance and political and economic connectivity of the region since the end of the 20th century. But the diverse nature and the swift development of transnational drug trafficking networks have made it more difficult to pursue these regional aspirations. Drug trafficking is today one of the region's most critical security challenges, equating narcotics control to one of the region's most critical security issues. As a result, regionalism in Latin America has been promoted and has connected with the politics of drug control, in such a way that cooperation, fragmentation, and sovereignty were mixed (Bianculli, 2022).

Budding regional integration in Latin America is exemplified by the development of regional organisations like the Organisation of American States and the Southern Common Market. They were established with a mandate to facilitate economic cooperation and political dialogue, but eventually made their way to security cooperation, counter-narcotics efforts, etc. The rise of transnational organized crime and narcotics trafficking revealed that the country's internal security agencies were not enough to handle the situation. Cooperation was therefore gaining momentum in the field of sharing information and experiences, identifying and coordinating the security of the border, as well as in joint law enforcement operations and cross-border cooperation in the fight against narcotics trafficking and organized crime groups (Quiliconi, 2020).

Latin America is a key area in the global narcotics economy due to its role in trafficking, consumption, cultivation, and production. Traditionally, Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru have been significant producers of cocaine and cocaine base, and some new states, such as Mexico and Brazil, are becoming key transit or consumer states in the region's drug economy. From its inception to these days, the global spread of drug trafficking networks has been

linked to increased violence, corruption in institutions and government, political unrest, and major human rights issues across the region. To this, different forms of governance have implemented various policies, including a militarist model of enforcement, which emphasizes force and coercion, and involves, at least, building drug-control facilities and sending police to support them, and a public health and developmental approach to drug control, which focuses primarily on prevention and therapeutic interventions (Garzón & Rueda, 2020). Although there are regional cooperation mechanisms, anti-drug cooperation in Latin America is very fragmented, both because of divisions in ideas and views on how to approach the issue, because of national interests, and because of other parties' political positioning. There have been other suggestions, especially from governments under the guidance of leftist political beliefs, that decriminalization and social development, intervention of public health, and harm reduction policies should be followed. In other states, anti-drug policies and policies of security and law enforcement have remained staples of prohibitionism. Such ideological differences have played an important role in hindering the formation of a regional drug policy. In addition, the impact of the United States as a policymaker of anti-drug policies, with the use of military assistance, bilateral security agreements, and interventionist strategies in shaping policies, has led to tensions in terms of regional autonomy and national sovereignty (Petersen & Schulz, 2018).

In addition, the politics of drug control in Latin America aligns with the debate on governance, democracy, and human rights. Militarized anti-drug operations have often led to claims of police brutality, violations of human rights, forced displacement, and infringement on civil freedoms. PAC fish have taken up positions in the political arena, undermined public confidence in the government, and enhanced corruption among law enforcement or judicial officials in several countries. The developments have reinforced the complexity of the cooperation on the regional level and further added to the fragmentation of the collective response to drug trafficking and gang activities (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

The goal of this study is to identify the effects of regionalism in Latin America on drug control policies, focusing on Latin American cooperation but also Latin American disintegration. The work investigates how far regional institutions can contribute to regional responses to transnational narcotics trafficking and examines tensions in the

political – ideological field that hamper regional integration. The study also explores the nuances of national interest, external influence, concern over sovereignty, and regional governance of security in the context of regionalism in Latin America. The study uses a qualitative analytical methodology, offering a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities for drug governance and regional cooperation in LATAM (Vivares, 2021).

Suggested Table (Use Only in This Heading)

Table 1: Major Regional Organizations and Their Role in Drug Control

Regional Organization	Primary Objective	Role in Drug Control
OAS	Political and security cooperation	Anti-drug policy coordination
MERCOSUR	Economic integration	Border and customs cooperation
UNASUR	Regional political integration	Security dialogue and intelligence sharing
CELAC	Regional diplomatic cooperation	Policy coordination and multilateral discussions

2. Regionalism and Security Cooperation in Latin America

Regionalism in Latin America has taken shape both as a dream of political and a practice of geopolitical interests against the regional common problems. The extension of the Latin American states to a greater degree of economic integration into the surrounding external world and political consolidation within the continent has been a long-standing policy goal. The regionally coordinated policy goals of the Latin American policy have been: overcoming economic dependency on external powers; increasing political unity within the region and its collective bargaining power in the international system. But, with time, the advent of transnational threats from organized crime, terrorism, illegal migration, narcotics trafficking, and others soon extended the framework of regionalism beyond economic integration to the field of security cooperation. As a result, some of the regional bodies began to include security governance and anti-drug coordination in their institutional values (2022, Bianculli).

Modern regionalism in Latin America developed after the Cold War, in the context of democratic and economic liberalisation, which bolstered mutual regional intervention by states through greater multilateral interstate cooperation and networking. In this stage, regional bodies were also looking for ways to resolve conflicts, ensure democratic stability, and create collective security among

themselves on economic integration. The strengthening of drug trafficking networks throughout the region greatly contributed to the acceleration of the process. Inadequate borders, low trust in institutions, and differing capacities of states' security agencies facilitated the exploitation of the drug cartels and the transnational criminal organisations, leading to severe security issues that were not addressed directly by individual states (Görge, 2023).

Support organisations at the regional level were developed as focal points between national and international development agencies to coordinate their responses. The OAS had a great influence on the development of collective security dialogue and anti-drug cooperation in the hemisphere. The organisation tried to boost joint responses to narcotics controls through the intelligence sharing, policy co-ordination, and regional monitoring work. These activities utilized the rise recognition of the drug trafficking market involving a network of interconnected transnational nature, which cannot be resolved without regional solutions (Shestak & Savenkova, 2024).

Security dimensions also gradually started to be integrated into the activities of economic integration organisations. Initially created for trade and economic cooperation purposes, MERCOSUR began to deal with problems of border management, customs coordination, and transnational criminal activity. When narcotics trafficking routes spread throughout South America, member states were aware that economic integration would not be possible without the corresponding development of security frameworks that would enable them to tackle organized crime and border insecurity (Gardini, 2015).

The idea of UNASUR was to foster a regional security cooperation without external geopolitical influences. The organization called for political dialogue, joint efforts in the field of defense, and the importance of sovereignty and collective solutions to the threats that face the region related to security, such as drug trade and organised crime. The creation of UNASUR was a way to build a regional governance that had a distinctly South American angle and that would focus on regional autonomy rather than depending on outside regional powers. Efforts to strengthen institutionalisation, though, faced significant challenges from ideological divides amongst its member countries and the fluctuations in the domestic political leadership of these countries (De Defensa et al., 2019).

The United States' involvement in regional drug policy has strongly impacted security cooperation in Latin America. From the late twentieth century onward, the United States has played an active role in directing narcotics control policies and strategies through its programs of military assistance with drugs, bilateral security agendas, and counter-

narcotics measures like Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative. These policies were drug-related and pathological, using military methods to combat drugs and having a great impact on security governance in the region. Some governments felt this U.S cooperation was a prerequisite to bolster the capacities of states for securing their states, while others denounced it as a form of interference and not in line with regional sovereignty. These differences led to a splinter effect of political polarization in the Latin American regionalism and hindered the establishment of anti-drug tactics in the region (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

Exchange of information and cooperation in law enforcement activities are also crucial components of regional security cooperation. DTs are using highly flexible transnational structures for the operation of their organization, which demand coordinated surveillance and enforcement action. As a result, governments in Latin America began developing more methods for providing intelligence support to each other, tracking the trafficking corridors, and performing border operations together. Collaboration and coordination between customs departments, police, and intelligence agencies became a critical key in breaking criminal networks that operated in several jurisdictions. However, the synergistic effect of it is often hindered by other factors such as the corruption within the region, the weakness of the institution, and unequal state capacities (Quiliconi, 2020).

Concurrently, the security partnership brought about debates over democracy, human rights, and militarisation. The anti-drug campaign in some other countries escalated violence and led to concerns about the abuses of state power. Other nations, like Colombia and Mexico, suffered long periods of conflict that coincided with anti-drug military campaigns and allegations of violence against civilians and the displacement of local communities. Critics identified structural problems like poverty and inequality, social exclusion, that are underlying considerations of the persistence of illicit economies and emphasized the need to solve those problems, rather than focusing on security-oriented policies, which meant enforcement and repression (Garzón & Rueda, 2020).

Despite these issues, regional security cooperation continues to form an integral element of the process of regionalism in Latin America. Despite political polarization and conflicting ideas, governments are still seeking cooperation to address organized crime and drug trafficking through governance mechanisms. As a result, regionalism in Latin America can be characterised as a kind of hybrid process of cooperation and division, in which states both strive for collective security goals and serve national security and political interests (Nolte & Weiffen, 2024).

3. Politics of Drug Control in Latin America

Drug control is one of the most complex and polarized aspects of government and public security in Latin America. The dilemma of drug trafficking in the region is not simply a crime problem but also political, economic, social, corrupt, and geopolitical issues. In the past few decades, the kind of policies that have been adopted in narcotics control by governments of Latin countries has varied, from military to a public health point of view. These varied reactions are symptomatic of larger political conflicts over sovereignty, security, democracy, and foreign influence in the region (Vivares, 2021).

Latin America is at the heart of the global narcotics economy, as the region is well known for growing, manufacturing, and trafficking in illicit drugs, in particular cocaine. Currently, some countries, like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, are important production centres for coca; others, like Mexico and some Central American countries, act as primary transit routes between the production zones in South America and the markets in North America. The financial success of the "drug business" contributed to the proliferation of significant economic and political influence among the criminal groups, which at times opposed the government and undermined the democratic structure of the region (Saborío, 2019).

Modern Latin American drug control politics has a close affinity to the international prohibition regime primarily run by the United States. In the twentieth century, anti-drug conventions throughout the world accepted prohibition as the norm for drug control. Latin American governments that increasingly matched their domestic policies with these international agreements adopted criminalization-based and enforcement-based policies, which focused on decreasing production, trafficking, and consumption. Prohibitionist policies, however, wrought diverse political and social implications, especially in areas that are more reliant on coca growing and black economies (Amoroso, 2025).

The trend toward militarizing drug control politics gradually swept over many Latin American states. Governments mobilised military troops, tightened police forces, and increased surveillance systems to deal with the activities of strong drug cartels and organised criminal groups. Considering that both guerrilla involvement and narcotics trafficking led to the existence of anti-drug policies in the country of Colombia becoming very linked to counterinsurgencies. The guerrilla organization's presence and drug trafficking by paramilitary groups forced anti-drug policies to become very close to counterinsurgencies in Colombia. New security programs like Plan Colombia were geared towards providing military aid, aerial eradication, and intelligence cooperation, with U.S. backing. These policies left some of these trafficking organisations less effective, but also exacerbated armed conflict,

displacement, and human rights issues (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

In the same way, Mexico saw a rapid rise in conflict after the rise of the “war on drugs” as part of the militarization that started in the early twenty-first century. Drug cartels diversified their operational modalities and increased their territorial control, resulting in bloody conflicts between them and other drug cartels and the state's security forces. Concerns were raised about the militarization of public security and the threat of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, corruption, and the loss of civilian control of the police. Although security spending and cooperation at the international level have been significant, drug trafficking networks showed resilience and adaptability, with questions raised as to the future effectiveness of an enforcement approach (Garzón & Rueda, 2020).

Some debate about national sovereignty and external influence has also determined the politics of drug control in Latin America. Many governments complained that programmes against drug demand, mainly in the consumer countries, have left out the demand, but the programmes against supply, driven by the U.S. government, have burdened producer and transit countries disproportionately. This criticism helped catalyze regional discussion on alternative strategies to drug policy. The various political leaders from Latin America spoke in favor of a decriminalized approach that moves beyond militarized prohibition and the drug-war approach, focusing on harm-reduction and public health interventions and rural development. (Petersen & Schulz, 2018)

Thus, in Bolivia, for instance, the policy of coca is closely associated with indigenous rights and national sovereignty. The government was on the side of the traditional applications of coca for nutrition and medicine, and against external policies that were seen as an infringement on national sovereignty. This was a way to subvert prevailing prohibitionist regimes and an attitude of discontent on the part of many in the region to external anti-drug agendas. Likewise, there was growing scepticism within some governments in the region that punitive measures for enforcing the rule of law had yielded lasting security gains, or merely fuelled violence and social unacceptability of the rule of law (Sauls et al., 2022).

Another significant physical problem in drug control in Latin America is corruption. Drug trafficking organizations often have infiltrated political institutions, law enforcement, and judicial systems through bribery, intimidation, and coercion. In several cases, these criminal groups created alternative systems of governance in some areas where the State's presence was low. In some places, the criminal groups created alternative systems of governance in places where the State's presence is low. This burrowing was affecting the trust function

of democratic governance and the cooperative work in the region. There was a deterioration of intelligence-sharing and anti-drug cooperation between countries, as well as of law enforcement coordination, due to corruption, which negatively affected the efficiency of the programs to stop the entry of narcotics from abroad (Rodriguez & Haag, 2022).

Regions' drug control policies have even further added to the political debate among the region's citizens. This militarisation particularly targeted low-income areas of the city, low-income rural communities, and the marginalised communities where black market ventures found existence due to poverty and lack of economic opportunities. Anti-drug interventions were often blamed for incriminating the vulnerable groups, and neglecting the structural inequalities, lack of work, and social exclusion. Thus, the balanced policy approach that combines security policies with other aspects of social development, social and educational services, public health, and institutional reform is being stressed more and more in current debates (Cáceres & Brincat, 2024).

The politics around drugs for control in Latin America is thus a contest for governance, sovereignty, and region. Internationally, governments are still under pressure to enforce criminals against the calls of their citizens for the protection of their Human Rights, social justice, and democratic accountability. Despite the development of important mechanisms for collective action on transnational narcotics trafficking at the regional level, differences in ideology and emphasis on various national issues have contributed to the fragmented nature of drug governance throughout Latin America (Vivares, 2021).

4. Cooperation versus Fragmentation

In Latin America, cooperation and fragmentation have increasingly come to the fore as a key dynamic in regard to regionalism and drug governance. Collective security cooperation has been initiated and has developed within the framework provided by Regional entities or organizations and international organizations, but the process is still hampered by the nature of big political, ideological, and institutional differences that persist in the region. This creates a complex regional situation for Latin America, in which numerous states are engaged in joint efforts to combat drugs, yet their own national interests and policies are divergent (Bianculli, 2022).

The primary need for regional cooperation was the understanding that narcotics trafficking operates in transnational networks where individual countries' policies have limited effectiveness. Flawed government institutions, poorly guarded borders, and inconsistent law enforcement across the region have created opportunities for drug trafficking organizations and criminal groups to cross borders.

Latin American governments thus came to realize the need for intelligence-sharing, joint law enforcement action, coordinated border management, and extradition agreements. Regional institutions are key to enabling collaboration and fostering dialogue among states facing the same security threats (Shestak & Savenkova, 2024).

They urged the member-states of OAS to coordinate anti-drug policies and improve the collective security mechanisms. Governments aimed to enhance their capacity to fight organized crime and narcotics trafficking through regional monitoring systems and successful technical cooperation programmes, as well as information sharing mechanisms. Likewise, alongside economic integration and governance of their borders, regional integration initiatives such as MERCOSUR brought security coordination in the discussions. The events were part of the rising awareness that the stability and economic cooperation in the region were increasingly reliant on the ability to respond effectively to transnational criminal activity (Quiliconi, 2020).

While these cooperative arrangements are present, fragmentation is still a hallmark of drug governance across Latin America. Ideological conflicts amongst governments about the required method of dealing with narcotics is one major reason for fragmentation. A few states back militaristic anti-drug policies that focus on strong law enforcement, military involvement, and punitive criminal justice approaches. Others call for alternative models that involve the use of decriminalization, harm reduction, public health and socio-economic development. The policies that can be formulated at the regional level are sometimes incomplete and incongruent because of these divergent views (Petersen & Schulz, 2018).

Fragmentation has been exacerbated by political polarization in Latin America. Changes in domestic political leadership are often accompanied by changes in regional political alliances and focus throughout the region, making institutions more porous within regional institutions. In addition, ideology-based feuds between leftist and conservative governments have also generated tensions within UNASUR and resulted in a weakened capacity of the forum as a means to promote regional security cooperation. In many cases, institutions at regional level of international organisations and institutions also became weak and unable to support the capacity of conducting collective anti-drug strategies in the long term because of domestic political changes (De Defensa et al., 2019).

Fragmentation is also largely a consequence of the influence of the United States. In Latin America the U.S. funded militarized “enforcement” and “security” policies, with bilateral agreements and military assistance programs. This support was

welcomed as necessary in order to bolster state security capability in some governments, and others viewed it as interference and being incompatible with regional sovereignty. This disagreement evolved into a split between the extent to which Latin American countries needed to follow a U.S.-led approach toward prohibition or should try to craft their own regional strategies (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

The symptoms of the fragmentation of Latin American states are further illustrated in the varying capabilities of institutions and economies in different states. Responsible states tend to be more resourceful in the area of intelligence, surveillance, border surveillance and anti-money laundering furnitures, to the extent that they are richer. Limited institutional capacity in the other hand is a challenge for the implementation of complex anti-drug strategies and control of territories. These differences hinder regional coordination as cooperation often relies on varying contributions and enforcement practices from other areas in the region (Rodriguez & Haag, 2022).

Another serious impediment to regional cooperation efforts is corruption. Law enforcement, political, judicial & border officials are often recruited, bribed or intimidated by the DTOs. In some places an organized criminal network is firmly in control of some local governance institutions, ceding their authority and making state institutions more difficult to operate effectively in supplying security arrangements for crossing the borders. Corruption erodes trust between governments, hinders participation in complete intelligence-sharing mechanisms and joint operations (Saborío, 2019).

The second issue is a variation in national security policies. Certain governments see drug trafficking mainly as a military and security matters, while others emphasize the socio-economic and public health dimensions of drug trafficking. These divergent understandings affect policy design and execution. A militarized response might be the preferred strategy in countries with severe cartel violence, as could be measures for regulatory reform, rural development, and harm reduction policies. Lacks of common regional perspectives on the root causes of narcotics trafficking exacerbate the ineffectiveness of policies in Latin America (Sauls et al., 2022).

However, fragmented relations have resulted in some significant gains through cooperation. Behind the scenes, cooperation for intelligence has hampered trafficking flows; cross-border prosecutions through extradition have solidified; and regional dialogue contributes to awareness of threats posed by transnational trafficking. Cooperation at the border and between the principal countries in the fight against organised crime is both feasible and essential, as evidenced by the existing examples of such cooperation. In particular, the

success of such initiatives relies upon the commitment and trust in institutions and political stability of the involved States (Gardini, 2015).

Cooperation and fragmentation then set the tone for a macro-politics of drug control in Latin America. While collective action is characterized by institutional opportunities in the region, ideological differences, sovereignty issues, corruption, and external geopolitical factors persist in stalling the formation of a unified regional approach to dealing with drugs. Latin American regionalism thus embodies a process of balancing the desires for joint rules on security on the one hand and the decentralized political fact within Latin America on the other (Nolte & Weiffen, 2024).

5. Comparative Case Studies

5.1 Colombia: Security-Centered Anti-Drug Strategy and Regional Cooperation Role

From this perspective, Colombia is one of the major cases in Latin American drug control politics in terms of the relation of narcotics trafficking, internal armed conflict, insurgency, paramilitary violence, and external security assistance to Colombia's anti-drug policies. For quite a while, Colombia was considered a big plantation of cocaine-producing coca and a big factory of cocaine, and Colombia's drug control was an integral component of national security policy. Indeed, the Colombian state's response was a security-driven strategy that saw narcotics trafficking as a criminal issue but also a danger to territorial sovereignty, political stability, and legitimacy of institutions (Garzón & Rueda, 2020).

Plan Colombia carried out the most overt manifestation of Colombia's security-centered strategy, which involved counter-narcotics police, military reinforcement, aerial eradication, intelligence sharing, and counterinsurgent fighting. This strategy was supported by a large number of U.S. agencies and supported successfully in strengthening drug trafficking organizations and armed groups engaged in the narcotics economy to reduce these. But at the same time, Plan Colombia was enhancing the capabilities of the state in some parts of Colombia, at the same time as it created discussions about militarization, displacement, environmental destruction, and human rights issues. Since the beginning of the new millennium, Colombia has suffered and paid heavy economic and social prices for the "war on drugs" (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

Additionally, Colombia's regional cooperation dimension has been as important. Colombian trafficking networks were closely linked to Central America, Mexico, the Caribbean, Brazil, and Venezuela, as well as the Pacific corridor, making it impossible for the country to combat the drug trade by itself. It engaged in intelligence sharing, extradition arrangements, maritime interdiction, and regional security dialogues. Also, Colombia has

been active in recent years in several significant international drug control operations, demonstrating that international cooperation is an important part of its drug control policy outside the region. All the while, the continuation of coca cultivation and cocaine processing shows that models solely focused on enforcement are ineffective. The facts remain unchanged: cocaine markets and trafficking are key challenges in the world, and the area at the heart of those cocaine flows continues to be Latin America (Shestak & Savenkova, 2024).

The Colombian case makes two things clear: the power and weakness of a security approach to the regulation of drugs. It has been revealed that military and police capability to control trafficking economies can break them, but it has also made visible that resolving poverty in the countryside, inaction against weak governance, inaction against armed conflict, and action in the world have not been enough. Regional cooperation is also required; however, it is not enough without the incorporation of policies for alternative livelihoods, institutional reform, and social development (Sauls et al., 2022).

5.2 Mexico: Drug War and Governmental Problems Militarized

It's also an interesting case of Mexico, as the country is mainly being used as a distribution, transit, and production base for South American cocaine supply and distribution runs to North America, and other illicit drug markets. Mexican Drug Trafficking Groups obtained tremendous leverage over trafficking lines, the borders for trafficking, trafficking logistics, and illegal markets. Established, well-known, and powerful in the Colombian drug economy during the 1990s, trafficking routes were changing, and the quality of the cartels had been degraded as they disintegrated into smaller networks. During the 1990s, Colombian cartels had become a major presence in the drug trade, but they fractured, and smaller networks emerged, while Mexico's drug cartels became more powerful in the regional drug economy (Saborío, 2019).

The militarization has been one of Mexico's main successful steps in its struggle against drug trafficking. The use of armed troops in the operation of internal narcotics countermeasures was rationalised in reference to the increasing capacity of the drug cartels and local police weakness or corruption. But the drug war became militarized and presented some serious governance problems. Violence escalated in some affected areas, criminal groups expanded their activities into kidnapping, extortion, trafficking in persons, and fuel theft and territorial control, and the public's confidence in the institutions of the state was eroded. Whereas the eroding of cartel capabilities, militarised enforcement sometimes resulted in less integrated criminal groups, which led to more localised and violent groups (Garzón & Rueda, 2020).

The Mexican case embodies a big paradox in drug control politics. At the same time, the state has to have the proper capability in order to counter the extremely well-armed criminal groups. However, over-relied military force can also compromise civilian policing, accountability, and human rights issues. However, the governance issues are especially problematic in areas of criminal networks' infiltration of municipal councils, police, and local economies. This leaves the situation where drug control is not only a security affair but also a democratic governance one, too (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

Furthermore, Mexico's regional influence is determined by its interaction with the United States. Cooperation has been extensive on a bilateral basis, particularly via security assistance and cross-border enforcement measures, which have substantially shaped Mexico's drug countermeasures. But such dependency has raised sovereignty issues and political controversy regarding whether the United States-enlisted priorities in the fight against drug violence are sufficient to tackle the root causes of that violence. In Mexico, then, drug control is complicated by the intersection of internal governance challenges, external pressures, cartel innovations, and regional trafficking (Petersen & Schulz, 2018).

5.3 Bolivia: Sovereignty and Coca Policy

Approach

A contrast occurs in Bolivia, where the drug policy has strong ties to cultural identity, indigenous rights, and national autonomy. None of the previous international drug control experiences in other countries has faced the same dilemma, and even though there are similar dynamics of firearm availability in the South, Bolivia has questioned the norms of international prohibitionism by separating traditional uses of coca leaf from drugs such as cocaine. The universal distinction in this manner lies in the political attitude regarding the control of drugs that has been endorsed by Bolivia (Amoroso 2025). The coca leaf has cultural, medicinal, and social importance among indigenous peoples in Bolivia. Consequently, forced eradication policies were sometimes seen as attacks on indigenous identity and national autonomy, due to their implementation under the umbrella of international drug control policies. Bolivia's policy stance focused on legal recognition of traditional uses of coca and opposition to cocaine trafficking. This became more prominent when Bolivia returned to the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1961, making a reservation for traditional coca leaf chewing. UNODC pointed out that Bolivia's re-accession had been linked to guaranteeing the practice of chewing coca, and that the UN treaty record had Bolivia's reservation regarding the traditional, cultural, and medicinal uses of coca (Sauls et al., 2022).

This is a significant challenge to the predominant international drug control model in Bolivia. It asserts the need to take cultural, indigenous, and social context into account in formulating drug policy, instead of a blanket prohibitionist approach. Its implications have also been extended to regionalism in Latin America as it creates a different policy perspective, the one focused on sovereignty, cultural recognition, and negotiated control of the region, in contrast with a military drive to eradicate it (Vivares 2021).

But these are the limitations of Bolivia's approach as well. In practice, it is challenging to differentiate between legal and traditional coca growth and illicit cocaine production. State institutions need to control planting, stop going against the law, and plump up their international image. Thus, Bolivia's policy must be not only tolerating but maintaining a comprehensive governance structure with a delicate balance between tradition, legality, and security. However, as the Bolivian case shows, the fragmentation of drug policies can be beneficial to legitimate differences in cultural values, political agendas, and national histories in Latin America (Quiliconi, 2020).

5.4 Brazil: Regional Leadership and Border Security Policy

Brazil is indeed a very important case, due to its geographical size, a large border area, and increasing role as a country that passes through transit and consumer goods. Brazil is bordered by several South American nations, including large Coca-producing and trafficking nations. As such, Brazil's drug control policy relies heavily on border control. In contrast with a country of internal armed conflict like Colombia, Brazil's drug control is more in line with territorial surveillance, urban violence, organized crime, and regional leadership (Görge, 2023).

Brazil's security problems revolve around how drugs can move across long borders that are hard to police, particularly via its Amazonian areas and remote regions along its porous borders with Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Colombia, and Venezuela. Those trails provide the opportunity for cocaine and other illegal commodities to be transported to Brazilian cities, ports, and international markets. There are also Brazilian criminal groups that are embedded in Brazilian domestic markets and are involved in trafficking for foreign destinations, particularly Asian and African markets, by connecting the local, urban crime magnitude to the regional flows of drugs (Saborio, 2019).

Brazil, as a regional power, has been trying to develop the monitoring of the borders, intelligence, and security dialogue with neighbouring regions. Its contribution to regional cooperation is crucial as effective drug control within South America is reliant heavily on Brazil's ability to control its borders and co-ordinate co-operation with

neighbouring states. Brazil's regional leadership, however, has been stunted from time to time by issues of internal security, institutional disintegration, and political shifts. The country's law enforcement chain is divided into federal, state, and local law enforcement, which sometimes makes responses difficult, especially with regard to organized crime (Rodriguez & Haag, 2022).

The countries in the region are not exclusively producer countries, as in the case of Brazil. Regional patterns of trafficking and consumer trafficking are also formed by transit and consumer states; they affect traffic patterns, markets, enforcement priorities, and adaptations by criminals. Brazil is therefore a pivotal country within the context of the regionalism of Latin America: the country not only has potential as a leader in cooperative governance of security issues, but also exhibits significant internal security tensions, ranging from organized crime to prison gangs, police violence, and urban insecurity (Nolte & Weiffen, 2024).

Comparative Interpretation

Latin American drug control is not so much uniform as it is diverse, illustrated by the four case studies. Both serve as a model for Colombia, where security is paramount and foreign forces play a significant role; the experience in Mexico shows how to operate in an environment of international criminality and low government control; in Bolivia, foreign forces are absent, but border security and regional leadership are crucial; and Brazil illustrates how border security and regional leadership are essential. Altogether, it suggests that regional cooperation is vital since drug trafficking is a transnational activity, but also demonstrates the reasons for the fragmentation of cooperation. The drug problem is perceived differently depending on the different socio-cultural contexts, history of each country, institutions, ideology, and security agenda (Cáceres & Brincat, 2024).

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Selected Country Approaches

Country	Dominant Drug Control Approach	Main Challenge	Regional Significance
Colombia	Security-centred enforcement and counter-narcotics cooperation	Coca cultivation, armed conflict, and trafficking networks	Major producer country and key regional security partner
Mexico	Militarized anti-cartel strategy	Cartel violence, corruption, and	Major transit hub linked to North

		governance crisis	American markets
Bolivia	Sovereignty-based coca regulation	Balancing traditional coca use with anti-trafficking control	Alternative model challenging prohibitionist policy
Brazil	Border security and regional enforcement cooperation	Long borders, urban crime, trafficking corridors	Regional power and strategic transit/consumer state

6. Findings and Discussion

The study shows that regionalism in Latin America has created opportunities for cooperation and incited protracted tensions in the politics of drug control. The inability of any Latin American state to assert its claim to “self-determination”, one of the largest-scale drug trading, has increased the need to turn to collective security governance. Narcotics trafficking networks are international in nature, with production, transit, and distribution systems linked across countries; this means a single country cannot tackle the problem of narcotics trafficking by itself. This has spurred the creation of regional cooperation platforms on intelligence cooperation, cooperative border security, bilateral or multilateral cooperation on the exchange of law enforcement information, maritime surveillance, and maritime-based cooperation on multilateral dialogue on policy issues, etc. (Shestak & Savenkova, 2024).

In addition, the study finds that regional organizations have had minimal impact in enhancing the cooperation against drugs in the region, so far. Regional institutions, including the OAS, established institutional channels for policy coordination and security cooperation, and mechanisms for regional integration facilitated discussions on transnational OOC and border control. Such structures were cooperative and helped to enhance the communication between governments and enable some effective anti-trafficking operations. The study, however, reveals that regional institutions often do not have the political unity, enforcement, and institutionalized continuity necessary to maintain unified drug control strategies over time (Bianculli, 2022).

The second significant finding has to do with the strong ideological fault lines that exist in drug policy in Latin America. The definition of narcotics trafficking varies among governments, as do the solutions and the means to solve them. Certain states still follow the militarised approach to prohibition

that relies on military engagement, criminal justice rather than civil justice, and on a stance of law enforcement. The models are generally going in the direction of public health, decriminalization, harm reduction, rural development, and social reform. The conflicting policy perspectives play a major role in creating regional fragmentation and hindering the potential of a uniform regional anti-drug policy (Petersen & Schulz, 2018).

Latam Drug Governance is illustrated through a series of comparative case studies detailing different experiences across countries. Colombia is a security-based model that is strongly shaped by counterinsurgency and relations with foreign militaries, such as the USA-backed military cooperation initiatives. While this measure bolstered state security, they concluded that it created the potential for long-term perpetuation of violence, displacement, and human rights issues. The partial division of cartels, the corruption of the institutions, and the problems of governance that exist in Mexico illustrate how militarized enforcement can impact. From the Mexican example, it is clear that if the criminal networks have significant power in terms of space and economic resources, then mass mobilisation of the police remains insufficient as a way of controlling organised crime (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

Bolivia, on the other hand, had a different perspective based on sovereignty, rights of indigenous peoples, and the separation of traditional use of coca from its illegal production as cocaine. Bolivia's policy represents the general regional resistance to imported prohibitive approaches and is a sign that drug policies are bound up with issues of cultural identity and political autonomy. In the meantime, Brazil underscores the importance of border security and South American leadership. Despite its large borders and strategic geographical location, Brazil has not yet scaled up its regional cooperation in combating trafficking due to the country's internal circumstances of security crisis and divided middle, which still hinder the effectiveness of its regional role (Vivares, 2021).

Another relevant finding, according to the study, is that external geopolitical influence is a key component of fragmentation in Latin American regionalism. A high level of American influence in the development of anti-drug policies through bilateral deals, military support, and policies with an emphasis on enforcement led to a degree of political conflict throughout the region. Some governments saw a need for U.S. cooperation in building the state's security capacity, while others saw it as an encroachment and a violation of their sovereignty. Disagreements created fissures within regional organizations and deepened the tensions and concerns over the way forward in regional drug governance (Gardini, 2015).

Another important discovery is that drug trafficking and governance go hand in hand. The study shows that there are places in the periphery where there is a lack of state presence, socio-economic inequality, corruption of institutions, and these are exploited by organized criminal groups. An emerging drug traffic, in this way, invariably evolves into a governance crisis involving the issue of democracy, public trust, judicial independence, and legitimacy of the state. Often, the policies on fighting drugs emphasized law and order measures and neglected other structural problems like poverty, unemployment, rural isolation, social marginalization, etc. This meant that despite large efforts to combat the illegal economy, it persisted (Sauls et al., 2022).

The dialogue also suggests that over-militarization can be a cause of more violence and of less accountability through democracy. In anti-drug operations, many countries reported an increase in civilian casualties, involuntary displacement, and allegations of human rights abuses. This discovery buttresses the emerging regional debate for security enforcement and public health strategies, social investment, institutional reform, and community-based development. Measures to curb narcotics trafficking in the long run must be a combination of improving socio-economic and governance conditions, and not just basing them on coercion fielded by the military alone (Garzón & Rueda, 2020).

In sum, the results validate the concept that the region is marked by a persisting dynamic of cooperation and fragmentation among the countries of Latin America. Despite this, ideological, sovereignty and security issues, corruption, disparity in institutional capabilities, and geopolitical tensions remain a challenge in realising the ideal of a single anti-drug strategy for the region. State drug control politics in Latin America are therefore connected with wider political dynamics on questions of governance, democracy, regional identity, and collective security cooperation between states in the region (Nolte & Weiffen, 2024).

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that regionalism continues to be part of the politics of drug control in Latin America, if not more important, in complicated ways. On the other hand, there have been gains in communicating, sharing intelligence, coordinating borders, and a collective understanding of the cross-border existence of narcotics trafficking through RACs. Regional bodies/multilateral platforms allowed relevant spaces for dialogue and collaborative governance on security, signifying that no state is capable of tackling the multiple threats of organized criminal networks by itself (Quiliconi, 2020).

The other side of the story is that despite some advances in the practice of cooperation in the region,

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the field of anti-drug cooperation is still highly fragmented, which stems from the ideological differences, conflicting national agendas, institutional and other obstacles, and international political positioning. States in Latin America are still working on various policy pathways and configurations based upon their own historical experiences, domestic politics, and existing security needs. Some governments favour a militarized prohibitionist approach to enforcement, others a public health and sovereignty approach. Such opposing strategies hinder a single, regional drug policy and make it difficult to integrate the institutions among regional bodies (Rodriguez & Haag, 2022).

The comparative case studies show that single frameworks cannot be used to understand drug control politics in Latin America. The lessons Colombia can offer on the opportunities and challenges of security-oriented enforcement through international support are illustrative. Mexico offers them the starkest example of the immense governance problems of anti-cartel military operations. Bolivia underscores the significance of cultural identity and sovereignty in formulating alternative drug policy perspectives, whereas Brazil makes a strong point of the border security and regional leadership aspects for transnational governance. All these cases demonstrate that the drug problem in the region is multi-dimensional and regionally embedded in the governance, inequality, institutional legitimacy, and politics of Latin America (Cáceres & Brincat, 2024).

The study also finds that a merely-enforcement approach to dealing with the narcotics problem in the region is insufficient. Military and police actions can temporarily interfere with trafficking operations, but do not remove the structural conditions that feed back into the perpetuation of trafficking economies. Organized crime thrives in conditions of poverty, marginalization in rural areas, corruption, weak governance, and social exclusion, which persist. Such is the need for integrated regional governance in confronting drugs and strengthening security cooperation with economic development, public health policies, institutional development, and social investment (Amoroso, 2025).

In addition, the study demonstrates the need to balance these elements of regional cooperation with national sovereignty and democratic accountability. Political and human rights issues with military over-involvement and externalization were frequently seen in the region. Cooperation trends in the region in the coming years should, therefore, focus on better integration through transparency and trust in the institutions, civilian control, and protection of human rights, as well as coordination of response to transnational threats of criminals (Francis & Mauser, 2011).

In summary, regionalism in Latin America is a continuous conflict between "agreed" collective security and political disunification. Regional institutions offer useful tools to tackle transnational drug trafficking, but can only do so when there is political stability, institutional capacity, consensus, and commitment among States. Whether or not regional governance bodies will be able to evolve to address both security and socio-economic aspects of the narcotics issue, as well as make more coordinated and balanced decisions, will depend largely on their capacity to move beyond enforcement-focused, fragmented approaches and finally establish policy frameworks that are comprehensive, collaborative, and sustainable, without compromising socio-economic values, interests, or economic development (Vivares, 2021).

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