

# FORUM FOR EAST ASIA–LATIN AMERICA COOPERATION (FEALAC): CHALLENGES ON INTERREGIONALISM AND FEALAC

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## Abstract

The Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) is an interregional multilateral institution launched in 1999 to enhance cooperation between Latin America and East Asia in areas such as politics, economy, culture, technology, and education. Comprising thirty-six member states from Latin America and the Caribbean and East Asia and the Pacific, FEALAC seeks to foster mutual understanding, establish new partnerships, and coordinate joint positions on international affairs. A distinctive feature of FEALAC is its deliberate avoidance of excessive institutionalization, operating instead on future-oriented, voluntary, and flexible management principles. However, this pursuit of non-strict institutionalization, combined with the widening socio-economic disparities between the two regions over the past decade, has posed challenges to the kind of cooperation originally envisioned. Furthermore, the scarcity of literature on interregionalism, the theoretical framework through which FEALAC can be understood, remains a barrier to assessing its potential and capacity. Against this backdrop, the present paper brings together existing academic works on interregionalism and FEALAC to inform future studies, focusing on the following questions: What is interregionalism? By which

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category of interregionalism can FEALAC be understood? What remains to be explored in research on interregionalism? What institutional shortcomings are embedded in FEALAC? And finally, does FEALAC face challenges arising from the growing discrepancy between Latin America and East Asia?

**Keywords:** International Organization; Multilateral Relations; Regional Cooperation.

# FORO DE COOPERAÇÃO AMÉRICA LATINA-ÁSIA DO LESTE (FOCALAL): DESAFIOS DO INTERREGIONALISMO E DO FOCALAL

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## Resumo

O Foro de Cooperação América Latina-Ásia do Leste (FOCALAL) é uma instituição multilateral inter-regional criada em 1999 para reforçar a cooperação entre a América Latina e a Ásia do Leste em áreas como a política, a economia, a cultura, a tecnologia e a educação. Composto por 36 Estados membros da América Latina e do Caribe e da Ásia do Leste e do Pacífico, o FOCALAL procura promover a compreensão mútua, estabelecer novas parcerias e coordenar posições conjuntas sobre assuntos internacionais. Uma característica marcante do FOCALAL é que ele evita deliberadamente a institucionalização excessiva, operando, em vez disso, com base em princípios de gestão voltados para o futuro, voluntários e flexíveis. No entanto, essa busca por uma institucionalização não rígida, combinada com o aumento das disparidades socioeconômicas entre as duas regiões na última década, tem representado um desafio para o tipo de cooperação originalmente previsto. Além disso, a escassez de literatura sobre inter-regionalismo, o quadro teórico através do qual o FOCALAL pode ser compreendido, continua a ser um obstáculo à avaliação do seu potencial e capacidade. Nesse contexto, o presente artigo reúne trabalhos acadêmicos existentes sobre inter-regionalismo o FOCALAL para informar estudos futuros, com foco nas seguintes questões: O que é inter-regionalismo? Em que categoria de inter-regionalismo o FOCALAL pode ser compreendido? O que ainda precisa ser explorado nas pesquisas sobre inter-regionalismo? Quais são as limitações institucionais inerentes ao FOCALAL? E, finalmente, o FOCALAL enfrenta desafios decorrentes da crescente discrepância entre a América Latina e a Ásia do Leste?

**Palavras-chave:** Organização Internacional; Relações Multilaterais; Cooperação Regional.

# FORO DE COOPERACIÓN AMÉRICA LATINA-ASIA ORIENTAL (FOCALAE): DESAFÍOS DEL INTERREGIONALISMO Y DEL FOCALAE

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## Resumen

El Foro de Cooperación América Latina-Asia Oriental (FOCALAE) es una institución multilateral interregional creada en 1999 para reforzar la cooperación entre América Latina y Asia Oriental en áreas como la política, la economía, la cultura, la tecnología y la educación. Compuesto por 36 Estados miembros de América Latina y el Caribe y de Asia Oriental y el Pacífico, el FOCALAE busca promover el entendimiento mutuo, establecer nuevas asociaciones y coordinar posiciones conjuntas sobre asuntos internacionales. Una característica destacada de FOCALAE es que evita deliberadamente la institucionalización excesiva y, en su lugar, opera sobre la base de principios de gestión orientados al futuro, voluntarios y flexibles. Sin embargo, esta búsqueda de una institucionalización no rígida, combinada con el aumento de las disparidades socioeconómicas entre las dos regiones en la última década, ha supuesto un reto para el tipo de cooperación previsto inicialmente. Además, la escasez de literatura sobre interregionalismo, el marco teórico a través del cual se puede comprender FOCALAE, sigue siendo un obstáculo para evaluar su potencial y capacidad. En este contexto, el presente artículo reúne los trabajos académicos existentes sobre el interregionalismo y el FOCALAE para informar futuros estudios, centrándose en las siguientes cuestiones: ¿Qué es el interregionalismo? ¿En qué categoría de interregionalismo puede entenderse el FOCALAE? ¿Qué queda por explorar en las investigaciones sobre el interregionalismo? ¿Cuáles son las limitaciones institucionales inherentes a FOCALAE? Y, por último, ¿se enfrenta FOCALAE a retos derivados de la creciente discrepancia entre América Latina y Asia Oriental?

**Palabras clave:** Organización internacional; Relaciones multilaterales; Cooperación regional.

## 1. Introduction

Established in 1999, the Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) is an interregional institution that promotes cooperation between Latin America and East Asia. With twenty countries of Central and South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, and Venezuela) and sixteen countries of East Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, New Zealand, and Australia) as member countries, FEALAC is a broad multilateral framework that promotes broadening and strengthening relations between the two regions in economic, social and cultural areas: trade; investment; sustainable development; innovation; micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises; socio-political cooperation; science and technology; education; gender; sports; tourism; and youth (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea). The forum was established to function as a platform for developing countries to share common issues and experiences and build complementary relations based on each region's comparative advantages (CEPAL 2013).

Despite its goals and symbolic significance as the only existing institution that connects two geographically distinct and distant regions directly and exclusively, the flexible and unrestrictive nature of FEALAC, as well as increasing economic and social disparity between the two regions, raises questions about its potential and capacity. Moreover, the vast socio-economic and cultural differences that exist at the intra-regional level—in other words, between subregions within each region: Central America and South America; Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia; and Northeast, South Asia, and Australia and New Zealand, also impede cooperation at a regional level. To make matters worse, compared to other regional or interregional organizations worldwide, FEALAC has received relatively little academic attention. Interregionalism, the overarching concept encompassing various categories of interregional arrangements through which FEALAC is explained, remains underanalyzed compared to the substantial body of literature on regionalism.

This article seeks to review the literature on FEALAC and interregionalism across five dimensions. First, what is interregionalism, and what types of interregional arrangements exist globally? Second, under which category of interregionalism can FEALAC be examined? Third, what has the scholarship

addressed regarding interregionalism and FEALAC, and which areas remain underexplored? Fourth, what institutional shortcomings are inherent in FEALAC? Fifth, does FEALAC face challenges arising from the growing discrepancies between Latin America and East Asia?

The second chapter lays the groundwork for future studies to address these questions in greater depth, by examining the definition and typologies of interregionalism, as well as the international and theoretical context of its emergence. The third chapter explores the principal factors that led to the establishment of FEALAC in both international and regional contexts. This discussion begins with the historical trajectories of regionalism in Latin America and East Asia, followed by an examination of FEALAC's aims, objectives, and key issues. The chapter further considers the institution's potential and limitations, particularly in light of the widening economic asymmetry between the two regions and the organization's inherently soft nature. Special attention is given to economic indicators such as GDP growth, trade, and foreign direct investment. Building on these findings, the final chapter addresses the challenges facing interregional cooperation within FEALAC and highlights the existing gap in the literature on interregionalism and FEALAC.

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## 2. Interregionalism: Theoretical Perspectives and Historical Background

Several definitions of interregionalism appear in the literature. According to Roloff (2006, 18 quoted in Camroux 2010, 58), interregionalism is a "process of widening and deepening political, economic, and societal interactions between international regions." According to Gilson (2005) interregionalism "represents the interaction of one region with another," and it is a means of managing relations in a globalizing world in which the region works as a central political actor. Doidge (2007, 232) argues that interregionalism is "premised upon a dichotomous relationship between two groups representing geographical/political/economic/cultural regions." Even though the specific wording of these definitions may differ slightly from one scholar to another, their essence is not difficult to grasp: they all converge on the idea of interregionalism as a process of structured interaction and the gradual development of relationships between distinct regions. One of the most noteworthy and distinctive features of interregionalism lies in its variability. Depending on the regions involved, as well as on the issues and thematic priorities placed at the center of cooperation, the character

and substance of interregionalism can shift considerably. In other words, interregional policy is, as Soderbaum et al. argue, “not a fixed set of guidelines but subject to adaptation” (Söderbaum et al. 2005, 367).

The majority of scholars point to the 1990s, and more specifically to the end of the Cold War, as the period in which interregionalism began to spread more visibly across the world. In their view, the rise of this new tendency in international relations can be explained primarily by the collapse of the bipolar international context. Within that earlier framework, interregional relations had been permitted only in a very limited sense, largely confined to transregional alliances and to a few dialogues conducted between groups of states or regional organizations (Hurrell 1995; Meissner 2016; Hänggi 2000; Dent 2003). However, Doidge (2007) traces it back to the first Yaoundé Convention of 1963 between the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Associated African States of Madagascar (AASM). A prevalent idea on interregionalism is that the European Community and European Union constructed the global model of interregionalism, as they did with regionalism (Doidge 2007; Söderbaum et al. 2005). Aggarwal and Fogarty (2005, 327) call the EU the “patron saint of interregionalism” since it has sought interregional linkages with almost every region, including South America, East Asia, Eastern Europe, and various developing countries—except for North America, toward which the EU has shown an absence of interregional strategy.

Interest in interregionalism in the academy was accompanied by “new regionalism” and comparative regional integration studies (Acharya; Johnston 2007 quoted in Camroux 2010, 58). Furthermore, this is well demonstrated in the perspective of Hänggi (2000, 13) on interregionalism as an “ongoing process of globalization and regionalism” and, therefore, a “lasting feature of the international system.” According to Gilson (2005), there are many positive functions that interregionalism perform, which are: managing global changes in the structure of the global political economy by addressing transborder financial and political challenges and threats together; fortifying the role of regions as actors; affecting intra-regional identity developments through region-to-region process, facilitating two-way interregionalism; and, lastly, opening space for nonstate actors, such as businesses, citizens and nongovernmental groupings.

The theoretical approaches that seek to explain interregionalism can, in broad terms, be divided into three main branches: realist, liberal-institutionalist, and constructivist. From a realist perspective, interregionalism is primarily understood through the lens of rivalry among regions and the pursuit of balance among different regional actors seeking to maximize their relative power.

In contrast, the liberal-institutionalist perspective interprets interregionalism as a response to the necessity of cooperation between regions, emphasizing the management of complex interdependencies that operate beyond the level of individual regions. Lastly, constructivist theory interprets interregionalism focusing on “identity formation through interregional interaction” (Urgen Ri’iland 1999 quoted in Hänggi 2000, 9). This point of view sees interregionalism as a vital element to constructing a sense of regional identity; in other words, a “sense of regional self.” (Gilson 2005, 321–323; Stubbs 2012).

According to Hänggi (2000, 3), there are three main types of interregionalism: (a) relations between regional groupings; (b) bi-regional and transregional arrangements; (c) hybrids, such as relations between regional groupings and single powers. First, relations between regional groupings are called the “prototype of interregionalism,” represented by the EU’s traditional group-to-group dialogues, which have been developing since the 1970s. Examples include the dialogue between the European Community (EC) and ASEAN that was institutionalized in the 1980s (Lukas 1997; Regelsberger 1990 quoted in Doidge 2007). Other examples of dialogues include the EU–Mercado Comum do Sul (MERCOSUL), the EU–Andean Community, the EU–Rio Group, the EU–Southern African Development Community (SADC), MERCOSUL–ASEAN, MERCOSUL–REC (Regional Economic Communities of the African Union), South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)–ASEAN etc

The second typology of Hänggi is that of bi-regional and transregional arrangements, in which states from other regions could participate individually with other regional coordinations (Urgen Ri’iland 2001, 2 quoted in Hänggi 2000). This type of heterogeneous arrangement took shape within the emerging triangular relationship among the three most significant economic regions of the world: North America, Western Europe, and East Asia. Examples of such interregional linkages include the establishment of APEC in 1989, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1996, the Europe–Latin America Rio Summit in 1999, and the Africa–Europe Cairo Summit in 2000, culminating above all in the creation of FEALAC in 2001. Lastly are relations between regional groupings and the single dominant power of other regions, such as the USA, China, Japan, and India. Examples of this category are as follows: EU–China, EU–Japan, EU–South Korea, EU–India, EFTA–Mexico, ASEAN–USA, ASEAN–Canada, ASEAN–Australia, ASEAN–New Zealand, and ASEAN–Russia.

Interestingly, the same author, Hänggi, modified his typologies in a book published in 2006: first, he described dialogues between two regional organizations, which are also called “old interregionalism” by the author or “bilateral interregionalism” by Ruland (1999). The first category of

interregionalism involves relationships established between two regional organizations, such as the case of EU–ASEAN or EU–MERCOSUR. The second typology refers to dialogues conducted between a formal regional organization and a more loosely coordinated regional grouping of states, with prominent examples including ASEM and EU–LAC. The third category encompasses dialogues held between two regional groups as such, and it is within this last category that FEALAC is generally situated.

Such confusion in the existing literature, which has not yet been sufficiently clarified, appears to be closely related to the lack of systematic analysis of the phenomenon and to the limited degree of empirical progress that has been made in the study of interregional dialogues. Even the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), the most advanced interregional mechanism, is considered to be in its infancy (Doidge 2007). Despite scholars’ noted interests and relevance in the role and meaning of interregionalism, the phenomenon, especially “the role of interregional interactions” and the “relationship between regionalism and interregionalism” have not been sufficiently explored (Meissner 2016; Hänggi 2000, 2; Söderbaum et al. 2005; Camroux 2010).

For example, Soderbaum et al. (2005) pointed out that a comparison of various types of interregionalism and empirical cases around the world in a detailed manner is of great need. Soderbaum et al. (2005) argue that interregionalism ought to be analyzed independently of the conventional framework of regionalism, since interregionalism constitutes an additional level of interaction within the world system, existing alongside regionalism and offering new avenues for structured region-to-region engagement. Furthermore, the complex and often intriguing relationships between interregionalism and the broader dynamics of multilateralism and bilateralism—forms of interaction that in certain respects compete with interregionalism while in other respects serve to reinforce it—require closer scholarly attention. In addition, the potential consequences of interregionalism for the evolution of global governance and for the configuration of the world order are areas that still call for further systematic investigation.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that regionalism provided the essential background from which interregionalism emerged and took shape. For this reason, any serious attempt to approach FEALAC necessarily requires an examination of the historical evolution of regionalism in both Latin America and East Asia, since the patterns of regional cooperation developed in these two areas laid the groundwork for subsequent interregional initiatives. Accordingly, the following chapter is devoted to studying the historical context of regionalism in each region, tracing the main trajectories and identifying

the conditions that made interregional dialogue possible. Building on this historical foundation, the analysis moves to the institutional dimension, with particular attention given to the structure, objectives, and challenges of FEALAC.

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### 3. Forum for East Asia–Latin America Cooperation

#### *3.1 Historical Context of Regionalism in Latin America and East Asia*

For countries to decide to cooperate and form institutions or organizations for regional cooperation, it is fundamental that they understand the decisive factors for cooperation, such as the severity of the problems that are present across the region, the level of interdependence with other actors, institutional incentives to cooperate (Dowding and Feiock 2012 quoted in Castro and Castro 2020), as well as shared interests, ideas, norms, and practices that transcend national borders from a constructivist perspective, among others (Ruiz-Camacho 2020; Castro and Castro 2020).

With regard to economic and political cooperation in Latin America, it is important to emphasize that regional integration in the region has historically been grounded in the principles of South–South Cooperation (Cooperação Sul-Sul). Within this framework, developing countries have sought to build cooperative ties on the basis of shared historical experiences, common social structures, and comparable economic conditions. At the same time, it should be noted that the trajectory of Latin American integration has not been linear, but has instead been characterized by a recurring pattern of advances and setbacks that have unfolded over the course of its history (Ruiz-Camacho 2020; Castro and Castro 2020; CEPAL 2016).

The process of regional integration in Latin America has unfolded simultaneously at the level of the continent as a whole and within its different subregions, continuing in a relatively steady manner through four identifiable waves of integration that can be traced across time. These waves extend from the initial efforts of the 1950s and 1960s, through the developments of the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the renewed dynamism of the 1990s, and finally into the more recent experiences of the 2000s and 2010s. Within this broader historical trajectory, the 1990s stand out as a particularly significant decade, during which Brazil sought to reinforce economic integration in the region. Brazil pursued this goal by deepening bilateral relations with Argentina, advancing trade liberalization initiatives, and adopting common external

tariffs, all of which were institutionalized through the establishment of the Mercado Comum do Sul (Dabene 2012). With the inauguration of President Lula in 2002, the momentum of regional integration in South America was further reinforced. During this period, the integration movement increasingly came to revolve around Brazil's leadership, and the country assumed a more prominent role in promoting and coordinating cooperative initiatives among its South American neighbors (Hirst 2006, 131–132; Gomes-Mera 2016), and MERCOSUL was once called “the most successful integration in the region” (Danese 2009).

However, territorial disputes and competition for regional supremacy are sources of rivalry (Ahn and Park 2007). To make matters worse, MERCOSUL has reached a deadlock on account of structural and political asymmetries between member states, the absence of institutions capable of managing the demands resulting from the increase in interdependence, and a low level of integration similar to other regional integrations in South America (Mariano and Junior 2012; Granato 2016; Oliveira and Gonçalves 2010; Terra 2009; Doctor 2013; Veiga 2007; Hijazi 2012; Giordano et al. 2004; Kume and Piani 2005). Indeed, cooperation between countries in the region has significantly decreased from the initial stage of integration (Gómez-Mera 2009). Even though there have been numerous efforts to reinvigorate weakened regional arrangements, according to Ghymers (2005), the Latin American region remains stuck in a typical suboptimal situation of a non-cooperation strategy, characterized by three different obstacles to regional cooperation: personifications arising from monetary, financial, and political aspects (structural asymmetries); the Latin centralization syndrome; and the lack of institutional reputation and credibility (Ghymers 2005; Nunes 2020).

With regard to East Asia, the region displays one of the most intriguing and complex features of regionalism. Unlike the other two components of the triad—Western Europe and North America—East Asia's geopolitical context has long been marked by deep-seated intraregional disputes and by a historical dependence on the United States. These two factors have consistently acted as obstacles to the development of more profound and comprehensive forms of cooperation among the countries of the region. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, Northeast Asia has experienced important transformations. The rapid advancement of technology, together with an increasingly sophisticated division of labor, has fostered the systematization and organization of regional production chains. This, in turn, has stimulated new forms of cooperation among the nations involved, and the expansion of regional market economy has stimulated financial exchange between the countries (Capannelli et al.

2010; Petri 2006). Especially in the 2000s, as China's economy grew drastically and emerged as the core of the production network in East Asia, exports and direct investment toward China increased significantly. As a result, the close connection between production, investment, and trade centered on China became the foundation of economic interdependence among neighboring countries (Lee 2015; Pempel 2007).

Nevertheless, as the term "Asian Paradox" shows, despite their high level of economic interdependence and complementarity, East Asian countries, especially South Korea, China, and Japan, have almost no political, diplomatic, or security cooperation (Manning 1993). Even though these countries are geographically close and have the most significant economies in East Asia, sovereignty and historical issues still dominate regional diplomatic agendas. These issues include a dispute over the Korean territory Dokdo, the illegal Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, as well as of Taiwan and some Chinese territories, comfort women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army, the North Korean nuclear issue, the arms race, security dependence on the US and the US intervention in the region, and Japan's constitutional revision (Lee 2015).

Besides, the economic conflict between the three countries is escalating. In 2010, China imposed a rare earth embargo on Japan over the Daoyu Dao (Senkaku Islands) territory dispute. (Bradsher 2010). In 2017, China imposed retaliatory economic sanctions on South Korea following Korea's introduction of a missile defense system, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD, Foreign Affairs 2021). In 2019, Japan restricted its exports of key chemicals to South Korea that are vital to making semiconductors and display screens. This was in opposition to the Korean Supreme Court's decision to seize the property of Japanese war criminal enterprises to compensate Korean forced laborers during the Second World War (Bicker 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the conflictual regional context, East Asia has demonstrated advances in regional, subregional, and transregional integration and cooperation frameworks. The 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis revealed limitations of international economic organizations and prompted discussions about regional mechanisms for economic cooperation such as the ASEAN+3, the East Asian Summit (EAS), and the Chiang Mai Initiative (Medalla and Balboa 2010).

In light of this basic understanding of the historical background of regionalism in Latin America and East Asia, the next chapter will focus on an institutional analysis of FEALAC and discussion on its challenges and potential.

### 3.2 Institutional Analysis on FEALAC

Latin America and East Asia are the two continents separated by the greatest geographical distance, situated almost as antipodes to one another. In addition to this vast physical separation, their distinct social, economic, historical, and cultural backgrounds mean that the two regions share relatively few features in common, a factor that partially explains the limited interactions that have traditionally taken place between them. Nevertheless, the growing global relevance and participation of several key developing countries from both regions, such as Brazil, Chile, and Colombia in Latin America, and China, Japan, and South Korea in East Asia, with the latter playing an especially prominent role, have gradually shifted the world's economic center of gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This transformation also implied that South-South economic linkages and broader cooperation between the two regions would become increasingly significant in the decades to follow.

This transformation in the international political economy generated an increasing need, and at the same time provided justification, for these countries to pursue closer cooperation and to adjust to the new global context. Such adjustments extended across a wide range of issues, reaching beyond the strictly political and economic sphere to include areas such as food and energy security, sustainable development, infrastructure, science and technology, as well as cultural and educational exchanges. Above all, the anticipated expansion of the Asian economy was seen as offering Latin America and the Caribbean an important opportunity to increase and diversify their exports to the region. With major East Asian countries among its member states, FEALAC came to be regarded as a substantial forum in terms of economic variables such as trade, finance, and production, holding the potential to serve as a bridge for deeper bi-regional economic engagement (CEPAL 2013).

The surge of interregional frameworks worldwide also made cooperation between countries in Latin America and East Asia necessary in various fora (Medalla and Balboa 2010). In addition, the international financial crisis also served as a catalyst for the two regions to form an interregional cooperation framework to address critical challenges together. However, due to a lack of institutionalization of high-level political discussions and well-coordinated strategies and plans, the two regions had difficulty establishing formal economic linkages (CEPAL 2013).

In this scenario, in September 1998, Singapore's-then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, during a visit to Chile's former president Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, suggested the idea of establishing a comprehensive interregional multilateral

forum for dialogue and cooperation between Latin America and East Asia. This was in light of the weak cooperation between two regions, despite their outstanding development and increasing relevance in the international economy. The East Asia-Latin America Forum (EALAF) was officially launched in September 1999 at the first Senior Officials' Meeting in Singapore. It was a unique platform for dialogue between the two regions. At the 1st Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Santiago, Chile, in 2001, the forum was renamed Forum for East Asia and Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC). The main objectives of the forum are to increase mutual understanding, trust, political dialogue, and friendly cooperation among member states with a view to enriching and sharing experiences and developing new partnerships; to tap the potential of multidisciplinary cooperation, inter alia, in economy, trade, investment, finance, science and technology, environment protection, culture, sport, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges; and to expand common ground on important international political and economic issues with a view to working together in different international fora in order to safeguard common interests (1st FEALAC Foreign Ministers' Meeting 2001).

The principles of FEALAC are as follows: FEALAC should be forward looking and future oriented. It will be voluntary, informal, and flexible in its working procedures. It will conduct itself in accordance with basic principles of international law, in particular: Respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity; Non-interference in each other's internal affairs; Equality, mutual benefit, and the common goal of development; Respect for each other's unique culture and social values; and Decision-making by consensus (1st FEALAC Foreign Ministers' Meeting 2001).

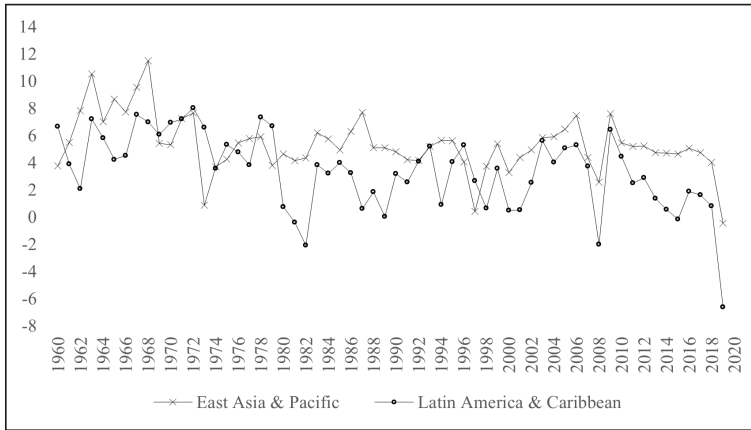
The initiative was highly persuasive and valid, especially during the first decade of the 2000s, when countries from both regions were dynamically emerging in the international economy. Therefore, economic interaction between the regions grew rapidly, complementing their industrial and economic structures. However, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 stopped the economic growth of developing countries in Latin America and East Asia (CEPAL 2010). Some Latin American commodity exporters, represented by Brazil, due to their increased dependency on exports to East Asia, especially China, experienced a decline in the global prices and exports of their oil, minerals, and agricultural (CEPAL 2013).

Since then, Latin America's economic performance has not shown a considerable recovery, while East Asia has quickly returned to its original state. Latin American countries depend a lot more on East Asian countries in terms of trade, which means East Asia determines the interregional trade structure

in FEALAC (CEPAL 2013). Initial levels of income and wealth distribution, as well as economic and social public policies—in other words, inequalities between countries (ECLAC and ESCAP 2019) that existed previously became more extensive. When it comes to comparing with Northeast Asia in specific, the discrepancy becomes far greater.

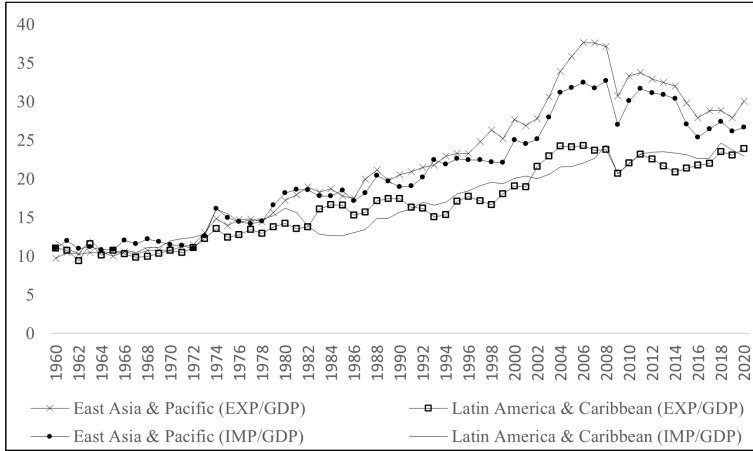
Economic indicators such as GDP, GDP per capita, total exports and imports, and outward flows of Foreign Direct Investment, in addition to demographic factors such as population, reveal a growing asymmetry between the East Asia and Pacific countries of FEALAC and their counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean. Both historically and in the period following the creation of FEALAC, these indicators have shown a widening gap, with East Asia and the Pacific consistently displaying stronger performance across most measures. This trend of divergence is illustrated in the following graphs.

**Graph 1—Annual GDP growth of Latin America & Caribbean and East Asia & Pacific (% ,1960-2020)**



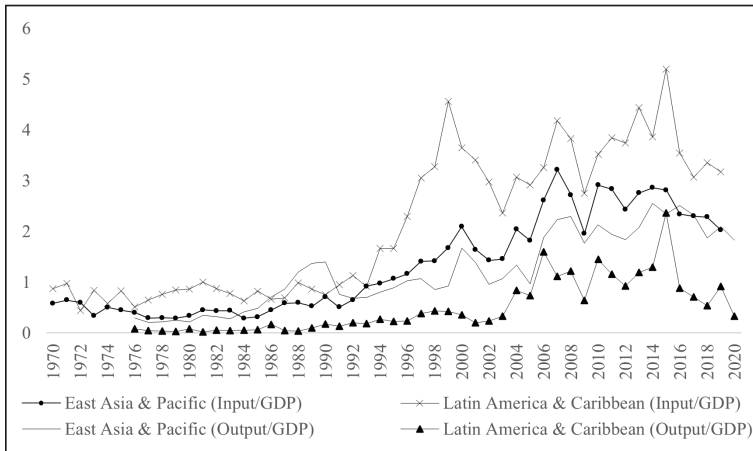
Source: World Bank (2021)

**Graph 2—Exports and imports of goods and services of Latin America & Caribbean and East Asia & Pacific (% of GDP, 1960-2020)**



Source: World Bank (2021)

**Graph 3—Net inflows and outflows of Foreign Direct Investment of Latin America & Caribbean and East Asia & Pacific (% of GDP, 1970-2020)**



Source: World Bank (2021)

In addition, FEALAC’s framework for dialogue and cooperation on various economic, political, and social issues is weakly institutionalized. Charalambos Tsardanidis argued that although FEALAC “could serve as an effective forum in exchanging views on security issues, all the gatherings of

government officials have failed to advance beyond diplomatic rhetoric, and have not broken down the psychological and mental barriers that still divide the two sides of the Pacific” (Dosch and Jacob 2010).

FEALAC, nevertheless, constitutes a particularly interesting example of interregionalism. Even though the forum has often been criticized for its limited performance, its relatively low profile, and its inability to exert meaningful influence on the policies of national governments—in other words, for its overall reduced visibility, it still represents a unique platform that brings together two geographically distant and historically distinct regions in institutionalized dialogue. Abad believes that FEALAC “contributes to the strengthening of regional identities both in Latin America and in East Asia as much as it helps some of the participating states to reduce their peripheral position in the world order and strengthen their negotiation power” (Dosch and Jacob 2010).

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#### 4. Final Considerations: Future Directions for Interregionalism and FEALAC

Despite various efforts and interactions that have taken place between the two regions within the framework of FEALAC, one of its most essential areas of focus, bi-regional trade, has remained relatively low. This limited economic exchange highlights a persistent gap between the ambitious objectives originally envisioned for FEALAC and the concrete outcomes achieved to date (CEPAL 2013). Furthermore, the socioeconomic discrepancies and disparities between Latin America and East Asia have become increasingly pronounced, posing an additional challenge to advancing bi-regional cooperation.

However, the absence of a hostile colonial hierarchy in the historical relationship between the two regions may serve as a positive cornerstone for strengthening interregionalism within the FEALAC framework. This contrasts with the case of EU–ASEAN relations, where the shared history of colonial domination and subordination has often been regarded as a structural obstacle that continues to impede deeper interregional cooperation. In this respect, FEALAC benefits from a more balanced historical foundation, which, if effectively utilized, could facilitate the development of more constructive and forward-looking forms of dialogue between the two regions (Camroux 2010).

Considering that, for many Latin American countries, FEALAC represents the only institutionalized forum through which they engage collectively with East Asia as a region, it becomes imperative that the organization effectively

fulfill its role in implementing and deepening a concrete cooperation agenda. Yet, there is broad agreement that FEALAC currently faces the challenge of addressing an excessively wide range of issues, many of which are not backed by the financial resources necessary to generate meaningful progress. This situation suggests that the forum may need to recalibrate its priorities, concentrating instead on a smaller set of feasible and promising areas where bi-regional cooperation could advance with greater focus, efficiency, and tangible results (CEPAL 2013).

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