

COLOMBIA'S ENTRY INTO THE PACIFIC ALLIANCE; A READING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

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Abstract

Colombia has a long tradition of participating in regional integration initiatives, as a full or associate member. The Pacific Alliance (PA) is one of the most recent integration projects in which Colombia participates. This article explores, from the perspective of neoclassical realism (NCR), the role played by the perception of foreign policy decision-makers, both in the systemic and regional context, and how these perceptions were assumed as opportunities or threats that defined Colombia's entry into this integrationist initiative. It employs a qualitative methodology through documentary analysis of scientific and journalistic sources. It concludes that the perception of the external context played an important role in Colombia's decision to become a founding member of the Pacific Alliance, and that the intervening variable of the decision-makers perception becomes valuable in contexts where the formulation of foreign policy falls largely on the presidential figure.

Keywords

Colombian foreign policy, Pacific Alliance, Neoclassical Realism, decision makers, systemic stimuli.

Resumo

A Colômbia tem uma longa tradição de participação em iniciativas de integração regional, como membro de pleno direito ou associado. A Aliança do Pacífico (AP) é um dos mais recentes projetos de integração em que a Colômbia participa. Este artigo explora, a partir da perspectiva do realismo neoclássico (RNC), o papel desempenhado pela percepção dos decisores de política



externa, tanto no contexto sistémico como regional, e como essas percepções foram assumidas como oportunidades ou ameaças que definiram a entrada da Colômbia nesta iniciativa integracionista. É utilizada uma metodologia qualitativa através da análise documental de fontes científicas e jornalísticas. Conclui-se que a percepção do contexto externo desempenhou um papel importante na decisão da Colômbia de se tornar membro fundador da Aliança do Pacífico, e que a variável interveniente da percepção dos decisores se torna valiosa em contextos onde a formulação da política externa recai maioritariamente na figura presidencial.

Palavras-chave

Política externa colombiana, Aliança do Pacífico, Realismo Neoclássico, decisores, estímulos sistémicos.

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Introduction

Based on Goldstein's (1993) and Giacalone's (2020) rationalist institutionalism, regional agreements, and therefore integrationist initiatives, are to a large extent an expression of political agreements on shared interests and ideas. That is, they are based on shared concessions, coincidences and values. This was not indifferent to the emergence of the Pacific Alliance (PA). Gonzalez (2021) and Actis (2014) state that the Pacific Alliance was mainly based on the convergence of foreign policies, the orientation towards free trade, openness and open regionalism shared by the founding countries (Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Peru), as well as the existence of harmonious relations with the United States. Each member of the PA joined the initiative according to its own expectations and interests, but there was a common feeling of sharing a pragmatic geo-economic vision that assumed the Asia-Pacific region as an economic and commercial pole to which it was necessary to integrate collectively.

In addition to shared interests, coincidences and ideological affinities, some factors play a role in the decision to join or not join a given integration process. Factors such as a systemic and contextual nature and the perception of foreign policy decision-makers, who, according to neoclassical realism, are those who interpret information as a threat or an opportunity. At the time of its creation, the Pacific Alliance was articulated with several objectives of Colombia's foreign policy: a platform for international projection towards trading partners and the Pacific Basin, reinserting itself into regional dynamics, and even, as pointed out by Daniel Flandes and Rafael Castro (2016) as a mechanism to confront Brazil's leadership in South America through *soft balancing*, in the words of Gonzalez (2021).

From this reflection, questions arise such as: Why did Colombia orient its foreign policy towards the creation and participation in the Pacific Alliance; what is the institutional design and guiding principles of the PA?; what were the systemic and regional contexts like before and during the creation of the PA?; what role did the perception of systemic



and regional stimuli play in the Colombian foreign policy decision to join this integrationist initiative?

In order to answer these questions and provide a contribution to the understanding of the Colombian foreign policy decision-making process, the article is structured in six sections. The first part shows the theoretical foundations of neoclassical realism, with special emphasis on the systemic stimulus variable and the intervening variable of the image and perception of the decision-making leaders for foreign policy. This, followed by a detailed description of the methodology designed. The third part analyzes the institutional characteristics of the Pacific Alliance. The fourth part shows a characterization of the external and regional context at the time of the creation of the Pacific Alliance; It also brings forward the image and perception of Colombian foreign policy decision-makers. In the fifth section, the possible systemic stimuli that influenced the decision to join the PA are related as a. The article ends with a series of conclusions.

1. Theoretical and conceptual foundation

Neoclassical realism (NCR) is a research program linked to the realist tradition that seeks to explore both external and internal determinants of state response and foreign policy. NCR seeks to bridge the gap within realism, which has traditionally been oriented towards theories of international politics rather than foreign policy. Authors considered neoclassical realists, such as Meibauer (2020), define it as a middle-range and eclectic theory in the sense of incorporating both structural and non-structural factors; domestic institutions, perceptions, identity, strategic culture, etc. (Meibauer, 2020, p. 8).

For this realistic program, the independent variable corresponds to systemic stimuli and power distribution at the international level, and the dependent variable is the foreign policy and external response of the States. Regarding the independent variable, Smith (2019) considers that it is a key determinant of international policy outcomes, because the international (and regional) environments in which a state is found, are what provide both incentives and disincentives for external action" (2019, p. 19). However, the process of translating systemic stimuli into external response is not a clear process; on the contrary, it is mediated by factors, which are considered in the NCR as intervening variables: the image of leaders, the strategic culture, the State-Society relationship and domestic institutions. In other words, these determine the way in which the systemic environment is perceived, the recognition of a threat, stimulus or opportunity. Also, and on the basis of these, decision-makers orient, in a certain way, a country's foreign policy.

Therefore, in order to explain the behavior of a state, one must elucidate the existing domestic processes that act as a perceptual filter through which all choices related to international pressures are made (Meibauer, 2020). In the words of Trapara (2017) foreign policy is ultimately more a matter of choices of political decision-makers, rather than an automatic consequence of the functioning of the international system (2017, p. 230). The perceptions of decision-makers become, among other factors, the hinge element connecting systemic conditions with a country's foreign response. These perceptions are like cognitive filters that inform how the information from the international environment is processed, what to pay attention to, where a state's



resources should be directed to, when and how to prepare to respond to potential threats and opportunities (2021).

Along this line of thinking, this article emphasizes the intervening variable of the perception of decision makers, in order to elucidate the motivations and opportunities, perceived by them, according to the stimuli and systemic context that made Colombian foreign policy be part of the nascent Pacific Alliance.

2. Methodological route

The article is based on a qualitative approach, through the search, analysis and interpretation of information from both primary and secondary sources. The selected information was processed and systematized by means of a bibliographic matrix under the orientation marked by the defined variables and the respective categories of analysis.

Table 1: Research variables

Independent variable	Intervening variable	Dependent variable
Stimuli and systemic and regional context prior to and during the creation of the Pacific Alliance	Perception of the independent variable by Colombian foreign policy decision makers, expressed as opportunity/threat.	Colombia's entry into the Pacific Alliance as a manifestation of the country's foreign policy

Source: prepared by the authors

Based on this, five (5) categories of analysis of the intervening variable were defined: i) the leftist shift experienced by a large part of the region at the beginning of the 21st century; ii) the weakness experienced by the Andean Community (AC); iii) the Colombian foreign policy goal since 2010 to reinsert itself into regional dynamics; iv) soft balancing strategies implemented by some secondary powers in Latin America with respect to Brazilian foreign policy, as in the case of Colombia; and v) the efforts of Colombian foreign policy to improve the levels of insertion in the region, mainly commercial, in the Asia-Pacific area. These five categories were evaluated based on the type of perception of the Colombian State's foreign policy, with "threat" or "opportunity" being the possible alternatives.

3. Historical Evolution and Integrationist Foundations of the Pacific Alliance

Through the different declarations and founding documents, the Pacific Alliance defines, among its main objectives: to progressively advance towards the free circulation of goods, services, capital and people; to promote greater growth, development and competitiveness of the member states, resulting in higher levels of well-being and overcoming socioeconomic inequality; to become a platform for political articulation, trade integration and projection to the world with emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region.



The Pacific Alliance defines itself as a deep integration. However, this feature is not enough to account for the institutional design and characteristics associated with the Pacific Alliance. The self-designation of deep integration in the case of the PA may refer to questions of rhetoric or the desired destination towards which this integrationist initiative will lead in the future, but it is not a feature of its current institutional structure.

On the other hand, the lack of consensus on the meaning and characteristics of deep integration should be pointed out. A number of authors, such as Schiff and Winters (2004), Barbosa and Buitrago (2019) consider that a fundamental condition for deep integration is supranationality, which allows, through the transfer of sovereignty, the harmonization of macroeconomic policies. On the other hand, another group of authors do not consider supranationality as an unrestricted condition for the achievement of deep integration. In that sense, for Vásquez (2013) this type of integration seeks to materialize global reforms within economies through openness, policy homologation and promotion of interdependence. This type of integration is based on four pillars: i) reduced differences in standards and production systems; ii) stability of governmental mechanisms; iii) eradication of custom and non-custom barriers; iv) elimination of barriers to trade in services (2013, p. 73). For Briceño, Legler and Prado (2022), interpreting the declarations and other documents of the Pacific Alliance, indicate that deep integration can be understood as a free trade zone that allows the free circulation of factors, but does not establish a common external duty or a joint trade policy. (2022).

The type of integration and regionalism, characteristic of the Pacific Alliance, has been considered from different shores. For example, Rojas and Terán classify it as New Latin American Regionalism (2016) this theoretical proposal of these authors, which goes beyond the exclusively commercial dimension and is framed in the new global and regional dynamics. Ardila (2015), on the other hand, calls it the New Latin American multilateralism (2015) and for Garzón (2015), it consists of Cross Regionalism (2015) because it consists on a complex network of trade agreements even with extra-regional economies and provides benefits such as: exercising a greater degree of control over the liberalization, increasing the attractiveness of foreign direct investment by signing trans-regional agreements with many extra-regional partners; and allowing economic visibility by establishing themselves as FTA "hubs" and serving as bridges between different regions" (Garzón, 2015, p. 11).

Another characteristic feature of the PA's institutional structure is its leadership. In this integration scheme, there is no evidence of a vertical and hierarchical structure led by a member state. In this sense, it can be considered that there is a shared leadership based on the *Pro-tempore* Secretariat, with an annual rotation among each member. In the words of Malamud (2011, p. 224), the PA is a liberal intergovernmentalism type: "it conceives regional integration as the result of the sovereign decision of a group of neighboring states [...] these states promote international cooperation to satisfy the demands of their relevant national actors. The intended outcome is the strengthening of state power, which retains the option to withdraw from the association, rather than its dilution into a regional entity" (Malamud, 2011, p. 224). Therefore, it is also of a presidentialism type, since the deliberative space where the transcendental decisions are taken are the presidential summits (González, 2021). The main mechanism for decision-



making is presidential declarations, which are based on the will of the parties and are not binding.

The working structure of the Pacific Alliance includes Presidential Summits, which in practice is the highest decision-making body of the process; the Council of Ministers, which is comprised of both the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade; the meetings of the High Level Group (HLG), made up of the Vice Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, who supervise the progress of the technical groups; and finally there are the technical groups and subgroups, which prepare the negotiations of the different themes of the Pacific Alliance, i.e. trade and integration, services and capital, mobility of people, cooperation and institutional matters.

Within the PA's organizational structure, there are also committees of non-state actors, such as the Pacific Alliance Business Committee, which has consultative and proactive powers. In addition to the emphasis on trade, the PA's work agenda also includes objectives related to education, cooperation and mobility, among others.

4. External environment and perception of decision-makers

China's entry into the world market and its impact on market globalization generated different consequences in both the industrialized North and the global South. Latin America was no exception and, in search of alternatives to the traditional relations with the United States and Europe, different regional leaders, as early as 2007, began to design a strategy to approach the Asia Pacific as a potential area of opportunities and development.

However, it was only in 2010, after the failure of the Pacific arc initiative, that negotiations began between Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Chile to create the Pacific Alliance. At that time, Presidents Alan García of Peru, Sebastián Piñera of Chile, Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Felipe Calderón of Mexico, met at the XX Ibero-American Summit held in Mar de Plata in December 2010, and agreed to promote a common project that would lead the four countries to the Pacific Alliance as an alternative and competition to MERCOSUR of Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina.

The PA was also created with economic rather than political integration in mind. A subtle form of criticism of the integration initiatives that were popular at the moment in South America. Also, as an alternative to UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) and ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America).

In this regard, there is an analysis of the external environments of the region and the perception of decision-makers in order to take the initiative to create the PA.

4.1 Genealogy

In Roman history, military personnel were used for the special purpose of espionage. Frontinus (40-103 AD) included espionage as an instruction among other services in the work of an officer (Erdkamp, 2011). It is also mentioned that when Scipio sent Caius Lilius to the camp of Syphax under the pretext of the embassy, he took many military officers with him in the disguise of his domestic servants and gathered expert soldiers.



In this way, the task of appointing generals to diplomatic posts in 17th-century Persia began so diplomatic reports could be checked. There are many mentions of appointing Generals as Ambassadors by Napoleon (Freke, 1854). Due to their historically strong role, most European powers had also employed military officers as foreign representatives by the mid-nineteenth century. The official nomination and regular position and name were given in 1857. In the same way, the United States came out of the period of isolation and in 1888 officially started appointing military attachés (Kupchan, 2020).

4.1 The pendulum to the left; the Latin American pink tide

The political and social environment in Latin America began to experience changes and turning points at the beginning of the 21st century; forces and changes of a systemic nature and also as a result of others generated within the region; one of these forces of change was the predominance of leftist governments in a large part of the region. Change motivated by the dissatisfaction with the results generated by the neoliberal policies implemented in Latin America since the end of the 1980s and by the search for empowerment of groups, communities and social movements excluded from these changes. This discredit allowed the rise of governments with alternative development models to neoliberalism, linked to the left-wing political spectrum, with its different nuances. This predominance of left-leaning governments has been known as the Latin American pink tide.

In terms of regional integration, several initiatives were promoted that distanced themselves from open regionalism, where trade took a back seat to include in the agenda various issues such as the political dimension, close cooperation, physical infrastructure, and the search for greater autonomy of the region from the United States, among other aspects. Sanahuja (2010) named these new initiatives post-liberal integration, which includes initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Union of South American Nations and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA).

These counter-hegemonic integration processes are also framed as a response and alternative to the proposal of North American origin and leadership for the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). This negotiation process began formally in 1998 at the second Summit of the Americas, after a preparatory period of four years (1994-1998) and ended, without a formal agreement, at the VI Summit of the Americas in 2005, signifying an ideological and political triumph of the so-called pink tide, especially of Hugo Chavez and Lula da Silva.

It is no coincidence that countries whose political orientation at the time was right-wing and liberal in matters of international trade, and which held, to varying degrees, a certain level of regional leadership, decided to create a new regional integration space. The formation of the Pacific Alliance can be considered a strategic response to counteract the counter-hegemonic project represented by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA).



It is worth noting that between 2002 and 2010 Colombia was navigating a project contrary to the leftist initiatives of the continental south. The United States was the epicenter of both economic and military policy. The then President Álvaro Uribe created, with his government, a retaining wall, so that Colombia would abandon any attempt to look towards alternative models of development and foreign policy autonomy from the United States, which was being forged in Unasur.

4.2 Weaknesses of the Andean Community (CAN)

The operational and institutional weakness experienced by the Andean Community is a stimulus for decision-making by Colombian foreign policy to establish the creation and active participation of a new integrationist alternative, such as the Pacific Alliance. This implies the mobilization of resources, strategies, and relationships with different stakeholders.

Authors such as Dos Santos and Ibañez consider that this crisis was the driving force behind the emergence of two diametrically opposed initiatives such as ALBA and the Pacific Alliance. Countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia approached the Bolivarian postulates represented in ALBA, while Colombia and Peru continued with a vision of free trade and open regionalism.

Several factors are attributed to the crisis of CAN. González (2021) considers that it has been largely due to the impossibility of achieving some of the integrationist objectives such as an Andean common market. According to Arroyave (2008, p. 299), this is attributable to the lack of political will to comply with the agreements, which was exacerbated in the early 21st century by ideological differences between the governments of the respective members. In the words of Casas and Correa (2007), it was the withdrawal of Venezuela from the organization, arguing discrepancies with the FTA negotiations between Colombia and Peru with the United States. In addition, the uneasiness in the political and commercial relations between Colombia and Venezuela contributed to the poor operability of the CAN, as these two countries have been the protagonists and leaders since its foundation, and their commercial exchange was the most dynamic within the organization (Casas & Correa, 2007, p. 608) .

As a result, for Colombia, the Andean Community lost its strategic value as the main mechanism for regional insertion, and the search for alternatives became an imperative for Colombian foreign policy. The Pacific Alliance was partly a response to the paralysis of the Andean Community, which immobilized it as the economic engine of the Andean region, but also caused the crisis to grow.

There were also political aspects that had an impact on the cracking of the CAN. Colombian foreign policy (2002-2010) was guided in correlation with the so-called "War on Terror" that George Bush had declared in the United States to the groups and countries that attacked the twin towers on September 11, 2001.

In Colombia, President Uribe assumed the war on terror doctrine and applied it to the guerrilla groups, declaring open war on them. The United States supported this war on the grounds that it was the way to counteract drug trafficking and therefore it was in the national interest of the US. Plan Colombia was the most powerful foreign policy



instrument Colombia has ever had in relation to the United States. It financed the modernization of the army, activated combined forms of collaboration in military intelligence and supported Colombia in its fight against guerrilla terrorism. All this led to an internal legitimization of the Democratic Security Policy, which Uribe had used to win the presidential elections.

This foreign policy was so ideologically empowering in Colombia that Venezuela and Ecuador became alarmed that the Colombian conflict was crossing their borders. There is a whole chronology of disagreements and border problems with Venezuela and Ecuador, which reached its peak when Colombia made an unauthorized incursion (2008) into Ecuador and intercepted and killed one of the most important FARC guerrilla fighters, the notorious *Raul Reyes*. This incursion was known as Operation Phoenix. With such provocation from Colombia to Ecuador, Venezuelan President Chavez confirmed his total disagreement with the Colombian government and prepared to close borders and reduce bi-national commerce to its minimum in the same year.

After the United States, Venezuela was the second most important market for Colombia. The losses of the crisis with the neighboring country were incalculable and the effect of such closure immediately affected the Colombian industry and forced the government to seek new opportunities in previously little-known markets such as the European Union. The export market with the latter went from USD 3,867 million in 2008 to USD 7,752 million in 2011. In addition, exports to neighboring countries such as Peru increased from 846 million dollars in 2008 to 1,323 million dollars in 2011, and Ecuador from 1,491 in 2008 to 1,909 in 2011 (DIAN, 2023). Relations with the latter were finally restored three months after the inauguration of Juan Manuel Santos as President of Colombia in 2010.

4.3 Colombia reconnects with the region gain

Several authors agree that during the 2002-2010 period, corresponding to the administration of Álvaro Uribe, Colombian foreign policy experienced a process of isolation in the Latin American context. In the opinion of Gonzalez (2021), this was the result of a strategic and intentional decision where the priority was bilateralism, the coupling relations with the United States, and the distancing from regional dynamics due to the predominance of left-leaning governments.

Several events deepened this process of Colombian isolation: the so-called Operation Phoenix on March 1, 2008, which involved the death of alias Raúl Reyes, number two of the Farc-EP guerrilla group, by means of a bombing by the Colombian air force in Ecuadorian territory; the military agreement between Colombia and the United States in 2009 that included the use of seven Colombian military bases by U.S. military and civilian personnel, which was perceived by much of the region as the possibility of greater interference by the northern country in regional dynamics. For Galeano (2019), the ideological differences added to these events was a reason for mistrust towards Colombia and an impediment to consolidate regional initiatives of relevance, or at least did not allow the inclusion of Colombia in these large projects" (2019, p. 64).

In seeking a shift in the orientation of foreign policy, since 2010, the administration of Juan Manuel Santos defined two explicit intentions: to break the country's isolation from



regional dynamics, (Sánchez & Campos, 2019), (Galeano, Badillo, & Rodríguez, 2019), and to exercise a greater role in the region and in multilateral spaces. This coincides with the perception of the then President Juan Manuel Santos, regarding regional integration and multilateralism, who stated:

We are a country that respects multilateralism and wants to strengthen it, that believes in integration, in trade openness, in respect for human rights, in the defense of freedom and democracy [...] We want to have good relations with all countries, including, of course, with those that have positions different from ours. This openness and international pragmatism are in Colombia's interest (Redacción el Tiempo, 2011).

An important difference that marked the arrival of Juan Manuel Santos to the presidency of Colombia (2010-2018) was the shift from a foreign policy of war against terrorism (Uribe 2002-2010) to a policy oriented towards peace with the guerrilla groups. In fact, there was such a diplomatic shift in neighboring countries that both Venezuela and Ecuador offered to mediate the Colombian armed conflict, which positively activated relations with those countries. Juan Manuel Santos never abandoned the strategic relationship with the United States; instead, he linked it to his peace policy and integrated it as a driving force in relations with Latin American countries.

4.4 Soft Balancing vis-à-vis Brazilian foreign policy

At the geopolitical and strategic level, authors such as Flames and Castro (2015) and González (2021) consider that the Pacific Alliance was presented as a means of institutional contestation or challenge in the region against the Southern Common Market and the leadership exercised by Brazil in this integrationist initiative and in the South American region. For Flandes and Castro (2015), from the administration of Álvaro Uribe — prior to the emergence of the PA— to that of Juan Manuel Santos, Colombian foreign policy underwent a shift towards the containment of Brazilian influence in the region. Under Uribe, it went from collateral hard balancing, expressed in the military cooperation agreement with the United States and the use of Colombian military bases by the northern country, to a soft balancing through the Pacific Alliance under Santos administration.

The context of the birth of the Pacific Alliance coincides with the deployment of Brazilian foreign policy led by Luis Inacio Lula Da Silva, aimed at consolidating a solid zone of influence in South America, excluding other power candidates such as Mexico. It also resulted in the leadership of regional projects such as Unasur, the South American Defense Council, the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA), the complementarity between Mercosur and CAN, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The Pacific Alliance was perceived by Colombian foreign policy as a sort of geopolitical counterweight to Brazil's South Americanist project, for a country that considered itself a secondary power, as is the case of Colombia. This Brazilian foreign policy strategy is presented as a clear systemic stimulus of a regional nature, which received determined responses from other Latin American states.



Soft balancing is a foreign policy strategy of states that aims at achieving a balance of power or reduction of influence of the dominant power, avoiding direct confrontation, whether on a global or regional scale. In this regional case, Brazil uses diplomatic and institutional mechanisms, such as "regional blocs and coalitions in multilateral spaces, financial movements, among others" (Carranco, 2017, p. 66). Colombian foreign policy elements that allowed improving relations with Brazil included thematic diversification, the search for reinsertion into regional dynamics, desecuritization, and a pragmatic relationship with the United States.

4.5 The Pacific Alliance as a projection platform to Asia Pacific

Colombia is a country with extensive coastlines on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. However, despite this condition, the country has historically registered low levels of insertion at the political, cultural, diplomatic, and commercial levels in strategic areas such as Asia Pacific; Colombia has emphasized its external relations with Latin America and Atlantic countries.

Since the last two decades, the emergence and rise of the Asia-Pacific region as an economic and commercial pole of the world has become a systemic and global fact, accompanied by geopolitical tensions, rivalries, and alterations in the balances of world power, as pointed out by Schereer (2019) and Morais (2023), as well as commercial and economic opportunities; Sanjay et al. (2022), (Lee & Chen, 2020), illustrate these different realities.

Certainly, for the foreign policy of the time of the creation of the Pacific Alliance, this area of the world was perceived by decision makers as a strategic opportunity for Colombia to diversify markets, as well as the exportable supply and the possibility of advancing in the insertion to the global trade dynamics. On different occasions, the president at the time expressed the vision and perception of the Asia-Pacific region as a zone of commercial opportunities for the Colombian economy: "Integrating Colombia with the Asia-Pacific region, which concentrates more than half of the world's GDP and more than half of world trade, has been a dream, almost an obsession, for more than two decades" (El Espectador, 2015).

On another occasion, the highest authority in foreign policy in Colombia, President Juan Manuel Santos, two years after the signing of the Lima Declaration that gave rise to the PA, and emphasizing the strategic importance of Asia-Pacific, stated: "Asia-Pacific is the new pole of development in the world and Latin America wants to be part and partner of this development. To achieve this, we created this Pacific Alliance" (El Tiempo, 2013).

The objective of achieving higher levels of insertion in the Asia-Pacific region did not fall exclusively on Colombian participation in the PA; this was also sought through different expressions of Colombian foreign policy; i) seeking formal entry to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), reflected in the participation, as an observer member, in different working spaces of this organization, such as the Investment Experts Group, Services Group, Subcommittee on Customs Procedures, Tourism, Small and Medium Enterprises, and the subgroup on Data Protection. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of



Colombia, 2019); (ii) signing of free trade agreement with South Korea; (iii) significant increase in official visits.

5. Synthesis of systemic stimuli that influenced the decision to become part of the PA

The following table summarizes the role played by the intervening variable of the perception of decision makers as opportunities or threats and their consequent response based on the development of the previous analytical categories, understood with the possible systemic and regional stimuli.

Table 2. Perception of systemic stimuli

Systemic Stimuli: Regional international context	Perception of Colombian Foreign Policy	Type of perception
Latin American pink tide	The advance of left-leaning governments generated polarization in the region between these and the countries governed by right and center-right projects. The Latin American pink tide developed integrationist and geopolitical projects not shared by Colombia, largely because it promoted principles contrary to free trade, distancing itself from the United States and open regionalism.	Threat
Weaknesses of the Andean Community (CAN)	The failure to meet some of the objectives set, Venezuela's withdrawal, and ideological polarization weakened the institutional framework and called into question the viability of the Andean Community. A double perception, both as a threat and an opportunity; a threat for losing an integrationist space of good political and commercial benefit for Colombia, and an opportunity to diversify commercial and political relations with important regional economies such as Mexico, Peru, and Chile.	Opportunity/Threat
Colombia reconnects with the region	The emergence of the Pacific Alliance coincided with the change in the orientation of Colombian foreign policy since 2010, which established as one of its main objectives to reinsert itself into regional dynamics. The PA was perceived as a means to achieve this objective.	Opportunity



Soft Balancing vis-à-vis Brazilian foreign policy	The orientation of Brazilian foreign policy at the beginning of the 21st century towards the consolidation of South America as an area of influence and its undisputed leadership in the region threatened the aspirations of secondary powers such as Colombia and Chile.	Threat
The Pacific Alliance as a projection platform to Asia Pacific	Among the Latin American countries with coasts on the Pacific Ocean, Colombia is one of the furthest behind in terms of its integration into Asia-Pacific markets. Colombian foreign policy decision-makers recognize the growing importance of this area in the world economy and the need to improve these insertion levels. Precisely, since its inception, the PA has been defined as a platform for insertion into the Asia-Pacific area.	Opportunity

Source: Prepared by the authors

The systemic stimuli, mainly expressed in the opportunity-threat relationship of the international and regional context, are one of the factors that influence the definition of a given foreign policy. As shown and evidenced throughout the article, the decision to join the Pacific Alliance and to place it as a strategic and fundamental axis within the country's foreign policy was largely influenced by the image of foreign policy executives, both in the systemic and regional environment. However, this is not the only determining factor; in this decision, factors such as the strategic culture, the tradition of Colombian foreign policy, the political orientation of the administration in office, among others, may also have played an important role. In other words, considering the systemic stimuli, the distribution of power at the regional and international level, the perception of foreign policy decision makers, the political orientation of the government in power, among other factors, joining the Pacific Alliance appeared to be the natural path to follow for Colombian foreign policy.

Foreign policy analysis currently has a series of diverse theoretical and methodological tools and options that provide an understanding of the process of design, decision-making and execution of this type of policy. One of them is precisely the postulates of neoclassical realism, which is useful for the analysis of specific cases, such as the one studied here. In this sense, regarding Colombian foreign policy, it is important to open the space for future research that seeks to answer questions such as: "Is it worthwhile to constantly open new regional integration initiatives that respond more to the ideology of decision-makers than to their institutional consolidation, beyond the governments in power?" "How can the different regional multilateral integration initiatives be integrated and coordinated among themselves as a strategic whole for the region vis-à-vis the large transcontinental market blocs?" "Is it possible for a country like Colombia to activate state institutional mechanisms that allow for a stable diplomatic and foreign policy route, regarding its bi-national and multilateral integration initiatives without depending on the ideology of the governments in power?" "How to ensure that the foreign policy of a state



is not so sensitive to the ideology of the governments in power?" "What can be expected from the Pacific Alliance in this decade when leftist presidents are returning to power in Mexico, Colombia, and Chile, who view this initiative with indifference and even suspicion?"

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