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Peru's leadership in the Lima Group: emergence and failure (2015–2021)

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This research seeks to understand the factors that enabled Peru, a medium-sized country in Latin America, to take on a leadership role in the creation and development of the Lima Group—a multilateral mechanism whose main objective was to find a resolution to the democratic crisis in Venezuela—as well as the subsequent failure of this leadership. Using the analytical tools provided by Neoclassical Realism, this study argues that Peru's leadership was made possible not only by the growing importance of the Venezuelan crisis on the international agenda since 2015 but also by changes in regional and global power dynamics. These shifts allowed a country like Peru to exercise such leadership and garner greater interest from the United States. Additionally, the presence of a favorable domestic political climate and clear national interests led the Peruvian government to view this leadership as beneficial, not only for the region but also for Peru itself. However, despite the Venezuelan crisis remaining on the international agenda due to Nicolás Maduro's continued hold on power, the hardening of the U.S. stance on Venezuela and political changes at the regional level since 2018 fractured the Lima Group and undermined Peru's leadership. Moreover, domestically, political changes led to heightened instability, weakening Peru's external position. Finally, the surge in Venezuelan migration and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the priorities of Peru's foreign policy, diminishing its focus on the Venezuelan crisis and contributing to the failure of its leadership.

KEYWORDS

Perú, Venezuela, Lima Group, democracy, neoclassical realism, Latin America

1 Introduction

In recent decades, although not frequently, Peru's foreign policy has demonstrated its capacity to play a significant role in matters of regional relevance. From the Contadora Support Group (1985) to the creation of the Pacific Alliance (2011), Peru has managed to assume a leadership position, whether in seeking peace in Central America or promoting integration with the Asia-Pacific region. Probably, the latest expression of this foreign policy is the action taken by Peruvian diplomacy since 2016 to address the Venezuelan crisis, an initiative that materialized with the creation of the Lima Group.

As a result of the shortcomings of the Organization of American States (OAS) in finding a way out to the Venezuelan crisis, the Lima Group emerged in 2017—proposed by Peru and supported by a number of Latin American countries—as a flexible multilateral alternative without control bodies or institutionalized procedures, to seek a solution to Venezuela's complex political situation.

The circumstances that enabled Peruvian leadership in the Lima Group were diverse, but these were not permanent. The changes that occurred revealed limitations for maintaining this leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to determine what were the conditions of

the international dynamics and the factors of Peru's national reality that allowed it to develop this leadership, and how, years later, these factors ultimately conditioned its failure.

The methodology to be used is the interpretative paradigm. This will involve an exploratory and descriptive qualitative research that seeks to understand the internal and external context that allows the development of Peru's leadership in the Lima Group. And, given the lack of secondary sources, semi-structured observation takes on special importance. This means conducting a series of interviews with diplomats involved in Peru's role in the Lima Group. Furthermore, the delimitation of the object of study that the interpretative paradigm entails, has made it possible to identify Neoclassical Realism as the theory to be used in this research.

It should be noted that this theoretical framework not only views foreign policy as a direct response to the international environment, but also recognizes the role of a state's own capabilities and the perceptions of decision-makers as elements influencing the definition and scope of foreign policy strategies. Thus, it is relevant to understand the presence of a series of external and internal factors behind Peruvian leadership in the Lima Group.

2 Neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework

The study and evolution of a state's behavior in the international arena can be addressed from different perspectives. Decisions in foreign policy made by countries such as Peru, a regional middle power but small on the global stage, not only depend on the resources and instruments available to the state, but are also conditioned by a power structure that determines the scope of its interests in the international arena.

This constitutes the argument of the present research, which proposes an explanation for Peru's leadership and subsequent failure in the so-called Lima Group. Considering the confluence of internal and external factors that seem to condition Peru's foreign policy, Neoclassical Realism presents itself as a suitable theoretical framework to validate the premises guiding this research.

The duality between internal and the international stage represents the central tenet of this theoretical perspective. Gideon Rose, one of the main exponents of Neoclassical Realism, affirms that, "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material capabilities" (Rose, 1998, p. 146). Thus, he conceives the power dynamics inherent to the international system as the independent variable in a state's foreign policy, while internal factors are considered intervening variables, as they condition the relationship between the independent variable and the state's actions.

But, how can we understand the structure of the international system as an independent variable? Following Kenneth Waltz who serves as "the starting point for the fuller neoclassical realist treatment of structure" (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 38), on the international stage, the distribution of the power capacities of the states (political, economic, military, etc.) organizes the international system and, as such, the position occupied by the states within it. The structure arising from these power dynamics results in practice in a hierarchical order. Thus, a favorable or unfavorable power structure determines the opportunities or limitations for a state to develop a certain foreign

policy (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 48) and have greater ambitions to assume a leadership role that reinforces its international positioning.

In that sense, it is no coincidence that for Rose "the international distribution of power can drive countries' behavior only by influencing the decisions of flesh and blood officials" (Rose, 1998, p. 158). This argument is further reinforced by Taliaferro, who points out that "unit-level variables are themselves dependent variables of prior structural conditions" (Taliaferro, 2006, p. 485). All of this constitutes important insights for the decision maker to determine the scope of the foreign policy of a state like Peru. In the present case study, the political changes that the global and regional dynamics faced will explain the existence of a juncture that would make it possible for Peru to decide to exercise a form of leadership in the search for a solution to the Venezuelan crisis. The latter will be reflected mainly in the creation of the Lima Group.

Although the inherent conditions of the international system (independent variable) are understood as capable of shaping the scope and interests of a state, thereby explaining its behavior, aspects of internal nature within countries also participate as part of this process. In this sense, Foulon recognizes that "structural incentives 'only tell half of the story' (...) therefore extends the analysis by including state-level variables such as the ideas that state leaders hold about other states" (Foulon, 2015, pp. 636–637).

The two main internal conditions addressed by Neoclassical Realism are state capacity, and the perspectives and interests of decision makers. Regarding the first, Fareed Zakaria "affirms the logic that capabilities shape intentions but finds it necessary to introduce state strength as an intervening variable" (cited in Rose, 1998, p. 162), which is why "the resources that the state-level can extract domestically and deploy through foreign policy at the international level" (Foulon, 2015, p. 648) are of great importance.

Given that Peruvian politics has proven to be quite volatile in recent years, it is clear that its state strength has varied over time. Issues regarding the political and economic stability of the state have affected its foreign policy. This is what Ripsman affirms when concluding that "because of domestic political/economic circumstances, states cannot always mobilize the domestic resources necessary to respond as the international system requires" (Ripsman, 2017, pp. 3–5). This will allow us to conclude that the reasons that conditioned the failure of the Peruvian state to maintain its leadership in the Lima Group were not only related to the new regional and global landscape, but also to a series of internal obstacles-political, social and institutional considerations (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 70–79) that limited the capacity of the Peruvian government to continue with an active foreign policy regarding the Venezuelan crisis.

On the other hand, the perspectives and interests of foreign policy decision makers are also considered. In fact, Rose emphasizes that "one must analyze how systemic pressures are translated through unit-level intervening variables such as decision-makers' perceptions and domestic state structure" (Rose, 1998, pp. 152). Therefore, not everything is based on state strength or capacity, but on how these are perceived by the authorities, being able to shape expectations internally, and therefore, to expand or limit foreign policy ambitions.

In the case of Peru, this second internal influence will allow us to evaluate how the perceptions and interests of Peruvian state representatives regarding the Venezuelan crisis shifted from being a priority issue on the agenda to being sidelined in favor of more urgent domestic concerns. It is therefore no surprise that this proposal

constitutes a “theoretical framework in which ideas are an intervening variable that serves to investigate the role they play when transferring the system’s stimuli to foreign policy”¹ (Vidal, 2022, p. 120).

3 A favorable international context (2015–2017)

Between the years 2015 and 2017, a series of circumstances occur and will constitute a favorable scenario so that, on the one hand, the Venezuelan crisis become an increasingly important issue on both the regional and global agenda, deserving a different treatment in light of the failure of the existing institutional mechanisms; and, on the other hand, so that Peru can lead a process of construction and development of a multilateral alternative that seeks a peaceful and democratic solution to the situation in Venezuela.

In that sense, the worsening of the political and economic situation in Venezuela along with the internationalization of this crisis beyond Latin America will be analyzed, positioning itself as a topic of great interest on the world agenda, especially for the United States. The latter, also as an expression of the transformations that, in those years, were already taking place in the power dynamics at a global level.

Likewise, it will be essential to explain important political changes that take place in the regional power structure and that would enable Peruvian leadership. Whether it is the weakening of the progressive governments that dominated the political scene in the first decade of the 21st century—giving rise to the return to power of more conservative governments—, or the difficult situation that the main regional powers went through, allowing a medium-sized country like Peru to assume a central role in a problem so relevant to Latin America.

3.1 Political and economic situation of Venezuela

The political evolution of the Venezuelan government, since the time of Hugo Chávez in power, has been a topic of interest in different countries in the region. Aside from the debate regarding the existing political regime, for some a “competitive authoritarianism of a plebiscitary nature”² (Bull and Rosales, 2020, p. 2), it was evident that in Venezuela, in terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, a process of alteration of the constitutional order that was affecting democracy in the country was taking place. Although it was difficult to talk about a complete unconstitutional break during those years, the situation was undoubtedly concerning.

With Nicolás Maduro coming to power, the situation not only persisted but worsened into something more complex. As Corrales observes, “following his close (and questionable) win in the 2013 presidential election, Maduro acted quickly and boldly to autocratize and repress” (Corrales, 2020, pp. 56–57). But, since the defeat of the ruling party in the legislative elections at the end of 2015, Venezuela undoubtedly began to move towards an authoritarian regime. The country was now heading towards a breakdown of the democratic

system: “The government went into a panic mode. Not only did it lose control of a major branch of government the National Assembly, but it also realized that not even with irregularities could it win elections” (Corrales, 2020, pp. 55–56).

The possibility that Chavismo, at its worst moment, could leave power, explained the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice—captured by the ruling party—to annul the electoral results of the state of Amazonas, thereby preventing its representatives from assuming their positions in the National Assembly. The opposition had begun “a roadmap to force a transition via elections, having the recall referendum as its ultimate goal [...], occurred in parallel to an increasing militarization of security policies” (Bull and Rosales, 2020, p. 5). For the government, the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice held significant political implications, since it prevented the opposition from having a majority in parliament, neutralizing its legislative capacity. It was to be expected that, once the National Assembly decided to incorporate the contested deputies, the Supreme Court of Justice would immediately declare the legislative body in contempt (Gratius and Ayuso, 2018, p. 2).

In this way, the National Assembly was practically deactivated, its powers being assumed by the Executive Branch and the Supreme Court of Justice, leading Nicolás Maduro to govern via emergency decrees (Lander, 2018, pp. 191–192). At that time, the division of powers in Venezuela came to an end.

Parallel to the political developments, the economic situation was also deteriorating. Venezuela went through one of the worst economic crises in its history. Between 2013 and 2019, the country lost 62% of its GDP (Bull and Rosales, 2020, p. 2), while since 2016 “inflation went from being high to being almost hyperinflationary”³ (Corrales, 2017, p. 30). Being an extractive economy built on the export of oil, the dramatic drop in the price of crude oil since 2012 had a strong impact on Venezuela. A barrel of oil “went from an average of US\$95 at the beginning of 2014 to costing an average of US\$54 at the end of the same year. This situation worsened even more in 2015” (Sánchez Urribarrí, 2016, pp. 367–368).

Even Venezuela’s leadership, built on the basis of an energy-oriented foreign policy, was also affected as oil shipments were reduced to those countries with which Venezuela had special supply agreements, such as Cuba (Sánchez Urribarrí, 2016, pp. 367–368). In those years, the terrible economic conditions of Venezuela made it impossible to continue referring to the existence of a “Caracas axis.”

It is worth noting that, in addition to the breakdown of democracy and the fragile economic situation, an aspect that began to generate attention in Latin America was the beginning of the migration of Venezuelan citizens to neighboring countries. Insecurity, lack of opportunities and the shortcomings inherent to the economic crisis led to the displacement of millions of people from Venezuela to other countries in the region (mainly Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile).

Venezuela stopped being a country that received population —“particularly in the 1950s and 1970s, two periods of economic expansion where it could welcome [...] migrants from countries in Europe and Latin America” (Freitez, 2019, p. 44)—, to become an unprecedented country of emigrants. This process began in 2015, coinciding with what was happening at the political, economic and

1 Translation by the authors.

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social level. By the year 2017, the United Nations estimated the number of 2.3 million Venezuelan emigrants, while other sources indicated up to 4 million; and according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), that same year the Caribbean country already ranked third behind Afghanistan and Syria in terms of asylum and refugee seekers in the world (Koechlin and Eguren, 2018, pp. 15–16).

The Chavista regime was not only an expression of authoritarianism and economic and social debacle, but it seemed to be at its worst moment. The transition was imminent, and the Peruvian government understood it that way.

3.2 Greater interest of the United States

In those years, the Venezuelan crisis was not only a topic of attention in Latin American countries, but also became a topic of global interest. Very rarely has Latin America been at the center of attention of the main world powers. But, as Juan Gabriel Tokatlian points out, after the Cuban missile crisis (1962) and the Falklands War (1982), the complex situation in Venezuela has brought the region back into high politics (Tokatlian, 2019). Without a doubt, starting in 2015, the political and economic problems of Venezuela, largely the responsibility of the government of Nicolás Maduro, acquired an unusual significance, turning this crisis into a central issue on the international agenda.

When it comes to the United States, its interest in Venezuela has been permanent in the 21st century. However, with Barack Obama this interest grew, especially in the last years of his administration. Probably the moment of greatest tension was the approval of Executive Order 13692 (2015), in which President Obama declared that the situation in Venezuela constitutes “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” Furthermore, this provision implied a series of selective economic sanctions against a group of Venezuelan government officials, which responded “to the objective of promoting democracy and human rights [being the] underlying motivation to change the regime of Nicolás Maduro”⁴ (Gratius and Ayuso Pozo, 2020, p. 42).

This Executive Order was possible thanks to the approval a year earlier (2014) of the Law for the Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society in Venezuela. This rule became the legal framework for the United States to issue sanctions against Venezuelan government officials responsible for the crisis, granting special powers to the president for these purposes. Precisely, the first sanction imposed within the framework of such provision was Executive Order 13692. Although in the past some sanctions had already been given to people and companies related to the Venezuelan government or simply reducing economic assistance, starting in 2014 sanctions were institutionalized as a tool of pressure against the Maduro regime, a fact that shows greater interest on the part of the United States in what was happening in Venezuela. It is noteworthy that, during the Obama administration, this tool was part of a more complex strategy of the US government (“multi-track approach”) that included promoting the actions of the OAS as a multilateral pressure mechanism, in addition

to negotiations between the ruling party and the Venezuelan opposition (Camilleri, 2018, p. 193).

Subsequently, under Donald Trump, United States foreign policy appeared to follow the path initiated by Obama. Hence, a few months after becoming president, Trump issued a second Executive Order (13808) that, as a result of what happened against the legislative body and the establishment of an illegitimate Constitutional Assembly, prohibited “transactions of persons or companies that are in the United States with the Venezuelan state oil company (PDVSA)”⁵ among other measures (Montenegro, 2021, pp. 125–126).

It is noteworthy that, for Trump, one aspect that made the Venezuelan crisis even more important for his interests was the concern generated by the influence that China and Russia had in the Caribbean country. In the speech of the American authorities, references to the rivalry of the United States with these world powers were permanent. Furthermore, the reinstatement of the Monroe Doctrine and the rejection of “the interference by foreign nations” in the Americas during his address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, evidently made direct reference to the presence of China and Russia in the Western Hemisphere. In this scenario of great changes in the dynamics of world order, in which the leadership of the United States in Latin America is called into question by the growing economic and political presence of China, the Venezuelan crisis has gained importance.

Thus, the Venezuelan situation began to position itself as part of a political agenda that transcended the regional sphere. There is a new power dynamic at the international level that allows us to understand the greater interest of the United States (and other powers) in the political and economic crisis in Venezuela. In this context, there are sufficient incentives for a country within the region to assume leadership on an issue of such global significance.

3.3 Changes in the power dynamics in Latin America

In those years, significant political changes took place at the regional level. The so-called “left turn,” which began in the early part of the century in Latin America, weakened, creating conditions for increased criticism of Nicolás Maduro’s regime. Likewise, the power dynamics experienced major transformations. Not only did Venezuela cease to play a significant role in the region, but Brazil and Mexico, also highly influential countries in Latin America, demonstrated significant weaknesses, leaving the region’s problems to the possibility that another country might assume a more important role.

In light of these events, it is difficult to refer to a “right turn” in the second decade of the 21st century. The conservative governments that came to power mainly in Brazil and Argentina, using various paths—some not very democratic—failed to consolidate a political trend in the region as the “left turn” did a decade earlier. Nevertheless, this new reality harmed the interests of Nicolás Maduro’s regime.

To a large extent, the support that the Venezuelan government had at the bilateral and multilateral levels was considerably reduced. The new governments began to question the situation of democracy and

4 Translation by the authors.

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human rights in Venezuela. Likewise, at the multilateral level, MERCOSUR indefinitely suspended Venezuela's membership, the Union of South American Nations (USAN)—an organization in the recent past with considerable Venezuelan influence—was going to practically enter a paralysis following the withdrawal of a series of countries with right-wing governments, and the OAS, although it could not apply the Inter-American Democratic Charter, launched a campaign against the Chavista government that explains Venezuela's withdrawal from the highest hemispheric organization in 2017. In a scenario like this, countries like Peru can assume, with lower costs and greater regional legitimacy, a critical and leadership stance against Venezuela.

At another time, an issue of such regional and global interest should have been assumed by the most important countries in Latin America, such as Brazil or Mexico. Both with right-wing governments critical of Maduro could have exercised regional leadership to confront the Chavista authoritarianism, but this did not happen.

The reality of Brazil was complicated. The capabilities of the South American giant to adopt a regional leadership role in the Venezuelan case weakened in those years (Legler and Nolte, 2019, p. 49), "leaving the region largely rudderless and allowing the crisis in Venezuela to fester" (Stuenkel, 2019, pp. 4–5). The impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff, the economic crisis and the transition of Michel Temer (2016–2018) were disastrous for Brazil's positioning as a regional power and, therefore, for exerting any influence on the Venezuelan crisis.

In the case of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto's government entered the second half of its mandate significantly weakened. Although Mexico had shown concern about the situation in Venezuela since 2015, promoting a multilateral strategy that emphasized the role of the OAS and actively participating as a mediator of the dialogue between the government and the Venezuelan opposition (González and Morales, 2019, pp. 798–801), those years were very difficult for Peña Nieto. A government that was highly questioned internally, stalked by criticism regarding corruption and human rights violations, possessed little legitimacy to promote initiatives of regional significance.

It even seems that, for Mexico, assuming a critical stance on what was happening in Venezuela was more important for seeking rapprochement with the United States. Acting as an "instrument of appeasement" (González and Morales, 2019, p. 799) could be very useful given the poor relationship between presidents Peña Nieto and Trump. In any case, Mexico, unlike Brazil, showed greater willingness and interest in cooperating to address the Venezuelan crisis. It is not coincidental that the first foreign government consulted by Peru regarding the initiative to develop a meeting among countries concerned about the future of democracy in Venezuela was Mexico (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

The change in the regional power dynamics, reflected in the end of the so-called "left turn," generated the conditions for the emergence of a greater concern about the situation of Venezuelan democracy. However, the regional powers (Brazil and Mexico) that in other circumstances should have marked the route of action on an issue so relevant to Latin America, were not in a position to lead this process. Thus, a medium power in the region like Peru can adopt a leadership role in its foreign policy as it seeks to propose a way out of the crisis caused by the Chavista regime.

4 A country committed to the situation in Venezuela

In the previous section it has been demonstrated that, at the regional and international level, the necessary conditions existed for Peru to assume a leadership position in light of the Venezuelan crisis. However, the changes in the power dynamics in Latin America and the concern that the situation in Venezuela generated among world powers were not the only determining factors to understand the interest of the Peruvian state to establish an alternative multilateral mechanism that facilitate the democratic transition and the end of the Maduro regime.

Following what is proposed by the principles of Neoclassical Realism, internal factors such as the strength of the state and existing interests are also elements that intervene in determining the performance of a country on the international stage. Starting from this, it will be analyzed how Peru was consolidating, starting from the government of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, a leading role of regional leadership in the Venezuelan crisis.

4.1 The rise of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski to power

Although in the first round of the 2016 presidential elections Pedro Pablo Kuczynski received around half the votes of Keiko Fujimori, a few weeks later he was elected in the second round by a narrow margin. Unfortunately for his interests, his poor performance in the first round led to his party only having 18 elected congressmen (out of 130), unlike Fujimorism, which had 73, constituting the main political force in the legislature.

This evident imbalance was a crucial aspect throughout his administration. The political dispute became permanent, generating instability. However, with respect to the situation in Venezuela, the reality was very different. The actions of the government of Nicolás Maduro generated a certain consensus between the Peruvian government and Fujimorism, which allowed Kuczynski to have all the conditions to assume an important critical role from the beginning of his mandate.

Furthermore, the Peruvian Congress expressed its solidarity with the National Assembly of Venezuela and its concern about the political and humanitarian crisis in that country, stating that the behavior of the Venezuelan government constituted "a breakdown of the constitutional order and an unacceptable coup d'état"⁶ (Congreso de la República, 2016). This explains the support of opposition politicians for the role that Kuczynski assumed internationally regarding what was happening in Venezuela (Gestión, 2016).

Favored by this situation, Kuczynski showed from the beginning of his mandate a marked interest in what was happening in Venezuela. His concern for the defense of Venezuelan democracy and the existence of an "ideological division" in the region were sufficient reasons to have to "say things clearly" (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). From the government's perspective, this "ideological division" explained the paralysis that was taking place in

⁶ Translation by the authors.

the main organizations where Venezuela exerted influence and, in some way, where the crisis in said country was discussed, such as USAN, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the OAS (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

Unlike the previous administration of President Ollanta Humala, Kuczynski had a completely different attitude. Humala had been hesitant regarding the situation of democracy in Venezuela. Moreover, at the beginning of his administration he sought rapprochement with the Chavista regime, but when the situation began to get difficult in Venezuela, he had to take a position. Publicly, the Peruvian government expressed its concern about what was happening in Venezuela, but the Humala administration did not show interest in Peru's involvement in the crisis in the neighboring country. In fact, the then-president stated that "it is an issue that Venezuelans have to resolve, it is not up to us to resolve this issue, [...] we must keep Venezuela's problems within Venezuela"⁷ (Humala, 2013).

Although in instances such as the OAS, the Humala administration showed a more critical position in relation to the Venezuelan government (Dextre, 2019), in its official statements the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was dedicated to urging dialogue between the different political forces and maintaining peace (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2015). It is true that the crisis of democracy in Venezuela worsened starting in 2015, completely changing the circumstances for the new government that came to power in 2016.

The first year of Kuczynski's government was quite intense internationally. The official discourse regarding what was happening in Venezuela would lay the foundations for Peruvian leadership on an issue that was becoming increasingly important in the region and the world. Shortly after assuming the presidency, in September 2016, Kuczynski appeared before the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN). In his speech, in addition to developing the priorities of a newly elected government, he dedicated an important part of it to referring to the situation in Venezuela, emphasizing the critical political, economic and social situation, in addition to the importance of full validity of democracy and human rights (Naciones Unidas, 2016). Even in an interview with Bloomberg, taking advantage of his visit to the United States, he harshly criticized Nicolás Maduro (Kuczynski, 2016). Without a doubt, he was one of the Latin American presidents who gave the most importance to the situation in Venezuela at this important international event.

One month later, at the XXV Ibero-American Summit, Kuczynski referred to the Venezuelan crisis in the same terms. By that time, officially, the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs already considered that Venezuela had "generated a disruption of the democratic order"⁸ that evidently violated the Inter-American Democratic Charter signed in 2001 (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2016). Following the events against the National Assembly of Venezuela, the Peruvian government hardened its stance internationally, shifting from a disruption to a breakdown of the constitutional order in Venezuela.

This position was also expressed through a foreign policy that showed a commitment to the difficult situation of the Venezuelan

people, opening the possibility for them to migrate to Peru (President Kuczynski even noted: You are welcome to this democratic country!) (RPP, 2017). Although the migration of Venezuelan citizens to the countries of the region began in 2015, coinciding with the deepening of the political and economic crisis in the Caribbean country, the migration process worsened in the following years. In this way, at the beginning of 2017, the Peruvian government implemented a Temporary Stay Permit (PTP in Spanish) for Venezuelan migrants to regularize their immigration status and be able to work in the country. As migratory flows to Peru increased over the months—along with the hardening of the Peruvian government's position against the Venezuelan government—this PTP was renewed on several occasions.

The firm stance that Kuczynski and the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been demonstrating at the international level was supported by other state powers. The consensus and shared perception between the Executive and Congress regarding the Venezuelan crisis allowed the country to establish a common political will at the regional level, embodied in an active foreign policy against the migration crisis in Venezuela and in a critical discourse against Maduro's government. In this context, the Lima Group emerges.

4.2 The Lima Group and Peru's leadership

From the beginning, Peru played a very important role in the Lima Group. Probably the closest precedent to this was the Peruvian request to the OAS to form a group of friendly countries to facilitate dialogue between the government and the Venezuelan opposition. This request was made in a special meeting of the OAS Permanent Council, precisely convened by Peru and 17 other member countries (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2017). It seems that the failure of the OAS to confront the Venezuelan crisis and the need to look for alternatives in the region to facilitate or exert pressure for a democratic solution in Venezuela was beginning to be evident.

The idea evolved until, a few months later in July 2017, taking advantage of a trip of the Mexican Foreign Secretary to Peru to discuss bilateral issues, the Peruvian government proposed convening a group of like-minded countries to analyze the situation in Venezuela. The reaction of the Foreign Secretary of Mexico was positive (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). In this way, the Peruvian government invited a group of Latin American and Caribbean countries to discuss the Venezuelan crisis, the main result being the call for a first official meeting.

Representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and Paraguay attended this first meeting organized and chaired by Peru. For the Peruvian government there were four points that were fundamental and on which a consensus was achieved: (i) the existence of a rupture of the democratic process in Venezuela, (ii) the importance of resorting to peaceful and democratic means, (iii) the Venezuelans had to direct the process and make the decisions, and (iv) the role of the international community was to support Venezuelans in this transition (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). Certainly, the Lima Declaration goes further, and denotes a harsh criticism against the actions of the government of Nicolás Maduro, reaching the point of not recognizing the National Constituent Assembly created by Chavismo to draft a new Constitution, but which, in practice, replaced the democratically elected National Assembly. It should be noted that,

⁷ Translation by the authors.

⁸ Translation by the authors.

although it was not a decision of the meeting, Peru baptized this informal group of countries as the Lima Group (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

This is how Peru went from being a generator of initiatives to coordinate everything related to the functioning and actions of the Lima Group. In the words of former Foreign Affairs Minister Néstor Popolizio, “if Argentina organized a meeting, everything went through Peru and we coordinated everything” (Popolizio, 2024, personal communication, February 16). Peru’s leadership role was expressed in very basic issues such as coordinating the WhatsApp group created for the member countries of the Lima Group to evaluate how the Venezuelan crisis was evolving. In this way, “when something happened in Venezuela, all the information arrived in Peru and we were the ones who directed that information, either to pass it on to other countries, or to analyze it in some way” (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). But it also went through more complex issues such as being in charge of watching everything related to the meetings between the countries.

Peru had the function of coordinating when the next meeting of the Lima Group would be held, until determining the topics to be discussed (the agenda was prepared by Peru) and the level of the meeting (whether it was a meeting of coordinators or chancellors) (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). And once the meeting took place, Peru was in charge of working on the comments of the different representatives, looking for common points and writing the draft statement. Even the representative of Peru in all this time, Ambassador Hugo de Zela, was in charge of “presenting the text to the foreign ministers and explaining to the foreign ministers what were the main decisions that they had to make” (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). This explains the reason why, in all the meetings of the Lima Group, the main table was always chaired by the host country and Peru. There was a kind of joint presidency. In other words, there was a “recognition that the natural spokesperson and coordinator of the Lima Group was Peru” (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

According to Ambassador Hugo de Zela, this leadership was not easy. Coordinating a group of diverse countries was complex, even more so when the group was growing and gaining influence (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). This will explain, in part, the problems that would arise later.

4.3 Leadership and interests

The government’s interest in addressing the Venezuelan crisis was not only due to the situation of democracy in Venezuela, but also due to an economic crisis that began to generate an immigration problem, which little by little was going to become an issue of importance in the region. Furthermore, Venezuela’s influence at the regional level was a destabilizing factor that was having an impact in different multilateral spaces of relevance to Peruvian foreign policy at both the South American and Latin American levels.

On the other hand, given the challenging internal political dynamics faced by Pedro Pablo Kuczynski’s government, Peru’s active

role in addressing the Venezuelan crisis could have been leveraged by the new government to seek rapprochement with the opposition on a topic of common interest. Despite the political differences, Venezuela could be a consensus point, essential to defuse the difficult existing political situation.

However, the interests that Peru had behind its leadership in the Lima Group went further. Peru was aware that launching an initiative of this nature was going to have not only a regional, but also a global impact (Popolizio, 2024, personal communication, February 16). This leadership allowed for permanent and fluid dialogue at the highest level with countries such as the United States, Canada, Spain and France, to name some world powers, which were evidently interested in what was happening in Venezuela. In normal times, Peru is considered a country with relative influence, not a country that is periodically consulted on the main issues on the international agenda (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). This changed during the Venezuelan crisis.

Likewise, this rapprochement with these countries allowed Peru to also discuss the priority issues on its own agenda at the bilateral level. While the United States and European countries “are interested in seeing how they help you or consolidate you in that leadership, that also happens by having a positive agenda with them”¹⁰ (Popolizio, 2024, personal communication, February 16). It should be noted that this positioning of Peru not only occurred at the bilateral level, but also at the multilateral level, making Peru a natural representative for this issue in organizations such as the OAS, CELAC and USAN. In other words, this leadership allowed Peru to satisfy a series of Peruvian foreign policy interests that go beyond the Venezuelan crisis.

International dynamics alone did not determine the leadership position that Peru managed to achieve with the creation of the Lima Group. Within the Peruvian state, there was a recognition of the importance of strengthening its international positioning and mitigating the consequences of the Venezuelan crisis, both for the Venezuelan population with whom it expressed solidarity, and for the region. In that sense, both the Executive and the Legislative shared the same vision about the need to assume a role in this crisis panorama, promoting and legitimizing the consolidation of Peruvian leadership through the Lima Group. This favorable internal situation and the existing clarity regarding the interests at stake led the Peruvian government to develop a foreign policy that aimed to lead, at least initially and with some success, the search for a way out of the Venezuelan crisis.

5 A new international dynamic (2018–2021)

The conditions of the regional and international landscape within the framework of any political process are characterized by their constantly changing nature. Although at first there may be favorable conditions for making certain decisions regarding foreign policy, the factors that end up influencing the course of events are different, as well as the objectives that at some point seemed feasible to achieve.

9 Translation by the authors.

10 Translation by the authors.

The opportunity that Peru had between 2015 and 2017 began to be overshadowed, precisely by the new panorama it faced. Facts such as the permanence in power of the government (still in crisis) of Nicolás Maduro, the impact of the actions of the United States in the Venezuelan crisis and changes in the power dynamics at the regional level, began to limit the scope of the Peruvian leadership's actions. Therefore, considering the theoretical framework that guides this article, we will analyze how this new international dynamic ends up conditioning the scope of Peruvian foreign policy in the Lima Group.

5.1 The administration of Nicolás Maduro resists

Since 2018, even though the situation of Venezuela's democracy was not going to improve and social protests were to continue, Nicolás Maduro's administration would demonstrate an incredible strength to remain in power.

Elections held in May 2018, which declared Nicolás Maduro the winner for a new six-year term, were questioned internationally. The United States, the European Union and several Latin American countries did not recognize the results of this electoral process (Castillo and Polanco, 2022, p. 261). Likewise, organizations such as the OAS and the UN questioned the elections for their lack of transparency and guarantees. In that same vein, the Lima Group expressed through a joint statement that its member countries did not recognize "the legitimacy of the electoral process developed in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (...) for not meeting the international standards of a democratic, free, fair, and transparent process"¹¹ (Grupo de Lima, 2018).

An election with very low participation (over half of the population did not go to vote), an opposition that decided to abstain from participating due, among other reasons, to the disqualification of some of its leaders and changes in the rules of the game, and an incumbent candidate who, as president, had not demonstrated the ability to resolve Venezuela's major problems (Neuman and Casey, 2018), were sufficient aspects to cast doubt on the legitimacy of these elections.

It should be noted that, in those years, the political scenario for the Venezuelan government was extremely complex, likely representing the period of greatest weakness for Chavismo since it assumed power. A failed coup d'état (for the opposition, a peaceful rebellion) and an alleged assassination attempt against Nicolás Maduro, expressed the problems of a government that seemed to no longer resist. It should be added to this the increase of social pressure. According to the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict, protests against the government in the Caribbean country increased from 9,000 in 2017, to 12,000 in 2018 and 16,000 in 2019, this last year being the year with the most protests since Maduro came to power (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, 2022).

Economically, the situation was worse. In 2018, the Venezuelan economy was experiencing an unprecedented crisis, with hyperinflation of around 130,000% (Hernández, 2022) and a terrible shortage of food and medicine. The social achievements of the first

years of Chavismo had practically disappeared. Even oil production, the main source of income for Venezuela, was considerably reduced.

However, despite such situation, the Maduro regime was able to remain in power. The continuation of Chavismo was favored by some changes that the Venezuelan economy began to experience. While for the year 2019 inflation was 9,585%, in 2020 it was 2,959% and in 2021 it was 686% (Hernández, 2022). And even though, "between 2013 and 2021 the Venezuelan economy contracted by 75%"¹² (Bermúdez, 2022) and hyperinflation continued to be a problem, it seemed that the worst was already over. Similarly, crude oil production, which reached its most critical moment in 2020 (registering an extraction of 434,000 barrels per day), in 2021 production practically doubled, remaining at around 700,000 barrels per day (Bermúdez, 2022). In any case, for a country with large oil reserves, this figure was still quite small.

Regarding social protests, some changes also occurred. It could be repression, the fatigue of the population, the health situation or the improvement of some economic indicators, but the protests, mostly for economic and social rights, decreased so that in 2020 there were 9,633 registered and in 2021 only 6,560 (Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, 2022).

At the political level, although since 2019 a series of countries, including most members of the Lima Group, began recognizing Juan Guaidó, president of the National Assembly, as Venezuela's interim president, this did not last long. Initially, this recognition challenged the Nicolás Maduro regime, questioning the legitimacy of the 2018 electoral process and affecting its "legitimacy in front of an important number of countries and other actors in the international community" (Boersner, 2020, p. 540). Having two governments that declare themselves legitimate, each with a different degree of support, generated an international problem, although in practice, it was the Maduro regime that had control of the government and the armed forces, some things Guaidó always lacked.

Thus, starting in 2021, different countries began to stop recognizing Guaidó as interim president, as was the case of European countries, Panama, the Dominican Republic, among others. In the case of Peru, the country ceased to recognize Guaidó in mid-2021 with the arrival of a new government to power, reestablishing its diplomatic relations with the Maduro regime. By the end of 2022, the Venezuelan opposition itself questioned the figure of the "interim president."

The permanence of Nicolás Maduro in power and the absence of a negotiated exit that could provide a resolution to the existing political crisis, serve to criticize both the actions of the Lima Group that did not seem to show results and, therefore, the leadership of the Peru as a key actor within this multilateral body as well.

5.2 The role of the United States in the times of Trump

Since 2018, Donald Trump's government intensified its pressure against the Venezuelan regime. Although the interest of the United States in the situation in Venezuela will continue, its

¹¹ Translation by the authors.

¹² Translation by the authors.

actions took new directions, assuming a tougher position (along with the hardening of the world power's position regarding China). Precisely, this new approach ended up generating a negative impact not only on the actions of the Lima Group, but also on Peru's leadership.

An example of this new reality was the increase in sanctions against Venezuela. After the Executive Order issued in 2017, which in some way implied the continuity of a policy implemented by Barack Obama, since 2018 the Trump administration implemented a series of Executive Orders that would reflect a change in the objective of the sanctions. "The new president discarded the policy of targeted sanctions practiced by his predecessor" (Bodemer, 2023, p. 12) in favor of a more punitive policy that not only affected senior officials of the Chavista regime, but also the Venezuelan population. These sanctions helped "to deepen the economic disaster in this country and the misery of its population" (Bodemer, 2023, p. 27), in addition to generating greater migratory pressures, in a context in which the increase in Venezuelan migration became an issue of regional debate.

Since these sanctions were supported by the member countries of the Lima Group, as shown in their statements, it affected the legitimacy of such multilateral instance as a mechanism interested in seeking a solution to the Venezuelan crisis. On the contrary, the Lima Group seemed to become another factor explaining the difficult situation in Venezuela.

In this context, a topic that the Lima Group also began to develop since 2019, largely promoted by the Peruvian government, was the convergence with the International Contact Group, a multilateral body made up of European countries with some Latin American countries, and also interested in finding a solution to the Venezuelan crisis. Precisely, with the objective of unifying both mechanisms, the International Conference for Democracy in Venezuela was held in Peru (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7); however, the sanctions implemented by the United States a day earlier (Executive Order 13884) completely changed the debate, now focusing on the consequences of such sanctions on the region (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). Since the meeting was not only sought to bring together the member countries of the Lima Group and the Contact Group, but also all the countries concerned about Venezuelan democracy, the representative of the United States, National Security Advisor John Bolton, showed more concern about the sanctions against Venezuela and how China was advancing in Latin America (Popolizio, 2024, personal communication, February 16) than about the objectives set by Peru of consolidating a great platform to confront the crisis of democracy in Venezuela. Thus, the sanctions not only seemed to affect the Lima Group's strategy, but also Peru's leadership.

As expected, "at the end of Trump's term, his strategy of phased sanctions was practically exhausted" (Bodemer, 2023, p. 28), not achieving the expected results. Regardless of the reasons that may explain its failure (such as China's and Russia's support to Venezuela), the possibility that economic sanctions have a real impact in this type of situation is lower (Hufbauer et al., 2007, pp. 158–159). The sanctions are justified as the best decision when faced with the obligation of taking action—especially after the failure of the negotiations sponsored by the Dominican Republic between the government and the Venezuelan opposition—, despite

knowing *a priori* that their impact will be limited (Hufbauer et al., 2007, pp. 5–9). The other options for the United States would be to do nothing or use force, but these are, for obvious reasons, more costly alternatives. However, although the Venezuelan crisis did not constitute a major threat to the security of the United States, the Trump government threatened to use force against the government of Nicolás Maduro.

Influenced by Mike Pompeo, new Secretary of State, and John Bolton, both convinced of the "preemptive use of military force against hostile governments" (Camilleri, 2018, p. 196), the United States government toughened its questions against Venezuela by pointing out that "all options were open, including a direct military invasion"¹³ (Bodemer, 2023, p. 30). Faced with this, the Lima Group expressed in different statements its opposition to the use of force to solve the Venezuelan crisis. However, although the Lima Group seemed to have a clear position on the matter, the majority of its member countries ended up supporting the US initiative.

Probably, the highlight was the meeting of the 17 signatory countries of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR in Spanish) in September 2019, to discuss the impact of the Venezuela crisis. As a collective defense mechanism at the regional level created in the context of the Cold War to jointly confront an external threat, it did not matter if the TIAR was a mechanism lacking legitimacy or designed to serve in other types of situations; for the USA "the TIAR is much wider in scope than a mutual defense treaty" (Oppenheimer, 2019). Finally, 12 States expressed that the crisis in Venezuela was a threat to the peace and security of the region, so they activated the TIAR Consultation Body. Undoubtedly, the United States government was trying to give some kind of legal backing to a policy (the threat of the use of force) that clearly constituted a violation of international law.

What is relevant for the purposes of this research is that eight member countries of the Lima Group (out of a total of 12 members at that time) supported this initiative. Only three countries that were part of the Lima Group, Peru, Costa Rica and Panama, abstained to vote (Canada is not part of the TIAR). In this context, it became evident that the United States had become a disruptive factor, fracturing the Lima Group. His actions altered the political dynamics of the Lima Group, because unlike other occasions, Peru found itself isolated, "it went from being the leader of the Lima Group to being a member of a minority" (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7) that prioritized the search for a peaceful solution to the serious situation in Venezuela.

Thus, the level of linkage of the majority of the countries of the Lima Group with the priorities and the aggressive discourse that the US foreign policy began to have regarding the Venezuelan situation, ended up undermining the nature and initial objectives of the Lima Group. The importance of the US influence on the position and decisions of the member countries of the Lima Group reduced the scope of Peruvian leadership, even giving rise to questions regarding its weakness in guaranteeing the validity of the mechanism around the search for a peaceful solution, a scenario that seemed increasingly unattainable.

¹³ Translation by the authors.

5.3 Political changes at the regional level

The rise to power of Iván Duque in Colombia (2018) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (early 2019), two countries of great importance—one being Venezuela's main neighbor and the other a South American power—did not strengthen the Lima Group due to their critical stance against Nicolás Maduro's government; instead, it weakened it. Their radical approach to addressing the Venezuelan crisis, in line with the strategy previously developed by the Trump administration, had an impact not only on the collective but also on Peru's leadership.

With the end of Juan Manuel Santos's presidency and the beginning of Iván Duque's term, "Colombian foreign policy realigned with the United States" (Pastrana et al., 2021, pp. 111–112). In this way, the Colombian government did not rule out the possibility of a military intervention in Venezuela, to the extent that it did not sign a Lima Group statement in mid-2018, which explicitly rejected "any course of action or declaration that implies military intervention or the use of violence."¹⁴ The fracture of the Lima Group was beginning. In any case, it seemed that Duque was attempting to "deploy regional leadership, obviously under the aegis of the United States, to pressure for a regime change in the neighboring country" (Pastrana et al., 2021, p. 122), to the detriment of the role that Peru had been playing.

In the case of Brazil, from the moment Jair Bolsonaro declared that "Donald Trump was his model leader" (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 2), the Lima Group was affected. Even "the American press coined the term 'tropical Trump' to refer to Bolsonaro"¹⁵ (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 2). In this context, it is not surprising that Brazilian diplomacy, represented by its Foreign Affairs Minister, adopted an aggressive and belligerent rhetoric (Rodrigues, 2019, p. 7), which turned Brazil, like the United States, into a disruptive factor within the Lima Group (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

The Lima Group "began to be perceived as a group that reflected the positions of the extreme right of the region" (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). The "lack of harmony in the group, due to the lack of affinity for the approach to certain topics," was increasingly evident since 2019 (Popolizio, 2024, personal communication, February 16). This explains the interest of the Peruvian government in seeking a rapprochement with the Contact Group, in order to maintain the original idea of the Lima Group. This new strategy allowed Peru to become an interlocutor between both blocks, enabling various meetings and preventing the most extreme countries of the Lima Group from assuming leadership (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7). Unfortunately for the interests of Peru, these efforts were in vain.

Another election that affected the Lima Group was the victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico at the end of 2018. With the new administration, Mexico's participation in the Lima Group disappeared, leaving it without one of its founders and main members. López Obrador meant an abrupt change in Mexican foreign policy, prioritizing rapprochement with the Nicolás Maduro regime with the aim of seeking a negotiated solution. The following year, the arrival of Alberto Fernández to the presidency in Argentina will further weaken

the Lima Group, adopting a postulate similar to that of the Mexican president.

Starting in 2020, the Lima Group began to have less international presence and its meetings became less and less frequent. Meanwhile, Peruvian leadership started to wane, not only due to issues inherent to international dynamics, but also because of the changes that occurred internally.

6 Problems in Peru and its impact in the leadership of the Lima Group

Starting in 2018, Peru went through a maelstrom of political and economic instability of great magnitude. After the resignation of President Kuczynski, in the next 3 years, the country had four presidents. In addition, it had to face a complex migration crisis resulting from the increase in Venezuelan migration and the COVID19 pandemic.

This new scenario made it very difficult for a country like Peru to have the capacity to lead a process as complex as the Venezuelan crisis in the Lima Group. This will lead to a change in the priorities of Peruvian foreign policy, which will ultimately not only distance Peru from the Lima Group but will also contribute to its end.

6.1 Political and economic instability

Despite the internal problems that Kuczynski's government had to face, it sought to avoid further political confrontation. Rather, its commitment to confronting the Venezuelan crisis implied a certain consensus with the opposition, making it possible for Peru to develop this policy. This began to change with the arrival of Martin Vizcarra in 2018.

Vizcarra inherited a weak and divided government. The Executive and the opposition that dominated the Legislature engaged in a type of "constitutional hardball" that seriously affected democracy (Encinas and Paredes, 2020, p. 484). In his 2 years of government, the threats from Congress that destabilized the previous administration continued, but now the confrontation would worsen, manifesting itself through a referendum called by the government, the dissolution of Congress and new legislative elections. In this challenging political scenario, the Venezuelan crisis became a secondary issue for all political actors.

Additionally, we must consider an economic situation that was gradually worsening. Thus, while in 2018 GDP growth was 4%, in 2019 it was only 2.2%, the worst result since 2001 (with the exception of 2009, post-financial crisis). Under these conditions, it is very difficult to develop large foreign policy projects, much less lead such a complex issue with great regional and global impact.

Furthermore, for Vizcarra, foreign policy was a second-order issue. In his national addresses for Independence Day in 2019 and 2020, there was no mention of issues related to foreign policy. However, when it came to the Venezuelan crisis, the interest of the Peruvian government seemed to continue in rhetoric, although with less and less real importance.

Thus, during his mandate he not only maintained the decision (of the previous government) to avoid the participation of the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, in the Summit of the Americas held in

¹⁴ Translation by the authors.

¹⁵ Translation by the authors.

Lima, but he was also part, with other countries in the region, of a request to the International Criminal Court to initiate an investigation into the Venezuelan regime for human rights violations. And, at the level of the Lima Group, political, immigration and financial measures were discussed to put pressure on the “Maduro dictatorship” before a new government period begins at the beginning of 2019 (Deutsche Welle, 2018). In this context, the most interesting proposal that the Peruvian government put up for debate in the Lima Group was to break diplomatic relations with Venezuela. Finally, the countries of the Lima Group, like others, decided to recognize Guaidó, president of the National Assembly, as interim president of Venezuela.

Although the effort seemed to continue (but with more and more limitations), the little support that Hugo de Zela’s candidacy for the General Secretariat of the OAS (the Peruvian ambassador who had led the Lima Group) received, seemed to express that Peru was being perceived as the country that had failed in its attempt to successfully lead the Lima Group (de Zela, 2024, personal communication, February 7).

At least until mid-2019, the Venezuelan issue continued to be on the Peruvian foreign policy agenda, but the increase in Venezuelan migration to Peru and the arrival of the COVID19 pandemic in 2020 will condition the leadership that Peru tried to build regarding the crisis in Venezuela.

6.2 Migration and health crisis

During the Kuczynski administration, it was evident that criticism of Nicolás Maduro’s regime was accompanied by committed support for the Venezuelan population, the same population that sought to migrate as a result of an unsustainable political and economic situation. But, since 2018, immigration changes began to occur, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, which posed new challenges for the Peruvian government.

Firstly, Venezuelan migration flows increased significantly. Until mid-2023, of the total entries registered by the different border control posts (around 1 million 600 thousand entries), 50% entered Peru in 2018 and 27% in 2019 (Superintendencia Nacional de Migraciones del Perú, 2023, p. 15). Although these incomes do not consider all those people of Venezuelan nationality who later left Peru or who entered without going through the checkpoints (around 34% of the Venezuelan population estimated to remain in the country out of a total of 1 million 150 thousand people) (Superintendencia Nacional de Migraciones del Perú, 2023, p. 24), reflect a situation that was beginning to be increasingly difficult to control.

Due to this, the policy of Vizcarra’s government will be different from that of its predecessor. Initially, a passport began to be requested to enter the country, however, in practice a series of humanitarian exceptions were applied. A year later, in 2019, the humanitarian visa was imposed as a requirement, demonstrating “a new restrictive approach to the migration of Venezuelan people”¹⁶ (Salmón, 2021, p. 28), although from the perspective of president Vizcarra the entry of Venezuelans to Peru was not being restricted, only minimum conditions were asked (El Comercio, 2019) in order

to have “an orderly, regular and safe migration”¹⁷ (El Peruano, 2019). In any case, this new immigration policy that is less “condescending” to the reality of Venezuela—for some even necessary—will affect a leadership that was built not only on criticism of the situation in Venezuela, but also on support for its population. By 2020, regular income from Venezuelan migration in Peru completely fell (although not necessarily irregular income); probably, the measures implemented and the start of the pandemic in 2020 (which involved the closure of borders) explain its reduction.

But Venezuelan migration not only increased in number, it also changed in sociodemographic composition. The first years, Venezuelan migration was mainly composed of young men with a high level of education, but in 2019 migration with a greater number of women and with a lower educational level, a population with “a profile of greater vulnerability” (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, 2022, p. 17) was evident. This new reality will negatively impact the perception of Peruvian public opinion, contributing to the increase in xenophobia. Hence, while in 2018 40% of the Peruvian population distrusted Venezuelans arriving in the country, in 2019 this perception increased to 68% (Instituto de Opinión Pública PUCP, 2020, p. 8). Likewise, this migration began to be associated with crime, to the point that out of the group made up of those people who disagreed with Venezuelan migration to Peru (73% of the total), 67% considered that the main reason was the increase of insecurity in Peru (Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2019, p. 10).

Even though official figures do not necessarily show such a threat, the government fueled the population’s demands and began to organize public acts of deportation of Venezuelan citizens and blaming them for the increase in crime in different parts of Peru. Obviously, this did not contribute to the international leadership that Peru had built, which was weakening as a result of the new priorities that the Peruvian government was beginning to have. The latter were manifested not only internally, but also internationally by giving more importance to a series of multilateral spaces that could serve to address the migration issue, neglecting the Lima Group.

Finally, another issue that also radically changed the actions of Peruvian foreign policy was the COVID19 pandemic. As it happened in other countries, the management of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on addressing the health crisis, initially developing intense humanitarian work, repatriating Peruvians who had been stranded in other countries, and then guiding the actions of the Peruvian diplomacy in two aspects, “contribute significantly to the State’s response to the pandemic and [...] contribute to the efforts for the economic reactivation of the country” (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores del Perú, 2020).¹⁸ In this new scenario, Peru’s leadership in the Lima Group took a second place in relevance for its foreign policy.

6.3 End of leadership and the Lima Group

With the election of Pedro Castillo as the new president of Peru in mid-2021, and as a left-wing political proposal, an

¹⁶ Translation by the authors.

¹⁷ Translation by the authors.

¹⁸ Translation by the authors.

important topic in the public debate was the future of Peru's role in the Lima Group and the relationship with Venezuela. From the beginning, the new government recognized the regime of Nicolás Maduro (something that several countries began to do) and proposed the path of dialogue as the way to address the crisis in Venezuela. Unlike the pressure mechanisms that ended up dominating the agenda of the Lima Group, the aim was to help the Venezuelan population solve their own problems (Maúrtua, 2024, personal communication, February 21). This explains the commitment that the Peruvian government showed to the negotiations that were taking place at that time in Mexico between the opposition and the government of Venezuela. The government even offered to make Peru an alternative venue for these negotiations.

There is no doubt that the new government was moving away from the Lima Group, but in practice the Lima Group had been quite paralyzed for some time prior to this shift. Its last formal statement had been issued at the beginning of 2021, but by that time, its statements were beginning to be repeated, offering no new insights or directions.

Despite the existing fractures and the poor results of the Lima Group to achieve a democratic solution in Venezuela, Peru did not seek to continue leading this regional project and clearly changed its strategy regarding how to face the crisis in the Caribbean country. And although it can be argued that the Castillo's government put an end to the Lima Group, and therefore, to the leadership of Peru, by that time the Lima Group had already ceased to function and Peru's leadership had effectively disappeared.

7 Conclusion

The evolution of Peruvian leadership in the Lima Group between 2016 and 2021 is explained based on the dynamics of the power structure at the international level, as well as on conditions of an internal nature, both material and regarding the priorities that the different Peruvian governments had in that period. Although all of this will initially enable Peru's regional leadership to confront the Venezuelan crisis, after a few years, as a result of a series of changes that would begin to take place starting in 2018, Peru's position will weaken, negatively affecting its leadership in the Lima Group.

Regarding the external variable, it has been identified that the development of Peruvian leadership through this multilateral initiative was possible as a result of the severity of the political and economic situation in Venezuela as of 2015, added to the increasing interest that the United States began to show in that country. The international dynamics made possible the successful positioning of the Lima Group, giving Peru a certain leadership on the issue, which was of great relevance in a region that denoted political transformations and an evident power vacuum. However, the existing conditions went from being favorable for Peruvian foreign policy to becoming obstacles. Not only did the Venezuelan government manage to resist international pressure, but also the government of Donald Trump (strengthened by its competition with China) and its Latin American partners (in a new power dynamic that seemed to turn to the right) adopted a more radical way of dealing with the Venezuelan crisis, limiting the role that

the Lima Group had sought to play and overshadowing the Peruvian leadership.

	Favorable scenario 2015–2017	Unfavorable scenario 2018–2021
External variable: power structure	The regime of Nicolás Maduro at its worst moment, end of the Caracas axis.	Continuation of the Nicolás Maduro regime in power, in increasingly favorable internal conditions.
	Increase of interest of the United States in the Venezuelan crisis in a new international context.	Radicalization of the United States strategy to confront the Venezuelan crisis.
	End of the “left turn” and absence of leaderships in the Latin American region	Radicalization of criticism against Venezuela in Latin America and new right-wing leaderships.

And, in relation to the internal conditions that, according to Neoclassical Realism, are also essential to consider in order to understand the external actions of the countries, it can be concluded that the interests of the Peruvian government showed a solid commitment to the Venezuelan situation. Peru also had the internal capacity to set ambitious foreign policy objectives, which resulted in the creation of the Lima Group and the leadership that Peru had in its operation. However, the political and economic instability of the country and the problems that the new governments in power had to face, such as the migration and health crisis, weakened Peru's ability and interest to continue promoting the Lima Group, conditioning its failure and the end of Peruvian leadership.

	Favorable scenario 2015–2017	Unfavorable scenario 2018–2021
Internal conditions: state strength and interests	New government concerned about the situation of Venezuela.	Governments begin to show less concern in the situation in Venezuela.
	Despite the internal difficulties, the crisis in Venezuela was a topic of common interest between the government and the opposition.	Increase in political and economic instability in the country: fracture between the Executive and the Legislative.
	The coordination of the Lima Group was a priority for the Peruvian government.	New priorities on the foreign policy agenda: migration and COVID19.
	Interest in positioning the country internationally by criticizing the situation in Venezuela through the Lima Group.	Distancing from the position assumed by the Lima Group. It no longer served Peru's interests.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

OV: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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