



A moonshot for Latin America?

by Andrew Thompson

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What happened?

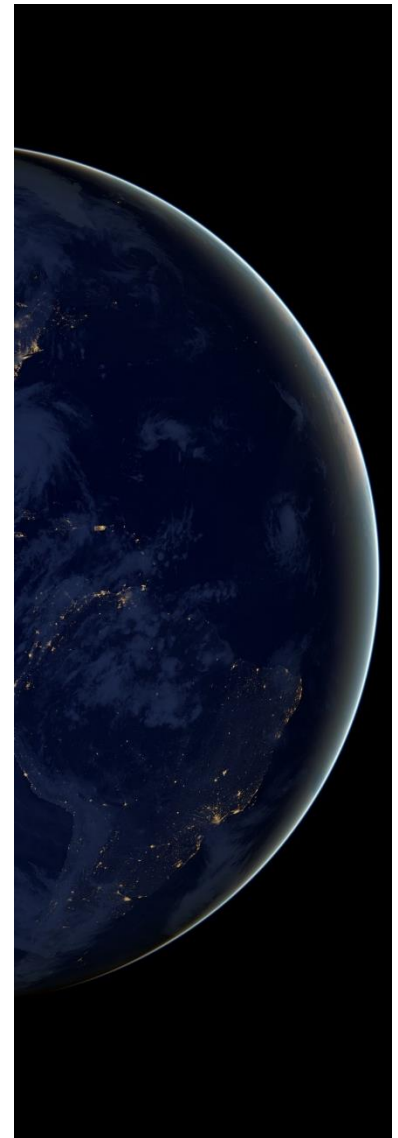
Six countries – Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Paraguay – said on 25 July that they had agreed to set up a Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency (which will be known by the Spanish acronym ALCE).

The details

Details of the venture are somewhat scarce. Argentina and Mexico are prime movers, having suggested the idea last year. The proposal to move forward was approved by foreign ministers meeting in Mexico City under the umbrella of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELADE). They hope there will be a formal treaty, perhaps ready for signing at the next summit of CELADE heads of state, due on 18 September.

There are a lot of early suggestions over what ALCE might do. There is talk of getting a first satellite up this year or in 2022. Mexican officials have said ALCE could launch a new generation of nanosatellites to monitor ocean conditions, weather, climate change and agriculture. There have been suggestions that by pooling resources the countries of the region might be able to play technological catch-up and even participate in some way in big-power projects like returning to the moon or exploring Mars, currently pursued by the likes of the US, China, and the EU.

Some might ask why do it all? Shouldn't Latin America spend money first on solving earth-level problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty and inequality of income? The traditional response is that space exploration does develop innovative technologies that have major and positive earth-level applications. One example: agriculture and tropical forest



protection is being revolutionised by satellite tracking, and more advances may be on the way.

Another possible challenge is whether ALCE can get a budget big enough to make a difference. It is estimate that NASA's budget is around US\$22.6bn, that China is spending US\$11bn a year on space exploration and that the EU spends US\$8bn a year. The six countries in ALCE have a combined space exploration budget of around US\$100mn (of which just over US\$80mn corresponds to Argentina, while the Mexican space agency has a budget of only US\$3mn). The Ecuadorean Space Institute was closed in 2018 to save money.

Finally there is politics. The region has many agencies and treaties promoting integration and solidarity, but many of them suffer from internal divisions and conflicting agendas. To gather more momentum and build a bigger budget, ALCE would need to recruit an aerospace heavyweight like Brazil. However, Brazil, with a right-wing government, withdrew from CELADE last year, and would have difficulty agreeing a shared approach with the centre-left administrations of Mexico and Argentina.

What does it mean?

Despite the political and organisational difficulties, there is clearly a case for the region to pull together to try and get more value for money from its current spend on space exploration. It was estimated in January that there are 3,372 satellites orbiting earth, of which only 51, or 1.5% are owned by Latin American countries. That proportion ought to change.

About the Author

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As well as being a Canning House Associate Fellow, Andrew is a former foreign correspondent (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro) and a broadcaster for the BBC's Latin American Service. Working through La Rambla Research Ltd., he writes about economics, political risk, and business in Latin America.



These stories are also available on Andrew's blog site, [La Rambla Research](#).