

Dollarization: Needed Monetary Reconditioning or Expropriation?

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Free international movement of capital and free trade and e-trade in financial services have combined to make regional currency consolidation inevitable. Faced with this prospect, advocacy of rapid dollarization, in some cases of this entire hemisphere, has spread beyond the United States. Business and government groups in countries from Argentina to El Salvador and Mexico have openly expressed interest in formal dollarization. While complete dollarization may indeed be a useful step for the period immediately ahead, I will argue that it is distinctly second-best in the short run and unsustainable in the long run even in this hemisphere.

Specifically, uncooperative unilateral monetary unions, such as those brought about by formal dollarization, are inferior to the multilateral sharing model of monetary union pioneered in Europe. Dollarization involves a very high financial tribute to the United States. Countries will be reluctant to continue paying billions of dollars' worth in forgone seignorage once they have become accustomed to monetary stability and internalized the virtues of low inflation. Rather than paying indefinitely for this lesson, they will reclaim co-ownership and co-management of their monetary asset in multilateral monetary union with like-minded countries.

The Business of External Dollarization

How did we get to the point of adoption of the U.S. dollar by other countries? As the paper dollar was coming into its own by being issued and accepted as a pure fiat money in its home market, it was also beginning to be accepted for transactions and store of value functions in foreign countries. Here is a brief look at history before evaluating the advanced stages of this development that could soon lead to formal dollarization – the unilateral adoption of the U.S. dollar as sole legal tender by other countries in the Western hemisphere. In glancing back, I will ignore the adoption of the U.S. dollar as in effect sole medium of payment by Panama already in 1904 because it is doubtful that the new state had any choice in the matter.

For centuries countries obtained most of their money by mining or panning for it or importing the precious monetary specie in return for goods or by means of foreign loans at great expense. During the twentieth century, national monetary sovereignty became the norm as links to commodity standards were cut in crisis-driven spurts of reform and replaced by discretionary policy management of the growth of fiat money. In the United States, for instance, the demonetization of gold in 1973, by lifting the requirement that Federal Reserve notes had to be 40% backed by a fixed amount of artificially-valued gold in the U.S. Treasury completed the process of *internal* or *national* dollarization by cutting the last ceremonial links to an external or international standard. Henceforth the dollar was a pure fiat money whose “production” was

entirely subject to national control and to whatever internal disciplines by which U.S. policymakers cared to abide.

Informal *external* dollarization, with the U.S. dollar circulating side by side with the respective national currency abroad without benefit of legal tender rights, had become widespread already in the aftermath of World War II, particularly in the occupied countries. It then receded as foreign monetary systems were rebuilt in Europe and Japan in the 1950s and the dollar proved weak against some of the other major currencies in the 1960s and 1970s. External dollarization started to advance again after the United States credibly rededicated itself to the virtues of hard money in the early 1980s. Also, post-communist transition economies and economies emerging from other disasters, particularly in Latin America, provided more liberal access to U.S. dollars in the 1990s. By the end of this decade, dollarization has become a hot issue from Mexico to Argentina, with informal, partial dollarization progressing. At the same time, formal or complete dollarization, under which the U.S. dollar would become sole legal tender in the adopting country, is being ever more openly debated in business and government.

National currency, being subject to strictly enforced government “copyright,” can be viewed as part of a country’s marketable and exportable intellectual property. Foreign use indirectly involves the payment of “royalties” to the United States. Even though paper money costs the U.S. monetary authorities next to nothing to produce physically, foreigners have to pay full value in goods to acquire it, or to relinquish interest earnings or make interest payments as long as they hold it. (Of course, U.S. taxpayers do not get the greenbacks for nothing either, but whatever seignorage profits and interest savings they provide for their own government they get back in lower taxes.) So while external dollarization is good business for the United States, the question is whether it is also the best the Americas can do by and for themselves in the long run.

Initial guidance comes from a 276-year old Scottish economist who wrote about the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. Adam Smith recognized that wealth arises from value-creating activities and not from government fiat or hoards of shiny things. So too with national money: It has value because a country produces goods and services that can usefully be transacted with it under noninflationary conditions. Let the price level explode or production implode and the value of money is destroyed. But just because the value of a national monetary asset can be ruined by mismanagement or calamity does not mean that each nation should not aspire, and lay claim, to its monetary wealth potential either by itself or jointly with others.

Not just their fool’s gold of national monetary-policy sovereignty but genuine national income is lost when financially small countries end up importing or renting the money they use. They then pay in goods and services exports and through interest payments on foreign loans for something they could have, by prudent policy and international cooperation, for free. A member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System recently rejoiced that “with about \$300 billion of U.S. currency in the hands of foreigners, the United States earns roughly \$15 billion per year in seignorage.”¹ The last figure is twice the current U.S. budget for nonmilitary foreign aid² and could soon be triple or quadruple. Foreign aid, net, could be flowing the wrong way.

The Disappearing Small Brands of Money

In principle, every country, regardless of size, has a right to its own, homemade, monetary base by virtue of the national product of its citizens that gives transactions value to this base. Yet if the country is small and wide open to international financial flows, it may have great difficulty exercising that right for its national currency if it acts alone. That currency denomination simply is of little use and ultimately uncompetitive. It may still be needed to pay wages, taxes, and retailers, and local banks may have to keep it on their balance sheet if the government says so. Yet all the big financial transactions and contracts will eschew denomination in an internationally obscure and volatile denomination that has little liquidity or accounting use. Buffeted and made expensive by country and currency risks even when kept on a strict regimen of internationally prescribed best practices, the small currency loses out to a currency that is in wide international use.

No matter how small countries decide to roll with the punches of open capital markets with their own money and exchange rates, small really is not beautiful in matters of money. Inflation targeting for a small country with flexible exchange rates is a frustrating exercise with frequent misses: Mexico was down to 7% inflation before the crisis that started in December 1994 forced it to crash and float. Five years later, its inflation rate is only just edging back to single digits, having come down painfully and slowly from over 50% during 1995. Currency boards offer good shelter from inflation as long as the exchange parity with their dollar or DM/euro backing can be maintained. But long stretches of sunny weather tend to be punctuated by severe storms requiring costly, and politically risky, interest-rate defenses. When Argentina's sovereign debt rating was reduced by Moody's in early October 1999, the agency cited the country's fixed exchange rate with the dollar: The deterioration in Argentina's terms of trade, in particular with Brazil that had given up on a less committed dollar peg in January 1999, and then also with Chile, was making the present downturn of its economy "particularly difficult." A peso interest rate surcharge of 500 basis points or more over U.S. dollar claims issued by the same Argentine banks in 1999 showed that the market is far from convinced that the Argentine peso is as good as the U.S. dollar or that the program of "convertibility" at a 1:1 rate is here to stay.

Whether garaged in a currency board or fretting on the curb, small moneys thus no longer can expect to survive in their limited areas of circulation unprotected. Here "small" is financially small with a currency denomination that is not fit for the international capital market, and not necessarily geographically small, like El Salvador. But currency protection itself is up against more and more rules of international finance and investment and trade-in-services liberalization. Even the citizens of a financially small country of issue, not meaning, of course, Switzerland, frequently require extra compensation to voluntarily hold their own money on deposit because they view it as an inferior brand. Loan customers get a correspondingly costly quote in the national money, if they are large and connected enough to get any quote at all, and turn to foreign-currency lenders, mostly foreign-owned institutions, both inside and outside the country if they can. Thus there is creeping eurozation at the eastern and southeastern periphery beyond the 11 current members of euroland and creeping U.S. dollarization in many other countries,

particularly in the Western hemisphere. It is just not fair, but lack of fairness is not an effective defense against natural currency oligopolies on the make.

Not that the oligopolies are particularly customer friendly or the least bit cooperative in public. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan intends neither to inhibit nor to facilitate the dollarization of an economy that seeks it. Hence if Argentina were to go from about 60% average dollarization of its bank balances now to 100% formal dollarization in 2000, it will do so by its own resources and initiatives. It would sacrifice an estimated \$750 million dollars in annual interest earnings to start with: Its peso banknotes would have to be taken out of circulation and exchanged for greenbacks purchased by Argentina's central bank with the proceeds from the sale of U.S. Treasury bills or of other interest-bearing securities. When Kosovo recently was declared a DM (future euro) zone, the Deutsche Bundesbank, too, held that to be none of its operational or policy concern. Hence countries who desire to use a strong international currency as their own can do so only through a costly unilateral act unless they are allowed to become partners in a multilateral monetary union.

Unilateral Monetary Union and the Emergence of a Superior Alternative

Unilateral monetary union is the distinctly second-best choice that is left for countries who can not do any better than embrace an established dominant currency as their own without formal coordination with its issuer. Such a union is much safer than enduring the stresses of bimonetarism under widespread partial dollarization. When banks have large amounts of both foreign and domestic currency assets and liabilities on their books, the quality of their dollar claims on domestic obligors tends to be undermined worst of all by contractive exchange crises. So economic vulnerability to any crisis of confidence in a country is less with formal, complete dollarization than with informal, half-baked dollarization that is never robustly hedged. But formal dollarization itself is worse than being allowed to accede to a multilateral union in the region. Such a cooperative solution is not on offer in the Western Hemisphere, but was adopted in Europe at the start of this year. Instead of importing a defense against a small country's monetary identity problems that seems more like surrender, it invites countries to hold out for something better by co-producing and co-managing their own pool of megamoney.

One way of explaining the difference between unilateral and multilateral monetary union is to think of what happens when a minor national airline company gets such a bad reputation that almost all air travelers, foreign and domestic, prefer to fly on other carriers. Eventually that bankrupt airline and all its local airbussing and landing rights are sold to a foreign carrier for a penny or cent, and good riddance.

But what if the small national airline had in fact been well run but now was unable to overcome the enormous network and code sharing externalities that it could not enjoy as long as it remained on its own? It would then seek a timely business combination, such as a friendly merger, that did not imply being closed down and declared dead for foreign vultures. Even if the

small airline were to lose its national identity through an exchange of shares in the surviving carrier, there would then be full maintenance of value and, indeed, the creation of new value, for both the acquired and acquirer, through an economically efficient merger. By contrast, if the acquirer refused a timely merger, declined to give anything of value, and rather waited until the small national carrier had gone belly-up, then one has a picture of the industrial-relations equivalent of what happens under unilateral monetary union.

Many applaud complete dollarization, the least adaptable and least giving form of monetary union, as more stable and efficient than carrying on with heavily protected, poorly maintained, and ultimately doomed mini-carriers of monetary services particularly in South and Central America and in the Caribbean. Others would say that taking a dangerous toy away from a small country is all to the good without acknowledging that its customer base should be worth something. By definition, Pyrrhic victories do not last, but neither do those that are completely unrestrained. On the European continent, commanders often could lay siege and starve out a free city rather than come to terms with its citizens if theirs was the only army and cavalry in the field. A few far-sighted field marshals chose the latter course, sparing the city, nonetheless, and they tend to be remembered as builders of history.

Multilateral union is much kinder to small countries than joining a monetary union unilaterally, as per unassisted formal dollarization. It does not expropriate their national monetary asset through annihilation and foreign replacement. Rather it transforms this asset from a national to a multinational form and makes it whole in the process. For even if a country had lost part of the domestic component of its monetary base, and hence part of its national seignorage, through currency substitution to the dominant international currency in the region, its seignorage share would be based on estimates of *all* of the common currency circulating within it after monetary union. The DM notes which account for 10 to 20 percent of Poland's currency supply together with U.S. dollars and zloty, now still yield a flow of seignorage benefits to Germany -- via interest saved on the debt which the German government otherwise would have issued. However, this foreign fraction will become part of Poland's own euros and seignorage share once Poland has joined the European Monetary Union as well may happen in the course of the next decade. In addition, the head of Poland's national bank (NBP) then will have a seat on the European Central Bank (ECB) Council, like every other member, thus acceding through a merger of equals. Financial and banking systems, once cleaned up and properly provisioned and mutually supervised, will start to mesh throughout a wider European monetary region, so that even country risk will drop sharply. Poland, incidentally, has had a per capita GDP that was about the same in 1997 as that of Mexico at the prevailing average exchange rates. Hence monetary union need not be a rich-country exclusive.

The Reckoning

Countries clearly are in a bind if they can not profitably keep their own small currency and can not gain accession to a multilateral union either. But those with the dominant currency

may want to beware of taking and keeping all: A unilateral monetary union is not anchored in international treaties or binding undertakings but predicated on the convenience of the adopting country. Once the 33 OAS member countries of the Western Hemisphere roughly to the south of the United States have been completely U.S. dollarized long enough to be used to world-standard stable prices, there may be nothing, not even the market, to stop them from eventually seeking to leave the unsettled state of unilateral monetary union with the United States. For seignorage recapture, they may try to form a multilateral sub-union of their own by creating popular demand for changing legal tender, tax, and unit-of-account rules. They may thus be able to induce U.S. dollars held by the public to be swapped for a freshly minted common currency by a future Latin American and Caribbean System of Central Banks. Alternatively, they may join an existing multilateral monetary union that gives better terms than the United States.

Once having been led on the path of monetary rectitude, why pay royalties to the U.S. dollar forever for a lesson well learned? It is unrealistic to think that the likes of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile will accept and then stay with U.S. dollarization for much of the coming century no matter how “American” it will be. Even Mexico, which is showing ever less determination to keep down the dollar portion of its money supply, could eventually come to resent dollarization which would tax it more than 1 billion dollars per year³ off the bat, and then more each year as its economy and monetary base keep growing, compared with enjoying the flow of seignorage from all the currency used inside the country.

Once a superior alternative has been worked out among the Latin American and Caribbean countries among themselves or with an established multilateral union, they will undollarize jointly. They will stop paying rent for the use of foreign currency and turn it in for income-yielding investments and also for U.S. goods and services down the road. Uncooperative unilateral union in which the external currency-customer be damned thus may have an eventual comeuppance: If the dollar should ever come to reign from Seattle to Santiago or from Alaska to Antarctica as famous alliterators have recommended, that reign will be shorter than the half-life of James Monroe. The model of shared control and ownership of the type pioneered in Europe is more sustainable as it contributes to the wealth of a plurality of nations and does not just make the monetary wealth flow *e pluribus ad unum*. It is time for the United States to take a careful look at Europe’s multilateral model of monetary union and to develop a variant that would remain beneficial for the Western hemisphere as a whole in the long run. Until then, there is no bridge that leads from European to American monetary union, or from EMU to AMU.

1. Meyer (1999).

2. Budget of the United States Government *Fiscal Year 2000*, p. 143: The spending proposed for international development and humanitarian assistance is \$7.6 billion.

3. Mexico’s monetary base, consisting almost entirely of peso currency, has been equal to about 3.5 percent of Mexico’s GDP in recent years (Banco de Mexico, 1999, p. 237). Adding U.S. dollar bills in Mexico would raise this percentage to around 5. At an interest rate of 5.5 percent

otherwise earned on U.S. government securities, the annual cost of complete dollarization would be equal to 0.275 percent of Mexico's GDP. With that GDP estimated at \$460 billion for 2000, the annual loss of seignorage would start at 1-1/4 billion. This figure could be expected to rise every year at the same rate as GDP so that the discounted present value of all the seignorage lost under just three decades of dollarization could easily be over 20 times as large.

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