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# How do China's foreign policies influence the current international politics of Latin America?

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## Abstract

Since China's Reform and Opening-up policies in the late 1970s, its economic growth has significantly enhanced its global influence, making it a primary trading partner for many Latin American nations. Transitioning from offering loans to direct investments, China has established a strong presence in South America, particularly in public goods and extractive sectors. This expansion has increased China's political sway in the region, provoking Western responses and concerns about shifting influence. This paper examines China's strategic objectives in Latin America, exploring whether it is altering the region's role vis-à-vis the U.S. and the factors influencing varying responses from Latin American countries. Through a comparative analysis of Brazil and Mexico, the study argues that China's foreign policy has facilitated Latin America's move away from Cold War dynamics, promoting regional integration and multipolarity, while domestic factors and external environments determine the extent of China's influence.

**Keywords:** Latin America, China's diplomacy, Regionalism

## 1 | Introduction

Since the Reform and Opening-up policies of China in the late 1970s, China's economic growth has significantly enhanced its global economic and political impact. China has emerged as the primary trading partner and a significant export market for numerous Latin American nations. In recent years, China has transitioned its economic approach from primarily offering loans to engaging in direct investments in Latin America, thereby expanding the potential bilateral collaboration. Although China has not currently been a significant contributor to foreign direct investment (FDI) globally, it has successfully created a robust investment foothold in South



America, namely in the sectors of offering public goods and extracting activities (CEPAL,2022). China's expanding economic connections with Latin America have bolstered its political sway in the area.

The growing influence of China has provoked responses in Western countries, with certain media outlets even proposing that Latin America is shifting from being considered "America's backyard" to being seen as "China's backyard" (Noesselt, 2021) from the perspective of the conventional Cold War mentality. In this context, both the European Union and the United States are concerned about containing China's rising power and raising its own foreign policies, aiming to engage in a new phase of power competition. This pertains to an additional facet of the political climate within and outside of Latin America that has been influenced by alterations in China's policies.

In order to analyze the influence of China on the political landscape of Latin America, it is essential to comprehend the role that Latin America plays within China's overarching strategic plan. The first layer of the question is: What are the strategic objectives that motivate Chinese economic engagement in a region that holds significant importance for the U.S.? Is China altering Latin America's current role in international politics vis-à-vis the U.S.? How is it undergoing transformation? Furthermore, what factors contribute to the varying responses of Latin American nations towards China's foreign policy, resulting in differing levels of impact on them?

This paper aims to examine China's foreign policies towards Latin America by analyzing its impacts on this region concerning political orientation, economic development, and cultural integration. It will specifically compare the cases of Brazil and Mexico, taking into account the influence of regional integration organizations and the United States. The argument of this paper is twofold: a) China's foreign policy has contributed to Latin America's departure from the Cold War era and has promoted the integration of the region as well as the trend towards multipolarity in the global arena; b) the varying domestic factors and external environments of Latin American countries determine the extent of China's influence on them. Furthermore, it will be argued that China does not seek to challenge the existing geopolitical order as a "revisionist" power, nor does it intend to become a new form of "dependency" for Latin America.

## **2| Primary concerns and fundamental interests**

The primary focuses of China is on economic development rather than geopolitical power engagement. Specifically, China is primarily interested in promoting trade between China and Latin America, ensuring energy security, and accessing natural resources and commodity imports. Chinese state-owned firms play a major role in the energy development industry, focusing specifically on lithium mining in the Latin American Lithium Triangle, which includes Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. By late 2022, China had more than fifty ongoing projects spread over fifteen

Latin American countries (Roy, 2023). Furthermore, it is crucial to establish formal relationships through bilateral agreements and the creation of regional institutions in order to enhance connections with Latin America. This will involve integrating Latin America into China's overarching global strategic plan, actively seeking opportunities for collaboration with Latin American nations, and establishing a platform for the successful execution of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Additionally, it should be addressing great concerns on the Taiwan issue by basing bilateral cooperation with the region on the principle of adhering to the "One-China Policy" (Xi, 2016).

By analysing these three main concerns, it is not difficult to find that America's factor could not be neglected when discussing China's influences on Latin America. As America has been the "dependency" for Latin America for many years, any actions in this region would intricate competitions and potential conflicts. However, this essay would focus more on China's intention to change Latin America's politics.

### **3| Soft balancing: Promoting integration in Latin America**

The formation of the China-CELAC Forums consolidated China's connections with Latin America through formalizing their partnership by means of bilateral agreements and the construction of regional institutions. The historical interdependence between Latin American countries and the United States has resulted in structural contradictions, rendering Latin America an area with limited regional integration (Almeida, 2018). The China-CELAC Forums have been actively engaging in regional dialogue in recent years, amidst challenges such as economic downturn, political complexities, strained relationships, the dissolution of Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), slow progress in the construction of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), obstacles in the reform of Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR), and setbacks in overall integration and cooperation in Latin America.

Established in 2014, this forum goes beyond being a triennial series of high-level meetings of foreign ministers. On the other hand, it is a platform that spans across several sectors and enables ongoing and unplanned contacts with government departments and various non-governmental institutions such as industry forums, sectoral associations, think tanks, and the international community (China-CELAC Forum 2016; Alden&Alves, 2016). The Forum's agenda primarily focuses on economic objectives and encompasses other areas of collaboration such as education and culture, health, interpersonal connections, science and technology, and the advancement and protection of human rights. It also addresses issues related to drug use, corruption, and cybercrime (Jakobowski, 2018). Tackling these concerns in a synergistic manner contributes to the promotion of inter-regionalism and international collaboration.

South American countries have achieved greater consensus in addressing global issues with the

guidance of China. South American nations harbor discontent with the Western dominance over global discussions, and China has taken the lead in presenting suggestions at the forum, granting Latin American countries the chance to explore alternative options, different from both the United States and Europe (U.S. Congress, 2023). In fact, Latin American countries have shown a favorable response to China's initiatives at the China-Latin America Forum (Bernal-Meza, 2020b). This encompasses not only high politics issues such as implementing United Nation (UN) Security Council's Resolution 1373, but also low politics and economic issues such as energy and resources, agriculture and food, science, and technology (China-CELAC, 2021). It also concludes sensitive topics such as political interventions, human rights and national sovereignty (Becard et al. 2020; Strüver, 2014). Discussing these topics enhances the development of the symbolic concept of autonomy that Latin American countries previously had in integration processes, leading to a more pragmatic and independent strategy.

This forum brings regional integration a promising future because it seized the most important topics and problems in this region: the lack of a regional industrial chain and the inadequate level of infrastructure connectivity. And the latter is a significant limitation on the former. During the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-Latin America Forum in 2018, China's "Belt and Road Initiative" policy has been targeted on large-scale infrastructure construction. Promoting this initiative is a good way to promote the connectivity and integration of the region and a "new platform for mutually beneficial cooperation" (Liang, 2019). The pursuit of regional infrastructure integration has long been a priority of Latin American countries and the annual funding gap for infrastructure in Latin America and the Caribbean is \$120 billion. The Central American region has many islands and a good geographical location but lacks infrastructure connectivity. Ignoring ideological factors, from the entire region, Cuba could build a bridge to connect with Florida in the United States, and Haiti could be connected to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Across the entire Americas, a road or railway could be built from the southernmost Chile to the northernmost Alaska. Large infrastructure projects could make intra-regional trade and access to the global market possible. China Railway has already made strategic layouts in more than 30 countries and regions, including North America, Central America, and South America, and has basically completed coverage across the entire Americas. This promising vision has possibly enhanced the status of Latin America in the global trade structure.

Except the practical interests brought to Latin America, for China, this platform neglected the previously underdeveloped relationship between China and Latin America since the 2000s (Nolte, 2021). During the discussion in this platform, more China's global values were delivered. Although it did not encourage Latin American countries to align with its values directly, it could facilitate positive engagement between Chinese understanding of issues such as human rights, against the intervention and Taiwan issue.

## 4|Soft balancing: Promoting integration in Latin America

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#### **4|The Heterogeneity of Latin American Countries**

The heterogeneity of Latin American countries determines China's limitations in certain cooperation. Latin American countries' different domestic situations and external environment conditions determine the depth of cooperation with China. The higher the degree of match, the deeper the degree of cooperation. Oviedo (2020) categorizes countries based on their economic relations with China. Brazil and Chile are considered "winners," Uruguay has a "trade equilibrium", while Argentina is classified as a "loser economy." Regarding matters of security and humanitarian concerns, South American nations are generally far more inclined to support China's positions on these matters compared to their counterparts in China. On the security and humanitarian issues, South American nations are generally far more inclined to support China's positions on these matters compared to their counterparts in Central America (Strüver, 2014). To analyse deeply about the heterogeneity, I employed process tracing in one central American country Mexico, and one South American country Brazil to present a comprehensive analysis of China's foreign policies in different countries in Latin America.

Firstly, different countries have different endowments for cooperation with China, and the breadth of China's foreign policy influence varies. Depending on China's resource needs, China's trade is more complementary with Brazil and more competitive with Mexico. Brazil boasts the most substantial trade surplus with China among its regional counterparts, while Mexico consistently experiences a trade deficit with China. Both Mexico and China engage in the exportation of produced goods to the United States. Additionally, Mexico relies on the importation of electronics, vehicle parts, and accessories from China. About 77% of the region's overall trade imbalance with China was made up of Mexico's \$107 million trade deficit with China in 2022. Mexico benefits from its low labor costs and its proximity to the United States, which provides a geographic advantage. Additionally, Mexico has implemented an "export processing zones" system, which is similar to "duty-free zone" in China. China and Mexico share strong similarities, and both implement export-oriented investment policies, which can easily create competitive anxiety within Mexico. In contrast, Brazil's exports to China reached 89,719 million dollars in 2022 (UNCTAD, 2024). China is its largest trading partner and has attracted significant Chinese investment in its power sector, financial services, telecommunications, and manufacturing (Raza & Geohs, 2022). The similarities between China and Latin America in terms of economic resources, product export structure, and target market influence the depth of the cooperation.

Secondly, the extent of China's impact on foreign policy is contingent upon divergent conceptualizations of cooperation and the formation of the global geopolitical environment. China and Brazil have cooperated extensively over the past decade, forging alliances in many global trade negotiations, and cooperating in international mechanisms in a variety of areas. In terms of concepts of cooperation, China and Brazil, as emerging economies, share similar perceptions of the world's political landscape, and are passionate about building a new world landscape that promotes multilateralism and mitigating polarisation. Both China and Brazil value national independence and sovereignty. For Brazil under the Lula administration, China is an ally in the fight against U.S. hegemony. Seizing the opportunity to cooperate with China is conducive to expanding its influence. Such shared visions and values determine a smoother and more frequent co-operation between China and Brazil.

Unlike Brazil, chasing multilateralism is not the main vision of Mexico and it has a lower level of anticipation to form alliances with China, challenging the United States' leadership in the world structure. Brazil, on the other hand, has established robust partnerships with China in areas such as international trade, finance, and climate change governance, making it one of China's significant allies on the international stage.



**Table 1 Brief Comparison of the cooperation potential between Brazil and Mexico**

	Understanding of World Order	International Governance	Cooperative Mechanism
Brazil	Emphasize the shaping power of emerging economies	WTO Doha Round; IMF governance reform	BRICS (New Development Bank); G20 Summit
Mexico	More negative about shaping the world structure	N/A	N/A

(Resource: Composed by the author)

Thirdly, the varying international market conditions also contribute to the disparity in the effects of China's foreign policies on the target country. Mexico's proximity to the United States gives it privileged duty-free access to the North American market. As of February 2024, Mexico will replace China as the largest trading partner of the United States. For the U.S., total imports from Mexico are at a record high, reaching 15.7 percent in May, an increase of 8.67 percent year-on-year (ITU, 2023). Mexico has effectively secured free trade agreements with many other countries such as Japan, the European Union, and numerous other countries. Moreover, it occupies a major place in the Pacific alliance and actively engages in the TPP11. By contrast, Brazil is presently experiencing economic recession domestically. To its Mercosur partners, the limited market size has resulted in unsatisfactory trade relations with Brazil. In terms of foreign policies, continuously large amounts of tariffs and other protective policies cause a limited chance to cooperate to other partners. This caused Brazil paid more attention to China's trade cooperation. Mutual interests cause China to attach more importance to Brazil in terms of both economic and diplomatic relations.

Overall, the heterogeneity of China's policy towards Latin America stems mainly from the match between China and that country in terms of core interests. Co-operation, however, is not plunder; it is not a matter of what resources the target co-operating country has, but what resources it does not have, and trade with complementary resources is the ideal situation. Not all Latin American countries have a complementary situation with China or a strong willingness to co-operate, so it is impossible for China to reach the level of influence it had during the imperialist period

## 5 | Revisionist power or a new form of dependency?

Due to variations in policy effects resulting from different domestic factors in each country,



China's in-depth cooperation is limited to only a few countries. Additionally, historical structural contradictions are difficult to change. China lacks the capacity to become a regional "revisionist power" and cannot achieve parity with the United States. At the same time, strategically, China does not possess the intention to become a "revisionist" power and adopts a more cautious foreign policy approach. It avoids direct confrontation with the United States to prevent a zero-sum game. Consequently, it can be inferred that China will continue to prioritize economic diplomacy in this region.

Revolutionary revisionism is not the keynote of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The change from isolation and confrontation to engage this region bring China new conception of this region. China has mentioned openly on different occasions that China has no intention of confronting America's "backyard" and its diplomats have consistently affirmed that China "does not target any third party and is not aligned". Although economic influence had a positive effect on expanding its influence in this region, even have been described as a new "lever" to confront the United States (Liang, 2019), China has not demonstrated a clear "flagship" role in politics, nor has it established orientated values towards Latin American countries on international issues. While confronting the sensitivity of the U.S., Beijing chose to chase its interests in the region in a non-confrontational nature. In this "positive-sum" world, China's diplomatic guidance framework South-South cooperation, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have not changed. As China itself suggests, in Latin America, its growing participation and economic diplomacy are yielding "win-win" results (Bernal-Meza, 2020a), and the uncertainties of geopolitical politics for economic development and the results of a zero-sum game are not the desired direction of China's foreign policy. Therefore, it is important to avoid overemphasizing both the concerns and the expectations about the rising influence of China in the region.

For the time being, China does not have the objective conditions to become a "New Dependency". In 2018, the United States has publicly stated that "Latin America does not need new imperial powers" (Yang & Lee, 2020). According to certain experts, China's efforts to engage in economic cooperation and invest in the region are causing a "third stage of Latin American dependency" (Bernal-Meza, 2020a). It is worth noting that Latin America's resurgence of commodity dependence and the increasing displacement of its manufacturing sector by competition from Chinese imports has fueled anxiety and resistance among Latin Americans, and whether China will objectively create a "new dependency" in the economic sphere of Latin American countries needs to be further examined. In fact, although China's involvement and influence in Latin America is expanding, it is still a considerable distance away from attaining the level of economic dominance in the region that the U.S. once held. China's foreign policy focuses on developing economic diplomacy in only six countries of key strategic value to China and does not seek to target all thirty-four countries in the region. This limited policy scope makes it difficult for Latin America as a whole to become dependent. Although China has not pursued bilateral relations with a focus on "neo-colonialism/imperialism", Latin America countries still

need to stay cautious about its movement but not overestimate its impacts.

## 6 | Conclusion and Discussion

The foreign policy of China towards Latin America is undoubtedly centred on economic policy. China has attempted to use its economic leverage to promote the discussion of international issues in Latin America on a platform that is not controlled by the Americans, to advance Latin American integration and trade. However, China's inability to achieve deep policy development and policy influence is due to the heterogeneity of Latin American countries. The effectiveness of policies primarily hinges on target cooperative country's domestic circumstances and external relationships, rather than being directly connected with the extent and tactics of China's incentives. In order to maximise the interests, Latin American governments could make adjustments to their own national conditions to follow China's foreign policy of active cooperation and avoid being trapped in the geopolitical struggle.

The "Taiwan issue" is not a mask to stigmatize and cover up China's friendly civil diplomacy, and it is undeniable that China's only diplomatic bottom line in this region is the "Taiwan issue", which is the premise and foundation of cooperation with China, and an important issue in geopolitical competition with the United States. During that time, these donations of COVID-19 vaccine to this region were described by Western media as diplomacy to set back Taiwan's influence. However, in that period, these donations of public goods help to contain the virus and bring their life back to normal. For Latin America, it is more practical to see this as a friendly gesture to promote civil diplomacy, not to be deliberately interpreted to isolate Taiwan, and to get help from it rather than to make political speculations.

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