



History: The Long Trajectory of a Relationship yet to Be Fulfilled

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INTRODUCTION

The first two decades of the twenty-first century led to a growing awareness, mixed with rising concern, about the emerging presence of China in the now-called Global South, particularly in the region traditionally seen as secured to US hemispheric hegemony: Latin America. China has indeed changed its foreign policy dramatically over the last 50 years—from restrained engagement in global affairs to increasing assertiveness in bilateral negotiations, regional block formation, and the very reframing of the international postwar order—demanding new, retrospective and prospective, reflection. But, even though the impact of these events has

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become the topic of growing scholarly interests, more often than not, analyses have been defined by anxiety about diminishing US influence in the region rather than evidence-based understandings about the actual dynamics of China-Latin American relations.

Setting the stage for this volume, which innovates in its focus and interdisciplinary approach, the present chapter critically reviews the historical trajectory of interactions between China and Latin America. State-to-state relations structure the analysis, but other dimensions are included whenever possible. Given its synthetic nature, though, we selected what we believe are some of the central actors and events that helped define relations over time. Though no exhaustive account could be provided within the constraints of the present piece, we are confident that it provided the background and the main contours capable of illuminating the thematic and country-based analyses offered in the ensuing chapters in this much-needed volume.

TRACING THE ROOTS OF A WINDING BUT EMERGING RELATION

The first point to understand about Chinese-Latin American relations is that they are not as new as they may seem. Chinese-New World trade relations helped define the course of the global economy since European incursions in the continent that came to be known as Latin America started taking place five centuries ago. Initially guided by the search for Asia, these expeditions incorporated new territories into European empires and Trans-Pacific trading routes, especially the one connecting Acapulco to China via the Manila Galleon (or *Nao de China*), played a significant role in making the colonial project economically viable (Hearn and Leon-Marinquez 2011). What is more, colonial trade based on New World exploitative activities, above all mining, helped create the underpinnings of what was to become globally connected trade networks, mainly by providing silver as the first global currency (Spate 1979: 161; O'Brien 2005).

In the nineteenth century, the Western hemisphere's overt and formal Chinese presence diminished for internal reasons on both sides of the Pacific. On the one hand, Latin American new republics (except for the Brazilian empire) were ensnared in domestic concerns about setting up viable political and economic institutions and cultural and diplomatic procedures, mainly by attempting to mimic the emerging European

nation-state system. On its part, China was focused on consolidating its territorial expansion into border areas in East and Central Asia (Bello 2016). This path of inwardness became even more accentuated in the second half of the century and early part of the twentieth century when China became mired in internal conflicts created on the throes of Western powers' neo-colonial incursions (Wahed 2016).

But, whereas government-level interactions decreased, this was a time when more intense migratory experiences between China and different parts of Latin America occurred. Well-established migratory networks were consolidated, especially with Peru, Cuba, Mexico, and Brazil, eventually leading to the formalization of new diplomatic relations with several countries in the region at the turn of the century. In 1810, the Portuguese authorities contracted several hundred Chinese workers to remedy the labor shortage and plant tea in Rio de Janeiro. In the Spanish-speaking new countries, and the remaining Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, especially Cuba, toward the end of the nineteenth century, more than 300,000 Chinese "coolies" made their way under different labor contracts (Chou 2002; Moura 2012; Bueno 2021).

Domestic strife defined much of the first half of the twentieth century in China. It would take the expulsion of Japanese troops in WWII and the victory of the Communist forces in 1949 for major domestic conflicts to be somehow resolved (Clubb 1964). In different phases and through multiple approaches, the new People's Republic of China (PRC) tried to move beyond the unusual lack of Chinese relevance in the world that had marked the previous 100 years by reversing lackluster diplomatic relations. And though this goal was initially hamstrung by Cold War policies, particularly from the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, China managed to push its way into global spheres of power (Gunter 2020).

At first, conservative ruling elites in Latin America were hesitant to have formal relations with Communist China. The Taiwan issue served as a proxy for diplomatic recognition across the region, along with trends unfolding in international organizations and largely under guidance from Cold War policies from the region's historical hegemon. Only Cuba, after its revolution in 1959, would establish formal relations before the 1970s, even though this was not a crucial move to legitimate the PRC in Latin America since the new Cuba regime remained aligned with the USSR after that country and China drifted apart over Cold War's strategies in the early 1960s. Thus, despite growing economic ties and reciprocal

interest, cross-Pacific relations were weighted more heavily toward politics for much of the Cold War. The Chinese tried to win the friendship of a broad cross-section of Latin Americans with an approach based on an appeal to actual and alleged similarities in history, goals, and interests, primarily defined by the overarching and loosely defined goal of overcoming the condition of underdevelopment at home and imperialism abroad (Ratliff 1972).

It was only in the 1970s, after Nixon's strategic overture to China, that formal diplomatic relations would slowly start taking place on the part of Latin American nations. Yet, though moving toward pragmatic engagement with the United States, during much of that decade, China continued to support causes of the developing world and to hold good relations with leftist regimes in Latin America, such as Salvador Allende's Chile and Luis Echeverría's Mexico, particularly in regards to their defense of what later be known as the promotion of a New International Economic Order (Shixue 2008: 29; Thornton 2011). Conversely, several Latin American governments moved to support China's re-entry into the United Nations in 1971. The Chinese Cultural Revolution derailed some of the emerging ties between China and Latin America, but political and economic exchanges were resurrected by the mid-1970s when Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru formally recognized the PRC and normalized diplomatic relations with Beijing (Shixue 2001).

Using its new status as an emerging power, throughout the decade, China continued to voice political support for Latin American issues of sovereignty, economic justice, and the right to self-determination (Wise and Ching 2017). And, even though Beijing sought to navigate its growing presence in the Western hemisphere in a way not to confront US historical hegemony directly, the PRC's ideologically driven foreign policy provided limited but important support to Maoist guerrilla forces in the region, especially in Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. In this sense, much of Cold War China's influence in Latin America was more ideological and, often through non-official, left-wing opposition groups than with ruling governments in Latin America. The new China indeed represented both a model for revolutionary changes in the periphery and an alternative of development beyond the constraints of the bipolar world for Latin American revolutionaries or more tamed progressive forces. Consequently, in addition to propaganda materials received in large numbers in local leftist organizations, such as unions and small but assertive break-away revolutionary parties, these efforts involved the

visits of thousands of Latin Americans to China, as well as multiple venues for cultural initiatives promoting good-will relations between non-official reciprocal organizations (e.g., different chapters of the Chinese-Latin American Friendship Association).¹

To be sure, by then the PRC could not compete with the Soviet Union's ability to provide assistance to Latin American Communist parties and Castro's Cuba. As a result, Beijing was relegated to splitting Communist parties in an effort to weaken the international position of the Soviet Union (Mora 1997). Chinese involvement in Latin America after the Communist Revolution was thus gradual, and official state policy instructed that China should not impose excessive requirements on the relationship and the role of people-to-people relations to circumvent Cold War constraints in between 1949 and early 1970s (Bingwen et al. 2011). These were uniquely important courses of action at a time when formal diplomatic relations were significantly curtailed by US pressure and submissive right-wing dictatorships, particularly in the Southern Cone.

Things started changing after 1976 when the promotion of revolutionary ideas was incrementally curbed by the dramatic shift in domestic and foreign policy directives coming out of the PRC leadership after Chairman Mao's death. Foundational for the changes that ensued in the following years was the Third Plenary Session of the Communist Party of China's Eleventh National Congress in 1978. Under Deng Xiaoping, major new policies were implemented, which sought to promote a new approach to pursuing the goal of enhancing China's role in the world. Thus, gradually, the PRC started moving away from an overt path of solidarity with the Third World, as prescribed by Mao's Three Worlds Theory, toward focused economic reforms structured along with a growing economic integration of the country in the global capitalist economy.²

¹ A classic piece on this Johnson, C., 1970. *Communist China and Latin America, 1959-1967*, New York: Columbia University Press. A more recent and insightful analysis, based on personal accounts and cultural history elements, is offered by Rothwell, M., 2013. *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolutions in Latin America*, New York: Routledge. See also: Ferry, M.M., 2000. China as Utopia: Visions of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Latin America, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 12, no.2. pp. 236–269.

² Details can be found in Shixue, J., 2008. The Chinese Foreign Policy Perspective, pp. 30–33.

As will be detailed in the next section, in the following four decades, Chinese-Latin American relations experienced their most transformative and consequential years. Policies toward Latin America became increasingly more relevant in China's global overtures. The region became a fruitful ground for Chinese ever more pragmatic courses of action, which emphasized economic issues and attempted to expand political or diplomatic ties with multiple regions of the world. To be sure, especially in the last years of the twentieth century, China grew ever more economically intertwined with, or even dependent on, the United States market and sources of capital and technology, making itself more vulnerable to political and economic pressures from Washington—a course of integration in the global economy that will have impacts in Chinese diplomatic efforts to this day. In effect, in order to reduce these very same vulnerabilities, in July 1991, China embarked on a well-publicized export diversification drive that resulted in a remarkable expansion of Sino-Latin American interactions. Ten Latin American presidents from eight countries and eight prime ministers and vice premiers from six nations visited China. Additionally, foreign ministers from fifteen nations and thirty legislative delegations from fourteen countries visited Beijing. Chinese diplomacy reasserted its interest and focus on LA, consolidating diplomatic and trade relations with several countries, a path that deepened rapidly during that transformative decade, including through Latin American regional organizations such as Mercosur (Mora 1997: 48; Bingwen et al. 2011).

The new direction from the leadership that came to power upon Chairman Mao's death did, in the long run, help redefine the shape of the global economy and its geopolitical dynamics. Yet, until recently, this new direction was based on the notion that a country's relationship with the United States lies at the core of its external relations, and anything considered detrimental to the stability of relations between China and the United States would often be sacrificed (Yu 2015). In fact, for much of the last 20 years, important American and Chinese analyses of China's intensification of relations in Latin America tended to see those developments mainly in relation to the United States presence and interests in the region rather than as an opportunity for pursuing engagement along more constructive lines with the governments and peoples of this region (Aranson et al. 2014; Hongbo 2011).

It is not entirely clear whether these prospective assessments shall materialize, as much of it will depend on dynamics still unfolding in a rapidly changing global, regional, and even domestic landscapes. What is certain

is that China's accelerated engagements with the global economic and multilateral system in the last 30 years have reshaped the course of what was at first widely perceived as a unipolar global order. The path of these developments and their impacts in Latin America detailed in the next section.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR, A NEW CENTURY, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A NEW HISTORICAL CHAPTER

The growing Chinese relevance for Latin America was defined by factors taking place on both sides of the Pacific. Upon the demise of the Cold War and Deng Xiaoping's southern tour (1992) in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis, the Chinese leadership increased China's engagements across the globe. Culminating with the "Go Out" Policy in 1999 and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China's role in the world underwent significant changes. Profound transformations were also occurring in several parts of Latin American at this very time, especially in countries transitioning from dictatorial regimes (such as Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, and others), as well as more autarkic economic systems in places like Mexico, as well as, again, Brazil, and Peru. Together, all these regional nations were embarking throughout the 1990s on the turbulent and painful neoliberal course of opening up their economies to global market forces under the promise (largely unfulfilled, at least for Latin America) that a more interdependent, globalizing world economy would benefit all willing to integrate themselves in global commodity chains and financial flows.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the two most striking features of Latin America's international relations were the new regionalism promoted by the center-left governments of the so-called pink wave and China's growing presence and importance for the region. Both were facilitated by the retreat of the engagement of the United States, mainly occupied with the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the context of the long "Global War on Terror." China's growth created alternatives to the US-led neoliberal experiences with globalization prevailing in the 1990s and early 2000s (Roett and Paz 2008: 16).

In economic terms, China used its foreign reserves, investment capacity, and domestic market opening to sustain high growth rates. The country's foreign reserves have increased since 2001 to over USD three trillion. Chinese banks hold more than USD15 trillion in deposits. As

a result, PRC's originated foreign direct investment (OFDI) increased from USD 35 billion in 2003 to 92 billion in 2007. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in constant dollars (1990) increased from 2.2 trillion in 2000 to 6.1 trillion in 2010, when China became the world's second-largest economy (The World Bank 2021). China's economic growth has fueled a strong demand for commodities, and trade with LAC, for instance, increased 22-fold between 2000 and 2012, from USD 12 billion to over USD 270 billion. And though Latin America was not at the center of its priorities in 2001, by the end of Hu Jintao's time as CPC and PRC leader, China's growing influence in the region had largely reshaped the national and international economic dynamics in the area. For once, China became an increasingly important creditor and investor for the region's various economic sectors.

While Chinese Outflows of Foreign Direct Investment (OFDI) to Latin America were limited until 2010, focusing on energy and mining sectors (Chen and Ludeña 2014), there were significant increases in its role as the region's financier and investor. Research by the Inter-American Dialogue and Boston University found that Chinese state-to-state finance has exceeded the combined sovereign lending from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) since 2005 (Ni 2019). The 2008–2009 financial crisis negatively impacted all countries in the region, but mainly Mexico and other countries with growth dynamics more dependent on the US economy. By the end of the decade, China had become the largest trade partner for Brazil, Peru, and Chile. Country-level chambers of commerce with China in different countries also became prominent.

Accompanying the increasingly intense economic relations, new bilateral and multilateral diplomatic arrangements were developed between China and Latin America in the first decade of the century. In 2008, at the onset of the global economic crisis, China released its first official policy on LAC, pledging to strengthen cooperation (PRC Government 2008). China also became a full member of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in 2008 (Shambaugh 2011). In 2009, along with Lula da Silva (Brazil), Dmitry Medvedev (Russia), and Manmohan Singh (India), Hu Jintao formally initiated what would become the BRICS Forum (South Africa joined in 2010) (Yanran 2016). Between 2001 and 2012, the PRC signed Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Chile (2009) and Costa Rica (2007). It also upgraded its bilateral relations with Brazil to “Global Strategic Partnership” (2012).

Along with economic and diplomatic initiatives, China has expanded, diversified, and intensified cultural links with Latin America. The official discourse and the social practices in China value what are called people-to-people exchanges, involving tourism, migration, and active cultural diplomacy. For example, the number of tourists traveling annually from Latin America to China went from 82,900 in 2000 to 300,000 in 2010, a 361% increase (China Statistical Yearbook 2019). Migration between China and Latin America is lower than other regional flows, mainly with Southeast Asia and North America. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, an estimated 5 million Chinese lived in the United States and Canada (;Budiman 2021; Chan 2019). In 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education established the Confucius Institutes Headquarters (Hanban) as an affiliated institution to promote language teaching, scholarly exchange, and interest in Chinese culture. In Latin America, 21 Confucius Institutes were created from 2006, when its first Institute opened in Mexico City, to 2012.

The second decade of the twenty-first century maintained an upward trajectory in China and Latin America relations, but with critical contextual changes. First, there has been an important political shift in Chinese and US leadership, with the assumption of Xi Jinping in China in 2012 and the growing anti-Chinese emphasis in US foreign policy in Obama's second term (2013–2016) and throughout the government of Donald Trump (2017–2020) in the United States. Such an antagonistic stance has continued so far in Biden's administration (2022). Another crucial contextual change was the reduction in global demand and the prices of the most exported commodities in Latin America, especially from 2014 onwards. Finally, the return of right and center-right governments in Latin America, some through elections and others through political coups, implied an increasingly acute crisis in regional integration initiatives. And whereas LAC's economic relations with China peaked in 2011–2012, it continued to flourish in a period of slower Chinese GDP growth (6.9% in 2017, against an average rate of 9.61% from 1989 to 2018).

In effect, as Wise and Ching (2017: 02) indicate, the “pass-through for LAC in terms of China's lower demand for commodities has been a slowing of growth to 1–2% on average since 2013.” By 2015, China's sovereign lending had increased to USD 29 billion, nearly twice the combined figure of all the Western multilateral development banks. It decreased to USD nine billion in 2017, still very relevant for the region.

Between 2010–2020, Chinese OFDI in Latin America was approximately US\$ 115 billion, mainly in the energy (more than 60%), mining (more than 20%), and transportation sectors (AEI 2021). About 90% of those investments were made by state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Rodrigues and Hendler 2018). In 2016, China responded for 9% of LAC's exports and 18% of its total imports. In 2018, China was the second trade partner for LAC as a whole (Dussel 2018).

China's growing presence in Latin America also provides at least the possibility that a new model of development with a much more vital role for structures of the central state and with a consistent concern about and implementation of measures to address structural economic exclusion could compete with traditional liberal capitalist lines of US-based development approaches. It is still early to know, but, indeed, it is no longer possible to make sense of Latin America without moving beyond US-Latin American relations to include manifold ties with China. Trying to make sense of these events, some scholars have claimed that growing Chinese interest in Latin America could lead to global engagement and better alternatives to the region (Hirst 2008). Nonetheless, others pointed out that China's increased Latin American engagements have primarily been based on commodity exports from the region, along historical lines that resembled traditional uneven, North–South exchanges (Lanxin 2008). What's more, the growing dependence of Latin American economies on commodity exports to the Chinese market in the last two decades may lead to excessive reliance on trade revenues for sustaining domestic growth (Harris and Arias 2016).

In short, China's presence has been crucial to the diversification of Latin American economic partners while also being a contributing factor for a re-primarization of regional economies as the booming Chinese market for Latin America exports has essentially been one for commodities. This is to say that having other trading options did not necessarily decrease historical Latin American dependence on external demand and prices for raw materials and produce from the former Iberian colonies in the New World (Cepik et al. 2021). In fact, as Latin American economies engaged more with China, different countries benefited differently, and commodity export, especially of raw materials, was the center of these transactions for some, but not all, of the regional economies (Gonzalez 2008).

To balance mutual costs and benefits, China's diplomatic engagements with the region became even more intense. Xi Jinping made his first

official visit as PRC President in 2013. By 2018, he had visited the region four times, reaching Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Panama. If one considers four regional powers (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia), the number of official Chinese presidential visits increased continuously in the last three decades (seven in 1990–1999, nine in 2000–2009, and twelve in 2010–2018) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.). Since 2013, bilateral relations were officially established (with Panama, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador) or upgraded (with Mexico, Argentina, and Costa Rica).

In 2018, out of 66 PRC's strategic partnerships in the world, 10 of them had been signed with Brazil (1993), Venezuela (2001), Mexico (2003), Argentina (2004), Peru (2008), Chile (2012), Costa Rica (2015), Ecuador (2015), Uruguay (2016), and Bolivia (2018). Although less frequent and intensive, Latin American heads of state have also visited the PRC more times since 2010. For example, the right-wing Chilean president Sebastián Piñera participated in the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in 2019.³ In addition, three Brazilian presidents visited China, signing more than 30 agreements.

Multilateral diplomacy also improved. China built partnerships with LAC countries in international forums such as G20, APEC, BRICS, and the United Nations. Following the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2011, a dialogue and cooperation China-CELAC Forum (CCF) was founded in 2015. Latin American countries were also invited to join the BRI, a flagship initiative of the Chinese government led by President Xi Jinping (OECD 2015). In June 2018, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela were members or prospective members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Myers 2018). After the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, high-profile official meetings between Chinese and Latin American authorities in 2020–2021 continue using online platforms. It is important to mention the 13th BRICS Summit, the China-CELAC Conference of Foreign Ministers on COVID-19, the II China-CELAC Ministerial Forum on Agriculture (China-CELAC Forum 2021), and Xi's speech to the CELAC 6th Summit in Mexico.

³ Details of the meeting can be found at: <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2019/0426/c22-1253.html>.

Since China and the Latin American countries are cautious about building political relations, its cooperation in the defense sector has been limited. Unparalleled to the traditional US military presence (active and indirect by support to regional armed forces), China's military/security diplomacy in the region is focused on a few countries. More than 93% of China's US\$ 872 million defense-related commerce with Latin America (2000–2020) was made with Venezuela and other ALBA members (SIPRI 2021). Between 2011 and 2018, there has been a minimal supply of Chinese military hardware to the region—which currently imports 6% of China's total outflows (Gurrola 2018). Low prices and better military technology can be China's significant advantages to attract substantial agreements beyond ALBA countries in the future (Nixon 2016). Relating to security matters, despite avoiding formal military alliances, China seems to have more interest in the Caribbean, donating military equipment to smaller countries. The Caribbean region concentrates some of the few remaining countries in the world that still recognize Taiwan. China has also mentioned in its white papers the importance of legal certainty through judicial and police cooperation with the region (Ellis 2020). The cost-effectiveness of Chinese technologies and its diversifying strategy can make Chinese companies more competitive—Huawei had a 21.3% increase in its revenues in the region in 2019—(Dua 2020) and lay the groundwork for future technological agreements with Latin American countries.

Beyond economy and official diplomatic relations, cultural, and educational, people-to-people exchanges with most countries in the region continued to develop. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to engage with dozens of different political parties in the region through its International Department (ID). The most critical Communist party-to-Communist party contacts since 2001 have been those with the Communist Party of Cuba (CPC). Still, CPC contacts with governing and opposing parties in the region are diverse and serve the purpose of defending China's core interests with flexibility and room for mutual learning about broader international issues (Hackenesch and Bader 2020). Compared to the previous decade (2001–2010), the number of tourists traveling annually from Latin America to China has increased from 300,000 in 2010 to 450,370 in 2018 (China Statistical Yearbook 2019). Likewise, the number of Confucius Institutes in LAC countries grew from 21 in 2012 to 41 in 2019 (He 2019), with more than 100,000 students, of which around 500 a year travel to China on scholarships.

And the number of LAC students in China grew from 2,200 in 2017 to approximately 6,000 in 2018 (Menino 2020).

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Latin America underwent catastrophic losses in lives and economic output, China's importance for the region increased even more. Through various actors and beyond state-to-state relations, China has donated medical equipment to numerous countries and has become the largest per capita supplier of COVID-19 vaccines in the region, strengthening its soft power in the health dimension as an extension of the "Health Silk Road" project (Vadell 2021). The China-CELAC Forum and the inclusion of the region in the BRI can be understood, according to Vadell (2021), as part of China's institutional minilateral and bilateral-multilateral relations, reinforcing Chinese presence in the region while being a major economic partner and infrastructure financier. For example, in the first China-CELAC Summit in 2015, Xi Jinping announced the goal of scaling up trade to USD 500 billion, the investment stock to USD 250 billion, and promoting currency agreements with the region by 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

This goal was part of the "1 + 3 + 6" pragmatic cooperation plan with the region: the 2015–2019 China-LAC Cooperation Plan was the first cornerstone; cooperation in trade, investment, and finance the three driving forces; and the cooperation in six sectors (energy, natural resources, infrastructural construction, agriculture, manufacturing industry, scientific and technological innovation, and computer technology) the priority (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). Yet, despite Xi's endeavor, expressed in his statement at the 6th CELAC Summit, to jointly build a "community of shared future" (Xinhua 2021) between China and CELAC—in line with China's foreign policy proposal and the principle of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind (人类命运共同体)—, there is still a need for a Latin American institutional arrangement compatible with this transformative goal. LAC's institutional fragility manifests in CELAC's internal disputes—such as Brazil stepping out in 2020—and a lack of strategic thinking about how to navigate a "new triangular reality" (US-CH-LAC), adding obstructions in China-LAC relations in the future (Dussel 2021).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) foundation in 1949, its relations with LAC developed in four periods (Cui 2016). Curbed links marked the first period (1949–1978) under the leadership of Mao Zedong. During the Cold War, ideological conflict plagued LAC. However, the changing alignments between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States resonated less loudly in the region. Even so, since the Sino-Soviet rupture process (1958–1966), the Three Worlds Theory (三个世界的理论) put great emphasis on the Third World. As a result, Asia, Africa, and Latin America (亚非拉) became the South-South component of China's diplomacy. Following the recognition of the PRC in the United Nations (UN) in November 1971, by the end of this first period, ten Latin American countries had established diplomatic relations with Beijing, including Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil (Colombia would follow in 1980). The second period (1978–2001) corresponds to the leadership of Deng and Jiang (second and third generations). It was a transitional period in world affairs, encompassing the second Cold War, the Tiananmen crisis, the end of the Soviet camp, and the first decade of the US's grand strategy intended to build a unipolar, globalized world order.

The third period (2002–2012), mainly under Hu Jintao leadership, was marked by influential transformations, culminating in a peaking insertion of China in Latin America, especially in trade, through strong demand for commodities and financial spheres, but also expressed in a substantial cultural and diplomatic growth. This insertion reshaped the economic dynamics of the region. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the fourth and current period (2012–2021) corresponds to a moment of consolidation of the Chinese presence in the region despite the more modest growth of China and LAC. China, by 2018, was the second trade partner for LAC as a whole, and its OFDI has escalated (though not linearly) and diversified. Even with growing anti-Chinese emphasis in US foreign policy since Obama's second term (2013–2016), China's multi and bilateral diplomatic engagements with the region became even more intense compared to the previous period.

In sum, it is clear that Latin America is now a region connected with two global powers, the US and China. Acknowledging these trends along with the concept of "New Triangular Relationships" seems critical for

Latin America today as the region and each of its countries, with no exception, has to understand, deal with and negotiate within this “new triangle” (Dussel et al. 2013). Even if not to the same degree as the US presence in Latin America, the past two decades have been characterized by a significant increase in institutional bilateral and multilateral initiatives from China, and its reiterated identity as a “Global South alternative” may reinforce its economic strength and growing projection—such as diplomatic and cultural—in the region (Guo 2021).

At the same time, China’s growing importance to the region triggers anxiety because of its impact on the environment and demand for natural resources. There are concerns in parts of Latin America about how China’s rise and its overseas expansion are shaping the development options for Latin American countries (Armony and Velazques 2015). But there is also the possibility that a joint and more determined resumption of the environmental agenda lays the groundwork for a *détente* between the US and China with constructive consequences for a more sustainable energy transition. In this sense, China also has a possible impact as an alternative model of development to the region, enabling a global engagement and better alternatives as the region moves beyond its historical relationship with the US. For a more mutually beneficial engagement, Latin America could pursue cooperation in the future on Chinese experiences and models of poverty alleviation, which are part of a still ongoing public policy and are much needed in LAC.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s prestige in the region has been enhanced vis-a-vis Trump’s debacle, with active engagement of private and state actors, donating medical equipment, and being a major vaccine supplier. Despite China’s regional engagement actions, politically and economically, LAC still has responsibilities regarding its institutional solidity. The region had more possibility of exerting agency when regional coordination was stronger (up to five years ago). The crisis of UNASUR, CELAC, and especially regional leaders (Brazil) seems to indicate a not promising action from Latin America. As Dussel Peters (2021) highlighted, the future of China-LAC relations involves better quality engagement and a much deeper understanding of the ongoing processes and needs, both in China and Latin America. Considering the scale of current global challenges for humankind, one can only hope that at least some of these more optimistic trends may materialized. It would be advisable to prepare oneself for the impacts of rising global rivalries in the horizon.

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