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International Relations Global Bachelor's Degree

Bachelor's Thesis

**The Dragon's Embrace in the New World:
China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Through my years of studying international relations, eastern countries like China have always caught my attention in multiple aspects, especially on its current role in the world. I was specifically interested in its approach towards Latin America, not just because it's where I'm from, but also to demonstrate its importance on an international level.

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Abstract

The role of the People's Republic of China in Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) is one of the most important and complex relations taking place today in the international sphere. This is due to a variety of factors such as the number of actors involved as well as their individual interests. That's why in this Bachelor's thesis the role of the Asian giant will be analyzed in the fields of geopolitics, economics and soft power. This work also demonstrates how China manages to expand its influence to the "backyard" of its number one adversary, the United States, and in what ways it tries to apply its hegemonic growth. Said interests come with miscellaneous policies such as new trade agreements, infrastructure/cooperation projects and strategies such as the commonly referred "debt trap" and "COVID diplomacy". Despite being different from other Global South allies, Latin America is looking eastward, as most of its countries have put China ahead of the US in commercial and geopolitical alliances.

Key Words: LAC, China, Geopolitics, Economy, Soft Power

Summary

El papel que ejerce la República Popular China en la región de América Latina y el Caribe es uno de los sucesos más importantes y complejos que toman lugar hoy en día en la esfera internacional, debido a su gran número de actores, tanto directos como indirectos. Es por ello que en este Trabajo de Fin de Grado se analizará el papel del gigante asiático en los campos de la geopolítica, economía y poder blando (soft power). Este también demuestra como China logra expandir su influencia hasta el "patio trasero" de su adversario número uno (Estados Unidos) y de qué maneras intenta aplicar crecimiento hegemónico. Dichas aplicaciones incluyen proyectos de infraestructura y cooperación dentro del "Sur Global", así como nuevos acuerdos comerciales acompañados de estrategias como trampas de deudas y "presiones" diplomáticas (especialmente después del COVID-19). A pesar de ser diferentes a otras regiones influenciadas por el país asiático, América Latina está mirando hacia el este, ya que la mayoría de sus países han puesto a China por delante de EEUU en alianzas comerciales e incluso políticas.

Palabras Clave: ALC, China, Geopolítica, Economía, Soft Power

Abbreviations

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt Road Initiative
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CDB	China Development Bank
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CHEXIM	Export-Import Bank from China
CPP	Chinese Communist Party
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
IFI	International Financial Institution
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MERCOSUR	Southern Common Market
OAS	Organization of American States
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of Taiwan
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
US	United States

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1.Introduction

China's influence in the international community has been significant ever since Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in 1978. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has had the need to open up its doors by increasing commercial and diplomatic relations with its Global South partners. That is why Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), with a population of 640 million and an economy worth \$5.7 trillion, has become an attractive region for Chinese interests until this day (Lopez Villafañe, 2018). Yet, said region is different from others in comparison, such as African or East Asia for example, due to its already established cultural and political homogeneity, in addition to its geographical proximity to the United States (US).

Before talking about how China has been using its economic and diplomatic strategies to draw closer to its Latin American counterparts, it's also important to describe the complex stance of this part of the western hemisphere. LAC is a region with an immense territory of 20 million km² and it's composed of 33 states. Its history at a political, social and cultural level dates back around 500 years, with the arrival of Europeans to the American continent.¹ Even after the emancipation of European powers (Spain, Portugal and France), its states' foreign policy was always dependent on the US². With that said, China has approached LAC more slowly and peacefully from the very beginning of its foundation.

In order to have a visual idea of how big LAC's territory really is and the states it's composed of, down below is a political map with the most important cities of each country.

¹ LAC's colonial past is an important factor since its countries possess more stable institutions as well as a history of democracy and justice in comparison to other continents such as Africa.

² See the chapter entitled *America for the Americans?* in the *Geopolitics* section.

Figure 1

Political Map of Latin America and the Caribbean



Note. Territories such as French Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Cayman Islands and Dutch Antilles are overseas territories of France, United Kingdom and the Netherlands, therefore they're not part of LAC's 33 independent states. Puerto Rico is culturally Latin America but it's an overseas territory of the US.
Source: (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.)

Despite their relations being economically-oriented, Sino-Latin American bonds are accompanied by other secondary but not less important factors. These include building a more multipolar environment within the American continent in order to reduce the power of the United States and also help with social/economic development. This is done through Beijing's "south-south" cooperation policy, which is directly linked to its infrastructure plans (Serbin, 2022; Dussel Peters, 2021). Also,

despite the fact that these relationships are formally established today and with few adversities, they have come with a series of both negative and positive consequences. Therefore, the objective of this thesis is to study and analyze how China has been approaching LAC and how it has affected said region, mainly focusing on three significant aspects; geopolitics, economy and soft power.

The geopolitical aspect includes the history of LAC's international relations, describing the roles of both China and the US, the rise of a new multipolar scenario and how this can affect the future of LAC's role in the international arena. Consequently, there is the economic aspect, which describes the commercial relations between these two actors, its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)³, the development of infrastructure projects like the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and the controversial strategy of "debt trap". Finally, the aspect of soft power will include how China tries to introduce its influence in the region through various diplomatic or cultural tools. These include the application of its "Non-Interference Policy", the historic spread of its diplomatic network, as well as its public diplomacy through modern means like cultural programs and media. Another recent demonstration of its soft power has been the recent measures adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, commonly referred as "COVID Diplomacy".

Even though LAC is composed of 33 countries, this thesis will make a greater emphasis on those states that maintain a greater economy and political influence within the region. These include the three biggest states, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. There will also be other moderately significant actors that possess strategic resources such as Chile, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador. In terms of international organizations, the main focus will be made on the "Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños" or "Community of Latin American and Caribbean States" (CELAC), since it represents LAC on a regional level, being the main institution that formalizes its relations with the PRC.

³ According to the OECD Ilibrary, FDI refers to "a category of cross-border investment in which a resident of one economy (direct investor) establishes an interest and influence over an enterprise in another economy (direct investment enterprise) (OECD, n.d.)

1.1 Sustainable Development Goals

Although it is not the central focus of this work, mention is made to the Objectives of Sustainable Development (SDG) from the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda, since they are also included within the Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas China-CELAC (*Plan de Acción Conjunto de Cooperación en Áreas Claves China-CELAC*). Said agreement establishes cooperation plans in various areas and friendly consultations made on equal terms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021; Official CELAC website, 2021).⁴

The SDGs included in the China-CELAC action plan are:

Goal 1: End of Poverty

Reiterate and maintain the ***China-CELAC forum for the Eradication of Poverty and Development***. This consists of the cooperation between both actors in order to fulfill specific goals such as rural and technological development, which directly improves living standards.

Goal 3: Health and Well-Being (Covid Diplomacy p. 39)

CELAC states received help during the COVID-19 pandemic by obtaining medical equipment and vaccines from the Chinese state.

Goal 4: Quality Education (Culture & Public Diplomacy p.36)

Support higher education institutions, implement exchange plans for stronger professional and cultural relationships. This may include scholarships or language programs, such as the introduction of the Confucius Institute.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth (FDI by Sectors p.19)

Growth in investment by Chinese companies in LAC, along with the increase of jobs for its citizens. Examples include the development of development networks from the BRI

⁴ This Joint Action Plan focuses on key areas such as security, cooperation, commerce, finance, agriculture, science/technology, energy, tourism, infrastructure projects, public health, education, arts/culture & media (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2021).

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (Belt Road Initiative p.19)

Implementation of various infrastructure projects such as transport, energy and technology. Some of these have been forming part of the BRI.

Goal 13: Climate Action (FDI by sectors p.18)

Exchange different policies with CELAC member states to respond to climate change, as well as management of environmental protection in the region, including investments in clean energy production.

Goal 17: Partnership to Achieve Goals

It is important to highlight this goal, since some of China's goals may counter others, affecting credibility

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis has been done through the collection of data on the Sino-Latin American relations using secondary, and to a lesser extent, tertiary sources. Such sources include media articles, research papers made by analysts and experts in the field of international relations, digital magazines, statistics and online books. By utilizing this approach, already existing data on Chinese activity through geopolitical actions, economic figures and soft power mechanisms had to be identified. The main objective for this has been to point out how China is influencing Latin America and the Caribbean through the lenses of these three categories.

Due to constraints, some topics related to international relations were left out of this research such as the security approach. China's foreign policy does not have a strong military outlook, limiting itself to the commercialization of military equipment. Examples of this include the selling of firearms and vehicles to a handful of countries like Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela, being a solely economic interest for the Chinese. Also, the provision of police equipment and training to countries like Cuba are also actions that involve Beijing's interests in providing alternatives from the US's economic embargo.

Since I had to resort to digital means in order to obtain data, I limited the usage of Chinese Government websites and tried to use more alternatives in order to compare the information so it wouldn't affect the legitimacy of my research. That is why I had conducted extensive research through this thesis, with the citation of numerous sources.

Research Findings

3. Geopolitics

The West typically sees China's geopolitics as a "race against time" in order to become the main world power, thus consolidating its hegemony in the regions where it invests (Vega Fernandez, 2021). Despite the fact that the United States still holds the first position as world power, the growth of Chinese influence around the world represents a new scenario with regards to international multipolarity. This turns countries in the Global South once again into battlefields between the West and the East, similar to that of the Cold War, yet with some differences. That is why in order to understand how China has been developing its geopolitical relations with LAC, it's also important to know how this region's foreign policy has been shaped by the ambitions of an influential actor like the United States. This section will also state how China has been defying the North American's ambitions to maintain their hegemony.

3.1 America for Americans?

When we talk about LAC, its geographical location is an interesting scenario for this new hegemonic race. Ever since the Latin American states got their independence from Spain and Portugal, the US sought an interest to maintain them far from European influence due to the return of various powerful monarchies after the Napoleonic Wars. In order to avoid future geopolitical conflicts from European interventionism, the US introduced the Monroe Doctrine in December of 1823⁵ (Vega Fernandez, 2021).

This foreign policy doctrine is composed of three main principles: defining the sphere of influence between the Americas and Europe, non-colonization of newly independent states and no intervention of European powers in American policies. Said principles have led the US to intervene heavily in LAC'S internal affairs for the next decades. Through the 19th century, the US has demonstrated these interventions through the initiation of conflicts such as their land expansion after the

⁵ Named after the 5th president of the United States James Monroe, who served in office from 1817 to 1825 (Vega Fernandez, 2021).

Mexican-American War or the Spanish-American War, which lead to the North American dominion of the last Spanish territories in the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and Cuba)⁶. By the early 20th century, the US introduced new military or financial policies towards LAC, such as Roosevelt's "Big Stick Policy" or Taft's "dollar diplomacy"⁷ (M.C. Pires & Do Nascimento, 2020).

Following WWII and the beginning of the Cold War, LAC along with the rest of the Global South became a battlefield for the new Ideological rivalry between the US and the USSR. This led to the US intervening and sabotaging democratically elected governments that the North Americans viewed as a "communist threat". The most notable period of this is during "Operation Condor", which took place in the 1970s and 80s, when the US toppled democratically elected governments and installed military dictatorships. Said interventionism came to an "end" during the 1990s, where the US took the leading role of the new liberal unipolar world order. For the last 20 years, the North Americans have maintained a somewhat interventionist relationship, especially with war on drugs and later on, economic sanctions against left wing governments. Therefore, the US views LAC as one of its main priorities in terms of geopolitical (and at some point cultural) influence for almost 200 years, generating numerous debates on whether its "imperialism" has turned the region into the country's "backyard". Regardless, the Monroe Doctrine hasn't stopped China's approach into the region.

The only Latin American country to recognize Mao Zedong's communist China was Cuba in 1960, evidently due to ideological motivations behind Fidel Castro's new revolutionary government. Later that decade, the PRC would obtain international recognition after being accepted as a member of the United Nations (UN), hence beginning their period of international relations. In the case of LAC, relations with China truly began after the turn of the millenium in 2001, after the country's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the urge to access more

⁶ Cuba would obtain its independence but Puerto Rico remained part of the US by becoming a "Commonwealth" (Vega Fernandez, 2021).

⁷ The Big Stick was a form of US foreign policy towards LAC during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, which consisted in the use of military force in order to secure its interests. Dollar diplomacy was used by Roosevelt's successor, William H. Taft, introducing US financial capital to LAC in order to cause economic dependency. Examples of these include the construction of the Panama Canal through the imposition of the country's independence from Colombia (M.C. Pires & L.G. Nascimento, 2020).

natural resources/food as a cause of the country's massive population growth and economic boom (M.C. Pires & L.G. Nascimento, 2020).

3.2 New Multipolar Scenario

During the turn of the millennium, Beijing began its pursuit of increasing its multilateral relations with LAC by participating in regional organizations, whether it's appearing in political dialogues or becoming an observer in multiple assemblies. Some of these include trade blocs such as "Mercado Común del Sur" (Mercosur) in 1997, the Andean Community (CAN) in 2000 and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 2005. On a larger scale, the Chinese also sought a larger participation in major political institutions such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), as well becoming a permanent observer of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2004 (Wintgens, 2022).

Although Chinese presence in LAC has been established since the early 1980s through its "south-south" or "noninterference" cooperation⁸, it didn't leave a significant footprint until the rise to power of Xi Jinping in 2013. The current president sought to relabel numerous bilateral relations with various countries, including those with powerful economies such as Brazil, Argentina and Chile in order to strengthen "strategic partnerships" (Wintgens, 2022). These strengthened relations, along with the rise of trade, led to future cooperation plans which would solidify China's role as a close commercial/political ally. This alliance was formalized in 2015, at the first ministerial meeting at the China-CELAC forum in Beijing. Said forum serves as the official institutional tool that promotes cooperation between China and CELAC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2015; CELAC website, 2021). Currently, CELAC still maintains close relations with Beijing, updating their objectives in 2018 and 2021, especially after the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸ See the chapter entitled *Non-Interference Policy* in the Soft Power section.

With regards to international relations as a whole, there are talks of expanding the size of developing emerging states worldwide, more specifically the expansion of the BRICS group⁹. Said intergovernmental organization is formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa with the goal of promoting peace, security and cooperation between these emerging powers¹⁰. The goal of this expansion is to help fight common challenges that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic impacts of the Ukraine War (Atalayar, 2022). Since China has the largest economy of all BRICS members, its headquarters are located in Shanghai. Such status gives us the idea that the Chinese state will play a key role with the expansion of the BRICS group, becoming a challenge for western powers. This specific topic will be analyzed more in depth within the “Trade” section of this thesis.

On the other hand, the US has felt the need to maintain its hegemony by retaliating against Chinese policies, yet the current international landscape plays against it. Nowadays, current geopolitical circumstances have changed, where the US can't resolve its international issues unilaterally. Most of LAC's states have significantly inclined towards the Asian giant, yet most of them still maintain somewhat stable relations with their northern neighbor despite infrastructure plans, like Mexico and some Central American states (M.C. Pires & L.G. Nascimento, 2020). According to Jiang Shixue, international relations professor and specialist in Latin American studies, the US takes advantage of its influence in order to put political pressure on China and diversify its relations in LAC (López Villafañe, 2018). The reality is that China has abandoned its anti-US rhetoric, focusing more on LAC's importance as a geostrategic partner, regardless of Washington's proximity and the distance from its land.

⁹ Argentina applied for its BRICS membership in 2022 (Atalayar, 2022).

¹⁰ BRICS started in 2001 as an unofficial organization composed of the world's largest emerging economies. Said acronym was first mentioned by the notorious investment bank, Goldman Sachs, due to its predictions that BRICS member states would dominate the global economy by 2050 (Chen, 2022).

4. Economy

When it comes to the economy, most of LAC has been shifting to China as a major ally. After launching its “Going Global” internationalization policy and entering the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China sought to invest and open its commerce beyond its continental location, including LAC. There is no doubt that the Asian giant has taken advantage of the region’s vast resources, as well as LAC becoming an important investment hub, not just for China, but also for other non-western countries like Russia and the Middle East. Yet, the development of these policies have come with certain consequences.

This section will analyze and explain the Chinese’s economic approach through its FDI, accompanied by its infrastructure projects, its trade relations and the debt situations that this region has.

4.1 Foreign Direct Investment and Infrastructure

Even though China's presence in LAC has been expanding over the years, their FDI flow is significantly lower than what some observers might expect. According to a report made by the European Union’s Security Studies (EUISS), Chinese FDI in Latin America is around \$160 billion between the years 2000 to 2020, being inferior to the US’s estimated accumulation of \$4 trillion (Wintgens 2022; USC Annenberg 2022). This means that China’s FDI flow in LAC is approximately 5% of what it invests worldwide, if compared to what the US sends. This is mainly due to China prioritizing its economic relations with its neighbors in Asia. However, since the arrival of Xi Jinping to power in 2013, Beijing’s economic approach to LAC became more gradual by increasing investments and introducing the BRI, creating a major contrast to the US’s presence in the region since the approval of the Monroe Doctrine (Ding, Di Vittorio, Lariau & Zhou, 2021). Most of these infrastructure projects are approved and financed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

4.1.1 FDI By Sectors

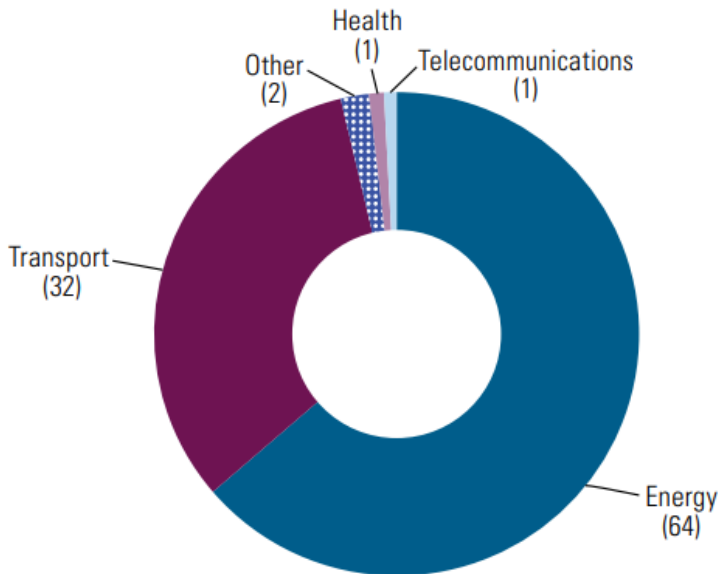
The Asian giant concentrates its investments in certain sectors, being energy and transport the most notable ones ¹¹(Figure 3). Energy projects include the development of alternative renewable energy stations, such as hydroelectric, wind, nuclear and solar plants, while fossil fuel projects include petroleum, gas, mining and nuclear energy. Some energy initiatives involve the construction of the *Atucha III* nuclear power plant in Argentina, as well as the development of the Punta Sierra wind farm in Coquimbo, Chile (Roy, 2022).

Transport investments include the construction of airports, maritime ports, railway systems and highways. Some notable projects in this sector are the Port of Paranaguá in Brazil, being the largest container port in South America and the construction of more developed railway systems in Colombia's major cities, Bogotá and Medellín (Barcena, Cimoli, Garcia-Buchaca & Shaw, 2021). China's largest companies that have heavily invested in this sector include China Construction Communication Company (CCC) and China State Construction Engineering Corp (CSCEC), both being state-owned (Dussel Peters, 2021). These projects mutually benefit both actors, since LAC states would develop more connected networks for a more efficient movement of people and goods, creating a more integrated Latin American economy. At the same time, China benefits from more improved networks and logistics, therefore supporting its investments in other fields like the previously mentioned energetic sector.

¹¹ According to a report from the IMF, most Latin American countries were increasing their demand for energy, yet they lacked the sufficient infrastructure for this. Therefore, Chinese investments contributed to the improvement of this energetic deficit in the region, as well as having Chinese companies take advantage of LAC's vast natural resources (Ding & Mano, 2021). China also has an interest in investing in the transport sector, as it facilitates the flow of commercial networks by sea, land and air (Barria, 2018). Beijing sees this as an opportunity since the US and the EU's investments don't have a significant effect on these sectors.

Figure 3

Sectors targeted by Chinese FDI in Latin American and the Caribbean between 2005-2019



Source: (Barcena, Cimoli, Garcia-Buchaca & Shaw, 2021)

One sector that has also been growing to a lesser extent is the Information/Communication Technology (ICT) or simply telecommunications. This growth is especially notorious after the year 2010, when Chinese investors began a diversification process in the region (Wintgens, 2022). Even though the telecommunications sector is only a small percentage of the total FDI flow in LAC (Figure 3), Chinese tech companies have penetrated the market by investing heavily in data centers, surveillance, artificial intelligence (AI) and even satellites. Some companies include giants such as China Telecom, Huawei and ZTE, taking part in the initiative of the “Digital Silk Road”. An example of these initiatives is the development of space programs, where China has collaborated with different states in the launch of artificial satellites to orbit. Venezuela and Bolivia were the first Latin American states¹² that have launched their satellites with the help of the China National Space Administration (CNSA), yet there have been recent agreements between more CELAC members. The CNSA has signed new cooperation plans with Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile (CGTN, 2021).

¹² Venezuela launched its first satellite, VENESAT-1, in 2008. It is named after *Simon Bolivar*, the Venezuelan-born general that helped lead 5 South American countries to independence from the Spanish. Bolivia’s satellite,TKSAT-1, was launched in 2013 and is named after indigenous insurrection leader *Tupac Katari*. Both of these were launched from the Xichang Launch Center (CGTN, 2021).

Finally, in the health sector, numbers aren't very high either due to China's historically low interest in this particular area, with the addition to LAC's less developed healthcare systems. It wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic when Beijing ordered the research and development of its vaccine¹³. That is why the health sector remains lower (Figure 3), regardless of a handful of projects like the construction of hospitals and exportation of medical technology.

Regardless of energy being 64% (Figure 3), the projects implemented in the transport sector have generated the largest amount of employment, creating an estimate of 50%-70% of the total jobs created by these infrastructure projects. Between the years 2015 and 2020, said projects created over 600,000 jobs¹⁴(Dussel Peters, 2021). These numbers help with the growth of a more active workforce in these countries and serve a way to achieve a more developed and sustainable economic growth.

4.1.2 Belt Road Initiative

The Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is a global infrastructure and development program adopted by the Chinese government in 2013, investing in more than 100 countries. A big portion of the states that form part of this are from the Global South and LAC is not an exception. Most of these infrastructure initiatives have been present in the region since the mid 2010s, meaning that there has been a minimal presence of the BRI in LAC until 2018. Some projects have been taking place before CELAC's participation in said initiative, and only one has been approved by the AIIB, in comparison to the 108 authorized in 2021¹⁵ (Dussel Peters, 2021).

¹³ See the chapter entitled *COVID Diplomacy* in the Soft Power section.

¹⁴ Almost 70% of all jobs generated by the projects were provided by 5 Chinese firms; China Communications Construction Company (CCC), PowerChina, China Railway Engineering Corporation (CRECG), China Railway Corporation (CRCC) and State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) (Dussel Peters, 2021).

¹⁵ This would mean that LAC's amount of Chinese FDI received was not a result of the BRI before 2018.

In 2018, during the second ministerial meeting of the China-CELAC forum in Santiago de Chile, Xi Jinping's government invited CELAC member states to join the BRI, describing the region as a "natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (Chiodi & Nguyen, 2022). With China's heavy demand to consume more resources, accompanied by LAC's determination for development and relative stability, both actors have agreed to this plan¹⁶. As of March 2022, 20 countries have signed their participation in the BRI (Figure 4). If we take into account the COVID-19 pandemic and the decrease of FDI money that has entered into LAC, more projects will be taking place in order to help continue developing the affected economies.

Figure 4

LAC countries that have joined the BRI (March 2022)

South America	Central America & Mexico	Caribbean
Argentina	Costa Rica	Antigua and Barbuda
Bolivia	El Salvador	Barbados
Chile	Panama	Cuba
Ecuador		Dominica
Guyana		Dominican Republic
Peru		Grenada
Suriname		Jamaica
Uruguay		Trinidad and Tobago
Venezuela		

Source: (Raza & Grohs, 2022)

It is also important to highlight that the main recipients of Chinese FDI have always been the countries with the highest GDP in the region. This is why the tendency of significant FDI flow and infrastructure projects normally go to Mexico and part of South America (Figure 5). Brazil, being the main recipient, has received a total of \$60 billion in FDI, due to its vast land and resources (Raza & Grohs, 2022). Its membership in the BRICS group forum has served as an advantage to develop its alliance with China without forming part of the BRI¹⁷. This tendency could change

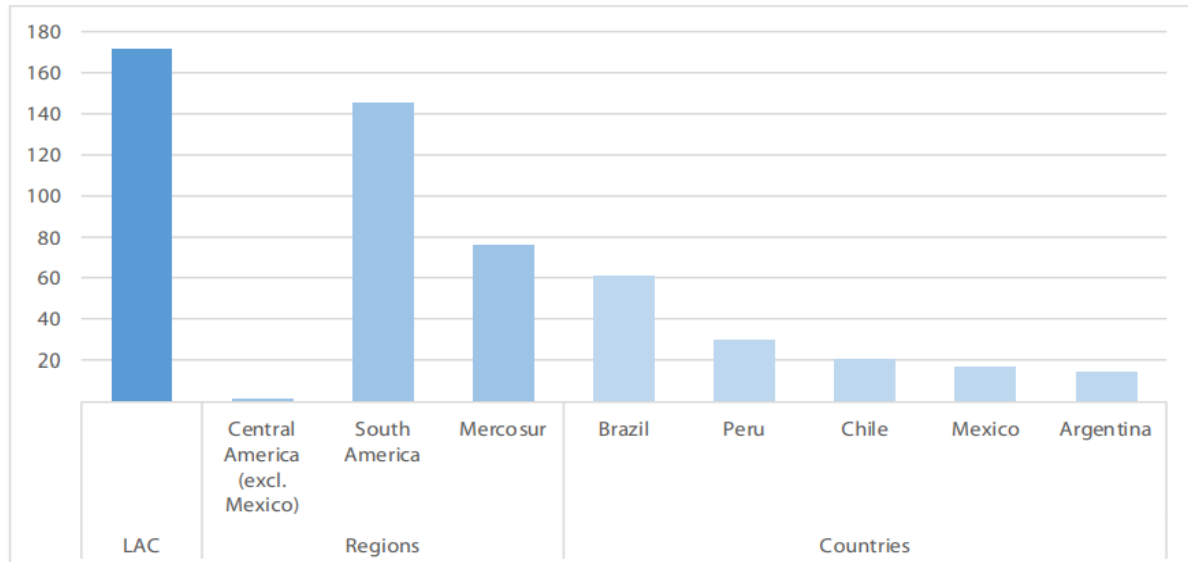
¹⁶ In other words, China seeks to integrate LAC into the BRI for two important reasons. One is due to the LAC's potential in the extraction of raw material and food in order to sustain the Asian giant's demands. Second, China seeks more partners in order to have more "financially safe environments". In comparison to Africa, LAC has more reliable judicial systems, which can help ensure investment and project contracts (Chiodi & Nguyen, 2022).

¹⁷ As of April 2023, Brazil has not joined the BRI. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), Brazil is China's largest investment hub in LAC as well as one of its BRICS partners, therefore its

since economically inferior countries that have joined the BRI may develop more progressively. These include Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Uruguay.

Figure 5

Accumulated Chinese FDI flow to LAC in USD billions, 2000-2021



Source: (ODFI Monitor China-ALC, 2021)

4.1.3 Environmental Consequences of China's Investments

Unfortunately, Chinese infrastructure projects have come with repercussions, especially with regards to their environmental impacts. Negative effects from Beijing's projects include disasters such as deforestation, severe pollution and even the displacement of people groups, violating human rights. These have been included in a report from the "Collective on Chinese Financing and Investments Human Rights and Environment" (CICDHA), where a total of 26 projects have been analyzed in 9 countries. An example of these effects is the Mirador Mine, a \$1.4 billion copper mine located in the Amazon region of Ecuador. The exploitation of this land has led to hundreds of indigenous people being displaced from their local villages, the destruction of their local agriculture and even endangering numerous species. Another case involves the construction of the Ricalhue hydroelectric dam located in southern Chile, where Mapuche families living by the Bio Bio river were

membership in the BRI is unneeded. With the country's newly elected president, Lula da Silva, visiting Beijing in April in order to re-establish cooperation and economic ties with the PRC, its intentions to join are yet to be seen (Sheng & Caiyu, 2023).

unaware of such a plan (Radwin, 2022). These particular cases are only a handful of miscellaneous environmental incidents with regards to Chinese interventionism. Regardless of how many seemingly “green” projects China tries to create, these initiatives may go against the China-CELAC cooperation agreements and the SDGs in general, affecting both the environment and human rights.

4.2 Trade

China’s role in LAC has been reinforced due to the commercial relations that have been developing with almost all its countries, becoming a key partner for their economies. Trade relations have dramatically increased ever since the PRC joined the WTO over 20 years ago, incrementing the import/export value from \$14 billion in 2001 to \$315 billion in 2020 (Wintgens, 2022). In other words, the Asian giant surpassed the EU as LAC’s second most important commercial partner and it’s estimated that by 2035 it will surpass the US (López Villafaña, 2018).

On a regional level, there are differences between the Sino-Latinamerican commercial relations due to miscellaneous interests that each country possesses. For example, Mexico has always been traditionally dependent on the US, making 85% of its trading value come from its northern neighbor. This dependency became notorious after the formation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992. This multilateral trade agreement was signed in 1994 by the US, Canada and Mexico to create a powerful bloc between these three states until its replacement by the USMCA in 2019. Such a trade bloc made the Mexican GDP and its growth strongly linked to this agreement, making this country view China as a major competitor and US rival, while it’s seen by the orientals as an important consumption market for their exports (Raza & Grohs, 2022).

Meanwhile for South America it’s the opposite situation, where most of its countries maintain much closer commercial ties with China and even a couple have even established Free Trade Agreements (FTA). So far three states have signed, them being Chile (2006), Peru (2009) and Costa Rica (2010), being the only one from Central America. By having these three countries sign their FTAs, their economies would be mutually benefited in multiple aspects. For one, China’s status as a market

economy would be recognized and it would have almost immediate access to raw material from these states through tariff reductions. Meanwhile, these three benefit from profits of traded goods and a growing development. It's also important to mention that Chinese FTAs serve as a strategy for gaining easier control of resources from states that are less industrialized and that seek a rapid development of the service sector (banking, finance and transport). This is why China hasn't signed FTAs with more industrialized countries like Argentina or Brazil, yet there are intentions of establishing more agreements with other small actors such as Colombia, Panama, Ecuador and Uruguay (Wintgens, 2022; Wise, 2012).

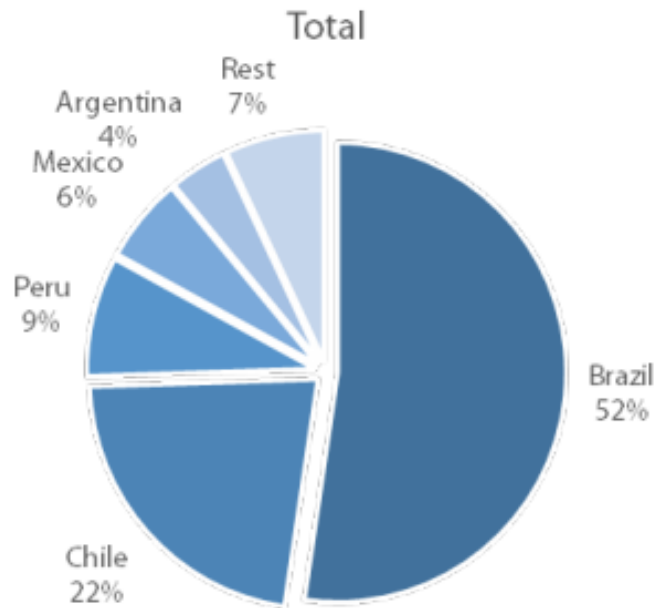
When talking about Chinese exports to LAC, the most common sectors are machinery (55%), transport equipment (30%) and certain chemicals (10%). These goods include electronic appliances, automobiles, and electronic components. LAC's biggest importers are Mexico, with \$45 billion of imported goods, and Brazil with \$36.7 billion. Other states include Chile, Argentina, Peru and Colombia, yet these only make up 15% of the total value of Chinese imports (Raza & Grohs, 2022). According to "Red China & America Latina" (REDCAEM) member and analyst, Igancio Bartesaghi, China has become an important competitor within the Latin American market, going against giants like the US, EU and even important technology producers like Japan and South Korea (Muñoz Lima, 2018). Even though there's been a decrease of imports, especially from Mexico, the sectoral composition remains unchanged and LAC's market has become more active (Raza & Grohs, 2022).

In the case of exports from LAC to China, it's the complete opposite. The sectors that dominate these are mining and food products, along with fuel resources like petroleum and gas. The region has become crucial for China's demand for raw materials as a result of its massive consumption growth. As we can see in the graph below (Figure 6), Brazil is China's largest trading partner, with an export value of \$67.8 billion due to its soybean and petroleum production. This makes the South American country possess 52% of all exports. Meanwhile, Chile (\$28.7 billion) and Peru (\$11 billion) are one of China's largest providers of extracted minerals, most notably copper. Meanwhile, Mexico (\$7.8 billion) and Argentina (\$5.2 billion) mostly export food products such as fruit and soybeans (Raza & Grohs, 2022; Ray, Albright

& Wang, 2021). This somewhat creates a trade imbalance, since LAC proportionally exports more valuable resources, yet these are less diversified. Meanwhile China has to fulfill its bilateral relations as well as modernizing its export networks.

Figure 6

Shares of exports to China by country



Source: (Raza & Grohs, 2022)

Even though commercial relations between both actors are bilateral, the Chinese state has benefited the most from these. Due to the PRC's economic growth, the demand for food and raw materials has been intensifying. This is why its commercial and diplomatic strategy has been crucial in order to develop an important economic network in the regions they want to invest in. China has also benefited from a growing economic "dependence" from LAC countries, especially for those in South America, as well as taking advantage of the region's low competitiveness and deindustrialization. Said "dependence" is a leading cause for a decline in US imports and exports participation rates, leading to a projected "catchup" from the Chinese. China also sees LAC as a crucial provider and ally, while Latin American states see the Asian giant as an important alternative for their economic/social development.

4.2.1 BRICS and Its Implications

Another reason as to why cooperation with Beijing has been increasing can be accredited to the proposal of expanding the BRICS memberships in order to accept more emerging countries of the Global South. It's important to understand the importance of this alliance, since it represents 40% of the world's population, 25% of global GDP (\$16 trillion) and 18% of trade flows. Currently, the only LAC countries involved in the organization are Brazil, being one of the founding five, and Uruguay as part of the organization's New Development Bank (NDB). In 2022, during the 14th annual BRICS summit that took place in Beijing, the organization's members discussed the potential entry of newer states, them being Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In addition, prior to the summit, Argentina and Iran had applied to become new potential members in June (Atalayar, 2022; Devonshire-Ellis, 2022).

Other Latin American countries like Nicaragua have manifested their interests in joining BRICS. With the hypothetical acceptance of these new members into the organization, this could bring the creation of new commercial networks that could enhance relations with China and LAC, along with other applicants from Africa and the Middle East. One example of these improved networks is the creation of larger food export/import routes among members. Brazil and Argentina are the largest soy producers in the world, which could mutually benefit from China and India's rice exports or even from Russia's wheat and sunflower oil production (Atalayar, 2022).

These new commercial networks are accompanied with another recent accomplishment from Chinese trade relations with this group of states. This achievement is the growth of the Yuan as a standard currency for trade, slowly replacing the US dollar. This tendency became relevant after Russia's trade block as a result of sanctions from the war in Ukraine. Beijing did not hesitate and commenced transactions in their currency with Moscow (France24, 2023). In the case of Latin American countries, these have initiated a process of exchanging their local currencies to the Yuan, decreasing their dependency on the dollar and western financial institutions.

Lets take Brazil for example, when president Lula da Silva visited Shanghai in April of 2023¹⁸, where he heavily criticized the role of the US dollar and the reliance it has caused to the economies of non-aligned states and BRICS. Said statement was accompanied by a new trade agreement between China and Brazil, where transactions would be exchanged between reais and yuans (France24, 2023). Similarly, Argentina's Economy Minister Sergio Massa met with Chinese ambassador, Zou Xiaoli, with the goal of a "monetary swap"¹⁹ between both countries without the intervention of a third currency (Wong, 2023).

4.3 Debt Trap

An important set of consequences that come with China's infrastructure projects and trade is the interest it has in lending loans to its major partners. Said actions are part of the previously mentioned "dependence" that has been developing from Latin American countries. While China marks a bigger financial footprint in LAC, it also creates a series of concerns from Western nations, especially from the US (Wintgens, 2022). This leads to the creation of fear and mistrust from Beijing's intentions, naming its loan mechanisms to Global South States as "debt traps"²⁰. Such a term was first adopted by Indian academic Brahma Chellaney in 2017, defining it as a geopolitical strategy for China to give other countries unsustainable loans in order to gain a higher political/economic leverage (Ferchen, 2018).

China is the world's largest bilateral lender or creditor, having a significant presence in developing countries through its two main institutional banks, the China Development Bank (CBD) and Export-Import Bank of China (Chexim). Since 2005, these financial institutions have provided between \$138 to \$140 billion in +100 loans

¹⁸ Lula da Silva's purpose for the visit was to attend Dilma Rousseff's inauguration as head of the New Development Bank. Rousseff is from Lula's political party and successor, being Brazil's first female president between 2011 and 2016.

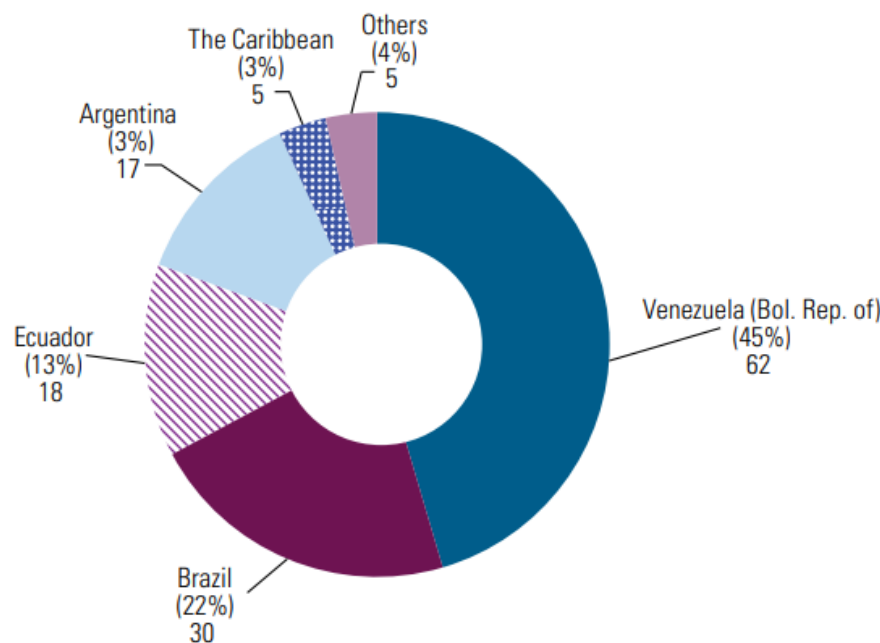
¹⁹ "Currency Swap" refers to the exchange of currencies between two countries. In this case, Argentina and China's central banks will exchange pesos to yuans as a way to reduce loans and maintain reserves (Wong, 2023).

²⁰ China is currently the world's largest bilateral creditor, most of these being destined to Global South countries. According to a study published by researchers from the UN's ECLAC in 2021, the Asian giant is also one of the least transparent creditors, since 50% of their loans are not reported to traditional IFI's like the IMF and WB, and are instead operated by state-owned institutions (Barcena, Garcia, Cimoli, Garcia-Buchaca & Shaw, 2021).

to LAC. These numbers significantly surpass other international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (CAF). Although Chinese loans are given to the entire region, almost 93% of these are concentrated in only 4 states, them being Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela (Figure 7) (Wintgens 2022;Barcena, Cimoli, Garcia-Buchaca & Shaw, 2021).

Figure 7

LAC loans from China by country 2005-2020 (percentage & billions of dollars)



Source:(Barcena, Cimoli, Garcia-Buchaca & Shaw, 2021)

LAC receives 24% of China’s worldwide loans, being ahead of Africa but behind Asia. These numbers spark concern from the US, since all of the previously mentioned IFIs maintain their headquarters in Washington D.C., and its neighboring region has more trust in Chinese IFIs. Ever since the US has recognized China as a “power competitor” in 2017, the State Department under the Trump administration released statements calling for cautiousness in Chinese infrastructure projects since they would take them into “debt traps” (Dussel Peters, 2021). On the other hand, this categorization is also seen as a myth by the Chinese state, accusing western media of creating fear and uncertainty among third world countries that are aligned with Beijing. The PRC’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Qin Gang, declared in a press

conference in the National People's Congress that 80% of debt traps were caused by major IFIs like the IMF and WB. Gang also declared how the US's rise in interest rates lead to a massive outflow of capital from developing countries (Diez, 2023).

In order to understand the complexity of these debt traps and how they affect the economies of Latin American states, the two of the major indebted countries of Ecuador and Venezuela will be analyzed due to their historical and geographic similarities. China's loans have also come with major consequences, since these two have given the PRC access to their natural resources as a payment method for their debts, most specifically their oil reserves. Both cases are very particular since their debt relations created polar opposite consequences.

4.3.1 Case of Ecuador

As it has been previously stated in the FDI section of this thesis, China has mainly invested in the energy sector, petroleum being one of its main fuel imports. Ecuador is the country with the 3rd largest oil reserves in LAC, yet it entered into default after former president Rafael Correa declared its external debt by traditional IFIs as "illegitimate" back in 2007 (Aizarani, 2023). Due to the South American nation becoming an outcast for credit markets, Chinese investors came into play as a "last resort". In 2010, the CDB came to an agreement with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Finance for a \$1 billion oil-backed loan. Said loan is backed by PetroChina and PetroEcuador, both being state-run energy companies, where the Ecuadorians are required to sell 380,000 barrels of crude oil to the Chinese within their validity period. The money received by the CDB is destined to the infrastructure projects previously mentioned (Gelpern, Horn, Morris, Parks & Trebesch, 2021).

This four-party agreement has come with multiple consequences with regards to Ecuador "giving up part of its sovereignty", since the contract signed by both countries includes a set of clauses that deny policy changes from the debtor. These limitations include policy changes that may be unfavorable against the PRC, pressuring Ecuador to maintain its relations with Beijing. Another clause from this contract includes severe repercussions if the Ecuadorian state fails to repay their

loans in a certain time stipulated in said contract. Said repercussions include the siege of state assets, such as natural resources extractions, as well as bank deposits. Since then, Ecuador has signed \$18 billion in total loans (Figure 8), from which it was required to extract more oil after the drop of petroleum prices between 2014 and 2015. Due to this crisis, along with inflation and political instability, Ecuador negotiated a bailout with the IMF for \$4.2 billion in 2019 (Wintgens, 2022; Gelpern, Horn, Morris, Parks & Trebesch, 2021).

Fortunately, Ecuador's debt with China stopped reaching unsustainable levels, regardless of the Chinese's larger leverage in the bilateral relations. It has been proven that in certain occasions, the South American nation has been able to repay its loans on time, saving millions of dollars in interest payments (Ray & Wang, 2019). In 2022, president Guillermo Lasso had announced a series of renegotiations with the Chinese government in order to restructure the country's debt, being \$4.4 billion and saving over \$1 billion of debt relief through 2025. Also, both countries' state-owned oil companies (PetroEcuador and PetroChina) have negotiated to extend crude oil delivery shipments, lengthening their schedules through 2027. This means that Ecuador will also generate more income from its exports, improve its delivery conditions, as well as to unbind the South American country's oil reserves from the Chinese debt (De la Torre, Myers & Holmes, 2022).

This is why said negotiations between both countries represent an important step for their relations. For one, Ecuador would be somewhat relieved from its heavy debt, with the addition of more modernized relations with Beijing. This means that Ecuador has reached a sustainable debt if we compare it to the IMF standards. Examples of said sustainability include the country's capacity to meet all of its current and future payment obligations without the need to reach for external financial assistance or entering into default (IMF, 2020). Yet, it could be stated that the governments that succeeded Rafael Correa have adopted policies that have helped combat Ecuador's previous issues. In the case of China, it has become more flexible in its debt relations, and towards the Ecuadorian economy. Such actions put in doubt said "debt trap" accusations, since the South American country has been able to restructure its loans, therefore China has also managed to modify its reputation as an "economic

predator”. These talks also draw Ecuador closer to signing a potential FTA member with Beijing.

4.3.2 Case of Venezuela

Unfortunately, debt relations with Venezuela have been deteriorating significantly, up until the point where the South American country is unable to repay its loans, creating a “lose-lose” scenario. Currently, Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in LAC and the world (304 billion barrels), also being the 25th largest producer, becoming China’s number one lender (Figure 7). Yet it’s one of the countries with the worst socioeconomic conditions in the region (Aizanari, 2023). That’s why it’s important to analyze how this unsustainable debt came to be in a matter of a decade.

After Hugo Chavez was elected president in 1998, he sought to distance relations with the US and draw Venezuela closer to other allies such as Cuba, China and Russia. Similar to Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, Chavez extended deep ties with Beijing through diplomatic visits and infrastructure plans in addition to seeking the CDB and Chexim as alternatives to western IFIs since 2007. This mutually benefited both countries, since Venezuela experienced its largest cash inflow during the “oil bonanza” and the PRC profited from a country located in a strategic region that’s extremely rich in resources (Frechen 2018). Regardless, these heavy loans that the Venezuelan state obtained served as one of the main recipes for its own destruction.

Similar to Ecuador, Venezuela pays its loans with petroleum, yet the lack of investments and development in the oil sector led to the decline of the required barrel production per month. Nevertheless, Chinese loans were sufficiently repaid during the second half of the 2000s. After the death of Chavez in 2013, followed by the collapse of global oil prices in 2014, the South American country began to sink in a crisis that still persists until this day. The collapse of the oil industry, followed by political instability, hyperinflation, humanitarian calamities and US-led sanctions gave Venezuela severe difficulties to repay its loans. This led to most of the Chinese infrastructure projects in the country to come to a halt, as well as the loss of thousands of jobs (Frechen, 2018; Gedan, 2018). Due to the inefficiency in

production from Venezuela's state-run oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA), the Asian giant stopped delivering new loans in 2016, leaving the current debt at \$20 billion. Being incapable of paying on time, Venezuela entered into default in 2017, where president Nicolás Maduro blamed the US's economic sanctions, which served as punishments for human rights violations committed during the protests of 2014 and 2017 (Hermoso & Fermin, 2019). Said circumstances have brought the Venezuelan debt to unsustainable levels with very little prospects of improvement.

In recent years, said sanctions have prevented PDVSA from exporting its oil payments, yet PetroChina has been able to receive oil shipments in an "under the table" manner between 2019 and 2021. This means that China never stopped purchasing Venezuelan oil, regardless of Washington's sanctions since PetroChina never reported any purchases publicly²¹ (Samberg, 2021).

Even though the Venezuelan government is directly responsible for the lack of management of its debt and economic sectors, China still maintains a heavy interest in the South American country due to its geostrategic location and vast resources. According to Mengqi Yuan, researcher on Sino-Latin American studies of the Tsinghua University, the importance of Venezuela to China is larger than we think no matter the political or economic circumstances. Other experts like the US Department state that the Asian giant's intentions are to be repaid slowly, therefore preserving its presence in the country (Navone, 2021).

This goes to show that both South American countries have had similar dependencies on Chinese oil-payment debts, yet both differ tremendously due to their internal political decisions. For Ecuador, it could be said it managed to surpass its debt trap stage through efficient policies and renegotiations with the CDB and Chexim, leading to a more stable debt. In the case of Venezuela it's a complete chaos due to the country's excessive loan requests, accompanied by its internal crisis and lack of sectoral improvement. This led it to find itself into a debt trap where

²¹ Various analysts report that other fuel companies from Russia, Switzerland and the UAE collaborated on this issue (Samberg, 2021). With the US re-negotiating with Maduro's government in early 2022, Venezuelan oil exports could be facilitated, therefore slowly improving its repayments to Beijing.

the Chinese don't have as much leverage in comparison to Ecuador, making both countries lose in these relations.

5. Soft Power

Chinese interest in LAC has gradually grown since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, however this process was uncertain and slow in its early days due to the country's lack of recognition amidst the Cold War and the US's already established hegemony in the region. As it has been stated in the "Geopolitics" section of this thesis, China has been able to combat the Monroe Doctrine after gaining its representation status as a permanent UN member and economic reform in the 1970s. Even though modern relations are mostly maintained by commercial and development interests, such as the previously mentioned BRI consolidated through the China-CELAC Forum, it's also important to understand how the Communist Party (CCP) has tried to approach the region using soft power strategies. These strategies have been an important tool in order to promote the PRC's "One China Principle".

That is why this section will focus on China's approach in LAC using its soft power mechanisms such as its non-interference policy or coexistence principle, its diplomatic strategy against Taiwan, as well as cultural programs that help these two seemingly contrasting actors collaborate.

5.1 Non-Interference Policy

When it comes to foreign policy, the Chinese state has successfully established its bonds with the Global South through its most notable diplomatic strategy, the "non-interference policy". Said approach is notable for its sense of community and respect of sovereignty, which are based on the five principles of coexistence²². These ideas were first formulated by the PCC's first Premiere, Zhou Enlai in the 1950s. The narrative later received positive reactions from developing regions such as Africa and LAC. In the case of Latin American states, said policy flourished after the turn of the millennium with the growth of left-wing governments in the region, also

²² The *Five Principles of Coexistence* were established by the following: mutual respect and integrity for national sovereignty, non-aggression actions, no interfering in internal affairs, mutual benefits and maintaining peace (Castillo & Gil-Barragan, 2018).

known as the “Pink Tide”²³ (Wintgens, 2022). Said event is one of the main causes as to why LAC has been drawing closer to Beijing, jeopardizing the US’s influence.

It could be said that Sino-Latin American relations grew through this non-interference policy as a response to the Monroe Doctrine and the past US interventions during the previously mentioned “Operation Condor” in the Cold War. Examples include ideologically related states like Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, which receive sanctions and punitive measures from Washington due to their autocratic regimes and human rights accusations. Beijing has assisted these states both diplomatically and politically, which goes to show that the coexistence model is composed of mutual respect for their allies, as well as the defense of their sovereignty.²⁴

These non-interference policies have also benefited the PRC and PCC through their “mutual respect” ideals. In other words, as long as China doesn’t intervene in Latin American internal affairs, the same is expected towards Beijing. An example of this is the position LAC took in the UN’s Human Rights Council, where big states like Mexico, Brazil and Argentina abstained from further debates regarding China’s controversial actions in the Xinjiang province. Regardless, states like Paraguay voted against these policies due to its bilateral relations with Taiwan and not with the PRC²⁵ (ISHR, 2022).

However, this policy has been questioned, mostly by western states and anti-Chinese media. Most of these opinions come from previously demonstrated effects of Chinese development programs, many of them including environmental disasters and economic “dependencies”. Also, Western media has accused Beijing of supporting authoritarian regimes in LAC, therefore feeding the narrative of the PCC wanting to politically influence the US’s southern neighbors.

²³ Also known as the *New Latin American Left*, left-leaning governments were elected as a response to corruption and the search for alternatives contrary to the United State’s principles. Said movement started with the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (1998), followed by Lula da Silva in Brazil (2003), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2006) and Rafael Correa (2007) (Wintgens, 2022).

²⁴ Dr. Evan Ellis argues that China works as an “incubator of populism”, where autocratic regimes find a powerful ally like China to seek diplomatic refuge (Roy, 2022).

²⁵ Although Argentina, Brazil and Mexico abstained, these supported a fair dialogue and multilateralism without explicitly stating their position towards the Uyghur situation (ISHR, 2022).

Although it's true that Beijing's policies have economically compromised some of LAC's states, both actors have worked to improve their bilateral relations, therefore proving how this idea of non-interference has made them closer to each other. And why is this? Similar to foreign policy towards Africa, China seeks to become an alternative to the United States by committing to non-violent methods of expanding its model towards its partners. The difference between LAC and Africa is its institutional development and relative stability, making it easier for the Asian giant to establish its commercial relations and diplomatic network.

5.2 Diplomatic Network & Relationships

One aspect of soft power that has favored China has been the growth of its diplomatic network. As it has been previously stated in the "Geopolitics" section, after Mao Zedong's proclamation of the PRC, the new communist state gained limited international recognition.²⁶ This caused difficulties for the Chinese state to establish any type of relations with Latin America, especially in an ambient of ideological competition and US domination. According to a report made by the Social Sciences Academic Press of China, Sino-Latin American connections began to develop through "people-to-people" exchanges. These policies proposed by then Premier Zhou Enlai worked as a mechanism of promoting cultural and economic dealings, which would later lead to formal diplomatic relations. Unofficial statistics dictate that 1200 people from 19 Latin American states visited the country between 1950 and 1959 as a way to establish representative delegations for cultural purposes²⁷ (Weiguang, Baiyi & Tongchang). Said strategy is directly related to the PRC's principles of coexistence.

In September of 1960, after Fidel Castro's triumph in the Revolution, Cuba became the first Latin American country to fully recognize the PRC, therefore establishing its first diplomatic missions in the region. Chile would then follow as the first South

²⁶ By being a communist country, the PRC mostly gained recognition from the USSR, members of the Warsaw Pact and a handful of Asian neighbors. The Republic of China (or Taiwan) was mainly recognized by the West and LAC, some speculated by Washington's pressure during the Cold War (Weiguang, Baiyi & Tongchang).

²⁷ Due to the historical context and restructuring of the Chinese state after the Civil War, these statistics are incomplete, yet they are supported by Chinese state journals (Weiguang, Baiyi & Tongchang).

American nation to commence diplomatic communications due to it being ruled by left-wing president Salvador Allende. After China officially became a permanent member of the UN in 1971, almost all countries in the region initiated their recognition process. As of today, China maintains diplomatic relations with 26 countries in total (M.C. Pires & Do Nascimento, 2020). This demonstrates the success of Chinese diplomacy through pacific means, since the country needed to expand its horizons as much as possible after its economic reform of 1978. It also helped to overshadow Taiwan's presence in the international sphere.

5.2.1 Taiwan's Constraint

Officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), the small island nation of Taiwan has been the most affected by the PRC's foreign policy, losing recognition from almost all Latin American states in favor of a more beneficial ally that could offer more economic/development benefits. This is due to the PCC's initiative of the "One China Policy²⁸", which has served as the primary political basis for diplomatic and economic relations with LAC (Castillo & Gil-Barragan, 2018). In order to understand better this scenario we will analyze the map below:

²⁸ Principle defended by the PRC and PCC, which consists of the idea that there is only one nation referred to as "China" in the world and that Taiwan should reunify with the Mainland (Castillo & Gil-Barragan, 2018).

Figure 8

LAC states that Recognize the PRC (China) and ROC (Taiwan) as of May 2023



Source: Author's own elaboration

Source of Data: (Reuters, 2023) & (Al Jazeera, 2023)

This updated map demonstrates how only a handful of states currently recognize Taiwan as a legitimate state, with official diplomatic missions and representatives. Regardless, it's only a matter of time for these 7 countries switch their position due to pressure from their neighbors and their possible economic/development benefits when allying with the PRC²⁹. Between the years 2017 and 2021, four countries³⁰ have established relations with the Asian giant, as it served as a pragmatic commercial measure, which has also been accompanied by the lack of understanding behind Mainland China's desire of incorporating Taiwan (Giusto & Haran, 2022). Honduras became the last country to recognize Beijing's government

²⁹ These 7 countries are Guatemala, Belize, Haiti, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Reuters, 2023).

³⁰ Panamá, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Nicaragua (Giusto & Haran, 2022).

in March of 2023, where president Xiomora Castro shared the same ambitions as its Central American neighbors (Al Jazeera, 2023). This goes to show the success of China's "Charm Offensive" and how this represents the constant growth of its bilateral relations.

5.2.2 Culture and Public Diplomacy

Another focal point that has been successful in Beijing's soft power implementation has been the approach of cultural programs and organizations. Even though Xi Jinping's ambition to expand Chinese influence to the region has become more notorious, the relationship between both actors can be traced back in history, even before the foundation of the current PRC.

The first time both actors have ever been in contact was in the 16th century, during the end of the Maritime Silk Road, through the exchange of South American and Chinese resources in the Spanish Philippines.³¹ Regardless, the relationship between both worlds was only limited to trade during the era of exploration and didn't grow until the 19th century. During this period, over 200,000 Chinese workers migrated to LAC to work in agriculture and mining. Said numbers grew even more after the US's Exclusion Act³². This resulted in massive migration flows until World War II, making LAC one of the main destinations of the Chinese diaspora (Hu-DeHart, 2021). Chinese culture has been able to adapt and survive in LAC, regardless of the US's heavy influence. With significant Chinese communities in the region, and most of its countries establishing cordial relations with Beijing, the process of introducing the Confucius Institute has been more feasible, becoming one of the country's most effective soft power strategies and public diplomacy.

³¹ After the Spanish colonization of the Philippines in 1564, the Crown joined the Maritime Silk Road by trading with China. Most goods brought by the Spanish included Peruvian and Mexican minerals with exchange of Chinese silk. Chinese communities would later on be transported to the Americas as a way to help the development of navigation through the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade (Hu-DeHart, 2021).

³² The majority of these immigrants were of Cantonese origin, specifically from the southern Guangdong region (Hu-DeHart, 2021).

The Confucius Institute (CI) started as an initiative from the Ministry of Education, which aims to implement the teachings of the language and culture in affiliation with universities overseas.³³ As of 2023, there's a total of 45 institutes in 23 countries in all of LAC, which have expanded with the help of the China-CELAC forum in 2015 (Gilstrap, 2021; Wintgens, 2022). Other than being beneficial for both actors to have cultural exchanges and educational programs, the CIs have also helped fund these to poorer countries that can't make their universities afford them. Such actions make China's image become associated with solidarity and peace, improving the nation's public diplomacy. Examples of other non-educational organizations that have originated from these connections include the Panama Association of Friendship with China or the Argentina-China Friendship Association (Wintgens, 2022).

Chinese public diplomacy overall has resulted in positive perceptions from various countries. According to a survey conducted in 2018 by the Chilean company CADEM, data demonstrated that 77% of Chileans viewed China positively in comparison to 66% to the United States. That same year, another similar poll was published by Latinobarometro³⁴, where four countries were tested in their views between both countries. Argentina had a favorable view towards China with 51%, Mexico 57%, Peru 59% and Venezuela with 63% (Wintgens, 2022). All of these polls had more favorable results towards Beijing in comparison to Washington, marking a more positive public opinion towards the Chinese state, yet it's still behind the African continent in that regard. The reason behind this is that LAC possesses a culture of doubt and mistrust against foreigners, as well as a more Western influence due to its proximity to the US (Cunhai, 2018).

All in all, the Chinese approach has been successful in LAC due to the PRC's efficient soft power strategies through public diplomacy. With a historical background dating back to centuries, to the reception of an enormous diaspora, Sino-Latin

³³ The Confucius Institute works as a non-profit educational program that is held by the Ministry of Education and the host university. Its function includes the teaching of the Chinese language abroad, the culture, as well as covering traveling expenses for both teachers and students through people-to-people exchanges (Gilstrap, 2021) & (Lopez, 2022). Works comparably to the US's American Space or Spain's Instituto Cervantes.

³⁴ Latinobarómetro is a non-profit NGO based in Santiago de Chile, which is in charge of studying and publishing public opinion analytics, similar to CADEM. This organization focuses on the fields of economics, politics, communication and society (Latinobarometro, n.d.)

American relations have deepened after its change of status in 1971 and geoeconomic reforms. With the implementation of the CIs in over ⅔ of the region, along with Taiwan's limited recognition, China faces little to no challenges in LAC with the possible exception of the US's struggle to maintain its historic influence. Regardless, Beijing's objectives are very clear and will continue to develop as the years go by.

5.3 Soft Power in Media

With already strong bonds between China and LAC, newer methods have been developing in order to adapt to modern times. With the innovation of technology and rise of the digital era, Beijing has opted to increase communication between both actors through audiovisual platforms and social media. President Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of media exchange from both regions as a way to promote friendship and trust between the Chinese and Latin American people.

During the 2021 China-CELAC forum, the PRC's state-owned China Global television Network (CGTN) launched the "China-LAC Media Action Plan", which consists in the cohesion of Chinese and Latin American media companies for the production and distribution of material such as news, documentaries and movies for all audiences. The objective of this is to draw both cultures closer, as well as demonstrating the defense of alternative journalism that's different from traditional Western media (Xiaotong, Jinjing & Dongxue, 2021).

The growing presence of Chinese state media in the region demonstrates how the Asian giant is willing to spread in order to gain the largest number of viewers possible. Digital newspapers like the People's Daily publish their content in Spanish and Portuguese and CGTN TV has a Spanish language version both online or through channel subscription. Although these state-run media outlets have a significant presence in Latin American television and online platforms³⁵, these have also been involved within national media from other countries. One prime example of

³⁵ Large outlets like CGTN, China Radio International, People's Daily and Xinhua are active on social media as well, with their accounts being in multiple languages including Spanish and Portuguese (Barrios, 2018).

this is Xinhua News Agency, which has its regional office for Latin America in Mexico City. The Beijing-based company works with big media agencies, such as Venezuela's TeleSur³⁶, which stands out as being the most notorious platform in republishing Xinhua content through its official website (Barrios, 2018).

Although the presence of Chinese media is significant, some obstacles are still present in these agreements. One of them being that there is still an information gap between both regions, meaning that efforts still have to be made in order to facilitate the delivery of Beijing's narrative. Ricardo Barrios (2018) suggests that LAC should collaborate with the formation of Chinese specialists, scholars or analysts in their countries so the networks don't seem ill-prepared.

Apart from manifesting its views through traditional media outlets overseas, the PRC has also made significant appearances on social media in order to engage with larger audiences, being another method of implementing its soft power. This was made possible by having the representatives of diplomatic missions create twitter accounts as a way to approach citizens in a more direct fashion, enhancing China's digital diplomacy. A study made by the Andres Bello Foundation was in charge of compiling data of these accounts and showed that the first of these were created in 2015, yet the trend became insignificant until a rapid growth in 2019 through 2021, increasing the amount of followers³⁷. As of 2023, the PRC has 26 embassies in LAC, yet only 16 have an account, as well as their representatives.

According to the study, there is a factor as to how PRC's activity grew dramatically in a matter of two years and it's the promotion of China's advancements as a world power. Some relevant objectives that have been highlighted include significant advancements in science and technology, such as the rapid development of the COVID-19 vaccine or the country's first space mission to Mars by launching the Tianwen 1. With the 100th anniversary of the PCC, state-media promoted the

³⁶ TeleSur is a left-wing satellite television network founded by the Venezuela's government in 2005. The channel is sponsored by other governments like Cuba and Nicaragua. Venezuela's China-backed *Simon Bolivar* satellite is used to help amplify the channel's broadcasting (Stuart, 2023).

³⁷ By conducting my own research, as of April of 2023, the most followed Twitter account of PRC embassies in LAC are from Brazil (@EmbaixadaChina) with 114 thousand, Mexico (@EmbChinaMex) with 60 thousand, El Salvador (@EmbajadaChinaSV) with 25 thousand and Peru (@ChinaEmbPeru) with 12 thousand.

success of the People's Republic by reducing poverty and becoming a "role model" for developing nations (Gañan, 2022).

The West has accused Beijing of utilizing this model as a form of propaganda, especially after being the country of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some experts highlight that Chinese soft power is beginning to fail due to the decrease of the country's credibility after the pandemic and the backlash diplomatic accounts have received in social media³⁸ (Youkee, 2020). Nevertheless, the Asian giant's narrative will continue to develop amidst criticisms from their rivals.

It's becoming very clear that the Chinese state has made numerous efforts in order to promote its image through media, whether it's through traditional or digital means. Regardless of the negative effects that the pandemic had on both China and LAC, the implementation of soft power hasn't stopped. Even if there are efforts for the PRC to improve its image and credibility in the region, it's not much of a priority since its diplomacy has been a tremendous success, as it has been previously stated in their diplomatic network.

5.4 COVID Diplomacy

China's reputation has been significantly affected after the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially by Western states. A survey made by the Pew Research Institute Center on 14 countries showed that on average 78% of people did not trust Xi Jinping in the international sphere and another 61% highlighted that China had handled the pandemic poorly³⁹ (Silver, Delvin & Huang, 2020). Although the West had a clear position on China's reputation, it didn't stop the Asian giant from launching its strategy of health assistance to the Global South.

When the first first cases of COVID-19 hit LAC, China responded rapidly to this situation. Between February and June of 2020, Beijing made over 500

³⁸ This was according to international relations professor from the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Alessandra Cappelletti, in an interview made by Dialogo Chino newspaper. This is the Latin American affiliate of the environmental NGO, China Dialogue.

³⁹ This point is based on the "COVID Diplomacy" section of Alvaro Lopez's thesis "*Looking a Gifted Dragon in the Mouth: China's role in East Africa*"

medical-related donations (health equipment, masks & medication), resulting in \$128 million of donated value (Sanborn, 2020). In 2022, this value increased up to \$214 million, having some experts call this the “Vaccine Diplomacy”, while Beijing rebranded it as the “Health Silk Road” (Gonzalez, 2021). Over half of these donations were coordinated by the Chinese government, as well as state-owned companies like MEHECO pharmaceutical group and Huawei (Sanborn, 2020).

By the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021, China had approved its vaccines (Sinopharm, Sinovac & Cansino), which meant a warning sign for the US and the EU in their efforts to send their vaccines as well. As of December of 2022, President Joe Biden had pleaded to donate 1 billion vaccines to developing countries, yet LAC only received a total of 70 million in 29 states mostly due to logistical difficulties and the high demand of Latin American states (Sullivan & Meyer, 2022). Meanwhile, the EU gave 130 million doses as of November 2021 (EEAS, 2021). Since December 2022, China has been able to provide almost 300 million doses in 22 countries and another 100 are still pending for delivery (Bridge Consulting, 2022). With this data in mind, it’s clear that China has the upper hand in the provision of its three vaccines, causing concerns from the US and Western allies. This has led Beijing’s rivals to compete in the medical area by providing as much assistance as possible.

Although China’s COVID diplomacy has been successful at times, the distribution of its vaccines and other medical equipment varies significantly by country. The two most populated Latin American countries, Brazil and Mexico, received the largest portion of the vaccines. The South American nation obtained 102 million doses, while the North American received 42 million. Meanwhile other states also turned to China for help such as Argentina (30 million), Chile (24 million), Peru (21 million) and Colombia (14 million). On the other hand, states like Paraguay and Guatemala did not receive any due to their ongoing diplomatic relations with Taiwan⁴⁰, therefore aiming at North American and European alternatives (Bridge Consulting, 2022; Myers, 2021).

⁴⁰ Some experts argue that China’s aid during the pandemic has been utilized as another political tool to isolate Taiwan. It is argued that the vaccines have been used to reward or dishearten states, depending on their positions towards the Island Nation (Myers, 2021).

The Asian giant hasn't just been successful in its COVID diplomacy through the delivery of vaccines/medical equipment to its Latin American partners, but it has also through the expansion of its medical manufacturers. President Xi Jinping announced in the 2021 Global Health Summit that he supports the country's vaccine developers to expand their technologies overseas, especially to developing countries. Currently, out of the 15 countries around the world that possess Chinese production facilities, 6 of them are located in LAC⁴¹ (Bridge Consulting, 2022).

The data above is not just a demonstration of China's efficient COVID diplomacy, but also an advantage of the United State's lack of leadership during the beginning of the pandemic. Seeing how some of its most important commercial partners suffered the consequences of the virus, Beijing viewed this situation as an opportunity to not just ratify its credibility, but to also promote its diplomatic model towards LAC.

⁴¹ Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Chile and Ecuador (Bridge Consulting, 2022).

Conclusions

China's presence in LAC can be referred to as a complex and extensive relationship that has taken decades for it to evolve. By analyzing the development of these relations through the lens of geopolitics, economics and soft power, we can deduce that Beijing's approach has been a success. The region is a key-element for China's influence, since its extensive size and natural resources have been crucial for the expansion of projects like the BRI and extending alliances like BRICS. Emerging states like Brazil and Argentina are the best examples of benefiting from these strategies, regardless of the internal problems these may face.

Although LAC has profitably chosen an alternative to Western powers as a result of the Asian giant's pragmatic foreign policy, its complex relations with the US are still present. Washington's position towards its southern neighbors remained intact 200 years after the Monroe Doctrine was first applied, even though its practice today is much more limited. The US still remains as the region's main economic partner, with addition to its political and cultural influence still relevant today. Nonetheless, its position has potentially changed as LAC has been looking at Beijing as an alternative. With foreign policies like the non-interference or south-south cooperation, Latin American states have received China's approach more positively, validating the credibility of its expansion.

Nevertheless, the PRC's strategy is not perfect, raising concerns in multiple fields. Issues like environmental impacts, support of authoritarian regimes and lack of transparency in certain policies have generated negative consequences that are visibly relevant. However, China has become the best option for the majority of states, having both actors mutually benefit from each other. As a result of effective geopolitical, economic and soft power strategies, the Chinese approach has helped LAC turn into an important geostrategic/economic hub.

In closing, the rise of China and its progressive influence on the Global South may generate doubts and uncertainty. However, it's also important to understand how this is a result of the multipolar world we're living in, and how the West's role is no longer

a protagonist in the current international society. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, the region's development gives some of its countries the potential of becoming significant powerhouses in comparison to other Global South counterparts. Yet these benefit heavily from a world power like China in order to keep developing their economies and infrastructure. That is why the future of this region still remains an enigma, as its stance in the international community is in an ongoing development.

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