

Reshaping Hegemony: China's Role in Latin America's New Power Dynamics

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Abstract

Following in the footsteps of the United States, China has emerged as Latin America's second-largest trading partner over the past few decades. The following paper discusses how China's strategic use of soft power and economic investments are reshaping Latin America's economic and political landscape. Trade between China and Latin America increased from USD 12 billion to USD 310 billion between 2000 and 2020. Chinese investments in various fields like technology and energy have led to increased dependency by some Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil. As a consequence, this shift toward China has raised alarms regarding implications for US economic influence and geopolitical position. Moreover, the paper claims that the United States has to revisit its foreign policy in an effort to rebalance the growing reach of China.

Keywords: Latin America, China's foreign policies, US historical hegemony in Latin America

I. Introduction

The United States has exerted huge influence over the geopolitical landscape of Latin America throughout history. However, China's growing power through large investments and strategic alliances is shifting the current scenario in favour of its influence. With the implementation of policies like the Monroe Doctrine and The Roosevelt Corollary, which designated Latin America as its sphere of influence, the United States has historically utilised economic, political, and soft-power measures in order to build hegemony in the region. However, as China grows economically and strengthens its diplomatic relations with nations from Latin America, this

long-standing balance of power for the US has been threatened.

The paper analyses the approach of China towards Latin America and it illustrates how it differs from the past U.S. initiatives. China's actions include initiatives on political realignments, soft power tactics, loans and economic investments in key industries of several Latin American countries. China is establishing a new degree of economic reliance and shifting regional allegiances by supplying Latin American nations with alternative economic models and collaborations that often lack the conditions of U.S. aid. Consequently, some of the Latin

American nations have started to increase their trading relations with China, regarding both imports and exports. Presented with these developments, for the US, maintaining its position in the area requires a reevaluated U.S. foreign policy that recognizes and responds to China's role.

II. Historical Context of US dominance in Latin America

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States had utilized different methods of economical, political, and soft-power approaches with the aim to create and maintain the hegemonistic position in the Latin American continent.¹ By designating Latin America as a sphere of influence where European interference would be seen as a direct threat to American interests, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 laid the base for American predominance in the region.² The Monroe Doctrine was a US policy established by President James Monroe in 1823. It declared that any European intervention in the political affairs of the Americas would be considered a threat to US security.³ The doctrine aimed to prevent European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere while asserting the role of the US as the dominant influence in the region. The Roosevelt Corollary, which further expanded the idea of the Monroe

Doctrine, outlined the United States' right to military intervention in order to stabilise Latin American countries if they are incapable of handling their own affairs.⁴

President Theodore Roosevelt extended the Monroe Doctrine in 1904 with the Roosevelt Corollary.⁵ It established the United States as a regional police power by asserting that it had the right to intervene in Latin American countries in order to preserve stability and order.⁶ Contrastingly, the main feature of the United States foreign policy in the 20th century was its interventionist approach: the Marshall plan, the US intervention in the Korean War, in the Vietnam War, and in the Middle East, among many other examples. In Latin America, the US had the aim of protecting its interests by reducing the influence of foreign powers, and positioning itself as an economic hegemony over the economies in the region.⁷ That is why, the US began to establish trade agreements, financial tools, and organisations such as the World Bank, the Organization of American States (OAS), or the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁸ This way, the United States strengthened its control in the area, through the dependencies created with these initiatives among the

¹ The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. "The Monroe Doctrine, 1823,"

² "The Monroe Doctrine, 1823."

³ "The Monroe Doctrine: The United States and Latin American Independence - the National Museum of American Diplomacy." U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, 10 Jan. 2024, diplomacy.state.gov/stories/the-monroe-doctrine-the-united-states-and-latin-american-independence/.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt Center "The Roosevelt Corollary." Theodore Roosevelt Center - *Roosevelt Corollary at Dickinson State University*. Accessed November 5, 2024. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Encyclopedia/Foreign-Affairs/Roosevelt-Corollary.>)

⁵ "The Roosevelt Corollary."

⁶ "The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, 1904." Roosevelt Corollary to Monroe Doctrine, faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/documents/tr_Monroe.htm. Accessed 9 Jan. 2025.

⁷ William I. Robinson, "Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony," *Latin American Perspectives* 30, no. 1 (2003): 111–145.

⁸ Robinson, "Promoting Polyarchy".

recipient countries. However, this period of uninterrupted dominance has now been challenged by new global actors, mainly China. The traditional power structures established by the US are under considerable stress as China increases its economic influence through trade alliances and infrastructure investments. This significant change threatens to undermine America's long-standing hegemonic position in Latin America.

III. China's Economic Investments in Latin America

China's foreign policy priorities changed dramatically during the second half of the 20th century.⁹ The country's economic investments in Latin America have increased significantly, influencing the energy, technology, and infrastructure sectors in the region. As the graph below illustrates, China's trade has grown considerably, especially after 2005. The red lines show an upward trend in both imports from and exports to China. This increase underscores China's growing economic influence in Latin America.¹⁰

U.S. Remains Latin America's Top Trade Partner



Fig.1. Latin America's trade in goods with the United States and China.

Source: the Council on Foreign Relations.

3.1 Loans and Overseas Foreign Direct Investment

Two of the primary factors influencing the relationship between China and Latin America are the Chinese loans and overseas foreign direct investment (OFDI). Political researcher Enrique Peters, illustrates in his article "Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023" (2023), that China invested around \$12 billion in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2022.¹¹ The investments in the period between the years 2020–2022, resulted in the creation of more than 81,000 jobs, which improved employment rates.¹² In 2022, Latin American nations borrowed a total of \$813 million from China.¹³ Venezuela is the biggest borrower of \$60 billion in Chinese state loans, mostly for energy and infrastructure.

Moreover, China created a development plan, called "South-South Cooperation," which emphasises developing

⁹ Riordan Roett and Guadalupe Paz, *China's Expansion into the Western Hemisphere: Implications for Latin America and the United States* (Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁰ Diana Roy. "China's Growing Influence in Latin America." *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 15, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>.

¹¹ Enrique Dussel Peters. "Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023." *Red ALC-China*, April 15, 2023.

¹² Peters, "Monitor of Chinese OFDI."

¹³ Peters, "Monitor of Chinese OFDI."

countries' common developmental experiences and presents China as a cooperative partner rather than a hegemonic superpower.¹⁴ In contrast to the United States' approach, China' involvement in the region is seen through agreements to provide infrastructure and resources. This approach has created a framework that many in the region view as more favourable and fair, where Latin American countries receive much-needed financing, technical support, and enhancements to infrastructure-such as ports, roads, and telecommunications-in return for extraction of natural resources or markets for products manufactured in China.¹⁵ For instance, in the case of Argentina, financial benefits that involve renegotiated rail and hydroelectric facilities have been backed by the Chinese through the infrastructure facility. In Brazil, huge investments by the Chinese involved renewable energy projects in the energy sector. Both strategies create such economic dependence since the nations have come to depend on the Chinese funds for development. Between 2005 and 2022, China provided more than \$140 billion in loans to Latin American nations, sometimes surpassing the amounts given by American and multilateral banks.¹⁶

The increase in dependency on Chinese infrastructure and investment for Latin American economies, together with the relative decline in the financial standing of the

¹⁴ Established in 1995, the network's main aim is to promote technical and economic cooperation among developing countries through sharing knowledge, facilitating exchange visits, etc. ("China South-South Cooperation Network." *United Nations; Office for South-South Cooperation*, August 7, 2024..)

¹⁵ "China South-South Cooperation Network," United Nations.

¹⁶ Peters, "Monitor of Chinese OFDI."

United States, makes this already financial involvement central to the impacts of US influence. Moreover, Latin American strategic alignment with Beijing causes changes in trade patterns and a decline in the power of the U.S. market. As a result, China's investments not only support regional economic expansion but also challenge the US' long-standing economic dominance, indicating a significant change in the balance of power.

3.2 Construction and Engineering investments

Since the start of the global financial crisis in 2008, Chinese companies have become more active on regional engineering and construction contracts through Latin America.¹⁷ These include infrastructure in Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina - railroads in Argentina and Venezuela, and roadways in Bolivia.¹⁸ Several major projects have been proposed, including a railroad that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific via Brazil and Peru, and a canal in Nicaragua.¹⁹ These have been financed using Chinese investment. It has been estimated that between 2005 and 2016 the Exim Bank, the China Development Bank (CDB) and other Chinese state institutions lent a total of

¹⁷ Price, John, "China's Investment Presence in Latin America." *Americas Market Intelligence Market Insights That Unlock Opportunities in Latin America*, Americas Market Intelligence, 8 Aug.2024,

americasmi.com/insights/strategy-chinas-commercial-engagement-latin-america/.

¹⁸ Pablo Chauvet et al. "China: Current and Potential Role in Infrastructure Investment in Latin America." *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe*, 2020.

¹⁹ Chauvet, "China: Current and Potential Role in Infrastructure Investment in Latin America."

more than US\$140 billion to Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁰

IV. Soft Power Strategies

China has tried to expand its “soft power” in Latin America, as in other parts of the world. This expansion played a significant role in the establishment of educational and cultural relationships between China and Latin American nations. The Chinese Policy Paper on “Latin America and the Caribbean (2016),” emphasizes cultural and people-to-people exchanges as part of the major diplomatic strategy in the region.²¹ It points out the endeavors to deepen mutual understanding through cultural cooperation in support of cultural exchanges, festivals, and exhibitions, including the protection of cultural heritage. The paper also underlines educational collaboration, such as promoting Chinese language education through Confucius Institutes, increasing scholarships for Latin American students, and fostering partnerships between educational institutions.²² Additionally, it addresses cooperation in media, advocating for the exchange of journalists, joint interviews, and co-production of programs, alongside enhancing tourism through expanded direct flights and promoting bilateral travel.

These initiatives reflect China's commitment to fostering goodwill and building long-term relationships with Latin American and Caribbean nations, leveraging soft power to deepen its influence in the region.

4.1 Chinese education in Latin America

In 2016, there were 36 Confucius Institutes established in Latin America.²³ They promote Chinese language and culture for influencing public opinion through better understanding and appreciation of China.²⁴ With their offer of language courses, cultural events, and education exchanges, the institutes provide an opportunity for local populations to gain direct exposure to Chinese traditions and perspectives. This engagement can lead to more favorable views of China, as individuals become more familiar with its culture and societal values.²⁵

Additionally, the presence of Confucius Institutes in educational institutions can shape elite opinions by integrating Chinese studies into academic curricula, thereby influencing future leaders and policymakers.²⁶ Chinese education first appeared in Brazil in the 1950s, with the establishment of the “First Chinese School in São Paulo” on January 3, 1958. It set the standard for Chinese

²⁰ Jason Yovanoff. “China-Latin America Finance Databases.” *The Dialogue*, May 6, 2021.

²¹ Xinhua. “Full Text of China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean.” *The State Council. The People’s Republic of China*. Full text of China’s policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean, November 24, 2016. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/11/24/content_281475499069158.htm.

²² Xinhua, “China’s Policy Paper on Latin America.”

²³ Leonardo Paz Neves, “Confucius Institutes in Brazil and BRICS Education Cooperation,” *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2020,

²⁴ Neves, “Confucius Institutes in Brazil and BRICS Education Cooperation.”

²⁵ Vladimir Rouvinski. “China’s Soft Power in Latin America.” *Diálogo Político*. (2023).

²⁶ Ricardo Barrios, “The Popular Perception of China in Latin America and the Role of Confucius Institutes,” *Academia.edu*, accessed December 2, 2024,

school construction in Brazil.²⁷ The rapid rise of China prompted a global "Chinese wave," and the flourishing of the Chinese language. As a result, Chinese schools in Brazil experienced a period of fast expansion as the twenty-first century progressed, raising the bar for education in Latin America.²⁸ A network of future leaders who are acquainted with Chinese culture and policy is being formed by the thousands of Latin American students who are currently studying in China.²⁹

Moreover, in an effort to promote staff and student exchanges, cooperative research projects, and academic alliances, Brazilian universities have aggressively pursued relationships with Chinese institutions, which created this new generation of Latin American leaders and citizens who have a more positive perception of China.³⁰ This cultural and educational alignment has progressively decreased US influence, exposing Beijing's complex and prospective strategy to change regional allegiances.

4.2 Chinese media in Latin America

China's impact is further strengthened by the dissemination of Chinese culture through the arts and media, which quietly harmonises local sentiments with Beijing's global narrative. With a strong and expanding

media outreach in Brazil,³¹ the Chinese broadcaster *China Central Television* (CCTV) established its regional headquarters in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2010. Chinese official media and diplomatic players increased their social media presence and actively participated in public diplomacy during the 2019–2021 coverage period.³² Additionally, Chinese state media organisations negotiated or extended collaboration agreements with Brazilian public and private media.³³

Through media organisations aimed at the region's Spanish-speaking public, Beijing is progressively increasing its influence over Latin America. *China Radio International* (CRI) and newspapers *Xinhua* and *People's Daily* both publish daily content in Spanish and Portuguese. In the meantime, CCTV offers a Spanish channel.

Lastly, the *China-Latin America Media Exchange Center* is one of the many initiatives the Chinese government has taken to establish communication with journalists in Latin America.³⁴

²⁷ "China and Brazil: Developing Education." BRICS Portal, June 15, 2023.

²⁸ Forum for American Leadership. "Engaging Chinese Engagement in Latin America: Recommendations for U.S. Policy." September 2023.

²⁹ Forum for American Leadership. "Engaging Chinese Engagement in Latin America"

³⁰ Diálogo. "China Expands Influence in Brazil through Universities." Diálogo Américas, 9 Sept. 2024, dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-expands-influence-in-brazil-through-universities/.

³¹ Ellie Young, and Sahar Cook. "Brazil: Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022 Country Report." *Freedom House*. Accessed November 6, 2024.

³² Astuti, Wiwiek, et al. "(PDF) China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy (Narrative): Development, Causes, and Political Effects." *China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy On Social Media In The Era Of Covid-19*, Dec. 2021, www.researchgate.net/publication/379600758_China's_Wolf_Warrior_Diplomacy_Narrative_Development_Causes_and_Political_Effects.

³³ Palit, Parama Sinha. "Public Diplomacy through Social Media: The Chinese Way." *China Research Center*, 24 Aug. 2024, www.chinacenter.net/2024/china-currents/23-1/public-diplomacy-through-social-media-the-chinese-way/.

³⁴ Guillermo García-Renedo. "China's Influence in Latin America." *CEU-CEFAS Center for Studies, Training, and Social Analysis*, April 2023.

V. Political Realignments and Shifts in Geopolitical Alliances

The diplomatic relations between Latin American countries and China began in the late 1970s.³⁵ The development of diplomatic relations is closely tied with the formation of closer political relations too. China created in 1993 its first "strategic partnership" in Latin America with Brazil.³⁶ It has since invested in the Brazilian mining, manufacturing, agriculture, and infrastructure sectors, among others. In Brazil, China's largest foreign engineering project, an 800kV transmission line spanning the Belo Monte to Rio de Janeiro is set to be an ultra-high-voltage direct current, making it the world's longest.³⁷ This remarkable advancement made power easily accessible to 16 million Brazilians. The line of trade is bilateral, as China has positive outcomes from its cooperation with Brazil, too. Over the past decades, China's economy has grown significantly.³⁸ For this economic growth, imports of natural resources from Brazil and other nations have been crucial.³⁹ Oil, minerals, and agricultural products have

accounted for 85 percent of China's imports from Latin America in recent years.⁴⁰

Consequently, after the agreement between Brazil and China in 1993, other Latin American countries established similar agreements with China: Venezuela in 2001, Argentina in 2004, Peru in 2008, Chile in 2012, among others.⁴¹ In order to formalize its approach towards the region, China published two White Papers about Latin America in 2008 and 2016.⁴² These White Papers, common in Chinese policy communication, serve as comprehensive government-issued reports outlining strategic priorities and providing aggregated data to guide diplomatic and economic relations.⁴³ While they offer insights into China's policies, the data contained is often limited to aggregated figures published only periodically, reflecting China's controlled approach to information disclosure.

The first policy paper emphasises the ideas of the Chinese government to expand the economic cooperations through trade initiatives and promote cultural and social exchanges.⁴⁴ Moreover, the second policy paper presented deepened cooperation through three main engines being trade, financial cooperation, and foreign direct investment. It also presented the idea of a model for production capacity cooperation - focusing on building three major

³⁵ Jiang Shixue. "A New Look at the Chinese Relations with Latin America." *Nueva Sociedad*. Accessed November 6, 2024.

³⁶ Jenkins, Rhys. "China's Global Expansion and Latin America." *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 32, no. 200, (December 1937): 675- 701 <https://sci2s.ugr.es/keel/pdf/algorithm/articulo/1937-JSTOR-Friedman.pdf>.

³⁷ Shixue, "A New Look at the Chinese Relations."

³⁸ Shixue, "A New Look at the Chinese Relations."

³⁹ Daniel E Perrotti. "The People's Republic of China and Latin America: the impact of Chinese economic growth on Latin American exports." *CEPAL Review*, 116 (August 2015). Accessed November 6, 2024.

⁴⁰ Carlos Casanova, et al. "Measuring Latin America's Export Dependency on China." *BBVA Research*, August 2015.

⁴¹ Xinhua, "China's Policy Paper on Latin America."

⁴² Xinhua, "China's Policy Paper on Latin America."

⁴³ Ellis, R. *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009.

⁴⁴ Ellis, "China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores."

passages: logistics, electricity, and information.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Chinese President Hu Jintao's initial visit to the Latin America continent in... was followed by other government officials, as well as President Xi Jinping. Chinese leaders have travelled to nineteen Latin American nations, and seventy-four Latin American heads of state and legislators have visited China.⁴⁶

5.1 Chinese foreign investments

Chinese investments in Latin American countries have a great influence on foreign policy decisions in these countries. Examples of such countries are Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina. According to the 2023 edition of the China-Latin America and the Caribbean Economic Bulletin, published by the Boston University Global Development Policy Center (YEAR OF PUBLICATION), trade between China and Latin America has reached record levels, with an importation rate estimated to be around \$265 billion in goods.⁴⁷ Recent developments in trade and investment have deepened the ties between China and Latin American countries.⁴⁸

Ecuador is continuing to develop close economic links by signing the Free Trade Agreement with China in December 2022. Later on, in February 2022, Argentina became a participant in the BRI, confirming that this step goes with an expression of interest to become part of the

⁴⁵ Ellis, *China in Latin America*.

⁴⁶ Ellis, *China in Latin America*.

⁴⁷ Zara Albright, et al. "China-Latin America and the Caribbean Economic Bulletin." *Global Development Policy Center*, April 20, 2023.

⁴⁸ Ellis, *China in Latin America*.

BRICS Group, due to a high possibility to develop better access to alternative structures of financing-the BRICS New Development Bank and China-headed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁴⁹ By contrast, the heavy dependency by Venezuela on Chinese loans and infrastructure support underlines an economic and political alignment with Beijing that is much more extreme. Together, these examples provide evidence of the growing dependency of Latin American nations on Chinese investments and their alignment with China's global economic strategy. In a similar way, Brazil has received major Chinese investments in key sectors, leading to changes in its regulatory structures to support Beijing's strategic objectives.⁵⁰ Implicit expectations are often attached to these investments, which have an influence on local government and policymaking which promotes Chinese goals.

VI. Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

As China emerges as a great trading partner for several Latin American countries, the United States' economic power in the continent is positioned at risk. The US has opposed the involvement of external powers in the Western Hemisphere since it announced the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, regarding Latin America and the Caribbean as its own sphere of influence. However, China is currently threatening US interests in a number of different ways, by directly threatening this very sphere of influence. It challenges the US hegemony in the region. This can be

⁴⁹ Ellis, *China in Latin America*.

⁵⁰ Ellis, *China in Latin America*.

observed as a reflection of China's geopolitical strategy of pushing for a multipolar international system substituting the until-now in place unipolar one, dominated by the United States.

Moreover, it has been suggested that China is increasing its influence in Latin America in order to counter the United States' dominance in East Asia and the Western Pacific.⁵¹ Regardless of the reason, the presence of a rival power in the region gives Latin American governments greater negotiation power and reduces the US's ability to achieve its policy goals.

Various Congressional Committees have held meetings in which this very topic of Chinese influence in Latin America has been examined, and a number of concerns were stressed, particularly on the political perspective. Congressman Dan Burton in a statement at a hearing before the House of Representatives' Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere stated: *"I am very concerned with the rise of influence China is pursuing in our Hemisphere and I believe it is important that the United States grasps the economic, social and national security implications of a Latin America under the thumb of China. Once China is able to move in and expand control, it will be difficult to turn the tide."*⁵²

The rise of China's influence can be observed not only as a threat to US geopolitical interests in Latin America but

⁵¹ Lei Yu. "China's Strategic Partnership with Latin America: A Fulcrum in China's Rise." *ResearchGate*, September 2015.

⁵² Burton. "The New Challenge: China in the Western Hemisphere" *Authenticated US Government Information*, June 11, 2008.

also as a threat undermining democracy in the region.⁵³

According to the Chinese model, a society may overcome poverty by employing a growth strategy that is not necessarily democratic.⁵⁴ This model emphasizes state-led economic planning, centralized decision-making, and a focus on stability and control over political freedoms as mechanisms to achieve rapid development. By prioritizing infrastructure investment, export-driven growth, and long-term strategic planning, China has demonstrated how authoritarian governance can produce significant economic gains without relying on democratic institutions or processes.⁵⁵ While this approach contrasts sharply with the democratic ideals traditionally promoted by the US, it presents an appealing alternative for some Latin American countries struggling with governance challenges, economic stagnation, or inequality.⁵⁶

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research paper underlines that China, through strategic investments, soft power, and diplomatic and political realignments, holds immense influence in Latin America. The United States has historically occupied the region for its own economic and political purposes, through a framework of doctrines that promoted its dominance of Latin America. Large loans, infrastructure

⁵³ Cimmino, Jeffrey. "China and Russia Engage Latin America and the Caribbean Differently. Both Threaten US Interests." *Atlantic Council*, 9 Feb. 2024, www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/china-and-russia-engage-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-differently-both-threaten-us-interests/.

⁵⁴ Jenkins, "China's Global Expansion and Latin America."

⁵⁵ Jenkins, "China's Global Expansion and Latin America."

⁵⁶ Jenkins, "China's Global Expansion and Latin America."

development, and foreign direct investment have all been hallmarks of the Chinese strategy , which has changed the economic landscape for nations like Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil. As a result of their increased economic reliance on China, American hegemony has been challenged. China has also gained soft power within the region as part of its cultural diplomacy initiatives, particularly through the Confucius Institutes and jointly undertaken media partnerships with the aim of influencing popular perception and elite decisions toward positive views of China.

V.III List of figures

Figure 1: Latin America's trade in goods with the United States and China.....3

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