

**China-Latin America and the Caribbean: Assessment and Outlook –
International symposium
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Clara Descamps,
Project Manager, IRELAC

The seminar was the opportunity to discuss the increasing presence of China in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), especially in a moment when important transformations are happening in Latin America (eg. the election of President Bolsonaro in Brazil). The seminar nurtured debate and reflection on future developments between China and Latin America.

Keynote Speech – “China-Latin America: A European view”

- **Christian Ghymers**, President of IRELAC

The introductory speech strived to lead to a better understanding of the Chinese strategy in Latin America and what the “Chinese dream” is. Through a historic as well as economic point of view, Christian Ghymers acknowledged that the Chinese growth led the world growth in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. According to him, the Chinese strategy is based on the free trade schema the USA had been developing beforehand. However, today President Trump’s strategy of inward-looking gives opportunities for China to spread its leadership in the world (China is a clear supporter of free trade and multilateralism).

China’s strategy with Latin America is clear: to penetrate the markets and develop a strong relationship. While China’s potential and capacities can boost Latin America – for example, China and Argentina share knowledge about nuclear technology –, risks of Latin American dependency and Chinese hegemonic position on the region is rising. Thus, Christian Ghymers insisted about the importance of using cooperation tools both among LAC partners and with the European Union in order to foster a genuine dialogue with China and rebalance powers between both regions.

Panel 1: China-Latin America and the Caribbean Relationship: What is at stake?

Chair: Sebastian Santander, Cefir, Liege University

- **“China’s Relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean: An Overview”** – Liu Jianhua
(City University of Macau, China)

Mr. Liu explained that the relationship between China and Latin America was becoming more and more important: Chinese visits to Latin America are reaching an unprecedented number. However, several misunderstandings about China remain to be overcome, notably the idea that “China is a threat”. According to him, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China’s presence in the region in general is benefitting Latin America through policy coordination, infrastructure connection (ex: high speed trains) and trade and finance. Cooperation between both regions need to become more important

because China is an “indispensable partner” for ECLAC. It is important to “go beyond complementarity”.

- **“La creciente complejidad de la relación ALC-China (2000-2018): retos y propuestas”** – Enrique Dussel Peters (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico)

Following on, Mr. Dussel Peters reminded that the Chinese process of globalization has potential, but that institutions for cooperation between China and LAC, although numerous, remain fragile and not based on adequate and reliable statistical information. He believes quality should prime over quantity. He finds regrettable that some good quality research papers exist but are not used efficiently. It is the case of research from COMEXI (Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales), CECHIMEX (Centro de Estudios China-México) from UNAM University, and AGENDASIA, that have been collecting information and analyses on China-Mexico relations for decades. It is important to start empowering the existing institutions and use information of quality today in order to make the relationship stronger in the future.

- **“Is China’s economic expansion responsible for pushing Latin America back in the periphery of the World Economy?”** – Jean-Christophe Defraigne (Université Saint-Louis UCLouvain, Belgique) and David Villalobos (Louvain School of Management UCLouvain)

According to their research, Latin America’s growth is slower than in other regions of the world – its capacity for technical innovation is the world’s lowest, criminality is high, and governance in general is inadequate, leading to non-competitive activities. The region has been experiencing a deindustrialization period for five decades, and China does not play a major role in the process. The region needs an industrial policy in order to become more technology oriented and to keep playing a role in international relations.

- **“China and Latin American Relationship under Xi’s New Era”** – Chen Yuanting (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), China)

According to Chen Yuanting, the relationship under Xi’s new Era has changed, going towards improved relations. However, Latin America’s expectations regarding China are too high to be realistic. On the other hand, she was also skeptical about China’s ability to manage efficiently the ambitious BRI.

- **“China y América del Sur: la re-significación de las relaciones bilaterales”** – Rodrigo Álvarez Valdes (Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH), Chile)

Rodrigo Álvarez Valdes backed Liu’s idea of a biased vision of China – seen as a threat. There is still a long track ahead in order for Latinos to differentiate and work along with Chinese, Japanese and other Asian peoples. However, trade and relations are already a reality. It is crucial for Latin America to change its position towards China. According to Robert Keohane, cooperation and stability go hand in hand with hegemony. Thus, Latin American countries which have a pessimistic view towards China should turn more optimistic, all the more so that many Latin American countries question the power of democracy to achieve one’s goals today. Since cooperation comes with mutual trust between partners, China has to gain Latin American countries’ trust in order to reach improved cooperation.

- **“No siempre todos ganan: las relaciones Sur-Sur de la República Popular China con los países del MERCOSUR”** – Lincoln Bizzozero (Universidad de la República (UDELAR), Uruguay)

According to Lincoln, the principle of a win-win game for China and Latin America in their cooperation does not work. China and Mercosur do not have the same influence and power, leading to a win-loss design.

In conclusion, the first panel gathered contrasted views on the relationship between China and Latin America. However, all panelists agreed upon the fact that China-Latin American relations are nowadays a reality, and that China has been developing a hegemonic strategy.

Panel 2: Case Studies: China-South America

Chair: Frank Mattheis (IEE, ULB / GovInn, University of Pretoria, South Africa)

- **“China’s South-South Cooperation Strategy in Latin America: The Case of Brazil”** – Carmen AMADO MENDES (University of Coimbra (UC), Portugal)

Carmen Amado Mendes talked about the specific relationship between Brazil and China. Brazil is indeed of particular interest for China for two main reasons: its position as one of the leaders in Latin America, and its link to the African continent via some Portuguese-speaking countries like Mozambique. While one could have seen a distance between Chinese and Brazilian cultures and languages, China overcame the issue with the promotion of China’s small community of Portuguese speakers in Macao, where Portuguese is one of the official languages. The use of Lusophony served as an argument for natural relationship with Portuguese speaking countries, like Brazil. On the other side, Brazil welcomes China as an alternative to the US position, and wants deeper economic cooperation with the country. However, Mrs. Amado highlighted that China-Brazil south-south relations do not always lead to win-win cooperation.

- **“China en la economía política internacional. La construcción de una estructura centro-periferia a través de un estudio de caso: las relaciones con Argentina 2003- 2018”** – Raúl BERNAL-MEZA (Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), Argentina)

Raul Bernal-Meza views China as indispensable for Argentina’s modernization (development of infrastructures, digitalization, etc). Argentina has been moving its production since China’s penetration to the market, going from a country of exports of meat and wheat to exports of soya.

- **“The Triangular Relationship of China, United States, and Venezuela”** – Ana SOLIZ LANDIVAR DE STANGE (German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Germany)

Ana Soliz presented her doctoral thesis on triangular Venezuela-China-US relations. She aims at analyzing the impact of China on Venezuela’s relation with the US between 2000 and 2015. China is indeed more and more present in Venezuela and diplomatic relations are increasing.

- **“Chinese trade and investments in Bolivia. South-South or dependency relations?”** – Valeria Marina VALLE (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico)

Valeria Marina Valle analyzed the Bolivian case. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America. It is an uneven and divided country. China represents a new form of south-south cooperation for Bolivia, and an alternative to the North-South relations the country has been experiencing with the US. However, Bolivia’s wealth only comes from its lithium resources, shared with Argentina and Chile. China might not consider the country as it should.

Panel 3: Case Studies: China-Central America and the Caribbean

Chair: Kevin PARTHENAY (CERI-OPALC, Sciences Po)

- **“Las relaciones China-América Central en el contexto de las tensiones sino-rusoestadounidenses”** – Carlos MURILLO ZAMORA (Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR), Costa Rica)

Carlos Murillo Zamora provided an analysis of how Central America and the Caribbean (Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela) are a strategic confrontation area between the USA and Russia and China. Moreover, he explained that China’s growing influence in the region is only officially acknowledged by a few countries (with whom diplomatic relations are developed). Nevertheless, in Costa-Rica, el Salvador and more recently in Panama, the formal relations with China are not always welcomed by the local population. Indeed, China’s interest for Central America is essentially strategic - the economic weight of those countries is almost insignificant from a Chinese perspective.

- **“China-Costa Rica: una relación compleja”** – Sophie WINTGENS (Cevipol/AmericaS, ULB)

Sophie Wintgens drew a picture of China-Costa Rica relations, officially recognized since 2007, and strengthened in 2015 to the level of Strategic Association. For Costa Rica, the cooperation creates several interests: Chinese purchase of public debt, investment in modern infrastructure, as well as political support Costa Rica’s appointment to UN Security Council. For China, Costa Rica is a road-opener to Central America and to inter-oceanic commercial routes. However, while exchanges have been multiplied by 16 in ten years, China-Costa Rica relations are not fully successful for Costa Rica, and demonstrations against the Chinese penetration in the country took place.

- **“Chine-Panama : nouveau pivot latino-américain de la Route de la Soie ?”** – Thierry KELLNER (REPI/EASt, ULB)

Thierry Kellner discussed the quick and impressive developments of China-Panama relationship under President Juan Carlos Varela. Panama has recently overtaken Costa Rica as the first partner to China in the region. Indeed, Panama is seen as a gateway to redistributing goods all over the American continent (country of transit). However, relations with China are also criticized in Panama.

- **“Les relations de la RPC avec Cuba, un cas spécial dans la Caraïbe”** – Eric DUBESSET
(Université de Bordeaux, France)

Eric Dubesset illustrated the interest of China towards Cuba. China’s interest in Cuba remains more political than economic because Cuba has moved independently from the "real socialism" model to a country-specific form of government, like China. China-Cuba cooperation appears in many fields such as the commercial, military and scientific ones, but the relationship is not perfectly harmonious.

In conclusion, the last panel showed that China is developing its relations with countries in Central America and the Caribbean, but that those relationships are usually questioned by the local communities.