

The China-Latin America and Caribbean Relation: Introduction

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The growing rivalry between the United States and China places Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in a complicated situation. On one hand, since its imperial rise in the nineteenth century, the United States has been a dominant power which tries to extract the greatest advantage from the region and does not hesitate to intervene in its political processes. On the other, China has emerged in the twenty-first century with a significant presence in all imaginable ambits. How should the countries of LAC confront this rivalry among great powers to minimize conflict and maximize the benefits to their people? Politicians—and scholars—of the region could play a mediating role to promote cooperation or at least competition among powers, while reducing conflict.

The following *LASA Forum* dossier is made up of seven articles on the relations between Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Enrique Dussel Peters was the main editor for this section. Thanks to Enrique's considerable network of *LASA* experts, we were able to recruit a diversity of essays reflecting *LASA*'s pluralism in perspectives and disciplinary complementarities. Bearing in mind that the central theme of *LASA*'s 2022 Congress is "Socioenvironmental polarization and rivalry among great powers," the essays in this section pertain above all to the last point, both historically and in contemporary terms. An underlying question seems to run through this section: What are the chief challenges and opportunities for LAC with China's emerging economic power?

In the first essay, Enrique Dussel Peters proposes that we transcend the newly fashionable analyses of the relations between LAC and China, especially those that characterize it in the framework of a new Cold War. Taking a step beyond such formulations, Dussel Peters proposes several concepts that

might enable us to better understand this critical emerging relationship in the twenty-first century. He also suggests that we need to improve the quality of the dialogue on specific topics of the LAC-China relationship and, particularly, to dedicate more time and resources to public, private, and academic institutions specializing in the LAC-China relationship in LAC, China, and other parts of the world.

Evelyn Hu-DeHart offers an erudite overview of Asian diasporas in Latin America and the Caribbean, highlighting how, invariably across time since the seventeenth century, this phenomenon was closely associated with the imperial powers' emerging needs to supply labor power in their colonies and realms, or, in the twenty-first century, new areas of investment. Hu-DeHart raises important questions about why it was in New Spain and Mexico that members of the Chinese diaspora, in particular, were subject to the most violent actions against them. She also notes that the persistent Chinese diaspora into the twenty-first century has yet to be studied in depth.

The COVID-19 pandemic and responses by the international system is the subject of Andrés Serbin's essay. Co-chair of the Asia and the Americas Section of *LASA*, Serbin describes the dire situation in which LAC countries already found themselves prior to the pandemic, due to one of the region's chief characteristics: socioeconomic inequality. Such inequality was deepened gravely with the pandemic, worsened in turn by overall global inequality among states, such that the most advanced capitalist countries have concentrated vaccines well beyond their population sizes. In this context, China and Russia have been much more proactive in their assistance to LAC by developing "vaccine diplomacy" and by providing the much-

needed vaccines in large numbers. Until recently, such diplomacy has been missing from wealthy Western countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by the People's Republic of China in 2013, is no doubt a central component of how this country has been engaging globalization, argues R. Evan Ellis in his essay. Since Panama joined this initiative in 2018, a total of 19 Latin American countries have joined, highlighting the relevance of understanding its main features and development. Ellis focuses on understanding the BRI's and China's strategic focus on connectivity for its development projects. For him, the principal adverse effects for LAC will be that China and its companies will gain considerable leverage to gain contracts, market position, and value added in other sectors. Such effects could deprive domestic firms of future opportunities.

With the transition from internal combustion engines in the automobile sector to electric cars, and the general need to store energy from sustainable but intermittent sources like wind and solar, lithium mining has become a huge strategic issue for LAC. As all kinds of extractive endeavors, a central question is whether lithium mining can be compatible with green goals of sustainability, including those embedded in Latin America's new Escazú agreement and China's new commitments to greening overseas investment. Such goals are particularly challenging because lithium mining requires enormous amounts of water. And it so happens that the "lithium triangle" is located in a desert shared by Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. This dilemma is discussed by Rebecca Ray, Kehan Wang, and Zara C. Albright. They consider past lessons of Chinese mining companies in Peru, which could serve as a model for dealing with issues of stakeholder participation and moving toward international norm building, civil society participation, strengthening central government capacity, and investor cooperation.

As anticipated in Evelyn Hu-DeHart's essay, a critical issue for Chinese diasporas and their countries of destination is how they are received and whether they are subjected to discrimination and even violence. Across the Americas, states and citizens are confronting histories of racial violence and

their legacies in the twenty-first century. Mexican president López Obrador's May 2021 apology for the 1911 Torreón massacre exemplifies this trend. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has exposed the continuity of these racist formations and new tensions, especially in relation to China. Asian bodies and communities have been marked as contaminated virus carriers subject to anti-Chinese sentiment and violence, even as the Chinese state has become an increasingly important development partner in Latin America. Monica DeHart draws on ethnographic research in Central America to illuminate the multiple Chinas and forms of Chineseness that have been constitutive of regional development, rather than foreign to it. Her transpacific analysis offers a useful vantage point for comprehending the nature and stakes of Chinese development in Latin America at a moment of racial reckoning and beyond.

As China's urban population edges toward one billion people, demand for pork, noodles, and bread is growing. To sustain this demand requires soybeans processed into animal feed, plus wheat and barley. The resulting supply chains, largely immune to recent trade frictions, stretch from China's dinner tables to South America's soy plantations and Australia's grain fields. Brazil and Australia reflect a comparable history of food production: from Indigenous horticulture to colonial agriculture and postcolonial agribusiness. Commodity cropping in both countries has combined with urban expansion to encroach on peri-urban land, where fresh food has historically been grown for cities. Citizens are pushing back with community farms and online platforms that connect producers with inner city customers. Anthropologist Adrian Hearn finds that local food activists are responding to global pressures in Beijing as much as in Rio de Janeiro and Melbourne. In all cases, their ability to mobilize communities and secure support from governments is strengthened by the articulation of food traditions.

The Joseph Biden administration in the United States insists on continuing the rift with China started by his predecessor in the form of a trade war, making it now more encompassing and pitched as a contest between democracy and

autocracy. In the second week of June 2021, Biden tried to convince US allies in a meeting of the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to “curb China’s economic influence.” US allies, however, are unclear whether China should be considered as “a partner, competitor, adversary or outright security threat,” as Biden would like to put it (Sanger and Landler 2021, 9). China has responded that “the days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone” (*China Daily* 2021), explicitly referring to the G7, and countering with an effective multilateralism and the relevance of the G20, with the participation of China and India, as well as of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico in LAC.

LAC countries, from this perspective, will increasingly have to deal with “big power competition” and “new triangular relationships,” as discussed by several of the authors in this issue. We at LASA can hopefully provide cultural, historical, socioeconomic, agricultural, and environmental analysis. Clearly, conditions in the short, medium, and long terms will be full of bumps and obstacles, and we should be prepared with better knowledge about LAC-China relations.

References

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