

One Actor, Many Agents: China's Latin America Policy in Theory and Practice

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Paper prepared for the VIIth ALACIP Congress
at Los Andes University, Bogotá, Colombia

25th September, 2013

ABSTRACT: As the presence and impact of Chinese companies, private and state-owned, gain traction in the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, it has become evident that their goals and approaches are often at odds with official government policy. What is more, the reaction to the new stakeholders has become more varied, as both collaborative and competitive relationships have evolved, and have strengthened or soured. This in turn reflects upon China's international image globally, for despite the diversity in evidence, the media, the public and national governments tend to conceive of China as a unified actor, and this is indeed a perception encouraged by Chinese leaders when they tour the region. This article contrasts the attempts at presenting a unified foreign policy of the PRC and the often incongruent aspects of the country's foreign relations in the region, and explores the implications of this umbrella approach, its incongruences and potential pitfalls. It adopts a comparative approach to examining patterns and implications in China's relations with Latin America, looking at Beijing's overall foreign policy approach, its evolving relationship with the Latin American region, the interests underlying this relationship, the challenges it faces and how to make coherent sense of it.

KEYWORDS: Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, China Relations with Latin America, Peaceful Rise, Going-out Strategy

The relationship between the two regions has grown rapidly since then-president Jiang Zemin's tour of Latin America in 2001 and his successor Hu Jintao's string of visits in 2004, both in quantifiable terms and in the perceptions of politicians, business leaders and foreign observers. The 2008 Policy Paper – a canvas of intentions and set out broad terms for bilateral cooperation – invariably described a 'win-win situation'. The Chinese leadership has made numerous overtures to the governments of Latin America and the Caribbean in the past few years, the most recent and noteworthy being the speech by Premier Wen Jiabao at the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) on 26th June 2012¹. Wen's address under the heading "Trusted Friends Forever" raised the character of the connection to something akin to poetic destiny. He outlined four specific proposals for furthering cooperation, focusing on political links, economic development, food security, and human and scientific exchange, backing these up with loans, funds, and financial goals. But what underlies this thinking and who was he addressing?

In an attempt to answer this dual question, this paper adopts a comparative approach to examining patterns and implications in China's relations with Latin America, looking at Beijing's overall foreign policy approach, its evolving relationship with the Latin American region, the interests underlying this relationship, the challenges it faces and how to make sense of it. I shall outline three broad issues: the core characteristics of China's foreign policy, China's view of Latin America and its place within this grand scheme, and the role of SOEs, SMEs and other agents within those strategies and challenges. I then return to the initial question and offer a possible explanation for the inconsistencies within the Chinese approach, before concluding with some observations on the prospects for China's foreign policy in Latin America and how to interpret the obstacles and challenges.

China's Foreign Policy

As China's footprint in every region of the world and every sphere of human endeavour grows, so does the debate as to what its true impact will be in the course of the

¹ Jiabao Wen, "Trusted Friends Forever: Address by Premier Wen Jiabao at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean of the United Nations " in *ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean of the United Nations)* (Santiago de Chile 2012).

twenty-first century. Opinions range from the boisterous predictions on countless Chinese blogs and opinion columns that it will reach “superpower status” and “rule the world”² within a generation, to more level-headed analyses that it will be a “partial power”³ at best. China is, unquestionably, a major protagonist on the global stage that is increasingly shaping ideas and institutions the world over. As it matures into this role, its identity and actions are shaped by its own history and aspirations: its history as a humiliated power after the middle of the nineteenth century (百年国耻), the concurrent fear of losing control over its sovereign territory, and a deeply felt urge to regain influence. In the hope of redeeming a metaphor that has been widely overused and misconstrued, it could be said that China is a benign dragon who was mortally wounded and had its cave destroyed, and as it rears its head it continues to be feared and misunderstood by the armored knights and confused maidens of today⁴. The core concerns of this injured dragon are its health, pride and sustenance: China is preoccupied in the first place with social stability, national sovereignty and steady consumption. These are inextricably linked with economic growth and reliable supplies of raw materials, energy and food. What then does this mean for its foreign policy?

It means, essentially, that China’s foreign policy strategies since 1978 are inextricably linked to the country’s modernization drive and its principal target is the creation of an international environment conducive to this priority. The Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011-15) describes a subtle transformation of the developmental model with the combined goals of accelerating urbanization and domestic consumption, improving public services and the distribution of income, and creating sustainable industrial and investment structures. Going

² This concept has been brought to the foreground of this global discussion by Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: the Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World* (London: Allen Lane, 2009). Not all books with similarly emotive titles, however, reach the same conclusion, see for instance David Scott, *'The Chinese Century'? The Challenge to Global Order*, ed. Jim Whitman, Global Issues (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). or Peter Nolan, *Is China Buying the World?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

³ This version has been argued recently by David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ The British poet U.A. Fanthorpe gave an unconventional voice Paolo Uccello’s dragon in her poem “Not my best side,” though this is still a far cry from the voice of the proud and playful beast roaming seas and skies in Chinese imagery. My argument is that when China projects the image of a dragon, or analysts do so on its behalf, well-intentioned or not, the lenses of Western audiences distort it into the fire-breathing dragon of medieval European imagination.

further, the State Council has published the “Energy Development Five-year Plan”⁵ where specific reference is made to global energy market volatility risks (全球能源市场波动风险加剧), a risk factor with trickle-down effects into all other spheres. It is clear, therefore, that China’s domestic concerns and requirements trump all foreign policy objectives, something that finds its expression in the makeup of the Chinese government: neither China’s new foreign minister, Wang Yi, nor his predecessor Yang Jiechi, are members of the powerful Politburo. This reality leads some analysts to describe China’s foreign policy as “highly deficient” and even to question whether there is such a thing as a foreign policy⁶.

Having said that, China does in fact have very clear foreign policy principles and objectives that underlie its attitude and approach to all countries. The *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (和平共处五项原则) were developed by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1940s as a basis for relations with the United States and articulated by Mao Zedong prior to the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949⁷: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in others’ internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Though they tend to sound to Western ears like somewhat outdated propaganda, they continue to define Chinese foreign policy today⁸. The *objectives* are less succinctly set in stone, but in July 2009 then-president Hu Jintao explained that China’s diplomacy “must safeguard the interests of sovereignty, security, and development.”⁹ This is officially defined as meaning (first) domestic political stability; (second) sovereign security, territorial integrity and national unification; and (third)

⁵国务院发布能源发展“十二五”规划全文[State Council publishes full text of Energy Development Twelve-year Plan], on Chinese Economy Net, www.ce.cn/cysc/ny/zcjd/201301/24/t20130124_21325226.shtml, published online January 2013.

⁶ Zheng Wang, "Does China Have a Foreign Policy?," *The Wilson Weekly*(2013), www.wilsoncenter.org/article/does-china-have-foreign-policy.

⁷ Sophie Richardson, *China, Cambodia, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁸ Several authors underscore this point, such as Xuetong Yan, *中国国家利益分析 [Analysis of China's National Interests]* (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 1997). For a more recent discussion, see Song Xiaoping in his chapter “Elementos fundamentales del marco teórico de la política exterior de China,” in: Benjamin Creutzfeldt, ed. *China en América Latina: Reflexiones sobre las relaciones transpacíficas* (Bogota: Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2012), p.96.

⁹ Quoted by Jisi Wang, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way," *Foreign Affairs* March/April(2011).

China's sustainable economic and social development¹⁰. Evan S. Medeiros translates this into “fostering economic development, reassurance, countering constraints, diversifying access to natural resources, and reducing Taiwan's international space.”¹¹

These principles and objectives are tempered, then, by domestic necessities, and it is these that must be considered to be able to understand China's approach to the rest of the world. The country and its single-party leadership is challenged internally by environmental degradation, systemic corruption and growing social inequality –often referred to summarily as *Latinamericanization* (拉美化)¹²– and externally by regional tensions and disputes. While it appears from without that China can effortlessly continue its impressive economic growth unabated, its policymakers, businessmen and academics do not take this for granted. Sustained growth within what Jiang Zemin in 2002 declared a ‘period of strategic opportunity’ (战略机遇期) is dependent upon social stability, continued scientific and industrial development, internal consumption combined with rising exports, controlled inflation and exchange rates, and steady supplies of raw materials for production and consumption, from diversified sources. This is where Latin America comes into the picture.

China's Relations with Latin America

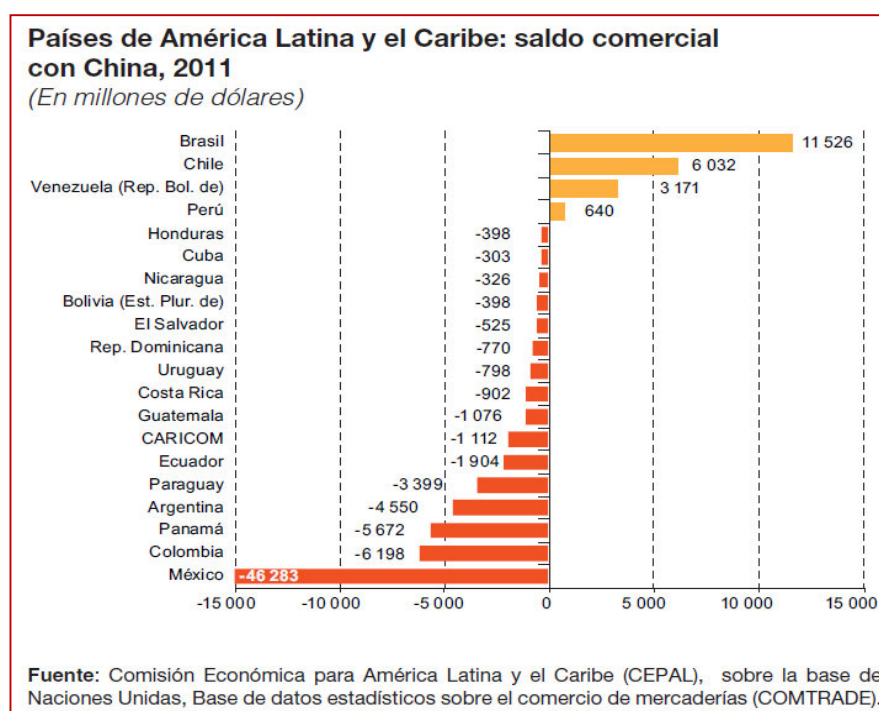
China's interest in Latin America has grown rapidly since the turn of the century and its rapidly expanding relations have found expression in many forms, beginning with high-level leadership diplomacy in 2001 when President Jiang Zemin visited Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Uruguay and Venezuela in April 2001, and made a separate visit to Mexico in 2002. This was followed by Hu Jintao's trips to Brazil, Argentina and Chile in 2004 and Costa Rica, Cuba and Peru in 2008, bringing in his wake a large entourage of officials and businessmen. These visits were part of China's growing engagement with all

¹⁰ Bingguo Dai, "坚持走和平发展道路(全文) [Adhering to the path of peaceful development (full text)]," *China News Net*(2010), www.chinanews.com/gn/2010/12-07/2704984.shtml.

¹¹ Evan S. Medeiros, *China's International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2009). p. 45.

¹² For a wide-ranging discussion of this phenomenon, see Simon Shen, “Online Chinese Perceptions of Latin America” in Julia C. Strauss and Ariel C. Armony, eds., *From the Great Wall to the New World: China and Latin America in the 21st Century*, China Quarterly Special Issue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 157-77.

regions of the world, driven by the strategic analysis underlying the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-05), suggesting among other things that Chinese national oil companies should expand their activities in three strategic geographical areas, one of these being Latin America. The region has been a highly dynamic trading partner for China¹³, constituting today almost 6% of the value of China's total imports. Measured in commercial terms, trade volume grew from ten billion US\$ in the year 2000 to \$184 billion in 2010¹⁴ (see ECLAC graphic below). While a large part of this consisted of minerals and fossil fuels, agricultural goods also featured heavily in the equation, with a third of Chinese agricultural imports derived from Latin America in 2003, of which Argentina represented 15 per cent and Brazil 14 per cent¹⁵.



¹³ Osvaldo Rosales and Mikio Kuwayama, *China and Latin America and the Caribbean: Building a strategic economic and trade relationship* (Santiago de Chile: ECLAC, United Nations, 2012). p.65.

¹⁴ SELA, "Relations between China and Latin America and the Caribbean in the current world economic situation," (Caracas: SELA (Sistema Económico Latinoamericano y del Caribe), 2012). Sources vary on the exact figures of growth, and in cash-based economies such as China and many South American countries, the actual transactions may well be more than double the published values, even without accounting for contraband and illegal goods, but the tendency is clear.

¹⁵ Teng Chung-Chian in Joshua Eisenman, Eric Heginbotham, and Derek Mitchell, *China and the Developing World: Beijing's Strategy for the Twenty-First Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E.Sharpe, 2007). p.93.

To accompany this expanding exchange, in November 2008 China published its *Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean* (as it had done previously for the European Union in 2003 and for Africa in 2006)¹⁶. Reiterating its commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the Paper describes Latin America and the Caribbean as “an important part of the developing world and a major force in the international arena [...] the Chinese Government aims to further clarify the goals of China's policy in this region, outline the guiding principles for future cooperation between the two sides in various fields and sustain the sound, steady and all-round growth of China's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean.” It states four broad goals which are to be promoted by means of policies and ties in the following fields: political, economic, cultural-social, and what it calls “peace, security and judicial affairs.” The broad goals are the promotion of mutual respect, trust and “understanding and support on issues involving each other’s core interests and major concerns;” the deepening of economic cooperation for the benefit of both sides, with China and Latin American nations each leveraging “their respective strengths;” the expansion of cultural and people-to-people links with the aim of promoting “development and progress of human civilization, and the insistence on the One-China principle as the political basis for cooperative relations¹⁷.

In spite of the multifaceted interests outlined, it is clear that China’s interest in the region is defined by its economic priorities: trade designed to secure and maintain support for sustained domestic economic development in China, as well as Chinese investments (and lending) in the region. It is also important to bear in mind that the physical distance means that Latin America is and will probably remain less important to China than Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The objective single-mindedly pursued here is diversification, and a key element of this approach is multilateralism: the People’s Republic is a member of the Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) which also includes Chile, Mexico, Panama and Peru, and became a shareholder in the Caribbean Development Bank in 1998 and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) in 2009. It enjoys observer status in the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), the Latin American Parliament, and the UN’s Economic

¹⁶ www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t521025.htm, published on 5 November 2008.

¹⁷ For more detailed reflections on the 2008 Policy Paper, see the chapters by Riordan Roett or Sebastian Castañeda in Creutzfeldt, *China en América Latina: Reflexiones sobre las relaciones transpacificas*.

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). It is also in permanent dialogue with regional economic organizations Mercosur, the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) and the Caribbean Community (Caricom)¹⁸. The Chinese government has initiated bilateral dialogue forums, such as the China-Latin America business summit (since 2007, under the auspices of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, CCPIT) and the China-Latin America Think Tank Forum (since 2010, sponsored by the Institute of Foreign Affairs, CPIFA).

One Actor, Many Agents

In the light of the thickening network of state visits, multilateral exchanges, and big trade figures, it is tempting to put a big bracket around these multi-layered activities and subsume them all under the official declarations. But while it is true that China's global expansion was initiated by Deng Xiaoping's call for "reform and opening" (改革开放) at the historic Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in late 1978, and Chinese corporate and entrepreneurial worldwide activities were further stoked in the 1990s through the "Going-Out" policy (走出去) and the call to "go global" (走向世界), this does not paint the whole picture. Many analysts focus on national interests and the political interactions that accompany such activity, and the media tend to have the same take, but for enterprises, whether state-owned or not, trade and investment are often only loosely linked to government policy. As Gastón Fornés remarks, "Chinese MNEs investing in Latin America do so for largely instrumental commercial reasons, and not at the behest of the Chinese government"¹⁹. What is more, there is now "some evidence that Chinese [corporate] interests are also acquiring strategic assets for market-seeking purposes"²⁰. (Examples to follow here.) Combined with the fact that there is often a lack of direct engagement with local communities by Chinese investors, situations regularly arise that run counter to the governments mottoes and intentions. As a result, there have been occasions in many parts of Latin America when

¹⁸ For a longer list and a discussion of China's multi-layered involvement in Latin America, see Ana Soliz Landivar and Sören Scholvin, "China in Lateinamerika: Chancen und Grenzen seines zunehmenden Einflusses," *GIGA Focus* 6(2011).

¹⁹ Gastón Fornés and Alan Butt Philip, *The China-Latin America Axis: Emerging Markets and the Future of Globalisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). p.75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.74.

corporate interests run counter to the image China intends to project in the region. One such instance is the multiple problems Emerald Energy has encountered in Colombia since its acquisition by Sinochem, ranging from local protests to becoming victims of kidnapping, resulting in complaints and accusations brought before ministries and the press. Other cases have been prominently reported in Brazil, Argentina, and Peru.

A Vacuum: Muted Response from Latin America

Following the diplomatic overtures initiated by China, Latin America soon awakened to the new possibilities of Chinese partnership and investment, bilateral exchanges and agreements continued apace. Though there is significant variance from country to country, and from one economic sector to another, the importance of China as a major trading, investment and lending partner helped Latin America sustain its growth even after the 2008 financial crisis. Nonetheless, the response from Latin American leaders was hesitant and spotty after Hu's in visit 2004, cautious and inconsistent after the Policy Paper in 2008, and continues, another four years on, to be largely unplanned, and incoherent across the region. According to Osvaldo Rosales of ECLAC²¹, a mere three countries – Mexico, Chile, and Brazil – responded formally to the Policy Paper within a year of its publication. The divergence across the region can be seen in terms of trade volume and balance, as ECLAC's statistics for 2011 show (below), and equally in the numbers of state visits in either direction since 2001: Chile and Brazil top the list of countries in the region receiving state visits from China, while Brazil, Chile and Venezuela are those whose leaders have most often travelled to China²². Of the 33 independent countries in the region, 21 have established diplomatic relations with the PRC, and only six of those have bilateral chambers of commerce²³.

²¹ Personal communication, March 2012.

²² The list most recently compiled by ECLAC (2012, p.48) is incomplete in that it omits some vice presidential visits such as Xi Jinping in 2009, and does not account for head-of-state encounters at international for a such as BRICS. It nonetheless shows clear tendencies.

²³ As a matter of fact, both Argentina and Colombia list TWO bilateral chambers of commerce each, but the PRC only recognizes one from each country. The low presence of independent commercial offices from Latin America in China is an impediment to market entry in China, though many businesspeople avail themselves of other facilities, in particular Spain's.

Under the heading of cultural diplomacy and academic exchange, China has established 22 Confucius Institutes in ten countries in the region²⁴. It has a considerable number of Latin America experts in universities and institutes in Beijing and Shanghai, many of whom publish in the respected Chinese-language journal 拉丁美洲研究 [Journal of Latin American Studies]. Unfortunately, there is no comparable journal, institute or organization of Chinese studies in Latin America. It is evident that there is a substantial lack of preparation and a worryingly fragmented response in Latin America to China's ever larger footprint in the region²⁵. While the Chinese government seeks bilateral agreements and increasing involvement in regional organizations, the countries remain totally unprepared and largely blinkered – unaware and uninterested in what their neighbors are doing about China, though the initiative presented by the newly created Pacific Alliance promises change in this area. While Premier Wen highlights the common cultural roots of the nations of Latin America, politicians and businesspeople here emphasize their differences, formulating vague ideas of national exceptionalism²⁶. While the press on this side celebrates trade growth and state visits, the press in China frequently gives those same events little or no attention. The questions then are: whether the Chinese government is in fact *aware* of this incoherence between its approach to Latin America and the local realities, to what extent it is *conscious* of the difficulties it faces, and to what degree it is *addressing* the situation.

In order to assess what shapes and informs China's approach to Latin America –in which it consistently includes the Caribbean despite the linguistic and cultural differences– it is necessary to explore Chinese sources. These can be divided into three groups: official statements and government declarations, scholarly publications, and the online press. In terms of official statements, I focus on those referring to the region as a whole, essentially the 2008 *Policy Paper* and Wen's ECLAC speech mentioned above, though a more thorough study might include CCP studies and relevant statements made by officials. In terms of scholarly

²⁴ This compares to the exact same number in Africa, but only little more than in South Korea (17) and considerably less than in the United States (74).

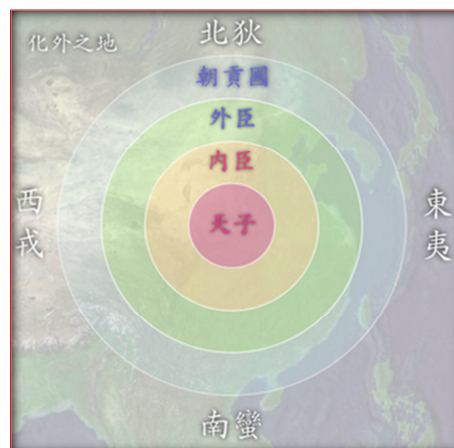
²⁵ This point is also made forcefully by David Shambaugh in his foreword to Adrian H. Hearn and José Luis León-Manríquez, eds., *China Engages Latin America: Tracing the Trajectory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011), p.xii.

²⁶ For instance, during a conference at the Colombian Foreign Ministry in 2009, a Chilean representative recommended expanding regional cooperation in order to make more ample use of the FTA with China, to which the then-foreign minister Bermúdez responded, “We Colombians are not very good at cooperating.”

publications, there are the many general IR schools with sites and publications, and considerably fewer concentrating on Latin America, so that I limit myself here to the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS). The last group, the online press *viz.* internet resources, is by its nature the richest and most diverse, but the most complex to evaluate²⁷. Allen Carlson and Hong Duan discuss the value and pitfalls of using the internet in the study of Chinese foreign relations and come to the conclusion that it is an increasingly useful tool, but that “so far scholars have failed to fully realize its potential”²⁸.

Official Statements

It is difficult for Westerners, trained to be skeptical towards political clichés, to take on board Chinese official pronouncements. Hu Jintao’s “Four No’s” and the concept of “Harmonious World” are often considered fuzzy and impractical, Wen’s “lasting friendship and common development” ring hollow to our ears. Nonetheless, it is important that they be taken at face value, at least in the first instance, if we want to attempt to understand the Chinese approach to Latin America. The widely held perceptions of China as an aggressive expansionist power, promoted in particular by English-language media, do not reflect China’s view of itself, nor indeed its background or trajectory.



²⁷ Chinese is now the second most widely used language on the world-wide web, with over 500 million users, likely to overtake English within a few years. The use of online translation tools is tempting but distorts contents beyond recognition, and way beyond usefulness.

²⁸ Allen Carlson et al., eds., *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.106.

A useful way to conceptualize the Chinese world view, which has its roots in the *Tianxia* vision, is in four concentric rings. The first ring corresponds to the territory administered (or claimed by) Beijing. The second ring represents the 17 terrestrial and maritime borders, while the third ring describes the conjoined geopolitical regions of Asia and their respective alliances. Finally, there is the fourth ring, the world beyond. This in turn may be further subdivided, and it is fair to assert that Latin America is not a priority concern, except where related issues (such as energy supply or food security) cross over into its four key foreign policy concerns.



A second key to understanding China's view of Latin America is its emphasis on regional coherence and diversity within unity, best illustrated by a scene from the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games, when children representing the 56 nationalities of the PRC marched under the national flag. The Chinese government is keen on national unity in its own cultural and national context, and on regional integration and cooperation at an international level. Countless statements and articles reflecting official opinion underscore this perspective: in the words of Wen Jiabao, "we firmly believe that a growing Latin America and the Caribbean serves the interest of world peace and development"²⁹. In a similar vein, Sun Hongbo explains that "China expects steady and sound development of the

²⁹ *Op. cit.*

Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and hopes it can become a major platform for China-Latin American regional dialogue and cooperation in the future”³⁰.

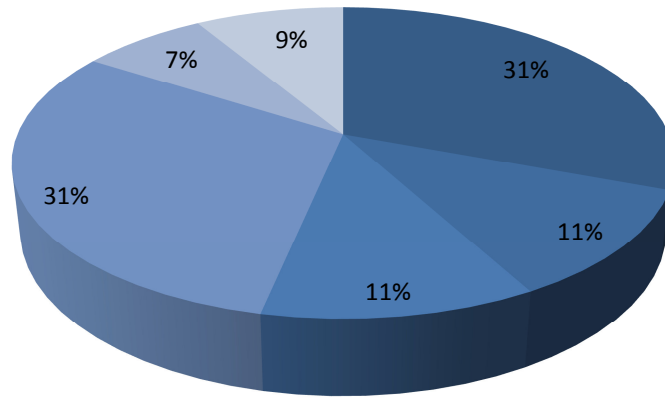
Scholarly publications

While a broader academic discussion on Chinese world view and foreign policy would be a fascinating topic here, if only to explore the contrasting concepts of the most prominent IR scholars such as Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong, Liu Mingfu and Zhao Tingyang, our spotlight is one region and the ILAS’ *Journal of Latin American Studies* (JLAS) is without competition the prime reference. A simple analysis of the 182 articles published by JLAS between 2010 and 2012 reveals that 63 per cent explore regional issues versus 37 per cent that discuss individual countries, among which Mexico and Brazil dominate, largely the former two out of economic considerations. In terms of subject matter, only nineteen articles are concerned explicitly with US influence in the region, half of these as part of historical discussions rather than matters of current affairs. It is only a small sampling, but it nonetheless permits the observation that the Chinese academic interest in Latin America, while informed in detail, is more interested in the whole, which coincides with the political perspective.

³⁰ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2011-12/05/c_131288689.htm

JLAS 2010-2012 by main contents

■ Politics ■ US relations ■ History ■ Economics & Trade ■ Natural Resources ■ Culture



A recent academically led event reflects a similar notion. In November 2010, the Chinese government convened the first “China-Latin America and the Caribbean Think Tank Forum” in Beijing. Orchestrated by the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, most participants were either former diplomats or university researchers earmarked by the political affairs sections of China’s embassies in the region. The hope was to identify themes of common concern in a “South-South” dialogue. Interestingly, what was missing was a Portuguese interpreter for the Brazilian participants. The image conveyed was that China views Latin America and the Caribbean as a coherent region –whether the region agrees or not– and Brazil as a power apart.

Online press

Among the main media sites in China, 人民网 [People’s Net] is the most visible and is run by 人民日报 [The People’s Daily], the official newspaper of the CCP. Xinhua Net tends to cover much of the same ground, and multiple others feed off these information networks. For this brief paper, we have analyzed 263 news items pertaining to Latin America and the Caribbean and its constituent countries, for the 12-month period between June 2011 and July 2012 (see table below). The classification of categories covered in the press is

incomplete and doubtless needs improving, but here we find that a little less than half of news items refer to the region as a whole, while about 60 per cent focus on individual countries. It should be noted that the fact that Mexico looms large on the table is partly conditioned by three factors: Mexico has *People's Net's* largest permanent press office in the region, and news coverage during this period was dominated by the fortieth anniversary of bilateral relations and the December earthquake.

The picture that emerges is that the Chinese view of Latin America and the Caribbean is that of a region with common characteristics. This directly impacts perceptions in China at all levels: the vice president of one of China's largest SOEs recently visited Colombia and was told by local businessmen that Colombia was different in every respect from Venezuela and its other neighbors, to which he responded impatiently: “但还是拉美” [*it's still Latin America*].³¹ This sentiment once again reflects the view China and its representatives hold of the region.

In answer to my question at the outset, we can conclude that the Chinese government and expert community are in fact aware of a level of incoherence between its approach to Latin America and the local realities. These same actors have also, through in-depth and thematically varied research and publications, explored the extent of the difficulties they face. And most importantly, they have chosen to be proactive and address the situation by proposing strategies openly and clearly.

Conclusions

The image of China as a unitary actor in Latin America as a uniform region is inaccurate and inadequate. The official statements and proclaimed strategies by the Chinese government are not yet matured enough to form a more widely attractive platform for multi-layered engagement across the Pacific, and persistently speaking about “China” leads to misinterpretations by ignoring the diversity of the many agents getting involved in the region.

³¹ Zhang Xisheng, vice president of CRCC, during a meeting in Bogota on 27 July 2012.

What these observations point to, is the necessity to develop a dual conceptualization of this relationship: putting the interactions and dynamics on different parallel planes may help resolve apparent contradictions in a very Chinese way, and open up the field for further inquiries.

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