

China and Latin America: Mutual benefits or asymmetric relationship?

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Abstract

With China's rapid growth, it is worth considering whether or not the country has challenged the United States, which for decades was the hegemonic power in much of Latin America. Posed in international studies, these questions are viewed from a Western perspective, arguably ethnocentric and universalist, which understands the international context as one of allies and enemies, center and periphery. Thus, it is difficult to understand a global rearrangement involving a non-Western actor. There seems to be no other way of understanding peaceful coexistence without involving the dominant and dominated relationship. Therefore, this paper seeks to explain whether a strategic relationship, fostered based on equal relationships for mutual benefit, is possible, without thinking about the soft or strong power notion that characterized the international order of the 20th Century. For the approach, a qualitative analytical-descriptive methodology is used.

Keywords: China, Latin America, peaceful coexistence, asymmetric relationships.



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China y América Latina: ¿Beneficios mutuos o relación asimétrica?

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Resumen

Con el rápido crecimiento de China, cabe preguntarse si este país ha desafiado a Estados Unidos, que durante décadas fue la potencia hegemónica en gran parte de América Latina. Planteadas en los estudios internacionales, estas cuestiones se ven desde una perspectiva occidental, posiblemente etnocéntrica y universalista, que entiende el contexto internacional como uno de aliados y enemigos, centro y periferia. Así, es difícil entender un reordenamiento global que implique a un actor no occidental. No parece haber otra forma de entender la coexistencia pacífica sin involucrar la relación dominante y dominado. Por ello, este trabajo pretende explicar si es posible una relación estratégica, fomentada en base a relaciones de igualdad para el beneficio mutuo, sin pensar en la noción de poder blando o fuerte que caracterizó el orden internacional del siglo XX. Para el planteamiento, se utiliza una metodología cualitativa analítico-descriptiva.

Palabras clave: China, América Latina, convivencia pacífica, relaciones asimétricas.

Introduction

Amid the prevailing global problems of internal armed conflict, forced migration, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all of which collaborative responses (United Nations, 2015), power relations and the international development system are changing progressively along with the dynamics and challenges raised by globalization (United Nations, 2020).

Rooted in the mid-20th century, the bipolar system led by the Organization for Economic Development Cooperation (OECD), with its distinct areas of influence and conditioned international cooperation dynamics, has, in recent decades, been transitioning to a multipolar order whose risks and uncertainties have sparked the arrival of new international actors, institutions, and spatialities with an important role in today's international society (Marley & Desai, 2020).

This has given rise to multiple forms of governance that seek to respond collectively to global challenges, as well as new leaderships that challenge the current order. In this context international actors have become prominent--none more so than the People's Republic of China, the world's largest exporter (The World Bank, 2021) and second-biggest economy. This position has allowed the country to participate in reshaping the world geopolitical order and, particularly in Latin America, to promote changes that have a bearing on the foreign policy relations and affairs of countries.

Notable developments were the Silk Road Economic Belt strategy proposed by President Xi Jinping during a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, and the joint promotion of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in a meeting between ASEAN countries that same year. Both mechanisms marked the launch of a foreign policy platform that has allowed China to strengthen its strategic role on a global scale (China, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of, 2021).

The rapid growth of this country has prompted many new questions in international studies. On the one hand, these questions center on how and why China has emerged in the international sphere (Castrillón Álvarez, 2019) and on whether or not China challenges the hegemony that, for decades, the United States--and much of Latin America--exercised. This attests to China's status as a world power, and thus its role in Asia and certain European and African locations, where the country's economic interests are linked to its power relations (Cordeiro Pires & Paulino, 2017). Clearly, such questions, posed by the classical or mainstream school of international relations, envisage an international context studied and understood in terms of anarchy and conflict, based on relations between hegemonies, partners and enemies, centers and peripheries, and so on. It is therefore difficult to understand the world from another perspective, or to grasp this century's changing global order in which an actor is promoting its own theoretical perspectives that go beyond the Western stance to shape a multilateral structure.

Peaceful coexistence in these terms would seem to be explained based on conflict and not just the relational standpoint proposed by China in historical terms. That is, it entails the application of principles such as harmony in relations with others by taking into account their differences. This, in international studies, promotes the analysis of new theoretical and methodological approaches to explain and understand the likes of respect and reciprocal relations founded on non-aggression and/or non-intervention in the affairs of other states. This position assumes a kind of strategic relationality that promotes mutual benefits based on inequality, without the notions of soft or strong powers that characterized the 20th century international order.

This changing context at the disciplinary level has been explained by contributions from the classical schools of realism and liberalism and their new variants, constructivism in its various strands, structuralism, as well as other modern and postmodern schools, most of them from the Western tradition. It is interesting to observe Western thought when attempting to explain the awakening of China, which appears to acknowledge to no other way of understanding peaceful

coexistence without summoning the dominating/dominated relationship. Thus, the North American and European schools understand China in geopolitical terms as a threat or challenge, or via the dualist friend--enemy dynamic.

As such, the Western analysis of peaceful coexistence ultimately conceives of an ogre that pursues its own interests and benefits, solely by way of dynamics or relations of antagonism and conflict. This paper will approach the discussion at a theoretical level, considering the ways in which China's contributions promote difference-based dialogue as a form of future cooperation. Thus, the study considers China's strategic relationships and how the concepts of peaceful coexistence, equality, and mutually beneficial relations guide Chinese foreign policy.

More specifically, the paper seems to introduce the changes to the international geopolitical configuration that have enabled the global ascent of China.

Second, it outlines how the discipline of international relations conceives of China in theoretical terms. Third, it explores the concept of peaceful coexistence based on contemporary transformations to Chinese foreign policy. And fourth, it presents the ways in which China challenges US hegemony and the effects on a regional level. Last of all, the paper will set down some final considerations.

International studies: Chinese contributions.

In the field international studies, one can witness the emergence of theoretical contributions that depart from the classical debates. For instance, non-Western theories of international relations (Acharya & Buzan, 2010) and global international relations (Acharya, 2014) offer an analysis of the global context beyond the West (Tickner & Blaney, 2012), (Acharya, 2011) by recognizing the importance of a local dimension centered on post-Western locations (Ling, 2014) and expanding the analysis of international reality through new lenses and approaches.

All of these proposals acknowledge a need to broaden the scope of the discipline by placing value on critical contributions situated in the global South (Armillas-Tyseira, 2014). For the Chinese case, these contributions include at least two main temporal axes: the first draws on a Marxist approach from a Chinese perspective, starting in 1949 and 1979. The second begins in 1980 and promotes theorizations from within China by taking into account local translation of and/or convergence with contemporary debates in international relations (Qin, 2011).

Since the 1990s, the study of the international has overlooked China's contributions to the discipline, all the while recognizing the importance, from the perspective of political economy, of a detailed Marxist analysis of imperialism, national liberation movements, and understandings of force and peace within a complex geopolitical context (Xinning, 2010). In this case, according to Qun, the discussion revolves around isolation or openness to the world.

Authors such as Chan (1998), for their part, have argued that the study of the international dimension meant the study of the lives of great leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping--thus revealing the scope of the political dimension based on strengthening interests of the governing party. And in recent years, as a result of new generations of academics that previously emigrated to the United States and Europe, classical theories have been proposed as a means by which to mold mainstream international relations to the form of China.

This takes into account a kinds of relational constructivism (Xue, 2006). However, to find an explanation for the rise of China as an important actor on the international stage this century, one

must acknowledge the local- and international-level dynamics in which the country's age-old traditions provide the principles for its modern-day actions (Montobbio, 2018; Margueliche, 2019; Dupuy & Margueliche, 2018). Thus, just as the Communist Party sought to dominate the political scene by edging out the nationalists domestically, it recognized and incorporated ancient Tianxia, Confucian, and Daoist thought as part of its political configuration. Indeed, various academics, such as Zhao Tingyang (2009) and Qin Yaqing (2012), have revisited these approaches to explain China's international presence through a philosophical lens.

The Tianxia system, understood as a mandate from heaven, has its origins in the Zhou dynasty in a China that was not yet unified and marked by major disputes. This dynasty, which was not China's strongest, proposed to "assure control and order in the region by seeking legitimacy through non-coercive power" and in so doing it achieved peace--in other words, harmony--that lasted almost 80 years (Margueliche, 2019, p. 33) Similarly, the values of Confucianism are instructive, insofar as they are "characterized by their profound implications for politics, inspired by their ambition to bring order and peace to the world" (Yao, 2001, p. 48). According to Yao, there are norms that guide this thought in the social sphere: humanity, rectitude, conviction, wisdom, and loyalty. These elements of Confucian theory were the moral rules to be followed, and became the variables with which to evaluate the behavior of authorities in present day (Yao, 2001).

Confucius added to the Tianzia system, indicating that government was best represented by starting from the family bond, in which the common good prevails; this facilitates cooperation and, in turn, care and responsibility between members, ultimately leading to harmony (Qin, 2012).

In other words, if this model is applied within a government, all citizens will commit to pursuing a harmonious environment and the result will therefore be a harmonious society (Qin, 2012, p. 72). In this cases, whoever governs must constitute a role model, such that everyone else contributes to maintaining order and harmony (De Jesús, 2019). Thus, according to Zhao Tingyang (2009), the traditional Chinese family model can be applied at either the micro or universal levels by favoring relations in which all members help each other out and all have obligations and, in this way, assuring peace and cooperation while avoiding conflict. Consequently, Confucianism holds that "states and all-under-heaven should be better developed by mapping the model of the family, inheriting the harmonious gene of family ties, so as to maximize the possibilities of universal cooperation and peace (...)" (Zhao, cited in Qin, 2012, 73). Now, if Confucianism fosters harmonious relations in society, Daoism envisages not only relations between individuals, but also their relations and role with nature based on principles of reciprocity and respect. Once again, the end result is a state of wellbeing and harmony for the collective (Figueroa, 2021; Kohn, 2014).

In this context, and given the attempts to establish a direct link between China's ancient philosophy and contemporary foreign policy with a view to understanding its current actions in the international arena, one can discern five elements in the country's foreign policy that are based on these conceptions. These elements, which comprise China's principles of peaceful coexistence and orientate China's policy guidelines, are mutual respect for territorial sovereignty and integrity; non-aggression; non-intervention by one country in the internal affairs of another; equality and reciprocal benefit; and peaceful coexistence (Connelly, 1989).

Moreover, studying international relations from a Chinese perspective by extending the scope of theory beyond the West allows us to identify three possible readings, which Qin summarizes neatly.

We often see three approaches of analogical interpretation: *obverse*, *reverse*, and *interactive*. Taking Chinese IR [international relations] study as an example, the obverse analogical interpretation refers to the interpretation of reality through an established Chinese conceptual system; the reverse analogical interpretation, very much to the contrary, employs a foreign conceptual system to interpret reality, including, for instance, the interpretation of Chinese elements by employing a foreign theoretical framework; the interactive interpretation constructs an inter-cultural dialogue in a reflective and critical way, and co-employs indigenous and alien conceptual frameworks, for instance, using both a Chinese conceptual system, such as Confucian relationism, and a Western conceptual system, such as rationalism, to analyze social reality. (Qin, 2012, 70)

The present paper inclines towards the interactive interpretation, linked to ancient principles and traditions associated in recent decades with Marxism and the Chinese Communist Party. It also adapts the contributions of international relations to the Chinese way, giving consideration to the possibility of convergent theorizing between one position and another. The next section stresses the traditional outlook that, in a practical sense, has enabled construction of the pillar of peaceful coexistence and shaped the scope of Chinese foreign policy.

Peaceful coexistence: Chinese foreign policy pillars in the present.

A theoretical enquiry into the construction of Chinese foreign policy attests to the scale of its configuration in terms of the linkages with the principles of harmony, peace, and peaceful coexistence that are central to the Confucian and Daoist traditions. Indeed, a review of the main elements reveals how these principles have been gradually incorporated into policies geared towards equilibrium and cooperation. To this end, an overview of this process, from the 1970s to present day, is presented next.

To understand China's new pre-eminence and its guiding principles, it is helpful to contextualize the historical trajectory of its foreign policy with reference to four fundamental periods. The first of these, 1978–1989, was when Deng Xioping, China's leader, initiated the process known as the reform and open-door policy. According to Chamorro (2008), the main objective of this process was economic growth without abandoning the Communist political doctrine.

To this end the government focused its efforts on various fields such as agriculture, industry, the army, science, and technology. Moreover, it was clear that if the objective was to achieve economic development, China would have to open its doors internationally, which meant innovating in the industrial sector in order to attract foreign capital.

Xiaoping's pragmatism also extended to foreign policy, where his government opted to tackle limited economic growth by doing away with radical socialism and modifying certain cultural

and ideological elements in pursuit of global cooperation and mutual benefit. The country had to look towards foreign markets to achieve economic and scientific growth through the exchange of resources such as labor (Connelly, 1989; Rogríguez, 2016).

In the 1980s, China promoted export operations in certain territories. And to promote nationwide economic growth China enticed foreign firms by allowing them to operate freely with reduced levies. Thus the special economic zones (SEZs) were born, where the government could test export-oriented initiatives, and determine whether they really did attract foreign direct investment, before rolling them out throughout the country (Chamorro, 2008).

This marked the beginning of an important change in China's foreign policy, which 12th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party of declared independent in September 1982. During this congress participants decoupled Chinese economic activities from ideology, giving rise to the aforementioned five principles of peaceful coexistence (Connelly, 1989).

This open-door policy was aimed at all other countries, independently of the USSR's socialist leadership, while also seeking commercial exchange with developed countries and regions such as the United States, western Europe, and Japan. With that, China's position beyond a revolutionary socialist state had been mapped out (Connelly, 1989).

In turn, these principles elucidate a foreign policy based on another eight governmental principles which, since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the country follows to guarantee equality and mutual benefit in economic and technical cooperation with different countries. Notable among these principles are:

The Chinese Government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a kind of unilateral alms but as something mutual. 2. In providing aid to other countries, the Chinese Government strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries, and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges. 3. China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for the repayment when necessary so as to lighten the burden of the recipient countries as far as possible. [...] 5. The Chinese Government tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient governments may increase their income and accumulate capital. 7. In giving any particular technical assistance, the Chinese Government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such technique (Pedraja, 1976, p.371).

To sum up the 1978--1989 period, there was a shift in China's foreign policy due to internal factors such as economic reforms and the open-door policy coupled with the international climate of

peace, in the context of the country's drive for modernization and economic development. This was underpinned by a Confucian ideology, which, by curbing hegemonism and presenting the mutual benefits of cooperation, demonstrated that the entire population benefited from harmonious wellbeing as a principle of governance, as well as the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

The second period, 1993--2013, was when Jiang Zemin, Xioping's successor, observed that the reform was functional. Zemin considered it necessary to adjust certain elements in order to optimize the financial system, given that the advances on the economic front had steered China towards a capitalist dynamic. This required legislative changes to regulate trade by way of taxation.

This stage was marked by socialist modernization supported by a diplomatic and cooperation strategy in which the country became the focus of attention for a US-led international system alarmed by Chinese growth. At this point, the West began to perceive China as a threat.

Under the Zemin administration, the Communist ideology ceased to be a unifying element and other social classes were discredited by the capitalist class. This gave rise to the theory of three represents, in which it was established that the Communist Party must always represent the development trend of China's productive forces, the orientation of China's cultural development, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese population (Zemin, 2002).

To ensure the success of the three represents, the government adopted a nationalist approach in which it brought the upper class onside in order to retain supremacy. But this did not obscure the culture of peace created by Xiaoping; China's development needed to maintain this stance of peace as well as commercial cooperation and exchange. Zemin's approach allowed China to keep its economy afloat during the crisis of 1997, when it stabilized the international financial market by pegging the renminbi against the dollar, allowing a supply of capital to countries in difficulty (Friedman, 2000).

These measures permitted the Chinese premier to embrace the notion of duty to do the utmost to ensure that something was within China's reach (Heath, 2014). In addition, in 2000 Zemin planned China's go out policy. This heralded a new economic era in which the government actively supported Chinese companies that sought to expand abroad (Min & Xiaodil, 2007). This plan was one of the most important foreign-policy contributions after Xiaoping's open-door policy, as it allowed China to start positioning itself internationally and to demonstrate its economic and political stability.

Third, during the period 200 –2013, President Hu Jintao sought to project an image of peaceful development with which to counter the perception that his country posed a threat. Thus, through multilateralism, the government looked to demystify the belief of an Asian hegemony headed by China. In this way, "China had to present itself as a great peaceful power, non-threatening, but without relinquishing the rights and responsibilities that awaited the country as part of its new position in the world" (Rocha,2006).

Under Hu Jintao, the country fostered international growth characterized by peace and diplomacy and a general emphasis on the involvement of other countries. Nonetheless, it was around this

time that China's status as a power, at least in the Asian region, started to become evident. To this end, the Chinese government stressed harmony, peace, and the common good internationally.

It is here that one can discern the Confucian theory based on collective growth in a context of harmony. This vision allowed China to continue its growth on a domestic level while expanding its influence on the international stage, without impinging on the social order of each country. The doctrine proposed by Hu Jintao were indicative of a foreign policy focused on cooperation through common interests between countries, regardless of their characteristics (Rocha,2006).

It served to bolster China's economic growth, while affording the country greater influence in diplomatic terms. This foreign policy was centered on a universal vision that revived Confucian values such as a harmonious world.

According to Serrano (2018), Hu thought that the harmonious world should encompass five characteristics; the political, through respect between all countries; the economic, through cooperation for mutual benefit; the cultural, through mutual learning based on respect for the diversity of all actors; security, through conflict resolution based on peaceful mechanisms and strengthened cooperation and trust between actors; and the environmental, through a common interest in environmental protection. By strengthening this posture, China was able to participate more on the international stage, proving it possible to attain rapid growth while addressing the problems that so often block the path for developing countries. For this reason, the Asian country is open to international cooperation for mutual benefit (Rocha, 2006).

Finally, the fourth period spans the leadership of Xi Jinping, in which China's international presence has become more pronounced in political and economic terms (Yan, 2014; Zhang, 2015). Thus, after the passive China of the 1950s to the 1970s, followed by a period of economic and political reforms in the 1980s and 1990s that allowed the country to broach relations with countries inside and outside the region, the Jinping era ushered in global dynamism and leadership through the pursuit of new relations with intermediate states (Rubiolo et al., 2020).

Favoring bilateral relations--initially within the region through overtures to ASEAN, economic cooperation agreements, and the New Silk Road Project and then with other countries by way of free trade agreements--China based its foreign policy on the principles of mutual benefit and non-aggression. But at the same time the country would defend its interests, just as Xi Jinping made clear at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 (via his white book) and in the report presented to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Libro blanco, 2021; Xi, 2017). In this way, the world has borne witness to the dizzying evolution and ascent of China as well as its economic development during the 21st century. In recent years, Xi's foreign policy has been characterized by its demonstration of a more active China when it comes to common economic development, cooperation, and peace (Rocha, 2006; Saiz, 2009; Vidales, 2016; Rubiolo et al., 2020).

In sum, each of the periods denotes a policy founded on peaceful coexistence via the five principles of respect for the sovereignty and integrity of each country, non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, equal relations between states, and mutual benefit in relations between states. In the early stages, these principles held firm within a low-profile model, but as the country advanced this discretion fell by the wayside (Cordeiro & Paulino, 2017).

This has been directly related to the five-year plans that since 1953 have plotted the country's economic and social direction. It is worth noting that since Deng Xiaoping's reform of the 1980s, the last three plans have centered primarily on resolving its inconsistencies.

The planning of these programs was focused on issues such as inequality, economic modernization and flexibilization towards greater openness, scientific and technological development, and the environment. It is worth noting the long-term planning of initiatives that characterize these programs, given the way they are devised.

Although the execution period is set at five years, each plan has continuity and must be valued and evaluated in terms of target attainment in order to determine the guidelines of the successive plan. This requires analysis by experts from different fields, which begins around three years before the corresponding plan is applied. Society is just as important in this part of the process, through suggestions that are taken into account. Once this stage is complete, the drafting of the document itself begins the following year. Then, having reviewed the previous plan, conducted the necessary research, and studied the comments from society, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) submits a report to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party for discussion. Finally, the NDRC concludes the plan in line with the recommendations, and the National People's Congress approves it.

Having characterized the scope of China's foreign policy, taking into account the principles and forms of engagement that promote peaceful coexistence, this paper will now explore the ways in which China has challenged an international order dominated by the United States.

Equal relations between states: Mutual benefits or asymmetric relationships?

Thus far, China's actions have been profiled from an Asian perspective based on the philosophical principles of China's ancient culture and its relationship with current foreign policy. In consideration of these principles of peaceful coexistence, equal relations, and mutual benefits between states, this section reviews bilateral trade between China and Latin American countries during 2020. The intention is to identify whether this mutual benefit does in fact exist between the respective trading partners; and, in turn, whether this trade challenges the US hegemony in Latin America.

To this end, the study will take into account the total exports and imports to and from China pertaining to 18 Latin American countries. These data were used to calculate the trade balance of each individual country as well as the region as a whole.

The preliminary results show that Brazil, Chile, and Peru are the countries in the region with the briskest trade activity, and that these are the only three of the 18 countries with a positive trade balance, as Table 1 shows.

On the other hand, Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, Paraguay, and the Central American countries posted a negative trade balance, and in most cases the difference was more than three-fold.

Looking at the regional level, the data show that the total export value in thousands of US\$ from the region to China in 2020 was \$125,483,540. In turn, the total import value was \$179,077,169.

Table 1. Latin America – China (2020) Imports and Exports

Country	Exports to China	Imports from China	Trade balance
2020 value in US\$ thousands			
Brazil	67,788,075	34,778,441	+
Chile	25,106,890	15,142,098	+
Peru	10,963,064	10,310,219	+
Mexico	7,786,027	73,608,184	-
Argentina	4,594,625	8,656,340	-
Ecuador	3,193,705	3,947,269	-
Colombia	2,670,041	10,398,882	-
Uruguay	1,014,640	1,231,222	-
Venezuela*	533,951	1,519,258	-
Cuba*	471,941	483,258	-
Panama*	441,986	8,803,232	-
Bolivia	358,398	1,580,142	-
Guatemala	227,750	2,251,500	-
Costa Rica	182,566	2,091,009	-
El Salvador	77,659	848,663	-
Honduras	45,927	922,773	-
Paraguay	13,836	1,603,788	-
Nicaragua	12,459	900,891	-
Total	125,483,540	179,077,169	-

Note. Compiled by authors based on data from TradeMap®. *According to the TradeMap® data, imports from Venezuela, Cuba, and Panama have been reported by partner countries.

Latin America's trade balance therefore necessitates a review of imports and exports in order to identify whether the terms of trade point towards mutual benefits in terms of what might be expected from agreements of this type and taking into account China's win-win proposition. To do so, the five main export and import products of each of the 18 countries were taken. The next step was to determine which of these products are exported most as a region. Then, the same exercise was performed for imports from China.

As a result, it was found that the top-four most-exported product groups from Latin America to China were ores, slag and ash; meats and edible meat offal; wood and articles of wood, wood charcoal; and oil seeds and oleaginous fruits, miscellaneous grains, seeds and fruit, industrial or medicinal plants. In turn, the four biggest groups of imports from China were electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof, sound recorders and reproducers; machinery, mechanical appliances, nuclear reactors, boilers, parts thereof; vehicles other than railway or tramway rolling stock, and parts and accessories thereof; and iron and steel. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Most exported and imported products, Latin America – China (2020)

Products exported to China	Latin America	
	Products exported to China	Products imported from China
Ores, slag and ash		Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof; sound recorders and reproducers
Meats and edible meat offal		Machinery, mechanical appliances, nuclear reactors, boilers; parts thereof
Wood and articles of wood; wood charcoal		Vehicles other than railway or tramway rolling stock, and parts and accessories thereof
Oil seeds and oleaginous fruits; miscellaneous grains, seeds and fruit; industrial or medicinal plants		Iron and steel
Coffee, tea, maté and spices		Other made up textile articles; sets; worn clothing and worn textile articles; rags
Edible fruit and nuts; peel of citrus fruit or melons		Organic chemicals
Fish and crustaceans, mollusks and other aquatic invertebrates		Miscellaneous chemical products
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes		Plastics and articles thereof

Note. Compiled by authors based on data from TradeMap®. *According to data obtained from TradeMap®.

This finding indicates that although trade provides the region with opportunities, the relation is far from being win--win or one of mutual benefits, since Latin American exports are still those with low value added. This is very different to the Chinese case, in which the products exported to the set of 18 countries studied do have high value added. Therefore, it can be asserted that the relations entered into by China through its foreign policy are not symmetrical.

Finally, from this preliminary reading it can be concluded that while China is not yet Latin America's biggest trading partner, the country's presence in the region cannot be overlooked or underestimated, at least not in commercial terms. The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 give an insight into the importance of China's importance as an economic actor in the region, having made gains in what was long considered territory of the United States. This, in the not-so-distant future, could bring about a true shift in the world geopolitical order.

Final considerations

Theoretical proposals from China have entailed a pragmatic look at its political system--and, in recent years, a mainstream reading of international relations. The study of China has incorporated new spatialities, ontologies, and cosmovisions by enabling the emergence of a new theoretical reading that respects China's ancient traditions and cultures and, in turn, collective principles, but without disregarding universal strategic interests.

Indeed, taking the long view, it is possible to identify two approaches, or strands, from foreign countries. The first is a Marxist interpretation of a driven political agenda, which has informed a model of its own; the second is the liberal interpretation of traditional debates in international relations, through a Western lens.

This study has focused on the first approach in the context of a process of consolidation, showing, on the one hand, the way in which these traditional elements are grounded in policy-building. In so doing, it is possible to observe the ways in which political reality--in the form of the Communist Party--has shaped how international studies have been read between the 1970s and present day.

In the 1990s, Xiaoping's transformations, supported by economic dynamics, allowed the scope of Western theorizations to be identified--and with them, the Chinese-style liberalization process. This has equated to a process of modernization, of flexibilization, of strategic investment in science and technology, and, in recent years, of environmental defense based on multilateralism.

This demonstrates the meaning of peaceful coexistence, understood with reference to moral precepts or principles drawn from cultural tradition, and, in parallel, the political pragmatism that sustains the Chinese centralist model. Given the historical context, the interactions with others, and the political dynamics themselves, it is possible to glimpse the changes and transformations resulting from different leaderships in coordination with the governing party structure. This allowed a radical change in the direction of China's economic model, along with the status quo in political terms.

By carefully observing some of the characteristics of this dual approach, it is possible to detect privilege given to reciprocal or horizontal relationships within foreign policy management; cooperation dynamics that favor reciprocal interests; the promotion of multilateralism as an international strategy; the consolidation of authoritarian leadership of government; and flexibility regarding the model of economic growth.

But in light of the current terms of trade between Latin America and China, the picture that emerges is one of asymmetric relations in which the aspirations of equality and mutual benefit seem to be obscured by economic considerations.

That said, these asymmetric relations do not disguise the possibilities that are available to Latin America when it comes to diversifying its trade partners, taking advantage of the improvements in terms of trade since the North--South structure that prevailed during much of the 20th century.

In this context, to return to the question of whether a strategic relationship based on equality and mutual benefit is possible from a Western perspective, the answer might be a negative one if China is understood as an enemy that challenges the established order. Thus, the present paper has studied this new global actor from different perspectives that, far from conceptualizing relations in the terms of soft or strong power that have characterized the international order, does so in consideration of principles rooted in China's traditions of peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

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