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**Communicating Influence:
China's Messaging in Latin America and the Caribbean**

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Introduction

China's economic and diplomatic presence in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has expanded dramatically since the turn of the century and is growing at remarkable speed.¹ China is now the largest trading partner of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru and accounts for a substantial portion of international commerce elsewhere (see [Figure 1](#)). LAC is increasingly central to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that aims to project Beijing's aspirations for economic prosperity and global influence.

Beyond unprecedented commercial and investment ties to LAC, China has sought to deploy "soft power" to advance its position in the region. Development assistance initiatives exemplify these efforts, which particularly in Central America and the Caribbean are driven in part by the quest to secure diplomatic recognition at the expense of Taiwan. There as in South America, where economic ties are greater imperatives, an array of cultural engagement initiatives aim to sway public and elite perceptions of China's activities and its contributions to shaping the global arena of the 21st century.

Increasingly, China deploys concerted public relations and communication strategies to influence how it is perceived across LAC countries and sub-regions. Little attention has been given, however, to China's proactive outreach to journalists and mass publics through traditional and social media channels, or to the impact of these efforts on perceptions of the emerging superpower in the region. This report aims to begin filling that gap.

With support from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and funding from the U.S. Department of State, American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) conducted research designed to illuminate China's efforts to shape perceptions in LAC of its role in the region and the broader world.² This study encompasses attention to the multiple channels through which Chinese authorities seek to project the country's image and convey messages regarding the benevolence of its engagement.

Following this introduction, we begin with consideration of conventional public diplomacy efforts, including a variety of people-to-people interactions and the increasing prominence of Confucius Institutes located in universities across the region. The next section analyzes messaging surrounding the Digital Silk Road, which as the technological component of the BRI has been an important component in China's economic and political strategies toward LAC. We go on to consider public health diplomacy, particularly with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study, finally, presents findings from what is perhaps the most novel feature of our research: an analysis of China's rapidly expanding and multi-faceted presence in

¹ The authors are all researchers at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University in Washington, DC. Invaluable research assistance has been provided by Le Bao, Madeline Elminowski, Wagner Mateus Sousa da Silva, and Christopher Kambhu, all of American University. We are grateful for comments on our accompanying country studies by Patricio Giusto, Rodolfo Mejia Dietrich, and Carlos Portales regarding Argentina, El Salvador, and Chile, respectively.

traditional media in LAC as well as on social media platforms. In the conclusion, we consider both the substance of China's messaging and the channels through which it is exercised in Latin America and the Caribbean. We also signal emerging dynamics that may become important during 2022 and beyond and identify themes that merit further empirical and analytic inquiry.

While the scope of our study is regionwide, we have prepared separately four country case studies of the evolution of China's engagement in LAC, illustrating in each instance how the evolution of ties has intersected with approaches to messaging. These countries – Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador – are among those that receive particular attention in this text. This choice of companion case studies allows consideration of each of the three priority themes – public diplomacy, technological cooperation, and public health diplomacy – and identification of patterns that may vary as a function of local circumstances and Chinese priorities across countries and sub-regions.

- **Brazil:** Given its importance as LAC's largest economy, the extent of its telecommunications market, and status as a Portuguese-speaking country, Brazil is a critical case. One important feature of China's engagement, not unique to Brazil but typical of its interactions with countries with important sub-national levels of government, is that Beijing has increasingly targeted state interlocutors beyond the central executive and legislative branches. There has been a marked increase in China's lobbying with legislators and entering into agreements with Brazilian state governments, which during the China-skeptical Bolsonaro administration (2018-) have to some extent become an alternative to inter-governmental cooperation at the national level. Brazil also has more than twice as many Confucius Institutes as any other country in LAC.
- **Chile and Argentina:** as with Brazil, China is now the largest trading partner for these two large South American economies, with cooperation encompassing energy and transportation infrastructure, mining, and the technology sector, as well as Covid-19 relief in various forms. Both countries have developing relationships with Huawei in hopes of deploying its technology for 5G connectivity,³ and Chile's cooperation around Antarctic development is mirrored by Argentina's partnerships with China around establishment of an aerospace station in Patagonia. Both countries are cooperating with the Chinese government to install fiber optic connections across the Pacific Ocean to better integrate their economies with Asia-Pacific countries. Regarding people-to-people activities, as in Brazil, Confucius Institutes have been established in major universities as platforms for encouraging cultural exchange and dialogue.
- **El Salvador:** More typical of the Greater Caribbean than South America, El Salvador lacks natural resources coveted by China but is nonetheless a priority for Beijing's diplomacy, investment, and pandemic assistance. In part this reflects China's drive to compete with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition, and public diplomacy initiatives and messaging regarding development aid are prominent. China has courted successive Salvadoran governments, legislators and, through its Embassy, projected an image of benevolence and solidarity. Notably, El Salvador's leaders, particularly President Nayib Bukele (2019--) have juxtaposed partnerships with a benevolent Beijing in contrast to bilateral dynamics with Washington, which is portrayed as both less generous and respectful of the country's sovereignty.

China's Public Diplomacy in LAC and the Role of Confucius Institutes

China's public diplomacy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is an increasingly engaged and multifaceted effort, which has ramped up considerably over the past decade. The evolving relationship between China and countries in the region now operates through multiple channels, at the highest levels but including sub-national interactions with provinces, cities, corporations, and academic institutions, among other actors. China's highest level multilateral regional channel of communication is the China-CELAC Forum, created in 2014 as an outgrowth of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, a regional body founded in 2011. To date the China-CELAC Forum has held three ministerial meetings, in 2015, 2018, and 2021, at which goals for this emerging relationship have been set.⁴

Public Diplomacy "with Chinese Characteristics"

China's expanding engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean reflects a set of Chinese diplomatic priorities, which condition China's relationship with countries throughout the region, and which inform the more specific agendas for cooperation coming out of successive Forum meetings. These include recognition of a multipolar world, abiding by the One China policy, an emphasis on developing South-South relationships, and promotion of a "win-win" approach to foreign policy goals.

While China seeks a more influential role in existing regional bodies such as the OAS, Chinese regional outreach also reflects a diplomacy "with Chinese characteristics," and with a long-term goal of reshaping international relations in accordance with China's political and economic priorities, and worldview. In its first policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean, which appeared in 2008, China states an objective to "build a harmonious world."⁵ In a 2016 follow-up, China describes its domestic goal of a "harmonious society, as well as ecological civilization," and its intention to "actively hold dialogues between civilizations" to bring about "the harmonious coexistence of different civilizations in the world."⁶ Regular references to "harmony" signal China's interest in pursuing a "new type of international relations," as Xi Jinping put it in a 2016 speech to Peru's congress, framed in self-consciously Confucian terms, understood in this context to be a source of "traditional Chinese virtues."⁷

Increasing the number and variety of people-to-people exchanges is a major feature of China's diplomatic outreach to the region. Ambitious commitments to undertake new programs of exchange are a prominent outcome of meetings of the China-CELAC Forum. These include high level visits in both directions by national leaders, but also regular exchanges involving members of legislatures, political parties, and local government officials.⁸ (see [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)) They also encompass exchanges of scientists, academics, students, and entrepreneurs, as well as sports teams, cultural workers, and artists. They further include exchanges in specific economic and technical fields, such as health, mining, agronomy, and other technology-dependent professions. For the purposes of this study, China's emphasis on cooperation and exchange with members of the media is particularly noteworthy. It has reportedly become common, for example, for Chinese authorities to invite journalists on free junkets to China lasting anywhere from a week to six months, with visits to several cities, media corporations, museums, universities, city governments, science academies, and elsewhere.⁹ The idea appears to be that journalists then return to their countries of origin, often with a more favorable impression of China.

The intended scale of exchange is apparent in Chinese pledges made as a result of the first ministerial meeting of the China-CELAC Forum in 2015, during which the parties launched a series of exchange programs, such as the "China-LAC Young Scientists Exchange Program," a ten-year training program for 1,000 young leaders from China and Latin America entitled "Bridge of the Future," and made plans to hold the "Year of Cultural Exchanges between China and Latin America and the Caribbean" in 2016. China promised to invite 1,000 political leaders of CELAC countries to visit during the ensuing five years, and to provide them with 6,000 governmental scholarships, 6,000 training opportunities and 400 opportunities for "on-the-job master's degree programs" in China over the same period.¹⁰ Similar commitments were offered at subsequent ministerial meetings, including in 2021 the goal of building a China-LAC network of sister cities and provinces.¹¹

Confucius Institutes in Latin America and the Caribbean

China's Confucius Institutes (hereafter CIs) are perhaps the best-known institutional expressions of China's expanding global public diplomacy effort. CIs operate as receiving institutions for Chinese exchange students to Latin America and the Caribbean and manage opportunities for students from the region to visit China. It is routine for CIs to run annual grant competitions for students to travel and study in China, participate in summer camps, or stay for more extended periods of training or study. CIs are not the only source of exchange opportunities, however. For example, more than 25 Argentinian academic institutions have so far participated in exchange programs with Chinese counterpart institutions.¹²

The Confucius Institutes project got underway in 2004, with the first in Latin America founded in Mexico City in 2006.¹³ While some CIs have specific mandates, worldwide their curricular focus is to provide Mandarin language instruction and Chinese government-approved courses on Chinese history and civilization. In addition to facilitating student and academic exchanges between the host country and China, CIs also organize an annual calendar of Chinese cultural events and workshops, frequently together with Chinese embassies and other China-focused organizations. Finally, they regularly serve as public settings for visits abroad by prominent Chinese diplomats.

Observers have described Confucius Institutes as instruments of Chinese cultural diplomacy, and so, a means for the international projection of Chinese soft power through the promotion of the Chinese language, people, characteristic cultural beliefs and activities, and policies. The Chinese government describes its CI program as a "nonprofit public agency affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education."¹⁴ As such, Confucius Institutes are often compared to cultural diplomacy organizations from other countries, such as the British Council, Alliance Française, the Japan Foundation, Spain's Cervantes Institute, or Germany's Goethe Institute.

In contrast to other parts of the world, such as North America and Europe where Confucius Institutes have been closing in significant numbers, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced gradual but steady growth in the number of CIs. The region now boasts forty-four such Institutes in twenty-one countries. Brazil leads the way with eleven, followed by Mexico with five, Peru with four, and Argentina and Chile with three apiece (see [Figure 4](#)). China has indicated its plans to continue to expand the number of CIs in the region.

Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power

While language instruction is their primary activity, as with other national cultural diplomacy nonprofits, CIs maintain a year round calendar of cultural activities. But in contrast to these others, CI's often organize and promote such activities in close coordination with the Chinese Embassy, Chinese corporate sponsors, and local Chinese community organizations, especially in countries like Peru with large Chinese diasporas.¹⁵ A brief survey of courses in Chinese history and culture, and planned cultural events, among a sample of regional CIs offers a snapshot of China's approach to cultural promotion in the region:

- The CI at the University of El Salvador,¹⁶ only recently founded, maintains an active blog which it uses as one of its primary channels of diffusion of information about Chinese culture. The blog features brief biographies of luminaries of Chinese history, such as the Mongol emperor Kublai Kan, the astronomer Zhang Heng, the military strategist Sun Tzu, and including the philosopher Confucius himself. It also features brief introductions to aspects of Chinese traditional culture and civilizational accomplishments, such as tea, the Great Wall, the celebration of National China Day commemorating the founding of the Republic in 1949, and the symbolism of the color red and importance of dragons in Chinese culture, among other subjects. It also posts short YouTube videos on such topics as Chinese calligraphy, traditional forms of dress, food, and important Chinese festivals.
- In addition to its language learning curriculum, the CI at the University of Buenos Aires¹⁷ lists a total of nineteen courses focused on Chinese culture. These include courses about Chinese traditional medicine, with its “classical philosophical principals”; Confucian thought, with its commitment to “recover the ancient wisdom of Chinese culture”; the *I Ching*, which “transmits the mathematical knowledge of the ancient Chinese”; Tai Chi, “a martial art developed during the Chinese Empire”; Feng Shui, “a classical Chinese philosophical system of Taoist origin”; and the Beijing Opera, declared an “intangible cultural heritage of humanity” by UNESCO in 2010, among others options.
- The CI at Chile's University of Santo Tomás¹⁸ serves as the Confucius Institute Latin America Regional Center, tasked with supporting the growing network of CI's across the region, including the teaching of Mandarin and the promotion of “ancient China” (*China Milenaria*), with its 5,000 year history. Its mission statement is guided by five traditional Chinese values firmly rooted in Confucian thought. As with other CIs, it hosts an array of Chinese cultural events, including film festivals and traditional annual celebrations such as the Spring, Lantern and Winter Solstice festivals. While it offers a selection of courses on modern expressions of Chinese culture such as science fiction writing, a majority of workshops address such traditional cultural expressions as meditation, classic Chinese poetry, the Chinese zodiac, the Silk Road, and acupuncture. These are typically also available in short videos or podcast formats.
- The CI at Sao Paulo State University¹⁹ is the largest Chinese language test center in Brazil and the largest CI in South America. In 2019 it boasted a reported 2,000 registered students, five multimedia classrooms, a 300-person lecture hall, and a dedicated library, with twenty teachers and ten Brazilian support staff.²⁰ It also has

thirteen locations throughout the state of Sao Paulo. This CI offers periodic cultural opportunities similar to others and features an active social media presence that explores Chinese topics of cultural interest, including the concept of “*guanxi*,” a traditional Chinese term used to denote the management of mutually beneficial business relationships.

One notable example of the cooperation of Confucius Institutes with the Chinese embassy and other actors is in the organization and promotion of larger-scale public cultural events. A good illustration is the growing popularity in South America of the annual Chinese New Year Festival, also called the Lunar New Year or Spring Festival. Chinese New Year has become an integral part of Argentina’s annual cultural calendar and “China’s most visible cultural achievement in Buenos Aires,” where before Covid-19 this annual event attracted up to 600,000 people.²¹ This Festival had been a smaller grassroots affair, largely organized by the shop owners of Buenos Aires’s Chinatown. However, the event has grown in size since 2013, when the Phoenix Dorada International Media Company took over, a cultural management company owned by Chinese nationals with ties to the Chinese Embassy, which also actively promotes this annual event. With Embassy encouragement, fourteen Chinese firms, including Huawei, made contributions to the organization of the 2016 Festival totaling almost \$7 million. This annual event is often presented in the Argentinian media as an official event co-organized by the Embassy. CI teaching staff annually take part with demonstrations of traditional Chinese cultural activities like calligraphy. Once a day-long affair, the 2022 Festival lasted more than two weeks and included dance and folkloric demonstrations along with opportunities to enjoy Chinese cuisine, culminating with the Dragon and Lion Dance through the streets of the city. The University of Buenos Aires’s CI was among the twelve stations along the “Chinese Road” organized for the Festival.²²

China’s efforts to promote its diplomacy – and an alternative approach to international affairs “with Chinese characteristics” – has some evident consequences for its efforts to project soft power and to successfully promote cross-cultural communication. As should be apparent from the prior review of cultural curricula of CIs throughout Latin America, the majority of China’s efforts highlights traditional features of China’s culture and history, presented as a “classic” or “ancient civilization” that is thousands of years old. Contemporary Chinese society features relatively little in the cultural promotion of CIs and regional Chinese embassies.

On occasion China has sought to develop this focus on its cultural heritage rather than its cultural present as a point of comparison and similarity with the pre-Hispanic “millenarian” indigenous civilizations of Latin America, seeking to promote commonalities between the great civilizational pasts, say, of China and Peru. A 2016 exhibit featuring 120 Chinese relics at Peru’s National Museum of Archaeology, Anthropology, and History titled “Two Cultures United by the Same Ocean,” for example, explored the “similarities between ancient civilizations on either side of the Pacific.”²³ One point of emphasis in deliberations of the China-CELAC Forum has been the need to cooperate in safeguarding cultural heritage and the “protection and restoration of cultural patrimonies.”²⁴ It is unclear how well China’s backward-looking civilizational approach effectively promotes contemporary cross-cultural communication with Latin American counterparts.²⁵ Not surprisingly, a survey carried out for this project determined that, while respondents recognized China’s economic importance for the region, they did not also view China as a culturally relevant influence or actor.²⁶

Confucius Institutes: Uncontroversial in LAC

International critics of Confucius Institutes have pointed to important differences when comparing CIs to other national cultural diplomacy institutions. If these also receive at least partial financial support from their respective governments, organizations like the British Council are not understood to be directly promoting the national interest, since they operate as institutionally separate and relatively independent nonprofits. CIs, however, operate with a different model from these others in that most are physically located on university campuses, and each CI is the result of an agreement between a host university and Chinese counterpart university.

China's government and the host university typically share start-up and operational costs for a given CI, with the Chinese counterpart university often providing teaching faculty. The first Brazilian CI, founded in 2008, relies upon an inter-institutional relationship between São Paulo State University and Hubei University, located in Wuhan. The CI at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, founded in 2009, is a collaboration with Nanjing University. El Salvador's only CI, founded in 2019 at the University of El Salvador, works closely with the Southwest University of Science and Technology in Sichuan. And the CI at Argentina's National University of Córdoba, stood up in 2020, is a shared undertaking with Jinan University in Guangzhou.

The Chinese government's financial support of CIs and their location on university campuses have made them lightning rods for controversy, primarily in North America and Europe but also elsewhere. In the U.S. in particular, CIs have increasingly been viewed with suspicion, accused of exercising a chilling effect on research, writing, teaching, and critical engagement inside and outside the classroom, particularly regarding topics considered off limits to China, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, the South China Sea, or the treatment of the Uyghur population, among others.²⁷ CI's have become the subject of active discussion in the U.S. about the deterioration of academic freedom. Where once CIs were opening at a brisk pace, in recent years more than half of the CIs founded in the U.S. have closed.²⁸ CIs have been the subject of congressional hearings and concerned reports on Chinese efforts to influence U.S. higher education. The emerging consensus in Washington DC has been that the CI program is a "foreign mission"²⁹ and an important part of Beijing's efforts to advance its "global propaganda and malign influence campaign."³⁰

While pushing back against such accounts, China also took steps to rebrand CIs in order to better insulate them from the charge of propaganda. Since the program's launch, CIs were managed by Hanban, a nonprofit branch of the Chinese government associated with its Ministry of Education. In mid-2020 Hanban was renamed the Ministry of Education Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation, responsible for curriculum development and teacher training. A second institution, the Chinese International Education Foundation, was also spun off from Hanban. Described as a nonprofit NGO, it was made responsible for funding and overseeing CIs globally.³¹

However, despite the circulation in Latin America of Spanish-language criticism of CIs on U.S. Department of State platforms like ShareAmerica and occasional concerns raised by the region's media, CIs are not nearly so controversial in Latin America and the Caribbean, where so far there have been no closures and the promise of continued expansion. The different reception of CIs in Latin America and the Caribbean, in comparison with the U.S., highlights the growing economic importance of China, particularly in South America. This is

reflected in a widespread belief that China is less an adversary or rival than it is an increasingly valuable partner helping to advance national economic and technological goals, and for students in the region taking Mandarin and other classes in CIs, an opportunity for personal professional advancement.

Confucius Institutes: Promoting Bilateral Economic Interests

CIs aggressively tie their courses to training in Chinese business practices. CIs throughout the region are also responsible for administering the Chinese Business Exam (BCT), a national standardized test established to measure language proficiency for those engaged in business activities. Language classes in the CI at Chile's Universidad Santo Tomás are pitched as a means to develop skills to operate effectively in China's "commercial sphere." The CI at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro offers a business-oriented program of study designed to facilitate employment with Chinese companies in Rio and for Brazilian companies seeking Chinese partnerships. CI-sponsored events organized for students often reference Chinese business projects, and the CI at Sao Paulo State University routinely posts job opportunities on its website. It also hosts an annual job fair intended to connect Chinese companies located in Brazil with local Brazilians interested in working in China-Brazil business relations. In 2012 a "Business Confucius Institute" was established at the Fundação Armando Alvares Penteado in São Paulo.

CIs have also played a role in the recent expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America and the Caribbean. In December of 2018, for example, as China was making a push to encourage countries throughout the region to formally join its Belt and Road Initiative, the Confucius Institute at Argentina's National University of La Plata hosted a Latin America Symposium of the World Forum of Chinese Studies titled "The Belt and Road Initiative and China-Latin America Cooperation," which included multiple sessions organized to explore features of the BRI and the opportunities it presents for both China and the region. Participants included Chinese and Latin American dignitaries, academic leaders, and area studies experts. The event concluded with remarks offered by the director of La Plata's CI. In this and other ways, CIs "play a key role in helping advance China's economic interests."³²

In Latin America and the Caribbean, CIs play an important role in laying the groundwork for deepening China's business relations with the region. In so doing they function as institutional conduits to promote China's economic agenda by serving as channels for interested students from the region to seek professional opportunities with Chinese companies and for Chinese companies to recruit employees from the region. Courses on the language of "business Chinese," how to interact with Chinese business partners, and how to leverage business opportunities with Chinese companies, are now common features of regional Confucius Institute curricula. In their outreach and promotion to attract students, CIs promote study-abroad programs in business settings, and advertise themselves as a means to develop business skills directly transferrable to the job market. CIs often offer classes of varying lengths, up to eight weeks, intended to assist students in acquiring the interpersonal skills, practical, and cultural knowledge for effective business transactions with Chinese companies. The approach adopted by CIs to the teaching of Chinese language and culture is reminiscent of similar curricular approaches to cross-cultural or intercultural communication popular in US business schools, with their emphasis on increasing competency in order to

offset the costs of cultural distance by reducing information asymmetries in transactions between Chinese and foreign companies.³³

Despite the expansion of Confucius Institutes and increasing sophistication of Chinese cultural diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past decade, geographic and geopolitical distance remains a challenge for China to overcome. It is more visible in countries with significant Chinese diasporas, Chinese culture remains historically marginal across the region and does not enjoy anything like the exposure or popularity of U.S. popular culture. CIs in the region continue to struggle with questions of staffing, since Latin American and Caribbean countries are viewed as distant and “less developed” and so considered less-desirable posts for graduates of Chinese language teaching programs.³⁴ Chinese teaching staff at CIs are also frequently not fluent in Spanish or Portuguese, which complicates efforts to meet curricular goals. These are among the challenges that Confucius Institutes across the region will have to overcome if China’s cultural diplomacy is to advance.

Technology and The Digital Silk Road

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's flagship global infrastructure development program and a priority mechanism created to support the internationalization of Chinese companies. It arrived in LAC only in mid-2017, five years after its creation and later than any other region in the world.³⁵ Latin American and Caribbean governments were invited to join the initiative by China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a speech delivered at the 2018 China-CELAC Forum in Santiago, Chile.³⁶ Together the members of this intergovernmental mechanism approved a special declaration pledging broad agreement to deepen ties under the BRI rubric.³⁷

As [Figure 5](#) illustrates, as of early 2022, 21 countries in the region have joined the BRI, with Argentina and Nicaragua the most recent, the latter on the heels of Managua’s having shifted diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. Notably, President Fernández’s visit to China also attracted unusually fierce criticism from Argentina’s center-right Juntos por el Cambio (JxC) opposition coalition. Ahead of his arrival in Beijing to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, it was confirmed that China had agreed to build Atucha III, Argentina’s fourth commercial nuclear reactor, which is to have a 1,200MW capacity, cost \$8.3bn, and use China’s Hualong technology.

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is the technological arm of the BRI and can be understood as the link that permeates all of the “five connectivities” or “five links” of the BRI, a vaguely defined category that encompasses the vast digital service sector.³⁸ It refers to but is not limited to the Internet of Things (IoT), ecommerce, big data, finance, blockchain, telemedicine, cybersecurity, smart cities, but also telecommunication and information networks. The last of these is a particularly crucial element for understanding the changes in China's messaging in Latin America and Caribbean.

The information technology component of China’s overseas investments expansion promises to pave the way to connect China's big tech firms with new markets and aims to influence the development of the latest technological standards. The DSR seeks to be the driver for the next-generation digital society and is increasingly involved in shaping, controlling, and influencing information and data flows. Notably, however, in LAC Chinese public diplomacy rarely employs the term “Digital Silk Road,” preferring to communicate separately about its

multiple components, such as 5G connectivity, the building of smart cities, or space cooperation.

In LAC as elsewhere around the globe, Beijing's political message about the BRI and technology focuses on its contribution to economic development through mutually beneficial arrangements between China and its partners. The horizontal aspect of a metaphoric road of cooperation is meant to reference China's "win-win" approach. However, this and other Chinese concepts and expressions central to communicating the nature and objectives of the BRI to Latin American audiences have at times been challenging to translate consistently into Spanish or Portuguese. Nor are the relationships among the five connecting parts always coherently conveyed. In addition, originally conceived as a Euroasian project, some parts of the BRI – such as the use of "silk road" – do not resonate historically in LAC, potentially generating more confusion than clarity.

Satellite Agreements

For member states, the information Belt and Road potentially incorporates a range of pre-existing initiatives of science and technology cooperation between China and LAC countries. Over the past several decades, Latin American space agencies and science and technology ministries have developed different levels of partnership with the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) or the China Academy of Space Technology (CAST) that predate the BRI framework. The pioneer example is the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) program, up and running since 1988, which has so far jointly-launched a total of seven satellites.

At least twelve agreements have been signed in the region with nine different countries, more than half of them in the past decade alone (see [Figure 6](#)). These include partnerships to develop communication satellite systems, commercial launches services, information interconnectivity infrastructure or more broader space cooperation agreements. Some agreements have both a satellite and general space component. As seen in the previous figure, cooperation with China has enabled Latin American countries to launch at least 23 satellites.

In Argentina, for example, the CLTC-CONAE-NEUQUEN station is operated by the Chinese National Space Administration as part of the Chinese Deep Space Network, in collaboration with Argentina's National Space Activities Commission. This project is the result of an agreement between then Argentinian president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Xi Jinping in 2014 to build a space-monitoring base in the province of Neuquén. But the fact that the base was to be managed by the People's Liberation Army sparked political opposition in Argentina and strong condemnation of Washington. Critics asserted that part of Argentina's sovereign territory was being ceded for 50 years to China. Though without any evidence, some experts alleged that the facility could be used for military purposes. Fueling opposition was the fact that the agreement approved by the National Congress contained secret clauses, apparently at the request of Beijing. It was in this context that the Mauricio Macri administration requested a review of the contract with Beijing in 2016, leading to an addendum to the original agreement clarifying that the base's operation would be strictly scientific and only for civilian purposes.

The base was finished in February 2017 but the controversy surrounding it has not ceased. This space facility, however, is not the only instance of China's collaboration with Argentina

on space matters. For example, Great Wall Industrial Corporation has helped to build and launch thirteen satellites for the commercial Argentine company Satellogic. The Argentinian state satellite company ARSAT also maintains commercial service contract relations with PRC-based firms. Other Argentine companies are also involved in new space projects with Chinese counterparts.

These activities gained traction as one part of diverse scientific and technological efforts of cooperation with Chinese firms in such areas as the construction of energy infrastructure, the provision of telecommunications and security equipment, and investments in Latin American start-ups. Examples include a 2018 investment of \$180 million by Tencent in Nubank, a São Paulo-based fintech startup, and a 2019 agreement between ZTE and the province of Jujuy in Argentina – the site of important Chinese mining and power generation operations – to set up a system of cameras with facial recognition and other sensors. Hikvision and Zhejiang Dahua, two of the largest Chinese surveillance equipment manufacturers, also saw their presence in Latin America grow significantly as providers for various governments of technological solutions to address the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁹

Cooperation on DSR-related projects have largely been perceived in Latin America as a form of technological development that can advance without the need for explicit political alignment with China. The sector is underfunded and there is strong regional demand for technology transfer, development, and training. Countries are becoming more cautious, however, about such forms of collaboration, given the involvement of China’s military, concerns about territorial vulnerabilities, data security, and privacy. Nevertheless, claims that the Chinese government aims to deploy a “techno-authoritarian” model in LAC seem unfounded. The expansion of Chinese state and private enterprises in LAC is instead better understood as a function of market opportunity, economic benefit, and China’s strategic interest in technological dominance.

5G: Driver for the Next-Generation Digital Society

Resisting U.S. pressure, Latin American countries are proceeding with Huawei as a potential or confirmed choice for their 5G wireless networks, while also trying to attract other Chinese investments in their technology infrastructure. Washington has been trying to shut out Huawei on security grounds since 2012, when U.S. companies were forbidden from using Huawei networking equipment. In May 2019, in the context of an escalating trade war, President Trump labeled the company a security threat and banned it from U.S. communications networks. The Biden Administration hasn’t reversed the sanctions.

These actions and the U.S. “Clean Network” campaign, emphasizing Huawei’s links to the Chinese government and alleged espionage, influenced Australia, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and others to institute similar bans. In 2018, at Washington’s request, Canada arrested Huawei’s Chief Financial Officer and Vice-Chairwoman, Meng Wanzhou, for alleged fraud, moving the issue into the international media spotlight.

Huawei has been present in LAC for about two decades and is a key provider for the 4G network and associated infrastructure used by major telecom operators throughout the region (see [Figure 7](#) and [Figure 8](#)). Ten countries are currently likely to use Huawei technology despite U.S. concerns. Eight or so others are avoiding taking a position on the issue, but none has come forward to declare a total ban on the company.

At least 30 5G tests have been recorded in a dozen LAC countries, more than one third of them with Huawei as the provider. The company secured an agreement with Uruguay to deepen cooperation on 5G and donated a telecommunications tower to Guatemala for training technicians on 4G and 5G networks. Colombia announced it won't ban the company and Argentina has enabled five connection points for the new technology in Buenos Aires using Huawei's technology. Costa Rica and Venezuela's 4G networks rely heavily on Huawei's infrastructure. In 2008, the Chinese company opened an office in Honduras and is now the main provider for telecommunications companies in the country. It also supplied nearly all of Cuba's Internet infrastructure.

Other countries are also unwilling to cut all ties to Huawei. French Guiana will comply with the French cybersecurity agency's decision to grant time-limited waivers on 5G for wireless operators that use Huawei. This year, the U.S. has struck a deal with Ecuador – helping it reduce its debt – conditioned on the exclusion of Chinese companies from its telecom networks, according to the *Financial Times*. Two months later, the country's National Telecommunications Corporation (CNT) and Nokia announced that they will begin to deploy 5G in the country, despite pre-commercial tests having been done with Huawei.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the political battle around Huawei have delayed 5G-specific spectrum auctions in many Latin American and Caribbean countries. About one third of them don't yet have concrete plans to adopt the next generation of mobile technology, and only Chile and Brazil have completed the bidding process to assign the 5G spectrum. Operators in Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname launched their networks in limited areas. Others are in different phases of this technological transition. The region's two biggest markets – Brazil and Mexico – have raised the possibility of placing restrictions on Huawei, but continued reliance on the company suggests major collaboration will continue in one form or other.

Brazil's main wireless firms already use Huawei for more than half of their networks and argue that banning Huawei would add billions of dollars in additional costs that would be passed on to consumers. The country's auction was delayed several times and finalized only in 2021 (see [Figure 9](#)). It established a compromise involving a dual network – a non-Huawei network for the government and all federal agencies and one that does not block Huawei from servicing more than 242 million active mobile connections, according to the National Telecommunications Agency (ANATEL).⁴⁰ In Mexico, Huawei is excluded from the system's "core" and areas near the U.S. border, but it is present in other parts of the country. The company claims to be building the largest public Wi-Fi network in Latin America, with more than 30,000 hotspots in the México Conectado project.

Huawei is undertaking robust lobbying campaigns to circumvent U.S. pressure and security concerns surrounding the firm's hardware and software. Competitive pricing for its mobile, network, and cloud-based services has been key to establishing itself as an affordable and reliable platform. Chinese diplomats have mobilized in the press and in social media to defend the company. But Huawei is also deploying a mix of traditional and controversial public relations strategies: large advertisement campaigns with local celebrities, events, partnerships with universities and other institutions, and donations of equipment to both government agencies and businesses. It has donated 5G network kits to test the agribusiness "Internet of Things" (IoT services). It is also directly engaging decision makers, for example, by hiring former Brazilian President Michel Temer to do its 5G lobbying in Brazil.

Their growing economic dependency upon China has made local governments fear retaliation and substantial financial consequences of a Huawei ban, a scenario which became even more sensitive during the pandemic. Indeed, as considered in the next section of this report, China enjoyed strategic advantages as a supplier of medical equipment items and Covid-19 vaccines to LAC, particularly during the first year of the pandemic.

China's Covid-19 Diplomacy in LAC

China's medical diplomacy can be viewed as an extension of its economic and political statecraft. An analysis of donations during the first half of 2020 shows more than 500 Chinese donations to 33 countries across the hemisphere totaling \$128 million.⁴¹ Measured by dollar amount, donations surged in March, peaking at over \$50 million during the week of March 23. Donations then experienced another smaller surge in early May – when Covid-19 deaths began to rise precipitously – before levelling off through the rest of May and June (see [Figure 10](#)).

Chinese medical diplomacy is not a monolith, with donors including: the central, provincial, and municipal governments; universities; businesses; foundations; and the Chinese diaspora. The Chinese central government was the largest donor at 41 percent of all donations or (\$52.7 million). More than nine percent of all donations (\$11.8 million) were made through Embassies – these were almost evenly split between donations made by Chinese Embassies in the recipient country and Embassies of recipient countries in China coordinating donations from Chinese entrepreneurs. Provincial and municipal governments were also active, typically donating to governments at the corresponding subnational level. For example, the Shanghai municipal government made donations to Rosario, Argentina; Sao Paulo, Brazil; Guayaquil, Ecuador; Panama City, Panama; and Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Many donations came from non-governmental sources. Donations from businesses totaled \$29.4 million; leading donors include Chery, MEHECO, and Three Gorges. One of the leading individual sources of donations was the Jack Ma Foundation, which is the second leading individual donor at nearly \$15 million. However, many foundation and business donations have been channeled through Chinese embassies in the region, blurring the line between government and non-governmental donations. This is particularly apparent with donations from the Jack Ma Foundation; Chinese ambassadors were typically present at award ceremonies and media frequently referred to these as “Chinese donations” without specifying the source.

China's vaccine strategy built on its promotion of medical supplies from its state-owned and private firms to become Latin America's Covid-19 partner of choice. It has signed deals for vaccines produced by Sinovac and Sinopharm totaling nearly 200 million doses regionally. The government has also offered \$1 billion in loans to facilitate regional vaccine purchases (see [Figure 11](#)).

Relationships with some pharmaceutical makers pre-dated the pandemic and governments throughout LAC largely welcomed Chinese vaccines. The government's willingness to open Chile as a host for clinical trials of Chinese vaccines, for example, helped Chile leverage these trials for better deals with Chinese drug-makers, while healthcare workers and public health officials gained experience working with different vaccines and companies.

For Beijing, vaccine diplomacy has been a short-term soft-power and public relations victory that lays the groundwork for its political as well as economic objectives. In April 2020, Paraguay's legislature debated switching recognition to China from Taiwan to appease Beijing and gain access to Chinese support. China's relations with El Salvador also center on its longstanding policy goal to weaken international support for Taiwan, and indeed China has expanded its influence in El Salvador since the country switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan in 2018.⁴² During the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing has donated a wide variety of medical supplies to El Salvador and sold it more than 2 million doses of Sinovac vaccine during the first half of 2021.

China clearly saw its vaccines deliveries during the pandemic through the lens of great power rivalry for regional influence. Hours after the United States announced a donation of 1.5 million Moderna doses to El Salvador in early July, China announced its own 1.5 million dose donation – and El Salvador's president Bukele touted his successes on Twitter. In securing and administering vaccines for millions of Salvadorans, Bukele has achieved a domestic political victory; 65 percent of adults have received one vaccine dose as of March 2022, well above the regional average.⁴³

Covid-19 Diplomacy and China's Communicational Strategy

China's diplomatic corps and media have aggressively promoted the donations and sales of medical supplies and vaccines across Latin America. Deliveries typically include photos ops at the airport and Chinese flags conspicuously placed on packaging. Announcements of medical donations often include ceremonies at the Chinese embassy in the recipient country with diplomats in attendance, even when the donation is from a non-state entity. Not only do these communication efforts raise awareness of China's medical diplomacy, but they also obscure the line between state and non-state aid (as well as vaccine sales versus deliveries). By blurring these distinctions, some in the media who might be unfamiliar with the range of Chinese actors and institutions involved have given unearned credit to Beijing by reporting "Chinese donations" without specifying the source.

This communication strategy has opened the way to a narrative that China is gaining influence in Latin America through its medical diplomacy. The timing of China's actions, coming early in the pandemic and preceding medical donations and vaccine shipments from other countries, undoubtedly helped. The resulting media coverage – particularly think pieces analyzing geopolitical implications – has overshadowed the fact that Washington has provided more regional assistance than Beijing. The United States had donated \$372 million in medical supplies and cash assistance as of July 2021, more than triple what China had donated up to that point. The same is true with vaccines; the U.S. had by mid-year sold 328 million doses of domestically developed vaccines and donated 14 million more, far outpacing Chinese efforts. Nonetheless, timing may have mattered more than the amount of the donation: in some countries Chinese vaccines enabled the beginning of national vaccination campaigns when South America was the Covid epicenter.

In addition to donating medical supplies to nearly every country in Latin America, including several that recognize Taiwan, the Chinese government has promoted its medical diplomacy on social media to generate positive coverage and pull discussion away from its role as the

site of Covid-19's emergence. At least twelve Chinese embassies, for example, created new Twitter accounts during the pandemic to better communicate China's message.

China has responded forcefully when disputes have arisen about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines due to poor or inconsistent clinical trial results. Most notable in this regard is Sinovac, which has seen varying results across clinical trials: 78 percent efficacy internally, 50 percent in Brazil, 91 percent in Turkey, and 65 percent in Indonesia. In response to these mixed results, and the critical analyses generated by them, the Chinese government has accused Western media of downplaying negative results regarding U.S. and European vaccines, while using diplomatic op-eds in LAC media to combat Covid-19 origin theories and paid content to promote Chinese vaccines and medical diplomacy.⁴⁴

Chinese embassies and other government social media accounts have also sought to discredit leading thinkers and politicians in LAC who criticized China's initial response to the pandemic, and China has at times also used vaccines as leverage to quell critiques. When Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa published an opinion piece in March 2020, the Chinese embassy in Lima called his work a "smear" campaign; when Brazilian politician Eduardo Bolsonaro leveled more blunt criticism in March, the Chinese embassy in Brasilia suggested that he contracted a "mental virus" during a recent trip to the United States. In May 2021, Sinovac executives reportedly told Brazilian officials that vaccine shipping delays were due to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's continued ridicule of China as Covid-19's country of origin. While the executives did not explicitly say the delays were due to interference from Beijing, they indicated that improved Sino-Brazilian relations would resolve the issue.

China's efforts to control the narrative of its role during the pandemic have had mixed results. While some politicians and citizens have responded positively by publicly thanking China for donations, others have continued criticizing the country; this is particularly evident in Brazil where President Jair Bolsonaro has consistently critiqued China throughout the pandemic. In other instances, Chinese messaging has not overcome controversies surrounding its donations, including accusations of low-quality supplies. The narrative surrounding China's medical diplomacy has also buried differences between individual countries. Countries that recognize Taiwan – Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Paraguay – have received comparatively fewer medical donations and vaccines from China.

The Growing Presence of Chinese State Media in Latin America and Caribbean

Before diplomatic ties between China and Latin America officially existed, media content was a component of their relationship. China Radio International (CRI) started broadcasting in Spanish in 1956 and in Portuguese in 1960. Xinhua News Agency, the largest official news agency in the People's Republic of China, has been present in Latin America since 1959. In the following decade, Xinhua opened its first office in Brazil and signed a cooperative agreement with the Cuban Prensa Latina, multiplying connections with pro-communist outlets. In the late 1980's, after most of the region started to recognize the PRC, Xinhua expanded its portfolio of partnerships with other state agencies in the region, such as Argentina's Télam and Brazil's Radiobrás and Agência Brasil (both later incorporated into the Empresa Brasileira de Comunicação).

Over the past decade, China's state-owned media presence grew significantly in the region, as it signed at least 45 agreements with media groups and media outlets operating in twelve

countries across Latin America and the Caribbean (see [Figure 12](#)). This number is almost certainly larger, since at present there are at least 27 other media outlets in twelve countries reproducing Chinese state-owned media content (see [Figure 13](#)).⁴⁵ Notably, we have been unable to identify media sharing agreements with any countries in the region that recognize Taiwan.

In 2020, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the China Media Group (CMG) co-hosted the Latin-America Partners Media Cooperation Online Forum. The event was organized around the theme of "Strengthen Collaboration & Defeat the Pandemic" and was intended to foster exchanges and business opportunities. The Forum was attended by fifteen media organizations from ten countries, including Latin America's largest media corporation, the Brazilian group Globo. This occasion also saw the launch of "Program Hoy" a TV show and partnership between CCTV Video News Agency (CCTV+) and Alianza Informativa Latinoamericana (AIL), the biggest non-profit television network alliance in LAC.⁴⁶ According to news reports, 22 mainstream media outlets in 21 countries and regions have already benefitted.

Media agreements signed with LAC media groups are part of China's global strategy and follow similar models for content sharing in dozens of languages in other parts of the world, including with international wire services that maintain LAC media outlets as clients. Given the high concentration of media ownership in the region, and the market dominance of its main operators, such agreements potentially allow content to reach a great degree of capillarity, since an agreement signed with one actor likely represents access to multiple print, digital, and broadcast media outlets.

Such media cooperation, as illustrated by the Xinhua and Brazilian EBC media agreement,⁴⁷ facilitates mutual real-time access to flows of news stories, photos and video galleries, live streaming, and radio content. These agreements are frequently based on free content sharing rights and on a smaller scale involve co-productions, periodical publications, or broadcasts featuring Chinese state-owned media content.

International news segments in LAC also rely heavily on wire services, a market dominated by Western state-owned or private media companies that have been impacted by Chinese media expansion in the past decade. Existing agreements between wire services create another layer of indirect access and rights to Xinhua content in local media. It is, however, difficult to define the duration of those agreements, though agreements can and are being renewed or expanded. And new accords with the same counterpart might include new products and services.

This has all taken place against the backdrop of broadcasting's transition from analog to digital platforms, of dramatically increased use of social networks, and the emergence of new media platforms as influential news sources. This period of convergence of traditional broadcasting with telecommunications, and increased reliance on the Internet as a source of information, has coincided with declining profits in traditional media and the shuttering of newsrooms across the region, which in turn ups the incentives for outlets to secure externally generated content.

Initially the demand for China-related content was low and Chinese offerings in a given language were marginal, less professional, and less appealing, when compared with the capacity of other international news agencies competing in the market. Chinese state media's

international expansion followed a similar dynamic as experienced by Western media intended for foreign audiences but took place later. In the 2010's, however, Chinese state media underwent significant reform, becoming more international and adapting to growing demand from digital outlets, the 24-hour news cycle, and changes in the information economy.

Under the presidency of Hu Jintao, the Chinese government initiated a new overseas strategy to spread China's message in a Western-dominated media landscape. The "Grand External Propaganda Strategy" or "Great External Propaganda Plan," (大外宣), also known as the 'media going-out' policy, prioritized the international expansion of Chinese media to advance Chinese influence and combat perceived media bias and the country's negative image, in an increasing ideological divided environment and as a response to international repercussions of unrest in Tibet, the Sichuan earthquake, and the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Xi Jinping's first term further accelerated Chinese media outreach and a new diplomatic strategy "under new conditions." China's diplomatic practice under Xi was described later by Yang Jiechi, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission and former Foreign Minister of China (2007-2013): "We should work hard to popularize the new thinking and new ideas of Chinese diplomacy, implement the Party's mass line and people-oriented diplomacy, and endeavor to make new progress in our diplomatic work, thus creating a more enabling external environment to make the Chinese dream, the great renewal of the Chinese nation, come true."⁴⁸ In a speech about a changing China and its diplomacy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi affirmed that the first priority was to "help other countries and their people better understand China's social system and development path."⁴⁹

In 2016, Xi made an in-person visit to the country's top three state-run media outlets. He went to the newsrooms of the *People's Daily*, Xinhua, and to what was then the state broadcaster CCTV to deliver a message to China's journalists. During his visit he declared that "all the work by the Party's media must reflect the Party's will, safeguard the Party's authority, and safeguard the Party's unity. They must love the Party, protect the Party, and closely align themselves with the Party leadership in thought, politics, and action."⁵⁰ In 2017, the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection, a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) internal control institution, collected and published a list of quotes from Xi Jinping during the period 2013-2017 regarding the "proper" way to present China's story domestically and internationally.

In 2018 China's national congress undertook to reform the PRC's state-controlled broadcast service. The China Central Television, China National Radio, and China Radio International were centralized under a new media organization, the CMG, which reports to the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CCP. The PRC is also investing more heavily to try to shape its image abroad, deploying increasingly diverse forms of public diplomacy. The global expansion of China's state-owned media has been followed by the increasing use of social media platforms and influence campaigns in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵¹ Indeed, *People's Daily*, Xinhua, CRI and CGTN only enter social media after 2010 in either Portuguese or Spanish. Just as China was becoming an important economic partner for countries in LAC, it also became a more visible actor in Latin American information flows, a process that started at the beginning of the last decade and gained intensity in Xi's second term.

Xinhua wire services represent the main driver of Chinese state-owned media expansion to reach foreign audiences in the region, followed by the China Media Group (CMG). Xinhua is the official state news agency and the highest-ranking state media organ in the country, along with the *People's Daily*. It is a ministry-level institution subordinate to the State Council, with a mandate to provide the official view of the Chinese government. Xinhua has 21 offices in the Americas. In 2016, it had more than 200 subscribed media outlets in Latin America, including Mexico's Notimex, Brazil's EBC, Peru's IRTP and Argentina's Télam, and more than 200 subscribers outside the media sphere, including the Chilean Foreign Ministry and Peru's Ministry of Culture.⁵²

Since 2009, Xinhua has also hosted the World Media Summit, with the direct support of the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee and the participation of several Latin American media groups. Other multilateral forums also involve Chinese media cooperation with LAC in their agenda, including: the BRICS Media Forum since 2015; the Belt and Road Media Community since 2016, and CELAC's China-Latin America Media Leaders' Summit, since 2016.

One indicator of the importance China now gives to international media cooperation is Xi Jinping's speech on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the China-CELAC Media Leaders' Summit.⁵³ In this speech he announced the creation of a media exchange center between China and Latin America and promised to provide training in China to 500 Latin-American journalists over the next five years:

“First, we must take advantage of the mutual advantages to jointly improve the influence of Chinese and Latin American media, show the world a more authentic and vibrant China and Latin America, and jointly express opinions on peace and global development and other important topics. Second, we must remain committed to jointly promoting new developments in bilateral pragmatic cooperation, inspiring enthusiasm, and confidence in cooperation on both sides, and promoting innovative cooperation models. Thirdly, we must learn from each other and raise China-Latin America media exchanges and cooperation to a new level. China has announced the creation of a media exchange center between China and Latin America.”⁵⁴

In this “New Era,” President Xi explained that the country must improve the way it tells its “stories” to a global audience. He affirmed China's need to promote its views and vision and to secure its voice in a Western-dominated media market as a soft power tool. A new pledge to improve “China's international communication capacity” was made by Xi in 2021, which noted that “China's influence on international discourse has notably improved since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012”⁵⁵.

China's Use of Inserts and Supplements

Using conventional advertising practices, sponsored content produced by Xinhua has appeared in publications in at least eleven countries and represents a new dimension of Beijing's international communication operations targeting LAC audiences. An editorial titled “A Swiss Army Knife for the world's problems” (*Una Navaja Suiza para los problemas del mundo*), promoting Xi's foreign policy concept “Community with a Shared Future” and accompanied by four images of president Xi himself, was made available to readers in Peru, Colombia and the Dominican Republic. These inserts, which appear in print, online, and

social media platforms, represent a separate practice from the regular news service provided by Chinese state media to various local media.

A profile of the Chinese president titled “Xi Jinping, the Man Who Leads the CCP on a New Journey,” was published in November in a dozen countries. Additionally, the communication campaign to celebrate 100 years of the CCP was responsible for paid content to several media outlets in the region. Such paid political messages frequently uses identical content – text and images – across multiple outlets in both Portuguese and Spanish. They are also published around the same time, suggesting a coordinated effort on the sponsor’s part. By using conventional advertising practices, Xinhua and CMG can determine specific content and place it in chosen media outlets regardless of the existence of media sharing agreements. The consequences for regional public opinion of this new strategy are yet to be explored.

The most common format adopted is the “infomercial” (*publireportage*), a content form that looks and reads like that of a publication’s news content but is actually a paid advertisement. Since the content is visually presented as if it was legitimate journalism, the reader might not immediately distinguish paid content from journalistic content in a magazine, newspaper, or website. In some cases, the disclaimer of “sponsored content” does not appear or is not clearly stated.

Before 2021, the use of political paid content was limited to separate sections and country-specific communiques, such as a five-page infomercial published in the Chilean mainstream newspaper *El Mercurio* ahead of Xi Jinping’s state-visit to Chile in 2016. Sponsored content might also appear as a separate supplement distributed periodically by local media outlets⁵⁶.

Argentina represents the largest share of Chinese political paid content identified during the course of this project (see [Figure 14](#) and [Figure 15](#)). In the Argentinian daily *El Clarín*, a series of more than 70 inserts of sponsored content were published ahead of the 100th anniversary of the CCP, both on the specific date and over the course of the following month of July. They present the same layout and format: a congratulatory story anchored in an interview featuring the positive opinion of a foreign leader. The message conveys how other countries are benefiting from a relationship with China, in an effort to demonstrate international support for the CCP and promote cooperation. The texts highlight examples of “peaceful cooperation” and “prosperous” bilateral relations with countries in Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. The series, published by Xinhua in Spanish, demonstrates the “great successes” (*grandes éxitos*) of the Chinese Communist Party in enabling Chinese socio-economic development. And they communicate the “lessons” of the CCP governance model as the key for the “Chinese miracle” and “poverty alleviation.”

The articles available in the online version are accompanied by policy catch phrases marked in bold, such as: “contributes to maintaining world peace” (*contribuye a mantener la paz mundial*); “the CCP always maintains close connections with the people” (*PCCh siempre mantiene estrechas conexiones con el pueblo*); “scientific and technological development” (*desarrollo científico y tecnológico*); “eradication of extreme poverty” (*erradicación de la pobreza extrema*) or “China’s success in combating Covid-19” (*el éxito de China en el combate a la Covid-19*).

Most of the stories are illustrated with a photo of the person interviewed and/or an image of significant Chinese landmarks, examples of infrastructure, industrial and agriculture production, China’s population, party leaders or national symbols. The article is accompanied

by a short video story featuring an extract from an exclusive interview with a foreign leader and followed by English subtitles. The video story is also available on YouTube. Paid content published on LAC media outlets is also shared on official Chinese social media accounts. The volume of paid inserts and the growing coordination of international communication operations suggest the use of targeted online paid ads in Spanish and Portuguese on social media, perhaps increasingly tailored to specific segments of a larger audience.

Instead of focusing on media acquisition, which is restricted by legislation in certain Latin American countries, Chinese state-owned media secure media agreements and pursue opportunities for the insertion of paid content into mainstream regional media outlets. Such Chinese-sponsored inserts don't represent disinformation campaigns or "fake news" content. Rather, they appear to be part of a larger "branding strategy" to combat anti-China sentiment. All such publications communicate a positive aspect of China. At least six sponsored pieces, for example, were dedicated to promoting China's response to Covid-19-pandemic. The highest concentrations of these publications occurred in July 2021 – during the celebration of the CCP's 100th Anniversary – and in November of the same year – when the CCP passed a rare resolution amplifying Xi's authority and praising his "decisive significance" in the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (see [Figure 16](#)).

In 2016 a media agreement between the *China Daily* and Grupo Uno (now Grupo América) launched the first edition of *China Watch* in Spanish. A media supplement produced by *China Daily* was distributed once every two weeks with the Argentinian newspapers *El Cronista Comercial*, *La Capital* and *Diario Uno*.⁵⁷ Content is also published online hosted by the *Diario Uno* website.⁵⁸ These articles follow the *China Daily* editorial line and present diverse content about China's economy, politics, Chinese contemporary life and culture, conveying an overall positive message about China and the Chinese government.

In Brazil, building on a 2011 media cooperation agreement, renewed in 2017 to include a content sharing agreement with the Chinese state channel, CCTV,⁵⁹ the 2019 media partnership between the China Media Group and Grupo Bandeirantes brought to Brazilian TV the Chinese channels BandNews TV and Arte 1, the weekly TV show "Classic Phrases Quoted by President Xi Jinping," and a daily co-produced segment "China World" (*Mundo China*), also broadcast by BandNews TV⁶⁰.

In 2020 the Chilean daily *La Tercera* partnered with the China Media Group to launch the "China Connection" (*Conexión China*) available online in a section of the newspaper's website.⁶¹ The content combined local guest columnists' articles with stories produced by the China Media Group covering such topics as bilateral relations, development, tourism, culture, and community. The project was described by *La Tercera* as a space for "China's culture" and to display an "updated version" of the country in the year of the "commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of relations between Chile and the Asian giant".⁶²

Placing Chinese Communist Party messaging and approved content into media outlets abroad, either overtly or covertly, has been made possible through media partnerships signed over the past decade. This mechanism, already identified in the Western media, is also being deployed in Latin America in both Spanish and Portuguese and in both print and multimedia formats. China's use of supplements jointly distributed with newspapers and magazines is an opportunity to partner with a well-established market actor but also to benefit from the reputation, credibility, and ability to reach the public that it commands. This is also a good

strategy for overcoming the lack of interest in Chinese media as the direct source for information consumption among regional consumers.

Op-eds in the Era of Digital Diplomacy

Chinese public messaging has become increasingly proactive in Latin America, as opinion pieces by Chinese diplomats – often the Chinese ambassador in a given country – have begun to appear in local media outlets and to be shared on social media by official diplomatic and media accounts.⁶³ This new practice to engage regional public opinion and decision makers was used sporadically as early as 2011. On the occasion of then vice-president Xi Jinping’s state visit to Uruguay, Chinese Ambassador to Uruguay, Qu Shengwu, published a piece entitled “A Journey of Friendship and Cooperation” (*Un Viaje de Amistad y Cooperación*) in *La República de Uruguay*, where he emphasized the importance of the event for “mutually beneficial” relations and regional development.

This tool to reach a mass audience in Latin America was gradually developed and became more popular among Chinese diplomats after 2017 (see [Figure 17](#)). Op-eds are now systematically employed in at least fifteen countries in the region, but are mainly concentrated in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. Mexico has seen the largest concentration of op-eds published, with local media publishing opinion pieces by Chinese diplomats in the region.

The timing of the publication of these op-eds is often connected to Chinese domestic developments, such as the annual session of the National People’s Congress, national celebrations, and major international events (e.g. meetings of the G20, BRIC countries, the CELAC Forum, or the United Nations General Assembly) (see figure # for an illustration of this trend). The content of such opinion pieces aligns closely with the Chinese external communication strategy and State Council Information Office (SCIO) whitepapers.⁶⁴ Their subject is often a topic determined for the year by SCIO and they faithfully reproduce key concepts and official positions.

As illustrated by [Figure 18](#), frequently recurring themes include China-LAC relations; the economy and development; multilateral forums; the CCP; Covid-19; Chinese Domestic Affairs and the Belt and Road Initiative. With regard to China-LAC relations, for example, Chinese diplomats write about the importance of cooperation and state visits. The topic of the economy and development aggregates attention to such issues as the U.S.-China “trade war,” Chinese economic achievements, new infrastructure projects, and China’s “poverty alleviation” campaign.

References to multilateral forums include Chinese defense of multilateralism and China’s positions on such international forums as the G20, the UN, CELAC and the BRICS. A focus on the Party typically presents official views on the Chinese model, Xi Jinping’s leadership, and references such celebratory dates as the 100th Anniversary of CCP and the 70th Anniversary of the PRC. Publications about Covid-19 generally highlight Chinese efforts to contain the virus, Chinese vaccine development and Chinese health cooperation, including medical donations to the region. When diplomats generate op-eds about Chinese domestic affairs it is in order to present the PRC’s views on Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea.

The issue of the "environment" has only recently become a topic, as have human rights-related themes. Chinese Diplomats often appear moved to publish opinion pieces as a way to display loyalty to the Party, sometimes delivering messages that resonate little with audiences in the region, such as the Sino-Japanese War, known in China as the War of Resistance to Japan.

Overall Chinese op-eds often do not appear well-adapted for consumption by LAC audiences. Although, more recent editorials are beginning to exhibit more of a tendency to present China's position as it relates to an ongoing local or public concern and/or in response to a regional declaration, event, or political decision, instead of communicating Chinese positions by following China's own political calendar. An example of this dynamic can be seen in the 2021 opinion piece "The Role of Political Parties in Modernizing Governance" (*O papel dos partidos políticos na modernização da governança*), published by China's Ambassador to Brazil, Yang Wanming, in the weekly magazine *Veja*. Wanming reacts to criticism of the Chinese government model expressed by both Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and his son, senator Eduardo Bolsonaro, presenting timely responses to local political events. The text is almost identical to the speech given by Ambassador Wanming in a webinar with the same title and sponsored by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil.⁶⁵

In Mexico, Chinese Ambassadors Zhu Qingqiao and Qiu Xiaoqi became regular contributors to the local publication *Milenio*, publishing as often as every two weeks while, in addition, writing opinion pieces for other media outlets such as *El Heraldo*, *Excélsior*, *El Financiero* and *Reforma*. The Chinese Ambassador in Barbados, Yan Xiusheng, maintains a permanent column in the mainstream publication *The Barbados Advocate*, which enables him to publish Chinese-approved content in media outlets that haven't necessarily established media sharing agreements with Chinese partners.

This strategy of content placement is perceived as inexpensive and effective, since in contrast to media agreements it generally does not involve payment, and the op-ed writer has relative freedom to choose what to write and when, with little or no editing from the host media. Op-eds placed in larger newspapers help to personalize the Chinese state message by giving it "a face" and by building a connection between a Chinese diplomat and their audience, which in turn helps to raise the profile of Chinese diplomats, both online and off.

Twitter as a Foreign Policy Tool

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the messaging of sponsored content, news supplements, and opinion pieces can be divided in three types: 1. positive stories about China's progress and development, 2. promotion of Chinese leadership and the Chinese Communist Party, 3. and China's Covid-19 response. A focus on those themes reflects the goals of China's current international influence strategy and align with China's so-called "Wolf warrior diplomacy," a newly assertive and patriotic diplomatic style.

Developing soft power has been a major goal of Chinese foreign policy, and the digital migration of much public diplomacy was accelerated by events connected to the pandemic, including an overabundance of information and false or misleading information circulating in digital and physical environments during the Covid-19 outbreak. To counterbalance the perceived deteriorating of its image during the pandemic, the PRC deployed public diplomacy tools focused on damage control in the face of growing negative content about

China connected to the 2019 civil movement in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, the trade and technology war with the U.S., and its handling of the pandemic.

China's messaging in LAC during the pandemic combines damage control with the goal of developing and controlling its own narrative about itself, and in the process reconfiguring global information flows. Chinese media refer to the existence of an "anti-China campaign" and "Western media imperialism" that need to be challenged by Chinese representatives, with China's efforts to develop a people-oriented diplomacy used to battle distrust. This behavior marks a shift from former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy, guided by the proverb "hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead," which encouraged keeping a low-profile. In contrast, Xi Jinping's leadership approach has adopted a much more combative public diplomacy.

Covid-19 has significantly impacted China's digital diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean. As part of the strategy to "tell China's story well," the Chinese government has increased its presence on social media platforms banned in the PRC itself. Beginning in 2019 and accelerating during the pandemic, the PRC created new Twitter accounts at an increasing clip, including 25 new accounts, mainly operating in Spanish and Portuguese, attributed to PRC embassies, ambassadors, consuls, and consulates (see [Figure 19](#)).

The region's need for medical supplies and vaccines in response to the pandemic exposed the asymmetrical relations between China and LAC, which Chinese social media posts sought to positively reframe. As illustrated in [Figure 20](#),⁶⁶ an analysis of 1,357 tweets by the Twitter account for China's Embassy in Argentina reveals "*Covid-19*" to be the second most used hashtag (#), just behind "*China*." A similar result is found in a review of more than 2,000 tweets of China's Embassy in El Salvador account. "*Coronavirus*" is the second most used expression, preceded only by the use of the word "*China*."

For China's Embassy in Chile, the hashtag "*coronavirus*" is the most used followed by "*covid-19*." Additionally, a review of the most recent 3,200 tweets by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil shows that messaging was concentrated around the keywords "*coronavirus*," "*5G*," "*Covid-19*," and "*Wuhan*." In Brazil, Chinese diplomats on social media not only published official content but also reacted to local public debate and statements by political actors. These accounts exhibit similar trends to Chinese Twitter accounts operating in English. Their published content is also in line with PRC positions about Chinese vaccine development, distribution, and donations.

Conclusions

The Chinese government, state-owned media, and leading corporations are increasingly engaged in promoting positive narratives about China to governments and the general public across Latin America and the Caribbean. The messages they convey emphasize China's offer of "peaceful cooperation" to foster progress, prosperity, and development for the region. China's own experience is often held up as an example, as evident in frequent references to the Chinese model, to Xi Jinping as a historic leader, and to the leading role played by the Chinese Communist Party. The success of China's efforts to overcome extreme poverty, the benevolence of its actions in the international arena, and its putative virtues with regard to human rights are among the themes that are articulated most frequently.

As this study describes, Chinese communication operations in the region have become more systematic and diverse over the past decade. They now include CIs, paid inserts and supplements in local journalistic outlets, opinion pieces, media content sharing agreements, co-productions, press trips for Latin American journalists, and diplomatic accounts on social media platforms. We see increasing use of first-person essays and invited contributions about China by foreign writers. Paid insertions celebrating CCP achievements and legitimizing the Chinese government and leadership are also becoming more frequent and reflect a determination to present counter-narratives to those of China's critics. These interventions highlight the Chinese understanding or redefinition of such concepts as "freedom," "democracy," "harmony," and "human rights."

The messaging is rapidly evolving and gaining in sophistication in both format and content, revealing a concerted strategy intended to shape perceptions of China in the region. For the most part what one encounters in a review of China's messaging in 21st century LAC is information that, while consistently slanted, is not entirely false. However, this appears to be changing, with narratives pertaining to some aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to human rights and the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, taking on the character of disinformation that in LAC as elsewhere has a troubling tendency to be amplified through digital and social media.

Even when the messaging is innocuous, its origins in official Chinese sources are often not apparent to LAC consumers of mass media, online content, and social media. A survey carried out as part of the project that gave rise to this paper found that opinion leaders in LAC believe that they do not draw significantly on Chinese sources for their understanding of public affairs, relying instead on national media as well as longstanding independent outlets such as CNN.⁶⁷ Yet our study suggests that those national outlets are increasingly delivering content produced elsewhere, including China. Moreover, whereas consumers of news may be relying on non-governmental channels from abroad, the supply of Chinese media content cannot be divorced from the agendas of the Chinese state.

All major powers endeavor to project a positive image of themselves through a variety of soft power mechanisms, but that should not lead to the mistaken conclusion that they do so in identical ways. This study suggests that China's approach to promotion of its culture, its role in the international arena, and its engagements in contemporary LAC exhibits distinctive characteristics. It is also surprisingly monolithic. That identical messages are simultaneously issued by news outlets in different countries and by diplomats stationed throughout the region suggests that there is either a highly centralized, coordinated decision-making process and/or limited capacity at this juncture to tailor China's messages to particular contexts. Given the significant expansion and diversification of China's public diplomacy efforts in the region over the past several years, and the growing exposure of Chinese actors and institutions to Latin America and the Caribbean as bilateral ties become further consolidated, we would expect to see ever more sophisticated and context-sensitive interventions in the not distant future.

With this in mind, subsequent studies of China's messaging need to understand evolving variations in content across different platforms, perhaps with particular focus on audiovisual content (in contrast to traditional print, online, or social media content), including but not limited to TV, radio, and streaming services in LAC. Future inquiries should be attentive not only to cross-national and sub-national differences in the content and mechanisms for Beijing's messaging in the region, but also to the degree to which interventions are directed

to particular audiences. Indeed, there is a need for systematic assessments of the reception of Chinese messaging in the region: Are the narratives emanating from Chinese sources taken at face value, and do Chinese concepts and terms (e.g. ecological civilization, silk road) effectively penetrate LAC public spheres? Perhaps most importantly: how might those labels come to frame public opinion or drive public policy agendas?

¹ For an exhaustive review of the literature on the topic, See Andres Serbin, “Latin American-China Relations: A Review of Recent Literature.” CLALS Working Paper 32, 2022. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4003586

² This year-long research project gathered data from an array of primary sources, focusing on the collection, documentation, and analysis of Spanish and Portuguese-language media content distributed by national, regional, and global news outlets operating in Latin America and the Caribbean. This included the documentation of Chinese media agreements with regional media corporations, analysis of Chinese official Twitter accounts in the region, and the development of four country case studies. This project also carried out an extensive review of public records in multiple languages to identify contractual arrangements, as well as policies, announcements, speeches, events, and diplomatic agendas made available in English and Mandarin by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, the China International Development Cooperation Agency, other state agencies, NGOs, and relevant Latin American government agencies. Complementing these efforts were a survey of the perception of China on the part of Latin American opinion leaders and a comprehensive review of academic literature on China’s relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean.

³ In Argentina, national operators are waiting for the government to bid 5G frequencies, the requirements of the bid will define a path that could favor or harm the Chinese firm. Huawei is a provider - among others - to local operators 5G tests in some cities. Interesting story from February 2022: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/el-gobierno-le-dio-una-senal-a-huawei-para-la-licitacion-de-la-tecnologia-5g-nid13022022/>. Chile concluded the 5G bid, the winners are WOM, Entel and Movistar - the 1st rely on Huawei technology the others on Ericsson and Nokia.

⁴ To date the three ministerial meetings of the China-CELAC Forum have resulted, in the *CELAC and China Cooperation Plan (2015-2019)*, the *CELAC and China Joint Plan of Action for Cooperation on Priority Areas (2019-2021)*,^[3] and the *CELAC-China Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)*.

⁵ State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2008) “China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean” *China Daily* https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-11/06/content_7179488_2.htm

⁶ State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2016) “Full Text of China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean” http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/11/24/content_281475499069158.htm

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2016) “Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at Peruvian Congress” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/lmzs_664952/gjlb_664956/3513_665118/3515_665122/201611/t20161124_596476.html

⁸ Zhao Li (2018) “From Cherries to Confucius Institutes: China-Latin America Relations at a Glance” https://news.cgtn.com/news/79596a4e79677a6333566d54/share_p.html

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- ⁹ Cardenal, Juan Pablo (2017) “Reframing Relations in Peru” In *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, p. 74. Washington DC: National Endowment for Democracy; see also <https://www.portaldosjornalistas.com.br/helio-rocha-recebe-bolsa-do-governo-chines/>.
- ¹⁰ China-CELAC Forum (2015) “Cooperation Plan (2015-2019)” http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/zywj_3/201501/t20150123_6475954.htm
- ¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2021) “Declaration of the Third Ministers’ Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202112/t20211207_10463460.html
- ¹² Cardenal, Juan Pablo (2017) “Navigating Political Change in Argentina” In *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, p. 37-38. Washington DC: National Endowment for Democracy.
- ¹³ Xinhua News Agency (2006) “1st Confucius Institute Opens in Latin America,” February 16 <http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/158250.htm>
- ¹⁴ Sun Xiaochen (2014) “Confucius Institute Blossoms Across Latin America” *China Daily* http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sunday/2014-07/20/content_17854567.htm
- ¹⁵ Space does not permit a fuller examination of this issue, but outreach to “overseas Chinese” and efforts to activate sometimes large Chinese diaspora communities throughout the world to support China’s political and policy goals in a given country is an evident dimension of Chinese state-run public diplomacy efforts.
- ¹⁶ <https://ic.ues.edu.sv/>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.institutoconfucio.edu.ar/>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.confucioust.cl/instituto-confucio/>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.institutoconfucio.com.br/>
- ²⁰ Wang Peng (2020) “Confucius Institutes in Brazil and BRICS Education Cooperation” *The Diplomat* <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/confucius-institutes-in-brazil-and-brics-education-cooperation/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20the%20Confucius%20Institute%20is,the%20establishment%20of%20Confucius%20Institute.>
- ²¹ Cardenal, “Navigating Political Change in Argentina,” *ibid*, p. 45.
- ²² Paju, Evangelina (2022) “La ruta del año nuevo chino en Buenos Aires,” January 27 argentina.viajando.travel/ano-nuevo/la-ruta-del-ano-nuevo-chino-buenos-aires-n37286
- ²³ Cardenal, “Reframing Relations in Peru,” *ibid*, p. 75.
- ²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2021) “China-CELAC Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)” http://fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202112/t20211207_10463459.html
- ²⁵ Albrow, Robert (2015) “The Disjunction of Image and Word in US and Chinese Soft Power Projection” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21 (4): 382-399
- ²⁶ CLALS and CRIES (2022) “Survey of Opinion Leaders: Assessments of China’s Role in Latin America and the Caribbean” american.edu/centers/latin-america-latino-studies/upload/survey-report_2022_01-20-finalform-7570.pdf, p. 18
- ²⁷ Sahlins, Marshall (2014) *Confucius institutes: Academic Malware*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- ²⁸ Green-Riley, Naima (2020) “The State Department Labeled China’s Confucius Programs a Bad Influence on U.S. Students. What’s the Story?” *The Washington Post* August 25 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/24/state-department-labeled-chinas-confucius-programs-bad-influence-us-students-whats-story/>
- ²⁹ Office of the Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State (2020) “Confucius Institute U.S. Center Designation as a Foreign Mission” <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/index.html>

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- ³⁰ Axelrod, Tal (2020) “China’s Confucius Institute Designated as a Foreign Mission of Beijing” *The Hill* August 13 <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/511863-chinas-confucius-institute-designated-as-a-foreign-mission-of-beijing>
- ³¹ Acevedo, David (2021) “Confucius Institutes Get a Makeover” *CounterCurrent* March 23 <https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/confucius-institutes-get-a-makeover>
- ³² Wei He, Lucia (2029) “How China is Closing the Soft Power Gap in Latin America” *Americas Quarterly* April 12 <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/how-china-is-closing-the-soft-power-gap-in-latin-america/>
- ³³ Jin-Young Jun, Wei Wang, and Sung-Woo Cho (2020) “The Role of Confucius Institutes and One Belt, One Road Initiatives on the Values of Cross-Border M&A: Empirical Evidence from China” *Sustainability* 12: 1-20.
- ³⁴ Sun Xiaochen, *ibid*
- ³⁵ The second cooperation plan generated by the China-CELAC Forum in 2018 explicitly incorporates China’s Belt and Road initiative for the first time.
- ³⁶ “China Invites Latin America to Take Part in One Belt, One Road.” 2018. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-chile-china-idUSKBN1FB2CN> (February 8, 2022).
- ³⁶ “Wang Yi Attends the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum.” http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/zyxw_1/201801/t20180124_6416754.htm (February 8, 2022).
- ³⁷ CELAC-China. 2015. “Cooperation Plan (2015-2019).” http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/zywj_3/t1230944.htm (March 27, 2021).
- ³⁸ The BRI emphasized five links: policy communication, facility connectivity, smooth trade, capital finance and people's hearts (also described in Chinese documents as people-to-people engagements).
- ³⁹ Pisanu, Gaspar, Verónica Arroyo, and Ángela Alarcón. 2021. *Surveillance Tech in Latin America: Made Abroad, Deployed at Home*. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/08/Surveillance-Tech-Latam-Report.pdf>; “Aeroporto de Porto Alegre Instala Câmera Térmica Para Medir Temperatura de Passageiros - Jornal Do Comércio.” https://www.jornaldocomercio.com/_conteudo/galeria_de_imagens/2020/07/750098-aeroporto-de-porto-alegre-instala-camera-termica-para-medir-temperatura-de-passageiros.html (August 20, 2021).
- ⁴⁰ Winning bids went to subsidiaries of Telefonica, Telecom Italia and America Movil. Brazil raised a total of 47.2 billion reais (\$8.5 billion) in its 5G spectrum auction, making it the second largest auction of assets in the country’s history.
- ⁴¹ Telias, Diego and Francisco Urdinez (2021) “China’s Foreign Aid Political Drivers: Lessons from a Novel Dataset of Mask Diplomacy in Latin America During the Covid-19 Pandemic” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 50 (2): 209-226, p. 7
- ⁴² Detailed analysis of China’s relations with El Salvador is provided in our accompanying study, CLALS 2022.
- ⁴³ <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>
- ⁴⁴ https://www.clarin.com/brandstudio/china-multiples-ayudas-combate-pandemia-region_0_-l4Q2XVXU.html
- ⁴⁵ Regular reproduction of Chinese media content indicates the likely existence of an agreement to allow content reproduction, but in these additional cases we were unable to locate the agreement itself or an official announcement referencing one.
- ⁴⁶ “Chinese, Latin American Media Join Hands to Tide over the Global Crisis - China Plus.” <http://chinaplus.cri.cn/recommended/1661/533783> (June 23, 2021).
- ⁴⁷ Radiobrás, Empresa Brasileira de Comunicação. 1996. “Acordo de Intercambio Com a Agência Noticiosa Xinhua.”

https://www.ebc.com.br/sites/_institucional/files/atoms/files/acordo_de_intercambio_com_a_agencia_noticiosa_xinhua.pdf (May 15, 2021).

⁴⁸ Yang, Jiechi. “Innovations in China’s Diplomatic Theory and Practice Under New Conditions.” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1066869.shtml (March 25, 2021).

⁴⁹ More in : Yang, Jiechi. 2013. “China’s Diplomacy at a New Historical Starting Point.” http://ie.chineseembassy.org/eng/zt/diplomacy/201311/t20131127_2540464.htm (March 25, 2021).

⁵⁰ Press, Associated. 2016. “Xi Jinping Asks for ‘absolute Loyalty’ from Chinese State Media.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/19/xi-jinping-tours-chinas-top-state-media-outlets-to-boost-loyalty> (February 12, 2022).

“Chinese President Xi Jinping Visits with CCTV America via Video Call.” 2016. *CGTN America*. <https://america.cgtn.com/2016/02/19/chinese-president-xi-jinping-visits-with-cctv-america-via-video-call> (February 12, 2022).

⁵¹ Though, the People’s Daily, Xinhua, CRI and CGTN only became active on social media in Spanish and Portuguese only after 2010.

⁵² Xinhua. 2016. “Xinhua Dispuesta a Profundizar Intercambios Con Medios de Comunicación de América Latina.” *Xinhua*. http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2016-11/26/c_135859663.htm (February 2, 2022).

⁵³ Xi Jinping Asiste a La Ceremonia de Apertura de La Cumbre de Líderes de Medios de Comunicación China-América Latina.” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/wjb/zzjg/ldmzs/xwlb/201611/t20161126_935293.html (March 27, 2021).

⁵⁴ Xi Jinping Asiste a La Ceremonia de Apertura de La Cumbre de Líderes de Medios de Comunicación China-América Latina.” https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/wjb/zzjg/ldmzs/xwlb/201611/t20161126_935293.html (March 27, 2021).

⁵⁵ “Xinhua. 2021. “Xi Focus: Xi Stresses Improving China’s International Communication Capacity.” http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/01/c_139983105.htm (June 4, 2021). “China’s Xi Calls for Greater Global Media Reach.” 2021. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-xi-calls-greater-global-media-reach-2021-06-01/> (June 4, 2021).

⁵⁶ The Chinese sponsored paid content reviewed in this research was accounted as one story, one paid content entry, regardless of the number of pages it represented. The paid content published as part of a sponsored news supplement was not considered individually in this review.

⁵⁷ <http://espanol.cctv.com/2016/05/11/VIDEx4kZ37ziAIAbQu9vv1Sf160511.shtml>

⁵⁸ <https://www.diariouno.com.ar/china-watch>

⁵⁹ <https://observatoriodatv.uol.com.br/noticias/band-e-china-media-group-fecham-acordo-de-cooperacao>

⁶⁰ <https://bandnewsfm.band.uol.com.br/2019/11/11/grupo-bandeirantes-assina-parceria-com-o-china-media-group-maior-grupo-de-midia-do-pais-asiatico/>

⁶¹ <https://www.latercera.com/canal/conexion-china/>

⁶² <https://www.latercera.com/conexion-china/noticia/conexion-china-cmg/959387/>

⁶³ This analysis of Chinese op-eds in Latin American and Caribbean media is based on a review of 391 such op-eds by Chinese diplomats in mainstream regional newspapers and magazines,

⁶⁴ State Council Information Office of the PRC (January 2021). *China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era*.

<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1696686/1696686.htm>

State Council Information Office of the PRC (April 2021). *Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution*.

<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1701651/1701651.htm>.

⁶⁵ Yang, Wanming. 2021. "Discurso Do Embaixador Yang Wanming Na Abertura Do Webinário O Papel Dos Partidos Políticos Na Modernização Da Governança." http://br.china-embassy.org/por/sglds/202106/t20210611_9078807.htm(February 15, 2022).

⁶⁶ Authors' calculations based on account creation data collected until the 1st of July 2021.

⁶⁷ Center for Latin American and Latino Studies and Consejo Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, "Survey of Opinion Leaders: Assessments of China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean." January, 2022. https://www.american.edu/centers/latin-american-latino-studies/upload/survey-report_2022_01-20-finalfinal-7570.pdf