

China in the Pages of Americas Quarterly: Three Interpretations

Written by Livia Peres Milani and Luciana Wietchikoski

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The pursuit of strategic competition with China by the Joe Biden administration discloses that great-power rivalry became the crux of U.S. foreign policy and a defining characteristic of current global politics. As the current U.S. National Security Strategy states, China's assertiveness is the "most consequential geopolitical challenge" to America's leadership (The White House 2022). Even though such competition centers on the Indo-Pacific theater, it is also part of a global dynamic, implying changes in U.S. policy to the Global South, including Latin America.

In the Western Hemisphere, Chinese inroads are predominantly economic, but the U.S. political representatives and military officers construct a narrative that characterizes China's regional influence as a threat to its national security (Milani 2022; Vidal e Wietchikoski 2022). There is prolific literature on this subject, much centering on how governments perceive the issue or dedicate it to macrostructural analysis (Guida 2018; Gardini 2021; Bernal-Meza 2020). But investigations that seek to understand the construction of the narratives and the myriad of public and private actors engaged in it are still needed. We consider this process relevant to examine the changing dynamics of U.S. hegemony. Comprehending hegemony as a convergence of coercion and consensus in promoting the global supremacy of the dominant classes of central states (Cox 1983), this narrative, and the actions promoted by the U.S. government, aim at hegemony maintenance by reaffirming the Monroe Doctrine and limiting Latin American partnerships with extra-regional powers.

The U.S. narrative, especially the one promoted by Southern Command officials, constructs the U.S. as the promoter of democracy and liberalism and China as a challenge to reinforcing such values in the region. Therefore, that narrative appeals for a consensual view of U.S. leadership. In order to better understand hegemony construction, greater understanding is needed regarding how other relevant actors that compose the political discussion in the U.S. frame this issue and whether there is a consensus on China's regional inroads.

Starting from this point, in this article, we aim to analyze how U.S. and Latin American elites frame the issue of China's growing relations with the region, investigating if they reproduce the military's narrative. Our analysis builds from a qualitative reading and systematization of pieces published in Americas Quarterly magazine, funded and edited by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas (AS/COA). We analyzed 34 articles published between 2017 and 2022, selected through the magazine's "China" tag.

AS/COA is a leading think tank dedicated to Latin America, and notable members of U.S. elites compose its Board of Directors. For example, David Rockefeller founded it, and Susan L. Segal, former leader of LATAM operations for JPMorgan Partners/Chase Capital, directs it today. John D. Negroponte, former Director of National Intelligence, is also a member of the Board, besides ex-ambassadors and other representatives of the finance market and academia.

At least three interpretations summarize the articles published in the last few years at Americas Quarterly. We identify the first interpretation as "securitizing" because it presents China as a threat to U.S. leadership, constructing a narrative of enmity. The second interpretation aims at "improving capitalism," highlighting both pending opportunities for Latin America arising from relations with China and particular risks. Finally, the third narrative builds

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on the rhetoric of “preserving national interest,” reflecting the views of elites from Latin America that also publish in the magazine and recommend maintaining good relations with both countries and refraining from participating in the global competition. In the following paragraphs, we will further formulate those views.

Securitizing China’s regional inroads

This interpretation describes China as a strategic rival and its presence in Latin America as a threat or challenge to U.S. regional hegemony. The chief proponent of this vision in Americas Quarterly is Eric Farnsworth, vice-president of the AS/COA Washington Office and a former U.S. Department of State employee who participated in the Clinton White House.

According to this vision, China’s regional inroads are “based on sharp power” defined as “[...] the use of state resources intentionally and proactively to manipulate behavior and actions in foreign states” (Farnsworth 2019). A frequent argument from this perspective is that Chinese activities in the region are a risk to democracy, human rights, environmental protection, and governance. In this sense, it reinforces the narrative advanced by the current U.S. administration and promotes an argument of global politics as divided between democracies and authoritarian states. There is an identification of America as the promoter of liberal values. Conversely, authoritarian states, such as China, are described as a threat to them.

For example, according to Farnsworth (2019), “[...] China seems not to care that much about the state of regional democracy or development; its mercantilist economic model directly undermines regional development”. Therefore, he claims that the Chinese model is a risk not only to liberal politics but also to a liberal economic model since it is supposedly mercantilist.

He also highlights the communist characteristic of Chinese politics and claims that “Beijing boasts a suite of state-led activities designed to bend hearts and minds toward the Chinese Communist Party worldview on core interests [...]” (Farnsworth 2019). Referring to Chinese regional engagement, he claims that the country intentionally exports an economic and political model.

There are also proponents of this interpretation from Latin America. According to Roman Ortiz, former advisor to the Colombian Defense Ministry, “warmer relations between [the Mexican president, Manuel Lopez Obrador] AMLO and Beijing could create a security conundrum for the U.S.” (Ortiz 2021) and, therefore, “President Joe Biden and his administration would be wise to consider their next move (Ortiz 2021).”

Hence, this interpretation constructs China as a threatening *other* and describes its behavior as intrinsically different from Western ideals and values. This view represents a minority position in the pages of Americas Quarterly, but it is significant because of the high-profile held by its chief promoter, Eric Farnsworth, within the AS/COA hierarchical structure. This view is the most related to the one promoted by military officers, and it reflects the intention of maintaining U.S. regional hegemony. It formulates China’s regional inroads as challenges to shared values, such as democracy, and the U.S. as the promoter of liberalism (and, therefore, a benign influence on the region).

Improving capitalism

This second interpretation differs from the “securitizing” perspective because it does not read China’s presence through security lenses. It is advanced by scholars on China-Latin American relations and members of U.S. *think tanks*, such as Margaret Myers, Kevin Gallagher, Robert Soutar, Pepe Zhang, and Richard Lapper. Latin American elites, such as Chile’s former minister of finance, Felipe Larraín, also engage in the narrative.

This interpretation describes trade with China as both an opportunity and a risk for Latin America, claiming it is ambiguous and complex. They interpret commerce with the Asian power as “critical to the region’s economic well-being” and “an alternative to the U.S. and other markets that had lost their appetite for LAC products” (Myers and Gallagher 2020).

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However, there are also concerns relating to growing Latin American dependence on commerce with China and the supposed inefficiency of Chinese investments. Myers (2019), for example, highlights the “frequent failure of Chinese companies to practice due diligence in the region, leading to unforeseen conflicts and resulting project delays or cost overruns.”

The proponents of this view describe Chinese investments as similar to that of the West in relevant aspects. For Soutar (2020), for example, “[...] Chinese institutional investors now see benefits in operating more like their international counterparts, working in partnerships and seeking long-term returns.” Similarly, Lapper (2019) points out that “[...] many Chinese investment decisions are dictated by the needs of the Chinese economy [...] much as Western multinational companies ultimately operate on behalf of their own shareholders [...]”.

This interpretation contests the “securitizing” interpretation by arguing that the latter promotes an overstressed formulation of Chinese economic presence in Latin America. According to Larraín and Zhang (2021):

Despite the aforementioned competitive dynamics, however, discussions about direct U.S.-China rivalry in LAC appear exaggerated when examined strictly through the lens of trade. [...] China has and will struggle to meaningfully out-compete U.S. trade dominance in Mexico and Central America, given the deeply integrated North American supply chains. Similarly, the U.S. cannot realistically replace Chinese demand for South American commodities.

Therefore, they aim to refute the alarmism of the securitizing narrative. This characteristic is also present when commenting on the relations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Military and diplomatic circles in the U.S. described Chinese health engagement with the region as containing geopolitical dimensions. The scholars counter this narrative by framing Chinese health engagement in good light, depicting China “as a key ally in LAC’s fight against the virus” (Larraín and Zhang 2021). Therefore, they do not perceive Chinese health cooperation as encompassing geopolitical intentions and effects.

Generally speaking, the view focuses on the economic dimension and examines the Chinese presence from this perspective. The proponents recommend caution for Latin Americans engaging with China but also see it as an economic opportunity in relevant aspects which could contribute to the development of capitalism in the region. As in the former interpretation, there is no structural criticism of U.S. policy. The maintenance of underdevelopment, highly unequal economies in Latin America and the tendency of deindustrialization resulting from the competitiveness of the international political economy are understated.

They do not contest the paradigm of neoliberalism and do not see Chinese investments as a challenge to such a model, even though they occasionally criticize such investments for the lack of parameters in areas such as environmental protection and human rights. This view is less identified with U.S. leadership *per se*, but it also promotes capitalism as the hegemonic mode of production and liberalism as core values for the organization of economic and social orders. Moreover, the parameters of Western investments are described as a model that China should follow, and there are commitments with the preservation of norms and rules that compose the American-led global order.

Preserving National Interests

This third interpretation comes mainly from Latin American elites, who tend to equalize Chinese and U.S. regional influence. They emphasize that both countries are relevant for Latin American economic growth, and impairing relations with either would have negative consequences. The proponents of this view describe China as a rising superpower and recognize the geopolitical dispute but recommend that Latin American governments take their distance from strategic competition.

Written by Latin American representatives, this interpretation differs from the former for being more inclined to convince Washington authorities of the relevance of trade and investment ties with China. This third interpretation reads relations between China and Latin America as inescapable and highlights national dependence. There is an instrumentalization of dependence rhetoric to allege the necessity of maintaining and improving relations with the

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Asian power.

According to Oliver Stuenkel, a public intellectual in Brazil, the country “[...] is economically dependent on China, which has been its most important trade partner since 2009.” (Stuenkel 2020). However, despite dependence, Stuenkel claims that the “China-Brazil trade and investment relationship is mutually beneficial and undermining it would have hurt Brazilian farmers” (Stuenkel 2019). Similarly, the former special secretary of strategic affairs of Brazil, Hussein Kailout, claims that the country’s “dependence on China is significantly greater than its dependence on the United States” (Kailout 2021).

When it comes to Mexico, there is a similar narrative. Martha Bárcena Coqui, the former Mexican ambassador to the United States, points out that in Mexico, “we suddenly realized that we were too dependent on Chinese products” and that “integration with both China and the U.S. benefits Mexico, but also presents challenges.” (Bárcena Coqui 2021). Regarding Colombia, former Minister of Interior, Luis Fernando Mejía describes China as “Colombia’s second most important trading partner” and “an immense opportunity for Colombia” (Mejía 2021).

There is also moderate criticism of U.S. policies, especially the hegemonic double standards. Kailout (2021), for example, highlights that U.S. pressures for excluding Huawei’s participation in the 5G infrastructure “seem wildly hypocritical in the face of the U.S. espionage operation against the former Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, revealed to the public in 2013.” From this, we can observe some equalization of U.S. and Chinese postures since the author perceives both as behaving as great powers that seek the promotion of their power.

Following this diagnosis, the representatives of such elites reaffirm the need to maintain cordial relations with China and the U.S. For example, Kailout (2021) affirms that “Both superpowers are pivotal to the country. Choosing is not an option.” Stuenkel claims that “Brazil has long used its ambiguous geopolitical role in its favor, remaining on good terms with almost everyone” (Stuenkel 2020).

Similarly, Bárcena Coqui (2021) and Mejía (2021) argue that

the path forward is particularly complex [for Mexico], considering the country’s dynamic and close economic ties to both China and its frequent rival, the United States. If Mexico can effectively navigate the showdown between the two superpowers, it will go a long way in shaping not only its own economic future but also the future of the U.S.-China rivalry.

Should Colombia further strengthen its ties with the U.S., or continue advancing its rapid pace of trade and investment integration with China? Barring a full-scale military confrontation, which would force the country to “choose sides,” Colombia should continue to do both.

This narrative aims to counter the securitizing narrative by arguing about the relevance of Chinese investments and trade for the region. It aims to convince U.S. elites that Chinese engagement is necessary for regional economic well-being and, like the former narratives, does not include structural criticism of the inequalities and oppressions that permeate capitalism in the region. Nevertheless, it sometimes reflects criticism of U.S. policy. As with the former, it is less compromised with U.S. leadership but intrinsically promotes capitalism. It also includes a clear recommendation for Latin American elites: not choosing sides.

Final Remarks

The views presented at Americas Quarterly are more plural than the ones usually expressed by the U.S. military or political leadership. The official interpretation that paints Chinese investments with menacing colors is present but is minor in the magazine. However, representatives of U.S. elites with a high position in the hierarchy of AS/COA advance it. It is an interesting phenomenon because it shows the existence of relative, even if minor, divergence among U.S. elites when it comes to interpreting Chinese regional inroads as menacing.

U.S. scholars and think tanks members who publish in Americas Quarterly tend to present a more complex

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interpretation of Chinese investments in Latin America. They see Chinese presence for its economic components and read it as offering opportunities and risks for Latin America. They tend to analyze the economic and financial dimensions, distancing themselves from geopolitical tones – which suggests different strategic possibilities for the United States in advancing its regional strategy. They recommend a return to a softer policy towards China in Latin America. However, they continue to promote capitalism as a mode of production and neoliberalism as the paradigm for policy, which show their compromise to the maintenance of hegemony.

Finally, representatives of Latin American elites that publish in Americas Quarterly tend to recognize the geopolitical dispute and, at the same time, seek to convince their American counterparts of the need to maintain close relations with China. They also do not formulate structural criticism and remain compromised with capitalism. Their position suggests some resistance from Latin America to the U.S. policy of representing China as a menace. There are still few analyses about how Latin American elites respond to U.S. current securitizing dynamics, and this is a relevant theme for research since there are a few manifestations of divergence.

Generally, there are nuances among the interpretations and the narratives presented at Americas Quarterly. The views published in the magazine are much less alarmist than the ones advanced by the U.S. government. The voices of Latin American leadership and the participation of scholars highly socialized in Latin American or Chinese politics contribute to this pluralism. Nevertheless, the defense of liberalism and capitalism is constant, and there is an understatement of Latin American underdevelopment and capitalism-related oppressions and inequalities.

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