

CHINESE SOFT POWER IN LATIN AMERICA DURING COVID-19

Andres Porras

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SUMMARY

This paper touches on Chinese soft power in Latin America since the COVID-19 outbreak. By determining the importance of Latin America for China, the paper attempts to explain Chinese soft power in the region. The author also briefly describes China's mask and vaccine diplomacy in the region. Finally, the author presents an analysis of the reasons explaining why China's recent aid to Latin America is causal of China's long-term interest in the region rather than a short-term image cleansing.

KEY FINDINGS

1. China sees Latin America as a key strategic region for its abundant natural resources.
2. China's recent and short expression of power to Latin America is a causal effect of its global economic diplomacy rather than a short-term image cleansing.
3. As perceived by China as the part of the Global South Latin America has short- and long-term dependence on China as a source of financing and a destination for its exports.

INTRODUCTION

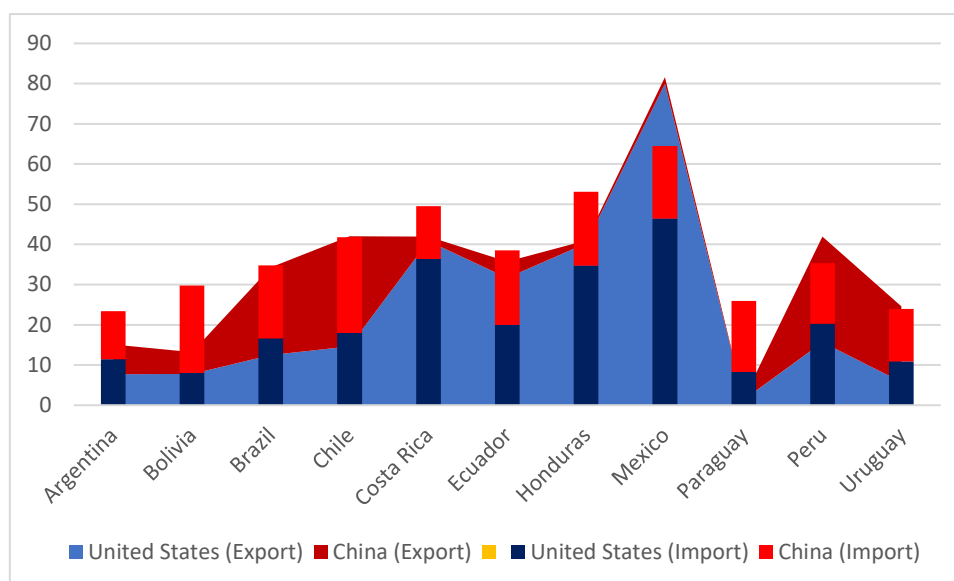
风雨同舟 (*fēngyǔ tóng lù*) was one of the phrases glued on the side of boxes of donated personal protective equipment (PPE) shipping from China to Ecuador. This phrase means that good and bad situations will be faced together and that this situation's joys and sorrows will be shared. This phrase is one example of how China portrays support to Latin America through a new mechanism of soft power, PPE donations. China and Latin America have seen an unprecedentedly close connection in the past two decades. However, this connection is jeopardised by the novel coronavirus, which originated in China. This paper will briefly discuss new and old soft power tools that China has been using in Latin America and how they were affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. China and Latin America have seen an unprecedented close connection in the last two decades. However, this connection is jeopardised by the novel Chinese-originated coronavirus. This paper briefly discusses new and old soft power tools that China has been using in Latin America and how they were affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

CHINA'S INFLUENCE AND INTEREST IN LATIN AMERICA

In 2008 China released its first framework on how to handle relations between China and Latin America in its "Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean." In this framework, China established that the country should strive to build high-level political dialogue, comprehensive cooperation in trade, investment and finance, and closer cultural exchanges. Ever since, and mostly due to the investment vacuum that the United States and Europe left as they recovered from the financial crisis, China increased its position in the region. This expansion in the region was especially visible through investments in natural resource extraction, infrastructure, government loans, and trade. Thus, it is clear that Latin America is an important strategic region for China.

Several studies have evaluated the interest of China in Latin America. However,

the primary and most prominent interest that China has in Latin America is natural resources. Latin America is a region full of raw natural resources like minerals and oil, as well as food resources, which are scarce in China.

Figure 1. US and China Trade in Latin America

Source: WITS, 2020

Furthermore, many Latin American countries have seen unprecedented foreign direct investment (FDI) and loans coming in from China. The FDI and loans were mainly directed to infrastructure and natural resources exploitation projects in the region. An essential factor to mention is that the primary recipients of this Chinese finance are countries that have left-wing governments that are ideologically against the traditional financial mechanism lead by the United States. This constant flow of capital coming from China has left countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador highly in debt with their Chinese counterparty. Finally, taking trade and financing into consideration, we can see China's hard power in the region's economy and understand China's interest in Latin America.

CHINESE MASK AND VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN LATIN AMERICA

When COVID-19 hit Latin America, the region was almost completely unprepared for a pandemic. This lack of preparation was evident in the first few weeks when many countries of the region lacked essential PPE making the health system struggle. At the same time, Latin America's usual partners (the US and the EU) had similar struggles provoking a leadership vacuum in the region. As a result of the void, in early March 2020, China thought private and public companies started PPE donations to various Latin American countries, especially Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Chile, through

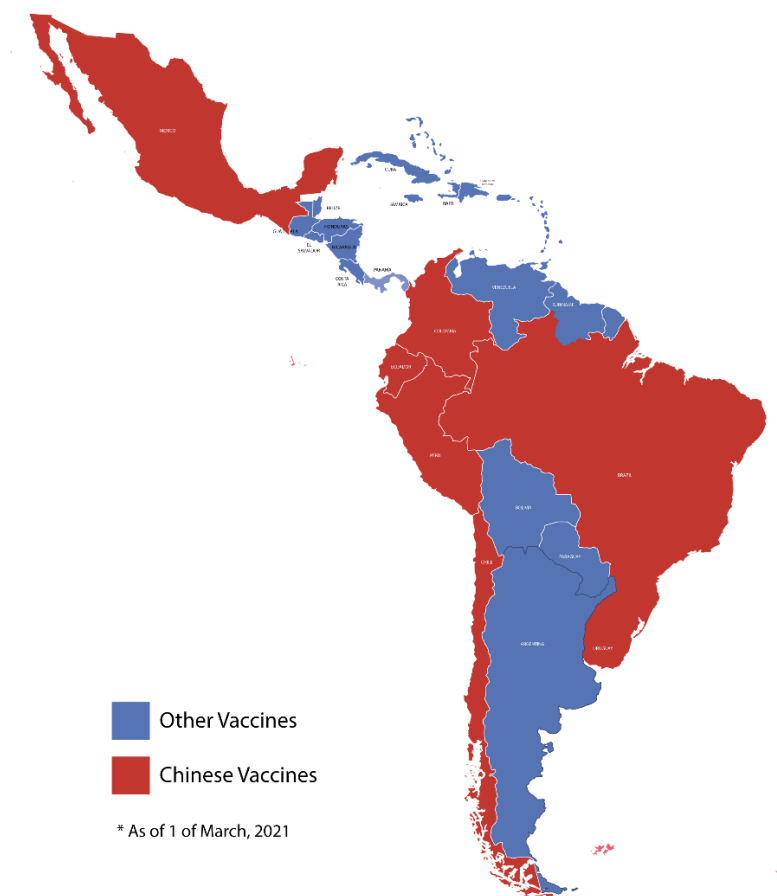
the so-called "mask diplomacy." These donations came in the form of masks, respirators, thermometers, and other medical supplies. In general, most of the donations were received with greet and gratefulness from the region's countries. However, these donations were not exempt from scandals. Many of the donations were not distributed appropriately by the country's leaders, and some of the products lacked the required quality for medical use. Nevertheless, with these limitations, it is essential to analyse and monitor the evolution of aid, the actors, and the reasons for China's cooperation in Latin America.

Furthermore, Latin America is suffering the worst economic crisis they've faced in a century. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the region suffered a more than 9% GDP contraction. This contraction means that the region had a 10-year setback in its economy, which, according to analysts, it would not be able to recover for at least three years. Taking this into consideration, Latin America is struggling to develop a plan for mass immunisation from COVID-19. Moreover, Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca are currently expensive and scarce as they have been purchased by developed countries and are lagging in their manufacturing speed. As a result, the region has seen the Sinovac (Chinese) and the Sputnik V (Russian) vaccine as an alternative. For example, in Peru's case, the country has reached an agreement to purchase 38 million doses of the Sinovac vaccine. This vaccine was approved after being tested in around 12 thousand volunteers in Peru. The Peruvian minister of health affirms that the decision to purchase the vaccine was due to the factors mentioned above and thanks to the lower vaccinating costs. Sinovac also provides more flexibility as the vaccines don't require additional vaccination infrastructure, which lowers the vaccination costs. Furthermore,

in July 2020, China promised Latin American countries one billion dollars in loans to purchase vaccines and other medicine to combat coronavirus. The details about the loan are still not precise.

However, it is important to note many of the possible recipients of the loans are currently highly in debt with China and might struggle to replay them. These factors may lead to China being the biggest distributor of vaccines in Latin America. As a result, this vaccine availability might have a positive effect on China's image in the region, as the United States centres on vaccinating its own people and neglects its own "backyard. "

Map 1. Latin American countries that approved Chinese vaccines



Source: map prepared by the author's own elaboration

CHINA'S SOFT POWER PLANS IN LATIN AMERICA

Taking previous sections into consideration, one may ask what China's plan in Latin America is through the recent show of soft power. It is clear that China's image in Latin America and the world deteriorated with the outbreak of COVID-19. This deterioration of image was evident when prominent Brazilian politicians, namely the president's son, the country's Health Minister and the Foreign Minister, claimed that China and especially the Chinese Communist Party were to blame for the virus. As a result of this animosity toward

China, it is evident that vaccines and PPE is a way for China to clean its image in Latin America. However, China's plan in Latin America goes beyond a short-term sentiment. China's goal is to be a more proactive player in the world's economy. Therefore, these new soft power tools meet China's objectives of domestic and foreign policy, including health security, economic growth, and business interests.

The vaccine and mask diplomacy may be a precursor to one of the Belt and Road Initiative's section, the Health Silk Road. The Health Silk Road (HRS) was first proposed in 2015 in the *Three-Year Plan for the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative*. The HRS was born as a global health cooperation initiative with China in the centre. Although, since 2015, this initiative did not flourish, it started to be discussed again in early 2020 in a call between Chairman Xi and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Therefore, through these new soft power tools and the absence of the traditional Western leading countries, China might be pushing the HRS in Latin America and looking for future "partners" in this new multilateral order.

Additional to the health security that the HRS can provide, China also has economic and business interests that require soft power. One of the main initiatives that China-backed is the South-South Cooperation (SSC). The SSC is an initiative from countries primarily located in the southern hemisphere focused on multilateral cooperation for sustainable growth. Since the introduction of this initiative, China has emphasised that the SSC provides equality for its partners without interfering in their political affairs. Thus, since the beginning of the pandemic, China has aided this initiative through vaccines, PPE, and even a 50 million donation. As a result, the vaccine and mask diplomacy are a way to build closer long-term relations with Latin American countries to cement the SSC's roots.

CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 has affected countries all around the world. However, Latin America has been one of those regions that have been hit the hardest. Furthermore, the leadership vacuum, especially from the United States, has led China to come to rescue the region. Many countries have received and celebrated the help, but many are still sceptical.

Moreover, it is undeniable that China has interests and now has hard economic power in the region. Thus, the recent expression of soft power to Latin America is a causal effect of its global economic diplomacy rather than an accident. It is also undeniable that American supremacy in the region is still present. Hence, it is still unknown if these soft power gestures will help China fulfil its long-term ambitions.



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