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DISCUSSIONS, ECONOMIC POLICY, FOREIGN POLICY

# PRC Assessments of China-Latin America Relations

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In three translated works by Cao Teng and Cheng Yiyang, Lou Yu, and Cui Shoujun, what topics are *not* discussed seem to shed more light on Chinese academic thinking toward Latin America than the topics that are.

Notably, all three works reference the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), suggesting this officially sanctioned framework impacts People's Republic of China (PRC) thinking beyond merely serving as a public relations slogan during engagement with Latin American and other partners. Notably, however, none of the documents mentions China's other, newer programs—including the Global Development Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and Global Security Initiative—which have been introduced in recent years to complement the BRI and give PRC engagement with the region a more explicitly strategic and political character.

Beyond frameworks, none of these three papers address the security dimension of PRC activities—or other noneconomic concerns that play an increasing role in the discussion of its engagement in the United States and the Americas more broadly. None, for example, discussed PRC arms sales and donations, its training of Latin American military and police officers, its role in military exchanges with and exercises in the region, PRC-based private security companies, or even Chinese space sector engagement.

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institutions in the region have facilitated criminal activities—including the production and sale of fentanyl and its precursors; money laundering; Chinese involvement in the illegal mining value chain; illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing by the Chinese deepwater fleet; wildlife trafficking; and human trafficking in the region involving Chinese mafias and ethnic communities.

The documents notably pay little attention to PRC activities close to the United States in Central America and the Caribbean, despite significant recent political and commercial advances in countries there, particularly in Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Similarly, areas in which the PRC and its companies have run into commercial problems and political pushback, including with major energy projects in Ecuador and the governments of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier Milei in Argentina, are also not discussed. Indeed, there is almost a complete absence of any references to concerns over the performance of Chinese companies in the region, including contractual issues, defects, social conflicts, and environmental concerns associated with their projects and other activities.

It is difficult to assess whether these three works are representative of Chinese government thinking on Latin America beyond the scholarly community, although the authors are consistent with their own English-language work and those of other PRC-based scholars. While the noted omissions may be idiosyncratic, it is more likely that they reflect disincentives within the PRC academic community to write on sensitive topics, particularly in self-critical ways. In the context of growing Chinese hubris accompanying growing Chinese economic and military power during President Xi Jinping's unprecedented third term, such

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over the past two decades. What was once largely an economic relationship fueled by the

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intricacies are not reflected in three recent articles by Cui Shoujun, Lou Yu, and Cao Ting and Cheng Yiyang. These articles exemplify the limited scope of Chinese academia in Latin American studies. As with many other recent works in the field, they prioritize alignment with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) narrative over offering critical, balanced academic analysis.

Notably, these articles are descriptive rather than analytical. They sidestep any discussion of the shortcomings of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the PRC's foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. The BRI has yielded mixed results in the region—some projects have been successful, while others have suffered delays, mismanagement, and corruption, leading to backlash from local governments and civil society. In some cases, BRI agreements have catalyzed further bilateral collaboration; in others, they have amounted to little more than political gestures.

Another issue is how the authors frame the role of the United States. They primarily depict U.S. actions in the region as obstacles to PRC-LAC cooperation, focusing narrowly on strategic competition. This perspective neglects decades of U.S.-led aid programs, investment, and institutional support that have significantly shaped regional development. It also overlooks cultural affinities the United States shares with LAC. While the authors emphasize the history of U.S. intervention in the region—an important but not exclusive factor—they fail to account for the multifaceted nature of U.S.-LAC relations, reducing them to a simplistic geopolitical rivalry.

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attributed to U.S. influence. This reductionist view overlooks the shared challenges both left- and right-leaning governments face when engaging with the PRC or any other major external actor, including the United States.

The articles' exclusive reliance on PRC official sources further limits their analysis. When compiling official trade data, for example, China often aggregates financial indicators without distinguishing between loans and foreign direct investment, making it difficult to assess the true nature of its economic involvement in the region.

Despite these shortcomings, the articles offer valuable insights into China's strategic interests in LAC, which can help inform regional decisionmaking and highlight areas for further academic research. First, they underscore that the United States remains a central variable in Chinese foreign policy, viewed predominantly through a geopolitical lens. Second, they present the BRI as a cornerstone of China's engagement, purposefully framed as a solution to the region's challenges, from infrastructure deficits to economic diversification.

The authors also highlight China's emphasis on securing access to natural resources and agricultural products, something that can be understood as part of its strategy to stabilize supply chains and ensure food security. Similarly, the PRC's focus on infrastructure projects reflects its goal of integrating deeply into the region's economic systems, positioning itself as indispensable in sectors such as transportation, electrical grids, and trade connectivity.

Additionally, the articles shed light on the PRC's soft-power initiatives, such as Confucius

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policy priorities. They reveal a manufactured approach aimed at deepening economic ties,

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China's growing presence in Latin America, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become an essential topic for analysis. Scholars such as Cao Ting, Cheng Yiyang, Lou Yu, and Cui Shoujun have explored the economic and geopolitical dimensions of China's involvement in the region. Yet while their analyses provide valuable insights into China's engagement, they often overlook critical social, environmental, and political factors that could shape the long-term outcomes of these interactions.

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countries in their political orientation and engagement with China. For example, Lou's work focuses predominantly on partnerships with left-wing governments, overlooking the potential challenges of emerging right-wing leaders such as Argentina's Javier Milei, whose policies introduce new dynamics. Furthermore, this analysis does not adequately consider the role of subnational governments, civil society, and nongovernmental organizations. These actors often play a decisive role in shaping the implementation of foreign investments, either facilitating or hindering China's plans.

Cui Shoujun's work highlights the economic complementarity between China and Latin America, focusing on trade and investment flows. However, he also downplays the socio-environmental tensions associated with these investments. For instance, the extraction of critical minerals has frequently sparked local resistance due to concerns over environmental impacts and the displacement of Indigenous communities. Additionally, Cui's emphasis on promoting economic cooperation and maximizing trade opportunities overlooks the risks of resource dependence and fails to explore strategies for fostering development. Issues such as technology transfer, value-chain integration, and long-term economic diversification remain underexplored, limiting the article's applicability to policy recommendations.

These gaps in the existing literature reveal a broader trend of prioritizing economic and geopolitical considerations over the social, environmental, and political complexities that shape Sino-Latin American relations. Without a more nuanced understanding of these factors, there is a risk of misalignment between China's expectations and the realities on the ground in Latin America.

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interactions' social, environmental, and political dimensions. By considering the risks of resource dependence, the opportunities for technology transfer, and the importance of inclusive governance, China and Latin American countries can better navigate the challenges of their partnerships. For the United States, a deeper understanding of these dynamics is also essential to engaging effectively with the region and responding to the evolving landscape of Sino–Latin American relations.

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Cao Ting 曹廷, Cheng Yiyang 程弋洋

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### TAGS

PRC, foreign policy, infrastructure, Latin America

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