

Article [EN]

## **Dynamic Adjustment: The Transformation of Trilateral Relations between China, the United States and Latin America (1949-2023)**

*Ajuste Dinámico: la Transformación de las Relaciones Trilaterales entre China, Estados Unidos y América Latina (1949-2023)*

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**[EN] Abstract:** This paper examines the transformative dynamics of the trilateral relationship between the United States, China, and Latin America from the 1950s to the present. Through the lens of national role theory, it explores how the national roles of these actors have shifted in response to geopolitical, economic, and ideological changes. The study is structured chronologically, analyzing distinct periods that mark the evolution of this trilateral dynamic. It delves into the historical evolution of roles and interactions, policy shifts, and strategic calculations to offer insights into the complexities of trilateral relations. The paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the interplay between self-perceived national roles and external expectations, and it provides a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities inherent in navigating the multifaceted interactions between the US, China, and Latin America. The research aims to enhance understanding of the broader geopolitical trends and regional dynamics that have influenced the trajectory of these relations, offering implications for global politics, regional stability, and economic development.

**Keywords:** China, Latin America, United States, national role theory, international relations

**[ES] Resumen:** Este artículo examina la dinámica transformadora de la relación trilateral entre los Estados Unidos, China y América Latina desde la década de 1950 hasta el presente. A través de la teoría del rol nacional, explora cómo los roles nacionales de estos actores han cambiado en respuesta a cambios geopolíticos, económicos e ideológicos. El estudio está estructurado cronológicamente, analizando períodos distintos que marcan la evolución de esta dinámica trilateral. Profunde en la evolución histórica de roles e interacciones, cambios en las políticas y cálculos estratégicos para ofrecer una visión sobre las complejidades de las relaciones trilaterales. El artículo contribuye a la literatura resaltando el intercambio entre los roles nacionales auto-percibidos y las expectativas externas, y proporciona una perspectiva matizada sobre los desafíos y oportunidades inherentes en la navegación de las interacciones multifacéticas entre EE. UU., China y América Latina. La investigación busca mejorar la comprensión de las tendencias geopolíticas más amplias y las dinámicas regionales que han influenciado la trayectoria de estas relaciones, ofreciendo implicaciones para la política mundial, la estabilidad regional y el desarrollo económico.

**Palabras claves:** China, América Latina, Estados Unidos, teoría del rol nacional, relaciones internacionales

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## 1. Introduction

In an era marked by increasing globalization and interconnectedness, the dynamics of international relations have become increasingly complex, particularly within the context of trilateral interactions involving major powers and regional players. The relationship between the United States, China, and Latin America stands as a prime example of this complexity, characterized by a nuanced interplay of strategic interests, economic imperatives, and geopolitical considerations.

In the realm of economic and trade relations, China has emerged as a significant player, holding the position of the second-largest trading partner for Latin America and the principal trading partner for several South American nations such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru. Beyond conventional sectors like infrastructure, energy, and minerals, Chinese enterprises are progressively diversifying into finance, agriculture, manufacturing, the information industry, the service sector, tourism, and other domains (Oliinyk, 2021). Moreover, China has forged “strategic partnerships” with ten Latin American nations at the bilateral diplomatic level, while concurrently fostering robust cooperation across multifaceted diplomatic frameworks such as the United Nations, the G20, and the BRICS. Concurrently, the creation of the China-Latin America Forum at senior diplomatic levels indicates a pronounced shift towards intensified and mutually beneficial bilateral and regional cooperation.

China-U.S. relations represent the preeminent bilateral relationship globally, and the escalating strategic competition between the two nations has extended to implicate third-party countries and regions. The U.S., with a history of intervention in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and Latin America, has been instrumental in reshaping global sub-regional orders. Historically, the United States has regarded Latin America as its “backyard”, asserting its dominance as the region’s primary trading partner and the largest source of foreign direct investment (Muno & Brand, 2014). Consequently, the United States’ longstanding influence in Latin America has engendered a significant and enduring impact. Thus, the involvement of extraterritorial actors in Latin America transforms their relationship with the region from purely bilateral to trilateral, inevitably including the United States.

This study, through a historical lens, seeks to elucidate two pivotal questions. Firstly, it examines how the national roles of the U.S., China, and Latin American countries have shifted and interwoven over time, especially in response to changing geopolitical, economic, and ideological dynamics. Secondly, it investigates the drivers behind the evolution of these national roles within the US-China-Latin America trilateral relations and the resultant impact on the strategies and behavior of each actor.

The literature on US-China-Latin America relations has illuminated various facets of this trilateral dynamic, from geopolitical rivalries to economic interdependence. However, a focused examination of the national roles and the role theory’s application to this context remains underexplored. This paper aims to fill this gap by employing national role theory as an analytical framework to examine the behaviors and strategies of the US, China, and Latin American nations. By delving into the historical evolution of their roles and interactions, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how broader geopolitical trends and regional dynamics have influenced the trajectory of trilateral relations over time. Furthermore, through a comprehensive examination of historical events, policy shifts, and strategic calculations, this study offers insights into the complexities of China-US-Latin America relations and their implications for global politics, regional stability, and economic development.

This paper is structured chronologically, examining distinct periods that mark the evolution of US-China-Latin America relations. The analysis begins with the historical context of indifference and ideological divisions during the 1950s-1960s, moves through the phases of diplomatic exchanges in the 1970s-1980s, economic engagements in the 1990s-2000s, and culminates in the comprehensive relations of the 2010s-present. Each section explores the national roles and interactions of the US, China, and Latin American countries, providing a historical evolution of their roles and the factors driving these roles. The conclusion of this paper synthesizes the findings, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in navigating the multilevel interactions among the three actors in the contemporary world.

## 2. Literature review

The trilateral relationship between the United States, China, and Latin America is a complex tapestry woven with historical, economic, and political threads. The literature on this topic provides a multifaceted perspective on the evolution, dynamics, and future prospects of this relationship.

The transformation of China's relations with Latin America has been characterized by a shift from ideological consideration to economic pragmatism, with trade and investment becoming the cornerstone of engagement (Chen, 2021). The US factor in China-Latin America relations has been pivotal, with the US's own relations with the region influencing the dynamics of China's growing presence (Paz, 2006). Creutzfeldt (2016) delves into the impact factors and strategic responses within the US-China-Latin America trilateral relationship, illuminating the complex interplay between economic interests and geopolitical strategies. The analysis by Creutzfeldt is particularly insightful in its conclusion that there is much space for collaborative development, and little reason for contention, although risks of dependency and further deindustrialization remain.

The pursuit of a balanced relationship among the US, China, and Latin America is a common thread in the literature, as noted by Ratliff (2009). Scholars have approached this theme from multiple angles, scrutinizing the diplomatic, economic, and security challenges as well as the opportunities for collaboration. This examination is commendable for its comprehensive outlook, yet it also reveals the complexity inherent in achieving a stable equilibrium in trilateral relations. Tong and Sun (2018) contribute to the literature by exploring the growing momentum in the science and technology cooperative relations between China and Latin America. Their work is a valuable addition, as it addresses the contemporary relevance of technological exchange and its implications for economic autonomy and development trajectories. Paus (2009) has sparked significant interest with her examination of China's rise and its implications for Latin American development. Her research is notable for its focus on some of the key drivers behind China's economic success which is developing domestic technological capabilities and diversifying the productive structure with a move up the value chain. While offering a robust analysis of economic opportunities, the study also acknowledges the socio-political challenges that accompany such rapid changes.

As we can see, the literature on the trilateral relationship between the United States, China, and Latin America has expanded to include various analytical perspectives. However, a focused examination of the interactions among three actors through the lens of national role theory remains a relatively underexplored avenue. National roles refer to the expected behaviors and responsibilities that states perceive for themselves within the international system, which are influenced by historical experiences, domestic politics, and international pressures (Thies & Breuning, 2012). The concept of national roles has been central to understanding state behavior in international relations. Early contributions by scholars such as Holsti (1970) and Walker (1987) laid the groundwork for role theory, emphasizing that the concept of national role can help the development of frameworks for foreign policy analysis and the construction of more realistic models of international systems.

States may conceive of their roles in various ways, such as hegemon, balancer, mediator, or regional leader. Each role type implies a different set of behaviors and responsibilities within the international system. Role performance is the actual behavior of a state in relation to its role conception, which can be evaluated by the state itself and by other states, leading to role affirmation or role adjustment. Role conceptions are not static; they can evolve over time due to changes in internal or external factors, such as shifts in power dynamics, leadership change, or global norms (Wish, 1980). The interactions between states are influenced by their respective role conceptions. When states have compatible role conceptions, it can lead to cooperation and synergistic relationships. Conversely, incompatible or conflicting role conceptions can result in tension and conflict. Therefore, national role theory offers insight into why China, the United States and different Latin American countries prioritize certain policies, how they respond to international crises, and how they engage in multilateral mechanisms. It also helps to explain the interaction of different actors in global politics and economy, and the dynamics of alliance formation, conflict resolution, and the evolution of international norms and institutions.

Although role theory's popularity has waxed and waned over time, this approach still has descriptive, organizational, and explanatory value (Wehner & Thies, 2014). The descriptive value of role theory is based on its rich conceptual vocabulary to describe and understand different events, while its organizational value lies in its ability to cross different level of analysis and bridge them. Finally, role theory's explanatory value derives from its capacity to adapt and be incorporated into other theoretical approach (Wehner & Nolte, 2017). The existing literature on the national roles of China, the United States presents a rich and multilayer view of these regions' roles in global politics and development. Shih (1988) believed that China's role conceptions as "a socialist country, a pursuer of peaceful coexistence, and a revolutionary country" are mirrored in traditional cultural norms, such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. He and Walker (2015) combined rational bargaining theory and role theory to illustrate the changes of China's role from "outsider" to "integrator" in the global economy and then to "initiator" in the bilateral and regional economic agreements with different bargaining strategies. Pu (2014) disentangled the discontinuity of China's role location—sometimes China tries

to signal higher status as a relevant rising power by showing muscle and strength while sometimes also signal lower status as fragile developing country.

Whener and Thies (2014) illustrate the possibilities and tensions of the interpretive approach in the process of role conception, location, and enactment in two Latin American countries, Chile and Mexico, in their attempts to become members of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. In the work of Wehner and Nolte (2017), the US as an external other has the master role of hegemonic power, a role that has been extensively documented in the US approach to Latin America. Brazil has the master role of regional power and enacts different auxiliary roles such as leader, integrator, security provider, mediator and crisis-manager. Venezuela has contested the leadership role of Brazil in UNASUR by trying to enact a leader role as well. Argentina and Chile have played the role of security cooperation experts and advanced a security agenda in UNASUR. Yet UNASUR has been able to enact the role of mediator and crisis-manager to solve governance crisis in some countries and to reduce tensions between states.

Despite the theoretical and empirical insights offered by role theory, there is a gap in the literature regarding its application to the specific context of US-China-Latin America relations. The existing body of work has not fully explored how the national roles of these actors have evolved and influenced their interactions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the self-perceived roles and the expectations of others through social cues and demands as well as by direct socialization, and how these have shaped the dynamics of the trilateral relationship.

By understanding the role-based interaction, this research attempts to offer a deeper comprehension of the strategic behaviors and foreign policy decisions of the involved states. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the field of international relations by exploring the role theory's applicability to a contemporary and complex issue, thereby enhancing our understanding of the motivations behind the US, China, and Latin America's interactions.

### 3. Methodology

A central aspect of the methodology involves historical event analysis, which entails a systematic examination of key historical events, diplomatic interactions, and policy decisions involving the United States, China, and Latin American countries. This approach allows for the identification of patterns, trends, and shifts in the roles and behaviors of each actor within the trilateral relationship over different time periods. Historical documents, diplomatic archives, and scholarly literature serve as primary sources of data for this analysis, providing valuable insights into the evolution of national roles within the trilateral context.

In conjunction with historical event analysis, content and discourse analysis play a crucial role in this study. By analyzing official documents, policy statements, media reports, and public discourse from the United States, China, and Latin American countries, this approach aims to uncover the underlying narratives, discourses, and perceptions surrounding national roles in trilateral relations. Through interpretation of textual data, this method enables the identification of prevailing discourses, ideological underpinnings, and shifts in narrative frames (Dunmire, 2012) regarding the roles and responsibilities of each actor within the trilateral context. Additionally, content and discourse analysis facilitate the exploration of how national roles are constructed, contested, and negotiated in public discourse and official communications, shedding light on the complex interplay of power dynamics and diplomatic strategies within US-China-Latin America trilateral relations.

By integrating historical event analysis with content and discourse analysis, this study enables a nuanced exploration of the historical trajectories, discursive formations, and power dynamics shaping trilateral relations over time, contributing to theoretical insights and empirical knowledge in the field of international relations

### 4. Analysis

#### 4.1 Ideological alignment and strained relations (1950s-1960s)

In the postwar period when the East and the West stood against each other, there was very little official contact between China and Latin American governments. The exchanges only took place in non-governmental sectors during the first twenty years of People's Republic of China. To counter difficulties in establishing official ties with Latin America, China initiated and promoted the exchange of visits between China and Latin America by individuals and delegations from political, economic and cultural groups. The non-governmental exchanges served as a strategic detour for New China while waiting and seeking political breakthroughs in its diplomatic relations with the region (Zheng et al., 2019).

The first country in Latin America that established formal contact with China is Cuba after its revolutionary victory in 1959. For China, the Cuban revolution was very similar in character to the Chinese one—both armed struggles of the

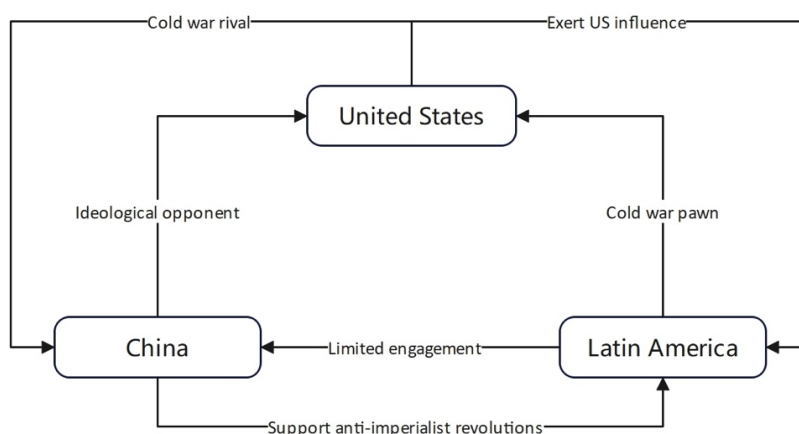
masses. Thus, it was Beijing's belief that it would be possible to replicate the Chinese and Cuban communist victories in other countries of Latin America so as to defeat the "imperialist and colonialist domination" of United States in the region (Mora, 1997).

In this era, the United States embraced its role as the hegemonic superpower of the Western bloc, leading the fight against communism and asserting its dominance through the Monroe Doctrine, which established Latin America as its sphere of influence. Meanwhile, China, as a novice state in the international system and a revolutionary leader, sought to align with anti-imperialist movements globally, viewing itself as an ally against imperialism. In Latin America, the region was marked by recipients of US aid and new independent state actors in the international system, with Cuba emerging as China's ideological ally and anti-US advocate. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 presented China with a unique opportunity to engage with a Latin American nation that shared its revolutionary fervor.

Clearly, China's perspective of other Latin American countries was largely shaped by the influence of the United States, as encapsulated by the Monroe Doctrine, which established the region as part of the US's sphere of influence (Pires & Nascimento, 2020). The American-led embargo on trade with communist nations significantly deterred its allies from engaging in commerce with China. Additionally, China faced challenges in establishing a significant presence in Latin America, a region often governed by conservative governments that were wary of Beijing's activities, thus maintaining a cautious distance. China's self-conception during this period, as a beacon of communist revolution, influenced its foreign policy decisions and its attempts to export this model beyond borders. This role perception led to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, which was seen as a like-minded state in the fight against the United States. The role expectations from China by Cuba were largely congruent with China's self-assigned role, facilitating a period of ideological solidarity and economic cooperation, albeit limited in scope.

Conversely, the United States, viewing Latin America through the lens of the Monroe Doctrine, adopted a role of regional hegemon and ideological counterweight to the spread of communism. This dominant role shaped US policy towards Latin America, emphasizing the containment of Soviet and, by extension, Chinese influence in the region. The US's role conception was reinforced by its economic and political interventions, which were aimed at maintaining its dominance and curbing the appeal of communist ideologies (Choo, 2009). We can summarize the interactions of the three actors during the first two decades after 1949 as shown in the figure (Figure 1).

However, the good relations brought by ideological affinity did not last long. The Sino-Soviet dispute in the 1960s led to rapid deterioration of Chinese relations with most of their Latin American comrades. The end of 1960s saw a significant shift in Chinese foreign policy. In order to gain greater political and economic independence from the superpowers, China was abandoning its Cultural-Revolution-era view on foreign relations, making it much more pragmatic and flexible.



**Figure 1.** Interactions between United States, China and Latin America during 1950s-1960s

**Source:** author's elaboration

If the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Cuba in the 1960s could be seen as an exception resulting from Cuba's successful revolution, Chile's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1970 can be interpreted as a transition from ideological moment to politically and economically oriented period. Just weeks after the

presidential inauguration, Chile's President Salvador Allende, as head of a socialist-communist coalition, established diplomatic relations with China on December 15, 1970. Chile is the first South American country, and second to Cuba in Latin America to do so (Domínguez et al., 2006). When Allende was overthrown three years later by the anticommunist military government of General August Pinochet, Beijing did not hesitate to recognize the new regime. Within a few years, the governmental and non-governmental links had return to pre-coup levels (Mora, 1997).

From 1970, instead of supporting revolutionary groups, China started to build diplomatic and economic relations with Latin American governments, no matter what their ideological or political affiliation. To put it in another way, if China's policy towards Latin American was ideologically driven before 1970, it was more politically and economically motivated thereafter (Mora, 1997).

#### *4.2 Diplomatic engagement and the quest for autonomy (1970s-1980s)*

In the 1970s, a pivotal shift in China's international engagement was marked by its rapprochement with the United States and its subsequent entry into the United Nations. These events signified a departure from China's earlier isolation and a move towards a more active role in global diplomacy. The Sino-American thaw and China's UN membership can be seen as China's response to its evolving self-conception as a socialized state actor diplomatically re-engaging with the international community, as well as the international community's expectations for it to take on a more constructive role in global affairs.

The ideological rift between China and the Soviet Union during this period further propelled China towards the United States, as it sought to counterbalance Soviet influence. The quasi-alliance between China and the US during this period showcased the strategic and flexible balancing act between China, the US and the Soviet Union. This strategic realignment was indicative of China's evolving role conception, moving from a strict ideological stance to a more pragmatic approach to international relations.

Additionally, China's focus on internal development seeker underscores its primary goal of economic and social development, which was a key driver of its foreign policy. The year 1978 marks the launch of Chinese "reform and opening up" strategy. From then on, China started to move from self-reliance and self-sufficiency to an open-door approach based on international exchange, foreign investments, and the introduction of advanced science and technology. With the economic development as the top priority, China's attempt to broaden foreign relations was more motivated by its need and desire to expand economic links with different countries and regions.

From Chinese side, after long exclusion and isolation from the postwar international system, China was eager for sources of capital, technology, and markets so as to restore the desperate condition of its economy. This became the concrete goals of Chinese policy toward Latin America through 1970s. On the other hand, Beijing tried to gain Latin America's favor "by championing North-South economic issues, emphasizing South-South cooperation, and supporting various issues of regional and economic interest to the leadership in Latin America" (Mora, 1997). Since the mid-1970s, China has identified itself as a developing country. But unlike other developing or Third World countries, China, although in a temporarily weakened position, also saw itself as a major power, due to its long-established civilization and culture, vast territorial size, coherent ethnicity and controlling central government (Acharya & Buzan, 2019). China's attempt to become the leader of the Third World was recognized by Latin America. In turn, China stood with Latin America on important issues such as the 200-nautical-mile economic zone, Panama's demand for sovereignty over the Canal Zone, etc. (Mora, 1997).

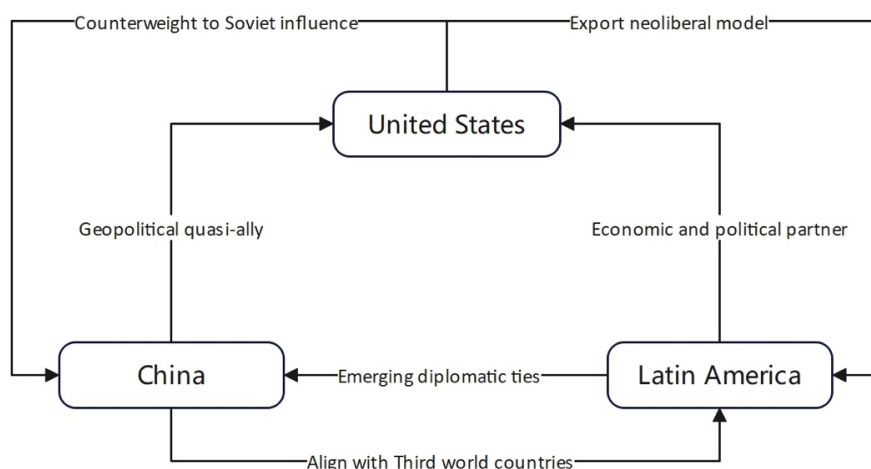
For the United States, the existing role of the Soviet Union's rival was a defining characteristic of its foreign policy. The Sino-American normalization reflected the complex relationship where strategic interests sometimes aligned, despite ideological differences. Furthermore, as a global norm shaper, the US highlighted its influence in setting international standards and promoting its values globally. Especially, the US played the role of neoliberal promoter and advocated for economic liberalization and free trade, which had significant implications for its relations with other countries, including Latin America. The 1970s marked a strategic adjustment in its foreign policy towards Latin America. The Nixon Doctrine, which aimed to encourage regional allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security, was a reflection of the US's reassessment of its global commitments (León-Manríquez & Alvarez, 2014). This shift in US policy created opportunities for China to establish diplomatic ties with Latin American nations, as these countries sought to diversify their international relationships and reduce their reliance on the United States.

Although the key South American governments, Brazil and Argentina, recognized People's Republic of China after U.S. President Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing, the specific timing of the development of Brazilian and Argentine

relations with China “owes more to the South American countries’ attempt to balance U.S. power in the sub-region than to their following U.S. leadership” (Domínguez et al., 2006). That is to say, Nixon’s trip to China did precipitate the trend for countries in Latin America to expand relations with China, but it happened also because the “backyard” of Washington was interested in seeking greater independence from the United States. The desire of several Latin American governments to diversify their political and commercial relations facilitated Chinese promotion of closer relations with the region.

The role of Latin American countries during this period was characterized by a desire for greater autonomy and a rebalancing of their international partnerships. The recognition of the People’s Republic of China by several Latin American nations, such as Mexico and Argentina, can be understood through as an assertion of their agency in foreign policy and a move towards a more independent stance in regional affairs. These actions were not merely responses to US policy but were also indicative of a strategic choice to engage with a rising economy, China, which was redefining its role as diplomatic diversification seeker in the international system.

As we can see in the figure (Figure 2), the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and various Latin American countries during the 1970s and 1980s was a manifestation of the evolving roles within the trilateral dynamic. China’s “Three Worlds” theory (Laufer, 2020), which positioned Latin America as part of the developing world that China sought to support, resonated with the aspirations of many Latin American nations. For China, Latin America was not only a potential market for many Chinese products, but also a vast territory with abundant natural resources which could fuel China’s economic growth. The foreign trade became the most important pillar of China’s new development strategy, which facilitated and accelerated domestic industrialization (Christensen & Becard, 2016). From the point of view of Latin America, the governments also sought to boost their debt-ridden economies by expanding and diversifying their markets. China, with the fourth of the world’s population attracted quite a few countries. The allure of the Chinese market lay not only in its size but also in its growing appetite for commodities and its capacity for foreign investment, which aligned well with Latin America’s export-oriented economic recovery strategies (Blanchard, 2019).



**Figure 2.** Interactions between United States, China and Latin America during 1970s-1980s

**Source:** author’s elaboration

#### 4.3 Economic engagement and the presence of China in Latin America (1990s-2000s)

In 1989, China was faced with challenges both at home and abroad. The collapse of Soviet Union and the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe rendered the world with drastic changes and uncertainty. Domestically, the Tiananmen Square incident considerably affected China’s ties with the West. While China was subject to economic sanctions by the West, it received sympathy from the followers of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (Choo, 2009). In the case of Latin America, most countries did not criticize or pressure Beijing. The Argentine President Carlos Menem was the first chief of state from a Western country to visit China after the Tiananmen incident in November 1990 (Domínguez et al., 2006). The moderate stand of Latin American was greatly appreciated by Beijing. In the same year, Chinese President

Yang Shangkun visited five Latin American countries (Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, and Chile). The Chinese presidential visit received prominent attention both in China and Latin America. It was hailed as “an important milestone in the history of Sino-Latin American friendly relations” (Mora, 1997).

From then on, China consistently emphasized economic over political relations. The economic diplomacy enabled China to maintain friendly relations with politically diverse nations while pursuing its economic objectives. It was Beijing’s belief that economic cooperation should take precedence over political divergence and that the former’s success would promote political relations (León-Manríquez & Alvarez, 2014). This strategy perpetuated through the 1990s as well as in the new millennium.

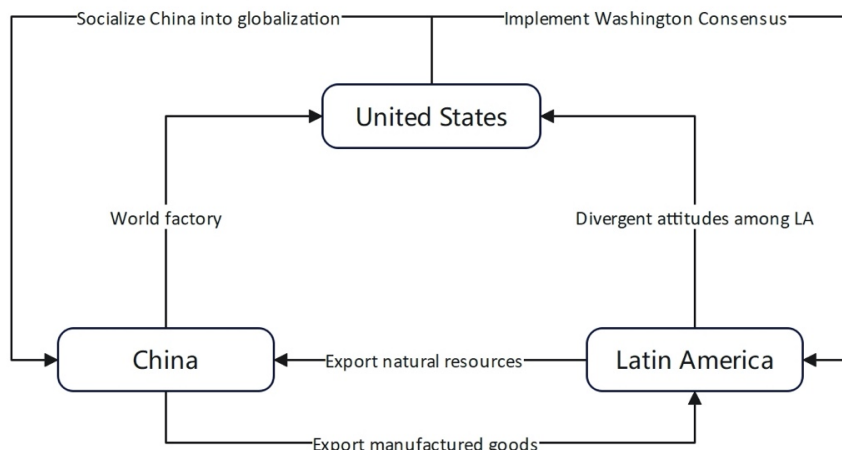
China’s reform and opening-up policy, initiated in the late 1970s, gained momentum throughout the 1990s, as China sought to integrate more deeply into the global economy. This strategic pivot positioned China as a dynamic economic actor, aiming to attract foreign investment, technology transfer, and to expand its export markets. China’s self-perceived role as a modernizing economy was matched by the international community’s expectation for it to become a world factory in the global supply chain. The Chinese “going out” policy, initiated in 1999, is a national strategy to encourage its enterprises, especially the state-owned ones, to invest overseas. In Latin America, China’s outward FDI went into massive resources-related infrastructure projects. A combination of outgoing FDI and policy bank loans coming from the China Development Bank and the Export & Import Bank of China entered various Latin American countries for building ports, roads, railways, dams, and nuclear power plants (Wise & Chonn Ching, 2017).

These domestic and foreign policies showed that China’s role as a globalization rule-taker and world factory was pivotal in reshaping its international standing. Embracing the norms and rules of the global economy, China leveraged its manufacturing prowess to become a dominant player in global trade. This transformation positioned China not only as a leader of emerging economies and third world countries but also as a crucial trade partner for both the US and Latin America. The Chinese model of economic development, characterized by its export-oriented industrialization, became a reference point for many developing nations, further solidifying its role as a leader in the global south.

The United States, during this period, maintained its status as a “global hegemon” and a norm-setter. However, the end of the Cold War and the rise of economic regionalism prompted the US to reassess its strategic engagements. Its role as a dominant economic and military power allowed it to shape international norms and influence global affairs. As an investment source for both China and Latin America, the US played a critical role in the economic development of these regions. The US’s influence extended beyond economic ties, shaping political landscapes and contributing to the spread of neoliberal economic policies. The US pursued trade liberalization and regional economic integration, which included Latin America through initiatives such as the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative and later the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) proposal. This period also saw the US reinforcing its traditional partnerships while navigating the complexities of its relationship with China, which was increasingly becoming a formidable economic competitor.

Latin American countries, characterized as a resource exporter and diverse economic relations seeker, navigated the aftermath of the debt crisis and the transition to democratic governance in many nations. This role reflected the region’s efforts to diversify its economic partnerships beyond traditional ties with the US. Latin American countries sought new markets and investment opportunities, leading to an increased engagement with China. This shift was not only driven by economic considerations but also by a desire to balance the influence of the US, thereby enhancing their strategic autonomy. Therefore, the trade flows between China and Latin America began to gain momentum during 1990s-2000s, reflecting China’s strategic “reform and opening-up” policy and the region’s pursuit of economic diversification.

In 2008, China released its first policy paper on Latin American and the Caribbean, clarifying China’s principles and goals for developing relations with Latin America. It also serves as an instrument to counter the “Chinese threat” arguments emerging in the West. It was the first time to state clearly in an official document that China is devoted to developing “a comprehensive partnership featuring equality and mutual benefits” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2008). Furthermore, the 2008 economic crisis led to a heightened focus on domestic issues within the United States and various European nations, consequently reducing their international engagement. In contrast, China was among a select few countries that managed to maintain economic growth and provided critical support to Latin America, aiding the region in its recovery from the global downturn (Blanchard, 2019). After the analysis above, we can summarize the relevant situation as shown in the figure (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Interactions between United States, China and Latin America during 1990s-2000s  
**Source:** author’s elaboration

**4.4 Strategic diversification of the trilateral relations (2010s-present)**

Since Xi Jinping’s arrival to office in 2013, Chinese foreign policy seems to change from a low-profile strategy to a more active and assertive one. Xi is more willing to strengthen the relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole and go beyond bilateralism. With only three years in office, the President Xi had already visited the region on three occasions. The first one took place only two months after his presidency began. He visited Mexico, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, and arranged high level meetings with officials in Antigua, Barbuda, the Bahamas, and Jamaica (Leiva, 2017). It is important to note that the Caribbean countries are not traditional destinations of Chinese presidents. Thus, Xi’s coming suggests a strategic purpose of increasing China’s influence in that sub-region. By doing so, Beijing can also squeeze the space for countries that still have official relations with Taiwan considering that Latin America, especially Central America and the Caribbean, is a major arena of diplomatic competition for Beijing and Taiwan. After the separatist party (Democratic Progressive Party) went to power in Taiwan in 2016, Beijing terminated the “diplomatic truce”, and then Panama (2017), Salvador (2018), Dominican Republic (2018), Nicaragua (2021) and Honduras (2023) severed their official relations with Taiwan and switched them to Beijing.

In 2014, President Xi made the second trip to Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, and Cuba. During the visit, Xi proposed a new cooperation framework for China and Latin America, which translated later into China-CELAC Forum. China-CELAC Forum reflects Chinese way of dialogue mechanisms based on the non-binding agreements, voluntarism and consensus, derived from the tradition of South-South cooperation (Oliinyk, 2021). The flexible institutional structure allows China to “combine multilateral and bilateral approaches, creating a highly adaptable blueprint for managing foreign relations on a regional scale” (Jakóbowski, 2018). Furthermore, the agenda of Sino-Latin American cooperation has transcended the traditional economic sphere and gone into sociocultural, political, and even security matters. This tendency is well demonstrated in the second Chinese policy paper on the region (Oliinyk, 2021).

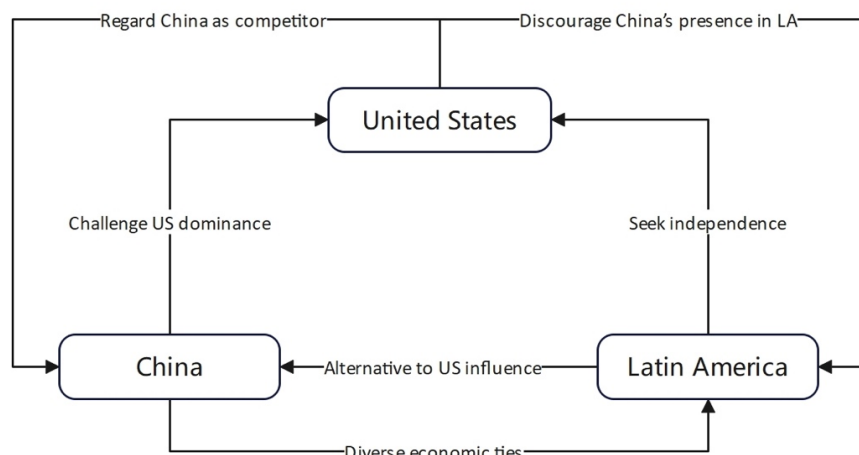
As a norm-shaper, China has been initiating new norms and institutions that reflect its values and interests. This is evident in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to promote infrastructure development and economic connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Through such initiatives, China seeks to redefine global economic and development norms, emphasizing cooperation, mutual benefit, and respect for national sovereignty. In Latin America, China was also proactive in garnering support from this region regarding Latin America as a “natural extension” of the Belt and Road Initiative. In response, several Latin American countries have expressed their endorsement of the Initiative, primarily driven by their desire to secure funding for infrastructure projects. Additionally, key Chinese trading partners, borrowers, and recipients of Chinese investment within the region—such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela—are recognized as prospective members of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (Koleski & Blivas, 2018).

Furthermore, there is a significant transformation in Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Latin America, moving away from massive infrastructure developments and towards pivotal areas such as essential minerals,

telecommunications, and renewable energy. This concentration on the so-called “new infrastructure” reflects the current “Small and Beautiful” philosophy, which epitomizes a more streamlined version of the Belt and Road Initiative (Olander, 2024).

The United States, traditionally viewed as the hegemon in the Western hemisphere, has experienced a reassessment of its role amidst rising Sino-American competition and domestic political shifts. The Trump administration’s “America First” policy led to a perceived retreat from international engagements, which in turn created opportunities for China to deepen its ties with Latin American countries (Bernal-Meza, 2021). During Trump administration, emerged a tendency to protectionism and reverse globalization. With Trump’s decision to tear up the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, the TPP members in Latin America, namely Chile, Mexico, and Peru, pivoted more toward China. The renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) around its “America first” pledge might further boost Chinese engagement with the region (Wise & Chonn Ching, 2017). However, the U.S. remains a significant actor in the region, and its role conception as a security guarantor and economic partner persists, albeit with a focus on private sectors.

The United States has been proactive in promoting private sector investment in Latin America and the Caribbean through the launch of the “America Crece” (“Growth in the Americas”) initiative in December 2019. This initiative aims to stimulate job creation and economic growth by encouraging private sector investments in energy and infrastructure within the region. It represents a strategic move by the U.S. to enhance its economic engagement with the region and to offer an alternative to the state-led investment model often associated with China (Crabtree, 2021).



**Figure 4.** Interactions between United States, China and Latin America during 2010s-present  
**Source:** author’s elaboration

In an effort to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the U.S. has also sought to establish similar infrastructure development plans, such as the Build Back Better World initiative (Crabtree, 2021). This competition is not merely financial but also strategic, reflecting the U.S.’s intent to assert its influence in the region’s infrastructure development. The political and strategic implications of U.S. policy towards Latin America are evident in the White House’s announcement of the “Partnership for Economic Prosperity in the Americas”, which reiterates the commitment to infrastructure development to forge closer collaborative ties within the hemisphere. The U.S.’s approach to infrastructure investment in Latin America is also characterized by the deliberate exclusion of certain countries, such as those governed by leftist regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. This exclusion reflects a political bias in U.S. initiatives and signals a broader strategy that extends beyond economic considerations.

Latin American countries have navigated a complex role defined by the need for economic development, political autonomy, and strategic diversification. Their interactions with both China and the US are influenced by a desire to maximize benefits while maintaining a balance of power (Pires & Nascimento, 2020). Some countries in the region have shown an increased willingness to engage with China for promoting alternative models of development and governance. For example, they advocate for a more inclusive and equitable global economic order, challenging the neoliberal economic paradigm that has been largely shaped by Western countries. This approach seeks to offer developing countries

alternative paths to development that are more aligned with their specific needs and circumstances. The figure in this section (figure 4) illustrates the interactions between China, the United States and Latin America after 2010.

## 5. Conclusion

As shown in the table (Table 1), the evolution of national roles among China, Latin America, and the United States over the past seven decades offers a compelling narrative of shifting power dynamics, strategic alliances, and economic transformations within the international system. This historical overview, grounded in national role theory, underscores the fluid nature of state identities and their interactions on the global stage.

Periods	China's Roles	Latin America's Roles	United States' Roles
1950s-1960s	Novice state in international system, revolutionary leader, anti-imperialist ally	Cuba: China's ideological ally, anti-US advocate Rest of Latin America: recipients of US aids, new actors in international system	Hegemonic superpower, Western bloc and anti-communist leader
1970s-1980s	Socialized role and diplomatic re-engager with the international community, strategic balancer between US and Soviet Union, internal development seeker	Diplomatic diversification seeker, US influence recipients, neoliberal norm taker	Soviet Union's rival, global norm shaper, China's quasi-ally, neoliberal promoter
1990s-2000s	Globalization rule taker, world factory, leader of emerging economies and third world countries, trade partners of US and Latin America	Resource exporter, diverse economic relations seeker, traditional US partner and new engagement with China	Global hegemon, investment source for China and Latin America, norm-setter
2010s-Present	Global economic powerhouse, new global norm initiator, US competitor	Navigating role between China and US	Status quo power, China's influence resister

**Table 1.** Summary of national roles of China, Latin America and the United States in different periods

**Source:** author's elaboration

During the early Cold War period, China emerged as a novice state in the international system, navigating its way through the complex landscape of global politics. Its roles as a revolutionary leader and anti-imperialist ally were pivotal in aligning with like-minded states and challenging the Western bloc. Latin America, particularly Cuba, became a China's ideological ally and an anti-US advocate, reflecting the ideological and strategic alignment against Western dominance. The rest of Latin America, meanwhile, was largely recipients of US aids, positioning them as new actors in the international system, heavily influenced by the United States. The United States, as the hegemonic superpower and the Western bloc and anti-communist leader, sought to maintain its dominance and counter the spread of communism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, China's role evolved to that of a socialized role and diplomatic re-engager with the international community, reflecting its strategic re-entry into global affairs. It also became a strategic balancer between the US and Soviet Union, leveraging its position to enhance the influence. Latin America, during this period, was characterized by its pursuit of diplomatic diversification, seeking to reduce its reliance on the United States and explore new partnerships. The United States continued to assert its role as the Soviet Union's rival and global norm shaper, while also promoting neoliberalism, setting the stage for economic reforms that would have far-reaching effects.

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed China's transformation into a globalization rule taker and world factory, as it embraced the norms of the global economy. China's role as a leader of emerging economies and third world countries and a trade partner of US and Latin America marked its emergence as a significant player in global trade and investment. Latin America, in this period, was primarily a resource exporter and a diverse economic relations seeker, balancing its traditional ties with the United States with new engagements with China. The United States maintained its status as a global hegemon and norm-setter, continuing to exert significant influence over global economic and political affairs.

In the most recent period, China has further solidified its position as a global economic powerhouse and a new global norm initiator, challenging the United States' dominance. Its role as a US competitor reflects the intensifying strategic competition between these two major powers. Latin America, in this context, has had to navigate a role between China and the US, balancing the opportunities and challenges presented by these two global powers. The United States, a status quo superpower, has had to contend with China's growing influence, thus taking on the role of China's influence resister.

It is imperative to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Latin American countries and the evolution of their national roles over time. From the ideological alignments of the mid-20th century to the economic pragmatism that has characterized recent decades, the region's nations have navigated a complex interplay of domestic aspirations and international pressures. The strategic partnerships, economic policies, and geopolitical stances of countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, among others, have varied significantly, reflecting their distinct historical experiences and contemporary priorities. As this article has illuminated, understanding the nuances of these national roles is crucial for a comprehensive appreciation of the trilateral dynamic. The future of US-China-Latin America relations will undoubtedly be shaped by the continued diversification and redefinition of these roles, as each Latin American nation forges its path within the shifting landscape of global politics and economics.

The recent leadership changes in Latin America, with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil and Javier Gerardo Milei in Argentina, signal a potential reorientation in the region's relations with both China and the U.S. Lula's return to power in Brazil brings a left-wing perspective that historically has been more skeptical of neoliberal economic policies and has advocated for a greater role for the state in economic development (Folena de Oliveira & Sotelo-Salazar, 2023). Lula's administration is likely to focus on social welfare, poverty reduction, and regional integration, which could lead to a more nuanced approach to relations with China and the US. Brazil may seek to strengthen South-South cooperation and pursue a foreign policy that emphasizes autonomy and multilateralism. The election of Javier Milei as Argentine president could signify a move towards a more laissez-faire economic policy and a greater emphasis on individual liberties. Such a shift could alter Argentina's role in the region by prioritizing free-market economics, deregulation, and potentially a more skeptical view of state-led development models often associated with China's approach to investment and infrastructure projects.

One can also observe a dual nature of balance of power in the trilateral relations between China, the US and Latin America at different times and under different circumstances. On one hand, the traditional understanding of balance, rooted in classical realist theory, is based on the anarchic international system, where states must constantly guard against potential threats to their sovereignty and security. In this context, balance is achieved through mechanisms such as military alliances, counter-alliances, and strategic partnerships that keep competing forces in a state of relative stability and mutual constraint (Zhao, 2015), as exemplified by the ideological rivalry and subsequent quasi-alliance between China and the United States as well as the revolutionary partners of China and Cuba during the Cold War.

Contrasting with the realist perspective is a more contemporary interpretation of balance that emphasizes economic interdependence and strategic partnerships or cooperative exercises through institutions (Han & Paul, 2020). The shift in China's foreign policy since 1980s, the economic interdependence between China and the US, as well as the flexible alignment of Latin American countries with either China or the US illustrate a noticeable shift from hard military balancing to a more cooperative and inclusive form of balance.

This duality underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of balance in international relations, one that recognizes the interplay between power dynamics and the potential for cooperative engagement. It also highlights the importance of adapting strategies to the changing global context, ensuring that balance serves not only to prevent dominance but also to promote stability, prosperity, and mutual benefit.

In conclusion, the trilateral relations between the U.S., China, and Latin America are marked by a dynamic interplay of historical ties, economic interests, and strategic considerations. The evolution of national roles within this framework is influenced by the changing geopolitical landscape, domestic priorities, and the expectations of the international community. As the U.S., China, and Latin American countries continue to redefine their roles and strategies, the trajectory of these trilateral relations will have profound implications for global politics, regional stability, and economic development.

The study of these relations through the lens of national role theory provides valuable insights into the complexities of international interactions that shape the behaviors of states. As the international system continues to evolve, so too will the roles and relationships of the U.S., China, and Latin America, offering a rich field for future research and analysis.

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