

Latin America has become strategic for China

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Following President Xi Jinping's momentous tour to Peru, Chile and Ecuador last November, the Government of the People's Republic of China released a new policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). This is the second framework document for the region, after its antecedent of 2008.



In its preface, the new paper mentions the intention to “forge a community of shared future” with LAC. The region is defined as a “land full of vitality and

hope”, which China assigns “a major role in safeguarding world peace and development”.

These strong expressions are in tune with the idea of “Chinese dream”, guiding the increasingly strengthened political project of Xi. He has recently been named “core” (another evocative expression) of the Chinese Communist Party, consolidating himself as the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping (1978-1993) era to date.

Much more concrete and exhaustive than the 2008 edition, the new white paper highlights the “huge development potentials and bright prospects” of LAC. This is in the context of a new global context which, for China, is marked by the “changes in the external environment triggered by the global financial crisis”.

The Asian superpower proposes to bring the relations with LAC to a “new stage of comprehensive cooperation”. The document ratifies a series of shared values and principles, as well as postulates deepening the collaboration in several areas:

Political field: China promotes an increase in the exchanges at the highest political level, in terms of bilateral relations with LAC governments, governance experiences, bilateral dialogue, consultation mechanisms and linkages between political parties, among other issues.

Economic field: Because of its extension and depth of content, this seems to be the central issue. The document highlights 13 phases of economic cooperation between China and LAC. These include: Trade, industrial investment, finance, energy, natural

resources, technology, infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, science, technology, maritime and space cooperation.

Social aspects: In this field, China promotes working together in “strengthening and innovating social governance”. To this end, it proposes to LAC countries increase the cooperation and exchange of experience in social development, health, poverty reduction, ecosystem protection, river-lake management and natural disasters reduction and relief.

Cultural and people-to-people fields: This aspect also has a broad approach in the document. For China, cultural promotion has become a key tool in terms of expanding its ‘soft power’. The possibility of increasing cultural and sports exchanges and cooperation is stressed; as well as deepening the links in education, training of human resources, think tanks, press, radio, film, television, and tourism.

International collaboration: China looks forward to have a greater influence on the global economic governance, reinforcing its participation in the most important international forums. In that sense, the countries of LAC are presented as natural allies. The paper addresses three other issues related to international coordination that are vital for China: Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, response to climate change and cyber security.

Peace, security and judicial affairs: It is another field of great interest to China, which will seek to expand its agreements with LAC countries in the next

few years regarding military, judicial and police affairs cooperation. LAC countries could be greatly benefited, thus enhancing their resources to fight against drug trafficking, organized crime and other security scourges that affect the region’s peace and stability.

Collective and trilateral cooperation: Finally, China aims to expand its participation in the framework of the agreements reached with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), as well as encourages its enterprises to carry out trilateral cooperation in economic, social and cultural fields.

The place of LAC in Xi’s global agenda

In light of the new policy paper it is evident the intention of China to continue expanding its presence and ties with the countries of LAC, a region historically considered of limited significance for the Chinese interests. Despite the great distance, LAC has become definitely strategic for China during the last years.

Political and trade exchanges between China and LAC grew exponentially, especially since the start of Xi’s mandate in 2012. According to official Chinese statistics, trade volume between China and Latin America reached 236.5 billion dollars in 2015, multiplying by 20 with respect to the last decade.

From the geopolitical point of view, it should be noted that there has been a clear change in China’s foreign policy approach since Xi came into power. Consolidated as the second biggest economy on the

planet, China also seems decided to challenge the United States in terms of leading the global political governance. “We need to actively guide fair, inclusive and resilient globalization”, Xi said during his speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Community (APEC) summit in Peru.

At the same time LAC has become one of the emerging priorities for the Chinese leadership, with Donald Trump in office LAC could be further deferred in the agenda of US interests. The main challenge for the LAC countries is to act in a coordinated way, in order to consolidate a regional position in front of China and maximize the advantages and possibilities that this new scenario will bring.

Broadly speaking, this has so far not been achieved. Today, there seem to be as many strategies for relating to China as there are countries in the region. What is worse, some countries have not even shown a strategy yet.

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