

LATIN AMERICA AND CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: CHALLENGES AND PROPOSALS FROM A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

Victor Ramiro Fernandez¹
Juliana Gonzalez Jauregui²
Gabriel Esteban Merino³

Introduction

The new turbulent century has brought a recurring and unique process of hegemonic crisis, systemic transformations in the world economic structure, and a reconfiguration of the multipolar order characterized by systemic chaos (Arrighi; Silver 1999). On the one hand, this recurring process is distinguished by financial over-accumulation that penetrates with financialized logic on the dynamics of production and expands both to the *Global North* (the USA and the EU) and the *Global South*. On the other hand, a progressive displacement and replacement of the foundations of the material accumulation is taking place, positioning Asia at the center, and especially China, but without being based on the logic of financialization (Merino 2021).

In this context, the most remarkable transformation has been the rise of China, based on a rapid and unique national process of industrial and technological development associated with an autonomous financial capacity, but also a growing regional leadership, and a geoeconomic and geopolitical projection with global scopes (Beeson 2018). This unprecedented development

¹ Development and Public Policies, Universidad Nacional del Litoral. Santa Fe, Argentina. E-mail: rfernand@fcjs.unl.edu.ar

² Faculdade Latino-Americana de Ciências Sociais. Tucumán, Argentina. E-mail: jgonzalezj@flacso.org.ar

³ Center for Geographical Research, Universidad Nacional de La Plata. La Plata, Argentina. E-mail: gmerino@fahce.unlp.edu.ar

model combines different productive modalities under the direction of a nucleus of 95 State conglomerates (Gabriele; Jabbour 2020), led by the so-called “market socialism” and/or “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

The Chinese imperative of modernizing through globalization has become key when implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, the BRI represents not only the reconstruction of transportation networks and the development of infrastructure in Eurasia but also an “articulated route” to the Global South, to reach Africa and Latin America. Based on the aim of acquiring influence in the region, Latin American countries were formally invited to integrate the BRI during the China-the Community of Latin American and the Caribbean States Forum (China-CELAC Forum) in January 2018, after the Chinese Foreign Affairs ministry, Wang Yi, announced that the region was a “natural extension” of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2017).

Until April 2023, 22 Latin American countries have signed the memorandum of understanding to integrate the BRI. Nevertheless, a regional consensus that establishes the conditions to guarantee mutual beneficial cooperation with China in the BRI framework, where the promotion of economic development prevails, is still absent (Gonzalez Jauregui 2020).

The question that arises is what the implications for Latin America are to integrate the BRI. In response to this, while part of the Chinese academic approach agrees on the importance of evaluating the existence of a “strategic overstretching” –disagreeing on the reach of it as a problem– (Pu; Wang 2018), at least three different perspectives have addressed how the BRI could affect the Global South –and Latin America, in particular.

For a group of academics, China recreates the well-known process of dependency in the periphery, positioning most countries as suppliers of natural resources in the global value chains (GVC) controlled by the Asian giant. This perspective is based on the revival of the imperialist/sub-imperialist/neocolonialist theories and points out that China can control strategic geopolitical resources for its future projection and build relations based on neocolonial dominance (Lumumba-Kasongo 2011; Stallings 2020). Furthermore, the BRI does not affect the link between China and Latin America but consolidates the peripheral condition of this region in the global economy (Myers 2018).

In line with the above-mentioned, the extractivist perspectives visualize Latin America as an “adaptive region”, rich in natural resources, that supports an accumulation model incapable of reversing exclusive and unequal historical patterns of capitalist accumulation and destined to exacerbate environmental deterioration and mono-production structures (Svampa; Slipak, 2018).

In contrast, other perspectives argue that the BRI represents a new “globalization model” that promotes unimpeded trade, infrastructure connectivity, and inclusive growth with mutual benefits (Ríos 2018). The BRI is interpreted as a new stage in the external insertion of China that proposes globalization with “Chinese characteristics” based on connectivity and inclusive development (Ramón Berjano 2019; Jabbour; Dantas; Vadell 2021). Consequently, China is promoting the emergence of a new international system, capable to overcome unilateralism (Malena 2018) and create a multilateralism led by the Global South, without global hegemony (Girado 2018).

These perspectives have an analytical “gravitational center” structured around the idea that China is increasingly leading the dynamics of the global system, having impacts on “the rest”. Thus, the integration with China is observed based on the Chinese centrality, evaluating how the Chinese logic of expansion, through initiatives such as the BRI, impacts the Latin American scenarios, and the Global South more broadly. However, these perspectives scarcely specify how different forms of regional autonomy could be built, and the required conditions to effectively create that autonomy. The autonomy approach recovers a proposal that aims to strengthen the margins of maneuver of peripheral countries and their regions in a way that avoids placing them as passive recipients, broadening their capacities and scopes of action when creating processes of integration with Asia and China. The possibility of achieving this autonomy is a condition to reconcile this integration and the projection of China in Latin America with a sustained and inclusive spatial and productive development of this region, as well as the reversal of its subordination and dependency ties that characterize Latin America international insertion from its postcolonial organization (Cardoso; Faletto 1970; Frank 1991).

Moving in this direction requires a careful and comparative evaluation of various elements that are present differently and unevenly in the trajectories and current realities of China and Latin America. From this comparative evaluation, a road map emerges for this region by considering those aspects to be strengthened and articulated in its growing and strategic link with the Chinese-Asian scenario.

Inspired by an adapted and updated Latin American structuralist perspective, based on dependency and autonomy theories, and in articulation with Arrighi’s version of the world-system theory, we carry out the comparative evaluation through the introduction of six interrelated elements that affect the conditions and forms of integration and development path of China and Latin America: 1) integration through autonomy; 2) integration

through strengthening the macro-regional integration; 3) integration through industrialization and the sovereign control of the financial and commercial capacities that define the appropriation of surplus; 4) integration through technological development and strategic control of the industrialization process; 5) integration through the inclusion of subregional scenarios; and 6) integration through strengthening the managerial and directive capacities of the State. It is worth noting that our proposal is mainly theoretical. This contribution has limitations regarding the nature of the research since it does not offer an empirical verification. However, it opens up the possibility for future works to confront the theoretical categories that we formulate with empirical approaches, e.g., case studies, and to enrich the discussion about the BRI's projection to Latin America.

Integration through autonomy as a central guiding vector

The proposal to deepen integration with China through the BRI needs to be analyzed in the framework of the current global restructuring process. The deployment of the BRI in the context of the current cyclical crisis of global hegemony means that the BRI should not be read merely as a proposal to deepen and qualify the globalization process, inspired by mutual agreement and mutual benefit, but as a broad strategy through which China pursues to recover its historical geopolitical and geoeconomic preponderance and to secure its economic and strategic interests.

The main challenge for the Global South when joining the BRI, and for Latin America in particular, is the capacity to establish the needed conditions for an insertion that contributes to promoting internal productive and institutional structures, jointly with a socially inclusive pattern and a reversion of spatial asymmetries. Latin American countries have not yet established preconditions or designed a joint strategy on how the mutual benefit will be part of the implementation of the BRI in the region. Furthermore, it is yet unclear how the enforcement of BRI's projects will set a scenario where local enterprises and societies participate jointly with Chinese counterparts. Thus, much of the implications of the BRI in Latin America depends on the extent to which the institutional mechanisms are adapted to promote interconnectivity and, subsequently, serve as drivers of economic development. In this endeavor, Latin America must define how the development process as a region, but also within its countries, will benefit from joining the BRI, and which are the main features of the Latin American "win" within this framework of cooperation (Gonzalez Jauregui 2020).

This requires the creation of spaces of elaborative and decisional autonomy. During the Cold War, Latin America developed the “Autonomy School”. Based on the contributions of Juan Carlos Puig (1984; 1986) and Helio Jaguaribe (1979), their proposals aimed to guide how to face the historical challenge of reversing the economic and political dependence of the region. Following these ideas, and Latin American structuralism, the virtuous link between international insertion and development requires, according to Jaguaribe, the need to articulate internal viability and external permissiveness (Jaguaribe 1979). The achievement of this goal and gaining autonomy is not merely a declaration of principles but an actual need to build a scenario that expands the conditions of internal socio-spatial reproduction and strengthens the ability to define the region’s international insertion. In geopolitical terms, this goes together intending to create a continental State (Methol Ferré 2013), which would start at the MERCOSUR/Rio de la Plata basin, and build up the capacities needed to reach relative autonomy, economic development, and State strength.

The feasibility of creating this institutional and economic autonomous scenario and making it compatible with the geopolitical and geoeconomic projection of and from Latin America in the “win-win” logic announced by the BRI, leads us to recover the proposal of an endogenous and dynamic accumulation nucleus with a macro-regional scope (Fajnzylber 1983; Fernández 2017). This proposal is also related to setting the conditions of a self-determined development, to be “self-conscious and proceed following own objectives and purposes, and free of external constraints” (Tokatlián; Carvajal 1995, 8).

In contrast to Latin America, the rise of China is closely linked to its capacity of building political-strategic autonomy through the national and social revolution that began in 1911 and triumphed in 1949. China ended its “colony” condition, according to the definition by Sun Yat-Sen, and changed itself from a huge and plundered periphery, with large extensions of occupied territories, to a semi-peripheral country that in the early 1970s began to emerge as an important world power. These transformations are key to understanding the reform process led by Deng Xiaoping –which followed the guidelines of Zhou Enlai–, and how China took advantage of the hegemonic crisis of the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s and acquired a position of strength and political-strategic autonomy (Arrighi 2007; Merino; Bilmes and Barrenengoa, 2022; Kissinger 2012).

Since the late 1970s, China began a process of industrial relocation and productive transnationalization and became an important recipient of investment in low-complexity manufacturing. These reforms were driven by a

national development project which was never renounced. The Chinese State kept the lead in economic development through a model of public planning, which allowed some market dynamics, but retained control of the strategic cores of the economy. Also, the State increased its capabilities in science and technology, along with the renovation of the military-industrial complex, as well as raised its control of natural resources and the financial system (Rosales 2020).

Reforms in China included the ability to open progressively to the international market, following, though divergently, the developmental reforms that had been taken in East Asia during the postwar (Beeson 2018). These changes included establishing conditions for the entrance of external capital. Conversely, the neoliberal reforms that took place in Latin America since the 1970s forced dependency, dismantled the national development projects, weakened the State's capabilities, and resulted in a process of peripheralization. As result, the GDP per capita in the region changed from representing 38 percent concerning the core organic countries average in 1980, to 28 percent in 2002 (Solimano; Soto 2005).

Thus, the Chinese "four transformations" led by the "Reform and Opening Up" policy during the Deng Era kept and reinforced the relative autonomy of China. This process was lately consolidated through three national strategies: the Western Development Program (WDP), the China Going Global, (CGG), and the BRI (Ye 2020). All of them bring together the globalization insertion objectives at the external level, and at the same time, the market expansion and economic development objectives, at the internal level. Although the CGG and the BRI emphasize Chinese participation in the international market, the domestic priorities are equally important; the objective of continuing advancements in internal economic growth and national modernization and, in this context, accomplishing technological autonomy, is key (Ye 2020; Naughton 2021).

Intra-macro-regional integration as a platform for global inter-regional integration

The Latin American challenge of building a dynamic and endogenous accumulation pattern cannot be limited to a national outreach. Conversely, it requires a macro-regional scope that proposes an integration process that considers the failures that occurred before the global and Latin American crisis in the 1970s (Teubal 1968) and continued due to different obstacles (Briceño Ruiz 2007). It is important to point out that the requirement of

strong regional integration is not new, it was proposed by Prebisch and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) predates the European integration process (Krishnan-Kutty 1999). Previously, several sectors and schools with different thoughts proposed the need for a regional unit, starting with the Bolivarian proposal to create a Confederation of Hispanic American Republics or later the Latin American generation at the beginning of the 20th century. In this respect and when the processes were found in a bottleneck in 1951-1953, the Argentinian president Juan Domingo Perón rehearsed his proposal of the new ABC (Argentina, Brazil, and Chile) and in light of not having a sufficient level to get economic unity and autonomy.

The Latin American integration should be planned based on a multidimensional approach –social, political, and cultural– (Di Filippo 2007) but focused on the promotion of productive articulations controlled by the State (ECLAC 2014). This proposal should be associated with the feasibility of deepening and qualifying the interrupted process of regional and national industrialization –and, thus, of promoting inclusion and income distribution in the most unequal region of the world. It should also be thought of as a way to give geoeconomic and geopolitical muscle in light of the process of global integration.

While the first aspect was early argued and reaffirmed by Prebisch (1959), the geopolitical element was scarcely debated, due to the restrictions imposed by the Cold War and the regional alignment with the United States (Camarinha Lopes; Almeida Filho and Henrique Pinto 2018; Pollock 1978). This might be the reason why both economic and institutional regional integration has been historically and structurally weak. Based on this, a new proposal of regional integration should also include the category of “Industrial Continental State” developed by Methol Ferré (2013), also considering form a dependence approach to the role of powerful groups and social classes with renters’ internal behaviors and a subordinated integration to global geopolitical and geoeconomic processes.

In the current global scenario, integrative proposals with a focus on a joint geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics are particularly relevant because they offer bargaining capacities that promote the recovery of the industrial development interrupted in the 1970s, as well as the reversion of inequalities and exclusion that has advanced in the region during the neoliberal years (Portes 2003). To overcome the ruling atomization (Comini; Frenkel 2017) and to move forward to a regional interstate system, the deployment of a geoeconomic and geopolitical integration is vital, based on an intra-regional productive articulation.

As an example of the above-mentioned, at the beginning of the 21st century, in the framework of a “popular national” turnover in several countries in Latin America, there was a return to autonomous regionalism (Merino, 2017). New entities were created to strengthen the scope of MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market), such as ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), UNASUR (Union of South American Nations), and ECLAC. However, the search for a “post-neoliberal” or “post-hegemonic” logic from a “productive regionalism” (Briceño Ruiz 2013, 22) or an autonomous regionalism was not achieved, and the regional integration was weakened. The emergence of the Pacific Alliance in 2012 reestablished the “open” neoliberal regionalism and exhibited a regional breakage, which showed a competition for political projects between countries in the region, as well as strong pressure from Washington.

These processes contrast with the strength and expansion of the integration logic in Asia (Beeson; Li 2014). Although not free from geopolitical turbulences, integration in Asia has been characterized by a growing Chinese leadership (De Grauwe; Zhang 2016), which is flexible and pragmatic, oriented to developmental regionalism (Wei 2018), as well as promoted by a State-led model that strengthens the strategy of global projection. China finds in the regional leadership a hub to protect itself from global financial crises (Beeson; Li 2014).

Since its role in the Asian Crisis in 1997/8, China enhanced regional integration based on “a new peripheral diplomacy” in Asia. Firstly, through its commitments with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and, later, by creating the ASEAN-China Summit, which established the basis for multiple cooperation in diplomatic and security dimensions, as well as people-to-people exchanges, among others. In 2003, the “Strategic Alliance for Peace and Prosperity” was launched, in 2008 a Friendship and Cooperation treaty was signed, and in 2010 the FTA was widened. This regional construction permitted, then, the BRI proposal, initially positioning Asian countries at the center, to integrate them later into the Asian Bank of Investment and Infrastructure, which was launched almost simultaneously with the BRI. These advances in regional integration also enabled the signing of the world’s largest commercial treaty in November 2020, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). RCEP’s creation contrasts with the unsuccessful attempt of Obama’s administration to contain China through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Merino 2018). Also, China together with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan consolidated in 2001 the Shanghai Cooperation Organization –core security, and cooperation institution in the heart of Eurasia. Far from improvisation, the

Asian regional integration under China's leadership finds its strength and anchor in a historical formation, before the European consolidation, based on the Chinese world's prevalence until the 18th century (Frank 1998; Arrighi 2008).

Integration from industrialization

The process of industrialization is central to the construction of autonomy. Industrialization, broadly speaking, involves the possibility of increasing the complexity of the productive structure, which should be articulated with trade structures (through the enlargement of intra-regional trade, the deepening of the customs union in MERCOSUR, the breakage of world trade monopolies, and the defense of raw material prices), as well as with financial sovereignty and an independent administration of regional savings. In this regard, the Chinese case stands out since its capacity of creating capabilities to disconnect from the global financial capital subordination (Petry 2020).

Therefore, the geoeconomic and geopolitical strength of Latin America to address the global change and integration with China in the BRI faces the challenge of making reindustrialization a reality but under an independent project, different from the dependent industrialization led by the United States multinational corporations, which was announced as a possibility for "development" in some countries in the region until the 1970s. The question is how to make this feasible with China as a counterpart, particularly considering that Chinese policy banks have provided Latin America with loans that lack policy conditions and have contributed to boosting public infrastructure projects. However, these loans include commercial conditionality: e.g., the promotion of Chinese firms, labor, and machinery (Kaplan 2021). These conditionalities pose a challenge for Latin America regarding industrialization, and development more broadly.

Positioned as a structuring vector of development in the initial formulation of ECLAC (Prebisch 1949), and later constituted the great field of social and political transformation of the region since the 40s, Latin-American industrialization was finally "incomplete" in the 1970s (Fajnsylver 1983), followed in the last decades of the century by an "early deindustrialization" (Palma 2019), encouraged by the liberalizing strategies of the Washington Consensus that dominated the region. Despite their differences, both the "incomplete industrialization" and the subsequent "early deindustrialization" occurred under an external insertion dependent on natural resources (Bresser

Pereira 2013). During this century, under the growing commercial presence of China in the region, a reprimarization of external insertion was consolidated (Jenkins, 2012; Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010; Gallagher, 2016), paradoxically when the Pink Tide left governments once again highlighted the need and benefits of industrialization (ECLAC 2015). Certainly, the industrialization that contributes to development requires it not to be “any industrialization” but one that allows expanding regional productive chains to knowledge-based activities and assures that they acquire command positions inside the regional space the industrialization needed. This process of industrialization should take place jointly with sovereign control of finances and foreign trade to help build up an autonomous platform of accumulation (Fernández; Brondino 2019). This is a historical characteristic of the path to industrialization that differentiates wealthy countries from those that are not (Chang 2008) and shows the importance of the regional integration processes that have contributed to higher dynamism and successful positioning in the global economic networks (ECLAC 2014).

In contrast to Latin America, the dynamic process experienced by China (Li *et al.* 2012) gave continuity to the leadership that Japan had assumed in the postwar (Medeiros 1999), combining regional industrialization and integration mechanisms (Beeson; Li 2014). To achieve this, China has merged industrialization policies based on the control and allocation of investment in activities and strategic sectors with progressive control of the regional and global chains (Jian 2016). Invited by China to be part of these chains within the framework of the BRI and under a “win-win” scheme, the Latin American challenge is to define its “win” by resuming its path of industrialization and reversing its traditional pattern of primary global insertion (Jenkins 2015).

Integration through technological development in the industrialization process

The “technological gap” and its relationship with the industrialization process have been key in the analysis provided by the Latin American structuralist and dependency perspectives. According to these approaches, the main characteristic of the asymmetry in the center-periphery is the unequal appropriation of the technical process (Prebisch 1949; 1981) or the establishment of technological monopolies by countries in the center (Dos Santos 2002). This constant asymmetry, which is a result of a historical process, would find critical limits once industrialization was boosted (Hirschman 1968). For its part, the dependency theory emphasizes the value

transfer that this gap makes, as part of an unequal and combined dynamic.

The link between technological development and the creation and deepening of regional productive chains is essential to revert the heterogeneity and hipper specialization of the socio-productive structure that distinguishes the underdeveloped pattern of the region (Pinto 1976; Chena 2010). This pattern is the main cause of socio-productive asymmetries and, at the same time, leads to a weak, subaltern, and primaried international insertion (Cimolli 2005).

The connection between innovation, learning processes, and the control of strategic functions of the productive chains with the capability of extending and complementing each other regionally can contribute to increasing the productive density, developing, and qualifying employment, and improving income distribution. Likewise, this connection can contribute to gaining greater negotiation power on a global scale (with States and GVC), both by controlling those strategic productive chains and, therefore, the surplus.

To accomplish that aim, States in Latin America should not only increase investment in Research and Development (R&D) (López Aymes; Morales Fajardo 2018) but also enhance complementation with the private sector and the State-owned companies that develop complex activities. This involves breaking with the isolation of the scientific-technological systems regarding the productive structures that characterize the region (Confraria; Vargas 2019) and is rooted in a long historical trajectory (Sabato; Botana 1968).

In contrast to Latin America, China became an active leader in Asian regional integration by increasing the control of the State in knowledge and complex activities. Though China began this process by becoming a recipient of technological activities and intensive work, the Chinese trajectory has been marked by the development of the high-tech sector, as a result of promoting an efficient innovation system led by the public sector that has permitted China to control neuralgic activities in the productive chains (Zeng 2017). China's industrialization and its involvement with qualified scientific-technological development have allowed the Asian country to be one of the largest patent applicants in the world, as well as to control several core functions of the high-tech sector, combining a progressive and advantageous position inside GVC (Song et al. 2021).

The "Reform and Opening Up" policy sought to make an integral change in the science and technology sector; a conversion which was then extended to the rest of the so-called "four transformations", in agriculture, defense, and industry. Since then, the development policies in China concentrated on,

firstly, setting the country as a “recipient” of knowledge, through adapting its industrial productive structures, to then promoting China to become an “endogenous innovator.” It is worth noting that the creation of a development strategy linked to the industrial policy, which not only promoted tech catch-up but enhanced technological leapfrogging, started being relevant in 2006. This new strategy became a priority in national modernization in 2015, through the launch of the “Development Strategy Based on Innovation” (Naughton 2021). Some examples of this broad tech strategy are the specific tech plans such as the “Made in China 2025” and “Internet Plus”, both launched in 2015, and the subsequent programs for the development of “general-purpose technologies”, based on a “triangle” integrated by communications, data, and artificial intelligence.

In the case of China, endogenous innovation includes becoming a “pioneer” in the development of certain technologies related to the 5.0 “technological revolution”; technologies that are applied transversally to different strategic sectors (Naughton 2021). This policy is part of a design and implementation process that seeks the development and modernization of China and has been reflected historically in the Five-Year Plans. The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) and the so-called “Long Term Objectives for the Year 2035”, integrated into the plan, reaffirm the importance of science and technological advances to the goal of turning China into an innovative economy and continuing the process of reaching the global leadership by 2049.

Integration through spatial inequalities reversion

Jointly with overcoming the socio-productive heterogeneity to achieve social inclusion and narrowing the inequalities that make Latin America the most unequal region in the world in terms of income (Bárcena 2016), other aspects of inequality are also relevant: e.g., space inequality (Kanbur; López-Calva and Venables 2005). Thus, the process of industrialization and technological development that aims to create and provide qualification to supra-regional productive chains requires, also, to extend spatial scopes and involves the progressive inclusion of the excluded intra-national territories, to avoid additional subalternities.

As part of the Latin American historical process, intranational socio-spatial inequalities were also considered in ECLAC's structuralist analysis in the 1970s, highlighting how they coexisted with the industrialization process promoted in the postwar period (Sunkel 1970). Far from being reversed, these inequalities were aggravated during the implementation of the Washington

Consensus (Fernández et al. 2008), coexisting with a process of spatial concentration in which “agglomerations without growth” (Polèse 2005) and intra-urban asymmetries were strengthened (Kanbur López-Calva; Venables 2005).

Spatial inequalities were also evident when China initiated the economic reforms since there was a restructuring of the industrial and urbanization dynamics. These transformations echoed in numerous academic works (Dunford; Li 2010), which sought to show how global forces, nation-States, and local factors interacted when understanding the uneven regional development in China. Such changes favored the development of coastal regions and provinces based on the growth of non-State-owned enterprises and export-oriented manufacturing, which functioned as structural forces behind the creation of regional inequalities at different spatial scales (Naughton 2007; Ye 2020).

Despite the existence of inequalities (particularly intra-provincial) and regional heterogeneities that entail a persistent challenge (Crane et al. 2018), two aspects are divergent when comparing the Chinese trajectory and the Latin American scenario. On the one hand, the Chinese convergence of spatial redistribution in industrial production. On the other hand, the planning actions made by the State to revert spatial inequalities. To do this, the State has deployed different ways of intervention that have been accompanied by heterogeneous but active engagement with peripheral regions. In China’s industrialization, gradual industrial/technological convergence has progressively added non-coastal regions (Lemoine et al. 2014), while achieving the progressive insertion of regions in value chains (Yu 2017).

The goal of integrating regional levels to achieve higher spatial asymmetry has led to proposals of new public policies “in favor of a more balanced development dates back to the late 1990s when the government launched the WDP, a program aimed at enhancing the economic development of twelve central and western provinces” (Lemoine et al. 2014, 10). The WDP encompassed fiscal transfers and tax preferences, measures to induce financial institutions and especially policy banks to increase loans to western regions development” (Lemoine et al. 2014, 10). The program aimed to reduce inequalities by investing in infrastructure, creating economic partnerships between the coast and the western provinces, and increasing the West regions’ ability to attract foreign investment (Sun 2013; Zheng; Kuroda 2013).

Despite the constant promotion of the development and industrialization of the western provinces in China -since the creation of the Republic in 1912, until the communist revolution and the Maoist period, and even during the Deng Era-, it was Jiang Zemin who implemented the WDP

program. Though the reforms launched at the end of the 1970s had permitted the development and industrialization of the east coast provinces, this was not the case for the central and western regions; their economic performance was much lower than the vigorous regions. Thus, the launching of the WDP in 1999 was a consequence of pressures by those regions' governments that claimed the central leadership for the delay in designing and implementing development and industrialization policies in their provinces. The WDP also sought a solution to the industrial overcapacity crisis that had irrupted in 1996 and had increased during the Asian crisis in 1997/8 (Ye 2020). Therefore, the WDP pursued the aim to overcome those crises, but also to respond to the underlying challenges of the reform of the State-owned enterprises due to the imminent entry of China into the World Trade Organization.

The BRI was launched in 2013, also in the context of an internal economic and political crisis due to the Chinese industrial sectors' overcapacity. The WDP was not removed but merged with the BRI to continue developing China at the domestic level. Thus, the BRI promoted the reactivation of the infrastructure construction that had been interrupted by the economic recession and the tightening of credit between 2010 and 2014 (Ye, 2020).

Actions to revert inequalities, enhance inclusion and improve well-being conditions and living standards in less favored regions in China were deepened; firstly, through the WDP, and, afterward, through the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, which proposed policies aimed at integrating urban and rural areas and reducing the disparities between provinces through an integrated regional development (Aglietta; Bai and Macaire 2021). In addition to the reduction of territorial inequalities, the Chinese government sought to enhance social equity through the increase in per capita income, the provision of better and higher conditions of access to housing, health, and education, the improvement of the social security system, and the eradication of extreme poverty. The Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, approved in March 2021, proposes to move forward toward these goals.

Integration through creating integrated capabilities within States

The aforementioned elements converge in an integrated final point: the configuration and development of the organizational, functional, and spatial capacities of the State. These capabilities are a determining factor in the strength or weakness of each of the aspects analyzed above, as well as their articulation for the development of a common regional strategy.

But concerning this last element, the Latin American and Sino-Asian trajectories and realities are also different and unequal. The state formation in Latin America, relatively recent in historical terms, did not take place together with a correlative strengthening of the state capacities (Centeno 2002; Mazzuca 2021), in particular, those necessary to achieve sustained autonomy to direct the process of industrialization and the technological development necessary to overcome the primarized logic and specialization of the local dominant elites and to reverse a peripheral and dependent international insertion (Cardoso; Faletto 1970). These limited capacities, necessary to achieve a “structural autonomy” (Hamilton 1981), were the result of the inexistence of both external permissiveness imposed by global powers (geopolitical) and internal viability because of the power/interest of local elites (Jaguaribe 1979). This conditioned the possibilities of building state capacity to create industrial and technological regional integration.

The main historical conditions that affected the formation of the State in Latin America had their sources in the late integration -and subordination- to the dominant European interstate system, that preceded it for at least three centuries (Fiori 2007), as well as by the absence of many of those elements that distinguished the formation of the European state.

While the rise of Europe found in the self-reinforcing cycle between its capitals and its states, and the development of the interstate warfare system, the determining factors of its transoceanic dominance (McNeill 1982), Latin America had to deal with geopolitically and geoeconomically unskillful states to form an autonomous regional interstate system. Unlike those European states, their emergence was not a result of external military confrontations, which gave them bureaucratic, fiscal, and military power (Centeno 2002; Burke 1997), but organizations limited by the penetration and adaptation to the distant hegemonic interests and the power and strategies of the local dominant actors that preceded them.

As a result, they were also states based around concentric and port socio-urban formations, with little connection and articulation with subnational spaces, whose power and control were disputed by local caudillos. These different instances, poorly articulated, developed bureaucratic machinery affected by multiple training and operational limitations, in which patronage patterns and caudillista dominance stand out as a limit to political centralization (Pfoh 2005).

All this limited, downstream, the development of infrastructural capacities (Soifer; vom Hau 2008) that would allow a combined process of decentralization and national strategic centralization, necessary to reverse fragmentation and spatial inequalities. Upstream, this hindered the formation

of a macro-regional interstate system, essential to carry out a process of industrialization and endogenous technological development (Pastrana Buelvas; Alegria 2015).

Since the second half of the 20th century, the incorporation of urban subordinate classes, grown with industrialization, promoted a multiplication of State organizations and functions, although without displacing the presence and incidence of internal and external dominant classes. This fueled tensions that sought to be resolved within the state (O'Donnell 1973), encouraging its feudalization (Portantiero 1989) and capture (Oszlak 2020), and restricting its ability to direct the deepening of the industrialization process and form a pattern of macro-regional integration.

The above-mentioned internal and external constraints contributed to generating many of the subsequent crises that characterized Latin American statehood in the 1970s, as well as the creation and consolidation of periphery conditions. Afterward, in the framework of the Washington Consensus projection during the 1990s, a combined strategy of privatization and decentralization deepened the fragmentation and weakness of national States and made them functional with the strategies of global capital accumulation and the international financial institutions (Fernández 2002).

The political changes evidenced in the first decade of the 21st century could not revert most of those structural transformations. Although the pink tide expressions (Fernández 2016) or popular national governments under neo-developmental ideas (Merino 2017) claimed to promote industrialization and inclusive projects with regional scopes, the State's capacities remained limited to achieve these goals. As a result, a new conservative reaction arose, seeking to limit the capacities of the state to become involved in strategic areas linked to production and, at the same time, to reinstall a regional integration associated with the declining and financialized hegemony of the United States (Cannon 2016).

The state formation and state capacity development look different in the Sino-Asian scenario. Unlike both the European trajectory and that of Latin America and Africa, as Sugihara (2019) points out: "It is only since 2015, a reaction that tended to weaken previous achievements in terms of integration and Asia, that economic nationalism has embraced regional integration on a regional scale", and under that integration "there has been a dynamic relationship between the growth of intra-Asian trade and industrialization on a regional scale" (Sugihara 2019, 77). The projection of this integration continues until today, most recently in the framework of the ASEAN Economic Community, and despite the emergence of China as a hegemon.

This process has been supported by the creation of a millennial State

structure based on an innovative bureaucratic centralization that gave effective control over lands and was combined with different ways of decentralization that permitted, though not without conflicts, the generation of multiple local, national, and supranational bodies (Cao 2018; Wang 2019). The process of State building at a macro-regional level was composed, apart from China, of several powerful bureaucratic State agencies. It did not work through interstate military confrontation (e.g., between China and its neighbors) as it had occurred in the case of the West powers (Arrighi 2008), but through an emulation and learning process that inspired nearby States such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, together with other smaller political organizations (Huang; Kang 2022). Based on this trajectory, China reconstructed and enhanced its state capacity to build a “regional system” that must be read both in historical and current logic as a key instance between the global dynamic (Frank 1998) and the national exclusivity (Wong 1997).

The Chinese revolution that took place in the mid of the 20th century became core, not only as a way to remove the regressive local elite power (Wang 2019) but also to recover the statehood that combines centralized and decentralized processes. In this regard, the Chinese State leads different actions through which central and regional governments, national bureaucracies, private and public companies, public banks, small and big companies, and internal/regional and global/external markets are articulated. The capital and the markets, as well as territories, work from the bottom trying to boost their profits; at the same time, the State has an “ordering and geostrategic supremacy” that works at the top, shaping the economic behavior so that it is aligned with the objective of national modernization (Petry 2020). In contrast, and according to what has been said, exogenous subordination dominates the setting and involvement of the State in Latin America.

Unlike certain approaches that compare the Chinese State system to the Asian developmental States, the State capitalism itself, or even those that classify it as a strategic, coercive, and authoritarian unit, it should be noted that the Chinese State is composed of diverse agencies and power centers. Though the State is central, it is far from being a monolithic unit. Conversely, it is a multilevel system, integrated by powerful political leaders, national bureaucracies, State capital, and local governments with high influence, that interact in a complex way, with constant conflicts. Therefore, the implementation of national strategies is characterized by continuous clashes between multiple economic-politic actors (Jones; Zeng, 2019).

Despite the Chinese State being a three-parties system that is structurally fragmented, there is an element that integrates those structures: the ideological and organizational cohesion provided by the Chinese

Communist Party, which seeks to guarantee the global rise of China, as well as the Chinese social-economic welfare and the national modernization. On the path to realizing national modernization, economic growth stands as a priority. Economic growth not only gives legitimacy to the system but provides the necessary resources to face economic and social challenges.

The ideological cohesion that characterizes the Chinese State system is a result of ideas and preferences that have been accumulated during more than forty years of reforms. These ideas recover the postulates of Mao and even those of Sun Yat-sen. However, there is plurality, flexibility, and internal fragmentation within the Chinese State apparatus, since subnational actors and companies have “freedom” to choose how to interpret and implement the strategies that the central power elaborates, based on incentives and local needs that, in general, are different and sometimes adversarial (Ye 2020).

Conclusion

The ambitious project of the BRI and its progressive arrival to Latin America opens the debate about its scope, but also about its implications for development and structural change in Latin America in the current global scenario.

Though our proposal is mainly theoretical, and therefore has limitations due to the absence of empirical analysis that confront our formulations, it opens up the possibility for future systematic research, e.g., case studies research, that enrich the discussion about the BRI's projection to Latin America. The above-analyzed six elements, presented in the framework of an updated Latin American structuralist, dependency, and autonomy approach, in tandem with Arrighi's version of the world system theory, are not only relevant individually but also need to be observed in unison. Such elements seek to show the importance of initiating a process of building State capacity that is capable of encouraging the creation of autonomous regional space. This regional integration should be based on a process of industrialization and technical development, with financial and trade structures that facilitate the creation of regional productive chains and revert historical subnational inequalities.

Such elements can be understood as challenges and constraints that emerge when evaluating the extent to which the Chinese growing geoeconomic and geopolitical projection to Latin America, through the BRI, could contribute to developing the regional scenario.

The differences observed in the historical creation and consolidation

of such elements in both regional scenarios, with absences and weaknesses in the case of Latin America, and visible progress in the case of China, show structural divergences that have implications for future cooperation in the framework of the BRI. The probabilities of those inequalities in Latin America to be reverted mainly depend on two facts. Firstly, to elaborate policies that set ways for the region and its national spaces to develop those six elements. Secondly, to guarantee that China's BRI proposal opens up a joint debate with Latin American counterparts on how to implement the Initiative in the region in a way that long-standing challenges such as commodity dependence and deindustrialization are not intensified.

In the pursuit of impeding a subaltern interaction with China that derives in a non-imperialist neo-dependency, it is essential that the deepening of relations as a result of the BRI projection to Latin America is promoted based on a collective approach in terms of countries/regions. This collective approach must encourage joint actions instead of individual ones and enable the elaboration of strategies oriented to deploy equal and articulated interactions between parties in the six above-mentioned dimensions. The accomplishment of this objective requires realizing in Latin America an effective geopolitical economy based on the strengthening of autonomy and negotiating capacity on a global scale, achieved through a process of economic and institutional integration such as the one led by China in the Asian scenario.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the divergent perspectives that address the presence of China in the Global South through the Belt and Road Initiative, scarce approaches identify how Latin America could face that challenge to reverse its historical dependency and promote economic development. We address this question by recovering and updating structuralist, dependentist, and autonomist contributions developed in Latin America combined with an arrighiean version of the world system. We compare the Latin American and Chinese trajectories regarding regional integration, productive and technological constitutions, spatial asymmetries, and state capacities. Finally, we propose how to forge a relationship with China that enhances Latin American autonomy.

KEYWORDS

Latin America; China; Belt and Road Initiative.

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