

# Over the Atlantic

Diplomacy and Paradiplomacy in EU and Latin America

Paulina Astroza Suarez, Giuliana Laschi,  
Nahuel Oddone, and Mario Torres Jarrín (eds.)



EUROCLIO  
ÉTUDES ET DOCUMENTS



PETER LANG

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Euroclio  
Vol. 115

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

This book is published with the financial support of the European Union (Erasmus + programme).



With the support of the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

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Mario Torres Jarrín (eds.), 2023

Published by Peter Lang Editions Scientifiques Internationales

- P.I.E., Bruxelles, Belgium

info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com



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This publication has been peer reviewed.

ISSN 0944-2294

ISBN 978-2-87574-427-2

ePDF 978-2-87574-632-0

ePUB 978-2-87574-633-7

DOI 10.3726/b20853

D/2023/5678/20

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available online at  
<http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

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# Paradiplomacy and cooperation in the pandemic era: A review from China in Latin America

FLORENCIA RUBIOLO AND GONZALO FIORE VIANI

## Introduction

The global pandemic has faced humanity with one of the most devastating, disruptive, and unequal crises of recent times. The collapse of world trade that had been dragging years of economic deceleration after the 2008 crisis; the general closure of borders; the interruption of commercial and productive activities; the fall in employment rates and the increase in the level of world poverty are some of the immediate consequences of this ongoing catastrophe. Unequivocally, the pandemic also brought to our attention the utter fragility of our health and distribution systems and the profound inequities that pierce and divide the globe.

The overwhelming differences between hemispheres, countries, and regional or provincial units within the States were catalysts for an uneven response capacity to the health emergency, which had a greater impact on the less developed territories. Latin America, one of the most affected regions, suffered deep setbacks. According to figures from the International Labor Organization, during the year 2020 the decrease in employment was equivalent to thirty-three million jobs.<sup>1</sup> That year, the fall in terms of economic growth represented 6.8 % according to Economic Council of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) – the worst hit region in the world –, and the poverty rate reached 33 %, the highest figure since 2002 in the region.<sup>2</sup> All of them with greater impact on minorities such as indigenous communities, children, and women.

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILO Labour Overview 2020 Lima*, ILO / Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms\\_777630.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_777630.pdf), last access: 18 March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Council of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *La paradoja de la recuperación en América Latina y el Caribe. Crecimiento con persistentes problemas*

In this given scenario, subnational governments suddenly found themselves on the front line of immediate responses to the pandemic, providing indispensable services and aiding in the continuity of businesses, along with providing essential information and maintaining constant communication. Altogether, this gave subnational governments key and prominent roles in addressing the pandemic. Yet it was not only at a local level that subnational governments gained new importance, but international cooperation also became of the essence.

The international action of local and provincial governments acquired, as a consequence, a deeper role. Among other measures, dialogue was promoted in subnational exchange spaces – such as UN Habitat and *Mercociudades* – that allowed the exchange of experiences between local actors.<sup>3</sup> The closeness to the varied demands of the territories, and the capacity to adapt national measures to local contexts highlighted the role of the local level in the implementation of decisions in times of crisis.

Decentralized international cooperation was the area that received the greatest boost from municipal and regional governments in Latin America. In the broad range of international actors, the main partners in terms of decentralized cooperation were their Chinese counterparts. In this sense, pre-established mechanisms were activated based on local and regional level agreements along with sister cities agreements, which mainly promoted the obtention of international health aid directed straight to the territories.

Based on these insights and added to the fact that the pandemic was an accelerator of China's subnational-level ties with different regions of the Global South, in this chapter we propose to analyze the main actions and practices implemented by China in Latin America from a paradiplomacy perspective, in the context of the pandemic. In the first section we make a brief overview of paradiplomacy, including the case of China in these conceptualizations. Then we delve into the most emblematic trajectory, actors, and actions of contemporary Chinese paradiplomacy and its distinctive features at a global level. Finally, we focus on the dynamics

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*estructurales: desigualdad, pobreza, poca inversión y baja productividad*, Informe Especial Covid-19, no. 11, July 2021, [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/47043/5/S2100379\\_es.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/47043/5/S2100379_es.pdf), last access: 18 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> M. Álvarez and N. Oddone, *Paradiplomacia en contexto de Covid19: nuevas dimensiones y desafíos*, <https://mercadoyempresas.com/web/aporte-tecnico.php?id=162>, last access: 17 March 2022.



of health cooperation at the subnational level between China and Latin America during the span of the Covid-19 pandemic, from the year 2020 to the beginning of 2022.

This chapter argues that China, as a global power, was the main country that promoted paradiplomacy and cooperation with Latin America in the context of the pandemic and the current state of world affairs. In this scenario, it is essential to shed light on this key issue for the opportunities offered by cooperation for the recovery of the Latin American region and the future of its cities in the post-pandemic era.

## Paradiplomacy: Theoretical perspectives

International relations analysis, traditionally concentrated in the study of interstate relations, started to introduce new insights along with the expansion of globalization dynamics during the seventies. The end of the Cold War, allowed for more diverse and multilevel agendas, that besides including topics apart from international security, also welcomed the more active participation of a wide range of actors, such as NGOs, regional organizations, transnational companies, among others. Along with these changes, the studies on international relations and diplomacy started to gradually incorporate new perspectives on the activity of subnational entities in the international arena.

Building on the theoretical breakthroughs Keohane and Nye introduced to IR lectures, by questioning the unitary nature of the State,<sup>4</sup> a new international agenda with more diffuse hierarchies and boundaries began to emerge, giving entity to multiple channels of relations.<sup>5</sup> More recent studies that called for more pluralism and theoretical diversity have acquired a greater centrality, strongly impacting the reinterpretation of international relations, both in the periphery and in the center, and called for investigating on the margins of the discipline itself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> R. Keohane and J. Nye, *Power and Interdependence Revisited*, International Organization, vol. 41, no. 4, Autumn 1987, pp. 725–753.

<sup>5</sup> N. Oddone, F. Rubiolo and M. Calvento, *Paradiplomacia y relaciones internacionales: de la práctica hacia su curricularización en Argentina*, Oasis, no. 32, 2020, pp. 63–84.

<sup>6</sup> A. Acharya and B. Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory. Perspectives on and beyond Asia*. London, Routledge, 2010; A. Acharya and B. Buzan; *The*

The international action of subnational units has been referred to as “paradiplomacy” since Soldatos’s introduction of the term,<sup>7</sup> although its scope is still being discussed. Following Cornago’s definition the concept can be described as

Sub-state governments’ involvement in international relations, through the establishment of formal and informal contacts, either permanent or *ad hoc* with foreign public or private entities, with the aim to promote socio-economic, cultural or political issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their own constitutional competences.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, it is not an action that opposes the state’s foreign policy, as there is constructive coordination and complementary action between national diplomacy and subnational international action. But the debate around the interpretation and motivations behind the international action of subnational units is still ongoing. According to Colacrai, it is a dynamic that in some cases can accompany the foreign policy of the State and in others compete with it and may even acquire a disruptive or separatist connotation. As Ippolito has suggested, depending on the intention pursued by paradiplomacy and the type of relationship developed between a national government and its constituent units the concept has at least two interpretations. The one that understands it in an instrumental sense, oriented to promote the local interests in terms of development, working in a complementary or collaborative fashion with the national State. And a second group that suggests the existence of a sense of symbolic political self-affirmation and in certain cases of construction of a nation minority, becoming “proto diplomacy”.<sup>9</sup> Zulbelzú also summarizes different groups of motivations, and differences

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*Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at Its Centenary.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> P. Soldatos, *An Explanatory Framework for the Study of Federated States as Foreign-policy Actors*, in H. J. Michelmann and P. Soldatos (eds.), *Federalism and International Relations. The Role of Subnational Units*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> N. Cornago, *On the Normalization of Sub-state Diplomacy*, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, no. 5, 2010, pp. 11–36.

<sup>9</sup> D. Ippolito, *Relaciones internacionales de gobiernos no-centrales: un análisis teórico-conceptual de la Paradiplomacia y de sus variables explicativas*, *Cuadernos de Política Exterior Argentina*, 125, January–June 2017, pp. 29–47.

between subnational units within the same national State, and introduces variables such as migration, diasporas, and cultural and ethnical identities.<sup>10</sup>

Among the diverse motivations behind paradiplomatic activity, international cooperation is certainly a central driver. Cross-border subnational cooperation has been regarded as the main arena for the successful implementation of such activities. Keating underlines that “one of the most common forms of paradiplomacy takes the form of interregional cooperation and networking”.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding the centrality of cross border decentralized cooperation, non-bordering units have also developed strong links in the last decades. As we analyze in this chapter, the Chinese case is a clear example of this trend. Among the motivations behind this type of cooperation, the idea of common functional interest and the advantages of pooling resources are central drivers.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the main focus of these works was on subnational units that are parts of federal states, and particularly in the Western hemisphere, there is growing interest in international relations literature in the development of paradiplomacy in non-Western region, and a particularly in China, given the global power status it has already attained. Although the political system is regarded as highly centralized, subnational units – provinces and cities – have developed an outstanding dynamism in terms of external actions since 1978. The “opening up” process introduced during Deng Xiaoping’s era encouraged a less monolithic approach to foreign policy,<sup>13</sup> particularly in coastal regions, but increasingly expanding to central and western provinces. Economic openness

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<sup>10</sup> G. Zubelzú, *Los gobiernos subnacionales en el escenario internacional: conceptos, variantes y alcance. Un marco de análisis para las acciones de las provincias argentinas*, in E. Iglesias, V. Iglesias and G. Zubelzú (eds.), *Las provincias argentinas en el escenario internacional. Desafíos y obstáculos de un sistema federal*, Buenos Aires. UNDP, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> M. Keating, *Paradiplomacy and Regional Networking*, Forum of Federations: an International Federalism, Hanover, October 2000, <http://www.forumfed.org/libdocs/ForRelCU01/924-FRCU0105-eu-keating.pdf>, last access: 23 April 2022.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Y. Zheng, *Perforated Sovereignty: Provincial Dynamism and China’s Foreign Trade*, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1994, pp. 309–321.

and the integration to international trade and investment, were major drivers for a more outward orientation of transnational regionalization.<sup>14</sup>

Given Chinese central government's support to regions to develop a more dynamic external approach, the result was a multiplication of paradiplomatic activity, with a focus on cross border relations – as the case of Yunnan's province shows – oriented towards enhancing development of backward regions and improving Chinese relations with neighbouring countries, such as Southeast Asian states, through transregional cooperation. As Liu and Song underline, even though the Chinese constitution does not recognize the right of provinces and cities to establish and implement international policies, the Central government has allowed a certain degree of autonomy in conducting external affairs, particularly in low-sensitive dimensions, such as economic relations and technical, scientific and development cooperation. Notwithstanding this relative degree of autonomy, the Central government in China still has a deep influence in subnational affairs, and, as an example and unlike federal democratic countries, the regional and local authorities are appointed by the national government. In this sense “although regional decentralization has gone quite far in many aspects, the central government's control is always substantial since the Chinese governance structure is still hierarchical”.<sup>15</sup>

As we analyze in the following sections, Beijing's foreign policy towards Latin America has been increasingly conducted through a multilevel and multiactor approach, particularly in the economic and health cooperation realms. Regions and cities came to the front of sanitary diplomacy, through donations and collaboration. These subnational actions were in clear accordance with the Central government's interests and motivations in promoting international cooperation to pursue international political goals during the pandemic.

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<sup>14</sup> X. Su, *From Frontier to Bridgehead: Cross-border Regions and the Experience of Yunnan*, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, vol. 37, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1213–1232.

<sup>15</sup> C. Xu, *The Fundamental Institutions of China's Reforms and Development*, Journal of Economic Literature, no. 49, 2011, p. 1078.

## China's paradiplomacy in Latin America on a global powers' competitive scenario

The world has profoundly changed since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping took the first steps that led to China's integration into the world economy some decades later. The process of opening-up and the market-driven reforms arrived at a major milestone in 2001 when the country entered the World Trade Organization. This symbol of the PRC's economic transformation was followed a few years later, in 2010, by its consolidation as a global economic player becoming the second largest world economy.<sup>16</sup>

Today, China's role as a global power is unquestionable and its influence irradiates to every corner of the world. Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is not an exception, as Beijing's interest in approaching the region has been growing steadily in the last two decades. Almost every LAC economy has seen an unprecedented growth in its export numbers, related to China's enormous demand. Among other commodities, exports of copper, crude oil, iron ore and soybeans skyrocketed, starting a decade-long commodity boom from 2003. Given LAC countries economic structure, trade became the outstanding pillar of bilateral relations as Chinese needs of natural resources soared.

Almost twenty years have gone by, China already has a foot in the region in many more dimensions and multilateral and bilateral aspects than at the beginning of the century. Contemporary China's emerging impacts on the world are evolving in all manner of messy and complex ways which make analysis difficult; in that sense economic engagement has political impacts, whether it is planned or not.<sup>17</sup> China's engagement in Latin America, encouraged by domestic needs, have led to inevitable competition with the United States, an aspect that is observed in several regions of the world, though in Latin America acquires greater

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<sup>16</sup> F. Rubiolo and D. Telias, *China-United States Competition in Latin America: Evolution, Perspectives, and Implications in the Covid-19 Context*, Estudos Internacionais Revista de Relações Internacionais da PUC Minas, vol. 9, no. 4, January 2022, pp. 43–62.

<sup>17</sup> J. Garlick, *The Regional Impacts of China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Routledge, London, 2021.

importance given that for decades it has been considered the backyard of the US.<sup>18</sup>

China acquired a new global role after the world economic crisis of 2008. In 2009, the year in which the financial crisis had the greatest impact<sup>19</sup> exports from Latin America to the United States decreased by 26 %, to Europe by 29 %, and to Asia by just 4 %. However, towards China, they not only did not decrease but even grew by 11 %.<sup>20</sup>

In the last two decades, Latin America has significantly increased its weight as an agricultural supplier to the People's Republic of China (PRC), going from representing 16 % of Chinese imports in 2000 to 29 % in 2020.<sup>21</sup> In 2008, the Chinese Foreign Ministry published the "White Paper on Relations with Latin America". In that official document, the government urged the country's companies to seek greater insertion in Latin America.<sup>22</sup> Unlike North America and Central America and the Caribbean, in South America there is greater economic complementarity with China, compared to a lesser presence of the United States.<sup>23</sup>

The context of competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China is a broad dispute and in no way can one speak of a linear phenomenon. It is traversed by a deep interdependence between both powers, in a context that is also markedly multipolar. In

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<sup>18</sup> F. Rubiolo and D. Telias, *China-United States Competition in Latin America: Evolution, Perspectives, and Implications in the Covid-19 Context*, Estudos Internacionais Revista de Relações Internacionais da PUC Minas vol. 9, no. 4, January 2022, pp. 43–62.

<sup>19</sup> E. Barzola and P. Baroni, *El acercamiento de China a América del Sur. Profundización del neextractivismo e incremento de conflictos y resistencias socioambientales*, Colombia Internacional, no. 93, 2018, pp. 119–145.

<sup>20</sup> CEPAL, *La República Popular China y América Latina y el Caribe. Hacia una nueva fase en el vínculo económico y comercial*, 2018, <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/2995-la-republica-popular-china-america-latina-caribe-fase-vinculo-economico>, Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>21</sup> *China-Latin America Finance Database*, 2020, [https://www.thedialogue.org/map\\_list/](https://www.thedialogue.org/map_list/), Last access: 20 March 2022.

<sup>22</sup> J. Malena, *La peculiaridad de la relación de China con América Latina*, 2013, <http://www.anu-ar.org/miradas/relacion-china-americalatina.html>, Last access: 20 March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> E. Barzola and P. Baroni, *El acercamiento de China a América del Sur. Profundización del neextractivismo e incremento de conflictos y resistencias socioambientales*, Colombia Internacional, vol. 93, 2018, pp. 119–145.

the post-pandemic global scenario, Latin American countries are likely to face a funding crisis. In this sense, neither the Trump Administration first, nor the Biden Administration later, seem willing to lose what they historically consider their “backyard” at the hands of who today is, in many ways, their most important adversary.<sup>24</sup>

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first launched in the year 2013 and it is the main global integration strategy of the PRC with the rest of the world.<sup>25</sup> Its growth and acceptance has been important in most regions of the planet. Although it is the official world economic integration project of the government of the PCR its impact on globalization processes far exceeds this dimension, since, in turn, the initiative incorporates new political and cultural meanings that require a proper interpretation.

In this competitive scenario, the Belt and Road is an important part of the future of global economic relations. In this way, it is a great opportunity, on the one hand, for businesses in Latin America, but also for different forms of cooperation in diplomatic, commercial, political, economic, and cultural matters.<sup>26</sup> The inclusion of Latin America in the Initiative has been greatly discussed, specifically the motives that led to the expansion of the PRC towards this region. It has been suggested that China did not originally have a “grand strategy” for this region, but its inclusion was really the outcome of the interests of multiple actors and mainly due to the lobbying by Latin American regional actors, wanting to be included in this initiative.<sup>27</sup>

China’s engagement with the region has recently had a “multi-tiered” focus, with a broad range of objectives going from the previously

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<sup>24</sup> F. Rubiolo and G. Fiore Viani, *América Latina: Entre Washington y Beijing*, 2020, <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/16929/am-rica-latina-entre-washington-beijing>. Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>25</sup> E. Dussel and A. Armony, *Beyond Raw Materials Who Are the Actors in the Latin America and Caribbean-China Relationship?*. Red Académica de América Latina y el Caribe sobre China y Universidad de Pittsburgh, Buenos Aires, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> G. Fiore Viani and M. Mosquera, *Ruta de la seda: Una oportunidad de desarrollo integrado al mundo*, 2022, <https://www.lavoz.com.ar/mundo/ruta-de-la-seda-una-opportunidad-de-desarrollo-integrado-al-mundo/>, Last access: 21 March 2022.

<sup>27</sup> R. Jenkins, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America: What Has Changed?*, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026211047871>. Last access: 21 March 2022.

mentioned investment opportunities to “advancing Chinese policy interests at various levels of government and society”.<sup>28</sup>

Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the reality of its link with the Global South rests on a complex network of multilevel and multi actor actions. It is that not only the states take on a leading role, but also the subnational government units (regions, provinces, departments, municipalities, among others), companies, universities, cultural actors, and civil society, display a growing participation in this intricate network in search of the positioning of their interests. The nature of this action is also replicated by China, whose multilevel diplomacy demonstrates the country’s capacity to establish links and simultaneous agendas in a multilevel sense. Within this sphere, financing for local development continues to be an unsatisfied demand by first-level local governments and, secondarily, by the state.

In this way, the multilevel link with the Belt and Road Initiative provides financing possibilities for the local development of subnational units of the Global South, which allow them to diversify their productive matrix, for example promoting renewable energy projects and connectivity infrastructure while seeking to reduce energy dependence and improve territorial connectivity. However, this reduction in medium-term dependence can generate long-term dependence to the extent that Chinese financing is usually granted to activate the import of Chinese technological products, generating a structural dependence on these projects in terms of capital and technology.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, this complementarity of interests is part of China’s long-term strategies, focused on maintaining channels of access to raw materials and non-renewable resources, which help sustain its economic growth.

As Liu and Song suggest, even though China has a centralized political system, “provincial governments have become partners or agents of the central government in the conduct of foreign policy agendas”.<sup>30</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> M. Myers, *GOING LOCAL An Assessment of China’s Administrative-Level Activity in Latin America and the Caribbean*, December 2020, <https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Going-Local-Chinas-Administrative-Level-Activity-in-LAC.pdf>, Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>29</sup> E. Oviedo, *El ascenso de China y sus efectos en la relación con Argentina*, Estudios Internacionales, Universidad de Chile, vol. 47, no. 180, 2015, pp. 67–90.

<sup>30</sup> T. Liu and Y. Song, *Chinese Paradiplomacy: A Theoretical Review*, SAGE Open, vol. 10, no. 1, January–March 2020, p. 6.



this regard, paradiplomacy and subnational ties play a fundamental role in Chinese foreign policy. This began in 1973, when the first sister agreement between a Chinese and a foreign city took place: between Tianjin and the Japanese city of Kobe.<sup>31</sup>

This growing process of twin city agreements has mainly been due to two reasons, one internal and the other external. The first one is the result of China's international relations, which have been expanding into new geographic territories such as Africa and Latin America. The second factor is the external one, in which paradiplomacy has been an increasing trend worldwide, and more cities everywhere have been delving into this type of relations.<sup>32</sup>

For China, this twinning policy is aimed at peaceful coexistence, in addition to strengthening the country's relations with the rest of the world. A feature worth noting, related to these Chinese city twinning agreements, is the foreign policy guidelines that the government has developed in the process, in which the recognition of the one and only Chinese Government and the maintenance of territorial integrity stand out.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, the twinning policy with cities in Latin America has experienced significant growth in recent years. In 2015, there were at least 147 sister agreements, while by 2020, these were already more than 200. All South American countries with diplomatic relations with China have at least one twinning agreement, while in Central America and the Caribbean, Mexico and Cuba stand out, and to a lesser extent Costa Rica, Jamaica, Panama, Grenada and the Dominican Republic. In some particular cases, there were very significant increases in the five years between 2015 and 2020: Argentina, for example, went from seventeen to more than forty, Chile, increased the number of twinings from thirteen to more than thirty, and Uruguay, went from having four to more than

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<sup>31</sup> A. Raggio, *Hermanamientos China-América Latina: ¿Qué son y adónde van?*, 2022, <https://latinoamerica21.com/es/hermanamientos-china-america-latina-que-son-y-hacia-donde-van/>, Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>32</sup> J. C. Mesa Bedoya and C. H. González-Parias, *Paradiplomacia: una herramienta de poder blando de China*, *Papel Político*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2016, pp. 537–563. <https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.papo21-2.phpb>, Last access: 20 March 2022.

<sup>33</sup> J. C. Mesa Bedoya and C. H. González-Parias, *Paradiplomacia: una herramienta de poder blando de China*, *Papel Político*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2016, pp. 537–563. <https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.papo21-2.phpb>, Last access: 20 March 2022.

fifteen.<sup>34</sup> An important fact is that these three countries are part of the Belt and Road Initiative, Argentina being the last to join, signing the memorandum of understanding in 2022.<sup>35</sup>

## The case of Latin America facing the Covid-19 pandemic

In the context of a more active Chinese policy in LAC through the Belt and Road Initiative, and the US policy reinforcement in the framework of this competition, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. This phenomenon has triggered different responses from Beijing, particularly has enhanced health cooperation through different channels and actors. In Latin America, nine out of the thirty-three countries hold some degree of partnership with China. As of 2020, there are seven countries that have reached the maximum status of comprehensive strategic partnership (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela), two that attained intermediate status of strategic partnership (Uruguay and Costa Rica), and Jamaica holds partner status.<sup>36</sup>

As Liu and Song suggests,<sup>37</sup> it should be noted that China's response to the pandemic is not only dependent on the Chinese government, but also on a wide range of actors involved. China's cooperation with the LAC region in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, can be divided into two phases. A first pre-vaccine stage in which donations and national, provincial, and municipal cooperation agreements prevailed, which we call multilevel action, with the participation of Chinese business and

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<sup>34</sup> A. Raggio, *Hermanamientos China-América Latina: ¿Qué son y adónde van?*, 2022, <https://latinoamerica21.com/es/hermanamientos-china-america-latina-que-son-y-hacia-donde-van/>, Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Cancillería Argentina, *Acuerdo con China: la Argentina obtiene financiamiento para obras de infraestructura estratégicas y se incorpora a la Franja y la Ruta de la Seda*, 2022, <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ar/es/destacados/acuerdo-con-china-la-argentina-obtiene-financiamiento-para-obras-de-infraestructura>, Last access: 19 March 2022.

<sup>36</sup> D. Telias and F. Urdinez, *China's Foreign Aid Political Drivers: Lessons from a Novel Dataset of Mask Diplomacy in Latin America during the Covid-19 Pandemic*. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026211020763>, Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>37</sup> T. Liu and Y. Song, *Chinese Paradiplomacy: A Theoretical Review*, SAGE Open, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020.

non-state actors, which we call multi-stakeholder, focusing on the purchase of health-related material and equipment.

In Latin America, Beijing has implemented both dimensions of the so called “chinstrap diplomacy”<sup>38</sup> based on health cooperation mechanisms at two levels: multilateral and bilateral. Bilateral experiences go beyond the traditional State-State mechanisms: they are multidimensional and multi-level, involving a range of diverse actors. We note that cooperation assumes a character: (a) intergovernmental; (b) between sub-national units among themselves or between them and national governments, and (c) between large Chinese companies and national/sub-national governments.

China has become, especially since its emergence as a major player on the global stage at the beginning of this century, a more proactive State in terms of world governance. However, their motivations and objectives, as is the case with other great powers, go beyond the mere desire to improve human health and safety in developing countries.<sup>39</sup> The commitment to health, in the form of help, assistance and cooperation, is also used as a form of soft power that simultaneously fulfills the objectives of internal and external policy.<sup>40</sup> This includes, in turn, health security, economic growth, and commercial interests.

In line with official policy, China did not provide support to countries enjoying diplomatic ties with Taiwan, including Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.<sup>41</sup>

Between February and June 2020 alone, China provided over \$128 million in medical-related donations to thirty-three countries in LAC. Later, in July, it announced a \$1 billion loan for vaccine access,

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<sup>38</sup> F. Rubiolo and J. Vadell, *América Latina y la ‘diplomacia de las mascarillas’*, Agenda Pública, 2020, <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/16938/china-america-latina-diplomacia-mascarillas>, Last access: 22 March 2022.

<sup>39</sup> M. Myers, *What Motivated China’s Covid-19 Assistance in LAC?*, The Dialogue, 2021, <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2021/10/what-motivated-chinas-Covid-19-assistance-in-lac/>, last access: 22 March 2022.

<sup>40</sup> F. Rubiolo and J. Vadell, *China, América Latina y la ‘diplomacia de las mascarillas’*, cit.

<sup>41</sup> M. Chang, *Covid-19 Aid from China to Latin America Twice as the US*. Fundación Andrés Bello, 2022, <https://fundacionandresbello.org/en/reporting/covid-19-aid-from-china-to-latin-america-twice-that-of-us-as-it-increases-investments-in-the-region/>, Last access: 23 March 2022.

strengthening economic cooperation and alliances with the region.<sup>42</sup> Three main destinations of Chinese donations (Venezuela, Brazil, and Chile) accounted for 61.4 % of total donations.<sup>43</sup> We can also note that, if measured in USD per capita, the greatest impact of such donations was in the Caribbean countries and Venezuela. The fact that Venezuela was the largest recipient of aid from China is not surprising given the humanitarian emergency that the country was experiencing after the economic crisis that began in 2015, which led millions of people to emigrate.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to government assistance, the following private and state-owned Chinese companies have made donations in Latin America: Huawei, BGI, China Three Gorges Corporation, NBFEE, CHCEC, Alifante, Tencent, CNPC, GAC Group, DiDi, ZTE, CATIC, Alibaba, COSCO, CCCC Dredging Group, Dahua Technology, Micropoort, Fosun, COFCO International, Trip.com Group, WanHuida, Nu Group, Yutong, Tencent, China Communications Construction, ICBC, Bank of China, TikTok, and Envision Energy.<sup>45</sup>

Though likely coordinated to some degree by Chinese authorities, China's assistance to LAC and other regions is coming from a wide range of actors. For instance, many of the donations have come not from the central government in Beijing, but from local governments across China. In an early-stage (February 2020–September 2020) Chinese pandemic outreach was notably decentralized. It entailed loosely coordinated engagement by wide-ranging Chinese actors, including embassies, companies, provincial government authorities, networks of overseas Chinese communities, and quasi-governmental organizations, such as the Chinese Red Cross. The latter donated US\$ 100,000 worth of supplies to Colombia, gave US\$ 100,000 in cash to Cuba, and provided some

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<sup>42</sup> C. Guevara, *Russia and China Have become Critical Allies to Latin America and the Caribbean during the Pandemic. The United States Should Step Up*, 2022, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/russia-and-china-have-become-critical-allies-latin-america-and-caribbean-during>, Last access: 23 March 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson Center, *Aid from China and the U.S. to Latin America Amid the Covid-19 Crisis*, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/aid-china-and-us-latin-america-amid-covid-19-crisis>, Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>44</sup> D. Pantoulas and J. McCoy, *Venezuela: un equilibrio inestable*, *Revista de Ciencia Política*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2022, p. 391.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson Center, *Aid from China and the U.S. to Latin America Amid the Covid-19 Crisis*, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/aid-china-and-us-latin-america-amid-covid-19-crisis>, Last access: 23 March 2022.

hurricane and pandemic-related assistance to El Salvador. These actors operated in broad support of China's diplomatic objectives and engaged the region through distinct and sometimes ad hoc channels<sup>46</sup>

International decentralized cooperation from Chinese non-central government actors was more active with certain countries in Latin America. Sister city linkages are one of many examples of China's expansive subnational diplomacy. In other cases, large cities in China have shipped equipment to Chinese embassies in LAC or to LAC governments for broader distribution. For example, the city of Chongqing in central China delivered 1,000 protective suits, 1,000 surgical suits, and 5,400 N95 masks to Ecuador in early April, according to China's embassy there. Suzhou, which is located in China's Jiangsu province, donated 20,000 facemasks and 200 hazmat suits to Panama's government later that same month. And the city of Nanjing donated 30,000 facemasks to Colombia.<sup>47</sup>

According to official figures, as can be seen below, the main recipients of donations from Chinese regional and municipal governments in Latin America were Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. In the Argentinian case, donations came from: Hangzhou, Shanghai, Chongqing, Nanchang, Guangzhou. For example, the city of Hangzhou donated to Argentina 196,000 masks, 20,000 disposable gloves, 5,000 disposable protection suits for medical use, 2,500 Covid reactive test kits, 2,000 protection glasses, 550 digital thermometers and three infrared digital thermometers in March 2020.<sup>48</sup> Shanghai donated to the city of Rosario, 3,000 masks N95 model, 300 medical protection Jihua suits, and 20,000 surgical masks.<sup>49</sup> The city of Chongqing provided the city of Córdoba with

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<sup>46</sup> M. Myers, *China's Covid-19 Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean: Motivations and Methods*. *Global Security Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2022, pp. 11–12. [https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=jgi\\_research](https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=jgi_research), Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>47</sup> M Myers and R. Barrios, *China's Medical Outreach in LAC: Facts and Features – The Dialogue*. 2022, <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2020/05/chinas-medical-outreach-in-lac-facts-and-features/>, Last Access: 23 March 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Telam, *Donaciones de China a Argentina están llegando al país y se espera videoconferencia médica*, 2020, <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202003/442176-donaciones-de-china-a-argentina-estan-llegando-al-pais-y-se-espere-videoconferencia-medica.html>, Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>49</sup> La Capital, *Rosario recibió una valiosa donación de insumos sanitarios del gobierno de Shanghai*, 2020, <https://www.lacapital.com.ar/pandemia/rosario-recibio-una-valiosa-donacion-insumos-sanitarios-del-gobierno-shanghai-n2589676.html>, Last access: 24 March 2022.

1,600 disposable masks, 1,520 surgical masks and 1,200 disposable protectors.<sup>50</sup> Both Shanghai and Chongqing are sister cities with Rosario and Córdoba, respectively.

Brazil has received donations from the following Chinese cities and regions: Shanghai, Shangxi, Shenzhen, Jiangmen, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, Qingdao, Guiyang, Sichuan, Guangzhou, Dongguan/Fujian, Jiangsu, Gansu, Henan y Hebei. One particular case was the city of São Paulo in Brazil that received donations of masks directly from the municipal government of Shanghai, a sister city since 1988.<sup>51</sup>

Uruguay was also a top destination for decentralized cooperation from China. The South American country has multiple sister agreements, some examples are: Paysandu with the city of Guanxi, Lavalleja with Sichuan, La Paloma with Zhoushan, the province of Rocha with its counterpart of Hainan, Florida with the city of Kaifeng; Montevideo with Guangxi, Qingdao y Guangzhou; Salto with Foshan, Rivera with Guizhou, and Trinidad with Weifang.<sup>52</sup> The regions and cities that donated medical features to its counterparts in Uruguay during the pandemic were: Chengdu, Chongqing, Qingdao, Guangzhou, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hainan, Sichuan, Shanxi, Qingdao.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> CBA24N, *Llegó una donación de material sanitario para la provincia desde China*, 2020, [https://www.cba24n.com.ar/internacionales/llego-una-donacion-de-material-sanitario-para-la-provincia-desde-china\\_a5ed03e9cf5bd154ab0ef5535](https://www.cba24n.com.ar/internacionales/llego-una-donacion-de-material-sanitario-para-la-provincia-desde-china_a5ed03e9cf5bd154ab0ef5535), Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Leikang, *The Chinese Consulate General in Sao Paulo Donated Surgical Masks to the Local Area*, 2020, <http://www.wzleikang.com/en/news/qyxw/newsShow249.html>, Last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Embajada de la República Popular China en Uruguay, *Lavalleja se hermana con Sichuan*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceuy/esp/xwdts/t1812359.htm>, last access: 24 March 2022.

Intendencia de Florida Official Website, *Firma de hermanamiento entre Florida y Kaifeng (China)*, 20 October 2020, [http://www.florida.gub.uy/noticias/firma\\_de\\_hermanamiento\\_entre\\_florida\\_y\\_kaifeng\\_china](http://www.florida.gub.uy/noticias/firma_de_hermanamiento_entre_florida_y_kaifeng_china), last access; 24 March 2022.

El Telégrafo, *Acta de hermanamiento con la región china de Guangxi se firma mañana Paysandú*, 24 October 2019, <https://www.eltelegrafo.com/2019/10/acta-de-hermanamiento-con-la-region-china-de-guangxi-se-firma-manana-paysandu/>, last access: 24 March 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Embajada de la República Popular China en Uruguay, Official Website, News, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceuy/esp/xwdts/t1766616.htm>, last access: 24 March 2022.

Regarding China's health diplomacy, some concerns have been raised about the country's true intentions in Latin America. As it has been widely addressed, China's need for raw materials in relation to its own economic and industrial development, has given Latin America a central role in its foreign policy agenda. Besides this domestic interest, there are also external or international concerns influencing China's policies towards the region and enhancing its own image as a responsible global power in the context of an intensified global competition with the United States is a core one. The pandemic context can be seen, in the aftermath, as a golden opportunity to improve the nature of the bilateral relations, from a trade and financial centered orientation to a wider and more diversified spectrum. Chinese health diplomacy enters in this already developed and consolidated relation with LAC, underpinning China's positive role in the region, contributing to a gradual change in the perception of the country's image. Given the centrality of vaccines as a tool to mitigate the impact of the disease, China's diplomatic efforts towards the region are nurturing its role as a "public goods provider" and strengthening a more diversified perception of the benefits of its presence, going beyond the economic centered approach.

The international initiatives from Chinese subnational units nurture these same goals and should be understood not as autonomic impulses but as contributing to Beijing's global expansion through a wide range of channels, actors, and dimensions.

## **Conclusions**

The events produced from the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that the building of the global idea does not endure with individual responses. What the pandemic brings to the table is the schizophrenia of a world with global productive connections and dynamics, but without forecasts, guarantees, or true transnational commitments to act in a joint way to face the challenges that a complex, changing and unpredictable world brings.

Transnational governance proposes a balance between the State, civil society, and the market. There, both civil organizations and multinational companies play an important role. Globalization, multilateral organizations, and international cooperation are going through an extremely difficult moment. Since the establishment of the current liberal world order

after World War II, the prevailing system has not faced major challenges such as those facing it now in the 21st century.

Global governance was already in crisis prior to December 2019, when the existence of a new coronavirus was announced in the Chinese city of Wuhan, but the subsequent pandemic has served to further amplify the voices against it. “A crisis within another crisis”, affirms José Antonio Sanahuja<sup>54</sup> with his gaze set on the questioning of globalization and the systemic failures that allowed anticipating the disaster. Failures, such as poor communication and management of global risks, the reluctance to make a legitimate commitment to well-being beyond national borders, which did not allow a rapid, efficient, and consensual response to a disease that became a global catastrophe.

Today transnational governance faces an unprecedented dilemma. Are there actors up to the challenge of committing to global well-being? The problem is no longer whether we recognize its usefulness: it seems that today there is no other option. Because in an interconnected and interdependent world like the current one, the “every man for himself” is inconsistent and incoherent with the very nature of that system.

The pandemic directly challenged local governments, demanding urgent, and unprecedented responses. Despite the challenges and tensions, strengths were demonstrated when it was essential to invigorate international ties in order to have greater access to alternatives for health cooperation and training. A clear example of the potential of the internationalization strategies of subnational governments to strengthen response capacities in the face of global crises with approaches adapted to the territory.

For China, it is clear the relevance that Latin America represents for the country is growing. In this sense, the pandemic represented a great opportunity for the Asian giant to increase its presence in Latin American countries. It did so by taking advantage of the already proven mechanisms of its subnational diplomacy. Everything indicates that Beijing will continue to deepen this in the future and that its sister cities policy will continue to grow. China found in them an opportunity to

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<sup>54</sup> J. A. Sanahuja, *Covid-19: riesgo, pandemia y crisis de gobernanza global*, 2022, <https://ceipaz.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/4.2020-AnuarioJose-Antonio.pdf>, Last access: 22 March 2022.



strengthen its diplomacy strategy towards the world in general and Latin America in particular. The ties that bind China to the region will continue to intensify within the framework of a complex, changing, and extremely competitive global context.