



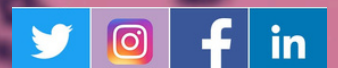
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CHINA'S RESOURCE DIPLOMACY IN LATIN AMERICA: AN ASSESSMENT AND TAKEAWAYS FOR INDIA

MS ARIJITA SINHA ROY

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Ms Arijita Sinha Roy, is a Research Assistant cum Publications Manager at CENJOWS, New Delhi.

Abstract

China's growing influence in Latin America through resource diplomacy has aroused debate, with some researchers and commentators viewing it through a neocolonial lens. This article examines China's involvement in the region, particularly in the resource extraction industries, in light of previous colonial dynamics. It examines China's investment objectives, techniques, and impacts in relation to concerns of sovereignty, economic dependency, and environmental sustainability. By drawing parallels to previous colonial tactics, the article investigates the implications of China's presence for local people, governance systems, and regional development paths. This neocolonial viewpoint strives to expand knowledge of the complex factors that shape China-Latin America ties, as well as the broader implications for global resource control.

The paper attempts to present an overview of the present China-Latin America relations, debates on securitization of resources diplomacy and whether patterns of China's involvement in the region have augmented a neocolonial trend similar to Africa.

Introduction

Latin America consists of the continent of South America with inclusion of Mexico, Central America and the islands of Caribbean. Most of the Latin American countries have shared similar historic movements and also share a common heritage. Since the times of European occupation, the Latin American nations have played significantly in material and economic endowments. Latin America consists of the continent of South America with inclusion of Mexico, Central America and the islands of Caribbean. Most of the Latin American countries have shared similar historic movements and also share a common heritage. Since the times of European occupation, the Latin American nations have played significantly in material and economic endowments. Today, these Latin American countries are still considered as “developing” and “emerging” economies with countries like Brazil, Mexico and Argentina leading in the region. Natural resources play a significant role in the development of these Latin American nations. As per the data available, the region is home to 20% of the world’s oil reserves, 25% reserve of strategic metals and 30% natural vegetation. ¹ Economic activities based on natural resources account for 12% value with almost 16% and 50% of exports in the region. Natural resources like oil and gas constitute major portions of the region, with dominant industries in Venezuela, Lake Maracaibo and the El Tigre region. ²

Additionally, the Latin American region is also rich in Iron, Steel and Copper. Peru and Chile constitute as the world’s largest copper exporter. Other significant metal deposits of Tin, Lead and Zinc are exported by countries like Brazil, Peru, Bolivia and Northern Argentina. ³ These data are indicative of the correlation between natural resources and the region’s strategic importance that should not be underestimated.

Predominantly, China has increased trade and investment with numerous resource-rich nations worldwide in response to an increasingly urgent need to obtain raw materials and natural resources. China's quest for natural resources is having a variety of effects on the nation's grand strategy. The acquisition of resources is seen to be the primary motivation behind China's foreign policy, which has been referred to as "resource diplomacy." (Downs 2004, Zweig & Jianhai 2005, Daojiong 2006).

Furthermore, China's increased strategic cooperation with Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and Latin America has been considered to pave way for securing vital energy resources and "establishing close relationship with resource-rich nations" that would ultimately drive China's State-Owned Enterprises. Growing numbers of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in China, frequently with "unconditional aid," have spurred international discussion over China's intentions and the implications for recipient nations.⁴

What is Resource Diplomacy? A Glance

Natural Resources have come to play a significant role in shaping a country's geopolitical and geo-economic goals. Resources diplomacy primarily can be defined as the use of resources as a tool for establishing diplomatic ties and furthering relations between two or more countries. Resource Diplomacy can also be understood as extension of 'power game' utilised by countries to leverage their national interests. (Gutman, 1975).

The Japanese Foreign Ministry defines resource diplomacy as "when great powers contended for supremacy in the past, it was those countries backed by strong military power who controlled natural resources through resources diplomacy."⁵ Resource diplomacy is defined as any diplomatic engagement aimed at improving a nation's access to resources and energy security and primarily consists of three elements: one, maintaining a consistent supply of energy and resources; two keeping resource costs reasonable and three being able to transport those resources to designated processing or consumption sites (Zweig, 2007).

China's engagement in Africa is the most notable expansion of Resources diplomacy in the present time. However, with geopolitical trends centering around securitization, China's resources diplomacy is becoming prominent in Latin America. Econometric examination of aggregate data generally supports the theory that Chinese enterprises seek resources, among other reasons. Buckley et al. (2007) study data from 49 host countries and discover that Chinese external investment is positively connected with a country's natural resource endowment (using ore and metal exports as proxies).

Buckley et al. (2008) get the same conclusion when using a different proxy for natural resource endowment (crude oil, natural liquid gas, and petroleum product exports).

Cheung and Quian (2009) support this finding for both developed and developing countries. Kolstad and Wiig (2009) study the relationship between host countries' institutional strength and natural resource endowment and their study showed how host nations with weak institutions are attracting Chinese investment in natural resources. It can therefore be evaluated that more the natural resources a host country has the more Chinese Foreign Direct investments will they draw. Nonetheless, China's resource diplomacy can be summarized in three significant elements:⁶

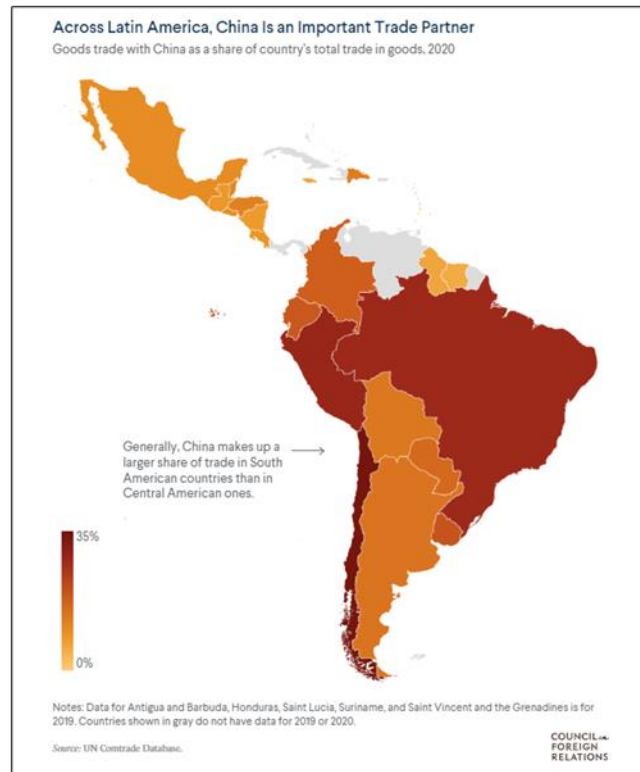
- Encouraging its state-owned companies to make foreign investments in resource-rich nations;
- Offering 'unconditional' financial help to develop physical infrastructure and move towards debt elimination;
- Providing political and diplomatic support to resource-rich nations on the international stage.

Contextualising China-Latin America Relations

China's position in Latin America has expanded significantly since the turn of the century, bringing economic opportunities while raising concerns about Beijing's influence. Today, the investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises are massive and have marked an edge in leading industries like energy, infrastructure and space. These developments have “eclipsed” Latin America's bilateral relations with the US, which once was the region's top trading partner.⁷ COVID-19 served a good opportunity for China to increase its diplomatic, cultural and military footprints in the region. This can be considered as the prime example of China employing its soft power to exert influence across its ‘periphery’.

The relation between China and the Latin American region can be traced back to the 16th century when trade routes were established primarily for the exchange of commodities like porcelain, silk and also spices.⁸ By the mid-19th century, many Chinese migrants have been sent work as “indentured slaves” in present day Cuba and Peru. However, due to China's own dynamic domestic instability, the relations had no particular momentum. ⁹ However, today, China's presence in the region has arguably become on the serious case study for strategic autonomy. Latin America was primarily the US ‘backyard’ from a geopolitical perspective and now the growing China's presence therefore is significant. Mexico currently holds the highest rating

China's Foreign Ministry has ever given to Latin American countries: that of having complete strategic ties. The ranking is the same for six other South American nations. They are Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina.¹⁰



Source: Council of Foreign Relations

In 2000, less than 2% of Latin American exports went to China, but the country's rapid growth and the ensuing demand drove the subsequent commodities boom in the area. It was not until 2010 when the trade resulted in an average annual rate of 31%, reaching a figure of \$180 billion.¹¹ The trade figures doubled by 2021 and the trends of bilateral trade have predicated a turnover of \$700 billion by 2035.¹² These trends in trade have replaced US and now China is Latin America's first and main trading partner.¹³ Even when most Latin American countries began to run trade deficits with the Asian behemoth, China tried leveraging the situation by establishing channels of second level of economic influence through foreign direct investment. Despite China's competitiveness in manufacturing¹⁴, Chinese electricity businesses have dominated Latin America.¹⁵ China has also made significant investments in the fight for control over natural resources. China has failed to establish manufacturing capacity in Latin America, and the region's trade gap with China has grown significantly since the pandemic began.¹⁶ In January 2020, China announced a \$600 million investment through the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) to build an

international consortium. Additionally, China's engagement in the energy and hydropower sector is equally remarkable with examples of domestic Latin American companies being acquired by Chinese market giants. One such example is Zuma Energía, the largest independent renewable energy company in Mexico¹⁷, was recently acquired by China's State Power Investment Corporation (SPIC).¹⁸

Strategic Cooperation and Partnerships

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has used various categorization for the Latin American countries, amongst which Mexico shares the highest advantage of 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'.¹⁹ Other Latin American countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela enjoy the same categorization. However, it is Brazil with whom China first established 'Strategic Partnership' in November 1993.²⁰ China classifies Bolivia and Uruguay as '*Strategic Partners*' (战略伙伴) and its relations with Guyana and Antigua & Barbuda are labelled '*Friendly Cooperative*' (友好合作) relations and '*Friendly*' (友好) relations, respectively.²¹

There are presently three countries in the region that share a status with China that no other country in the world does. The first is Cuba, which is designated as '*Good brother, Good comrade, Good Friend*' (好兄弟、好同志、好朋友)²², primarily due to the historical and political reasons that have contributed towards the genesis of Cuba-China relations. With Trinidad & Tobago, it maintains a '*Comprehensive cooperative Partnership of Mutual Respect, Equality, Mutual Benefit, and Common Development*' (相互尊重、平等互利、共同发展的全面合作伙伴) relationship that had evolved from the earlier '*Mutually beneficial development Friendly Cooperative*' (互利发展的友好合作关).²³ Jamaica was elevated to a strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系) in 2019 from the earlier unique label of '*Friendly partnership for Common Development*' (共同发展的友好伙伴关). Suriname's shares '*Strategic Partnership of Cooperation*' (战略合作伙伴关系) status with China, a classification shared only with South Korea and Bangladesh.²⁴



Source: The Dialogue

Objectives of China's Resource Diplomacy in Latin America

China's effort to strengthen its relations with Latin America is manifold but can be narrowed down to three key arguments. First, strengthening its international influence in comparison to other big countries throughout the world in general, and in developing regions in particular.²⁵ China's goal of expanding its sphere of influence is at the forefront, as is its "South-South Cooperation" development framework, which prioritizes aid, investment, and commerce. China's recent leverage of soft power by strengthening cultural and educational ties has reinforced amongst the Latin American countries a sense of correct political goodwill as against Western partners.²⁶

Second, is China's drive towards export orientation and securing foreign markets for raw materials and other commodities, primarily for domestic development.²⁷ Energy and Minerals remain as key components.

Third, isolating Taiwan within the international community on the basis of China's interpretation of the "One China Principle" (Connelly, 2006; Kurlantzick, 2006; León-Manríquez, 2016; Mora, 1999; Puyana and Costantino, 2015). China's efforts to isolate Taiwan are also significant. These have proved extremely efficient as the support for Taiwan's independence has waned amongst the Latin American countries with only with only seven countries now recognizing it.²⁸ Honduras, Dominican Republic and

Nicaragua became the latest countries to switch diplomatic allegiance to Beijing in 2023.²⁹

The nature of growing China-Latin America relations is simultaneously strengthening authoritarian governments in the region as can be understood from the political situations emanating from countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.³⁰ According to Evan Ellis, a research professor of Latin American Studies at the United States Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, China's position in such countries is that of a "populist incubator."

Securitization of Resource Diplomacy

China's Resources Diplomacy with the Latin American countries have also resulted in great securitization of the region. The so-called US Backyard now has direct strategic and security implications. The region also plays an essential part in China's overall energy security calculations, which is why we expect China to continue to interact with Venezuela despite the numerous obstacles it faces.³¹

The Chinese government outlined a strategy for Latin American countries in the Defence Strategy White Paper in 2016 that emphasized on security and cooperation between China and the region.³² There has been concerted effort by China to strengthen military ties with the region that includes arm sales, military exchanges and also training programs. The period between 2006 and 2022 witnessed a boom in Beijing's export for armaments worth \$629 million to Venezuela. Countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru have also invested in acquiring China's military aircrafts, ground vehicles, air defence radars and assault guns.³³ Recently, Cuba has worked military ties with China by inviting PLA representations to many strategic port visits that further have stirred concern amongst US intelligence officials. Meantime, China has continued to focus on creating and developing 'new infrastructure' with emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence, cloud Computing, smart cities and 5G technologies through telecom companies like Huawei. In 2022, despite security concerns and allegations around Huawei technologies, the company plans to launch a two year 5G city test project in Curitiba, Brazil.³⁴ Reports of space collaborations with Latin American region is also on the rise with China's largest non-domestic space facility in Argentina's Patagonian Desert. Presently, China also has established satellite ground stations in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Venezuela.³⁵ The proximity of these

stations to the US have raised serious security concerns that brings the question of regional security to the foray. ³⁶ ³⁷ These developments have highlighted a huge correlation between how China has used the tool of Resource Diplomacy to invest in these developing Latin American countries and further have leveraged its regional interests through the so-called ‘cooperative’ projects.

Resource Diplomacy and the BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative, officially launched in 2013 has become the corner stone of China’s foreign policy under President Xi Jinping. It can be understood as a “web of investment programs that seek to develop infrastructure and promote economic integration within partner countries.” Although China does not share geographical proximity with the Latin American region, Xi Jinping underscored the strategic importance of the region when he mentioned, “Latin America is a natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. The extension of BRI to a far-fetched region can be directly linked with Latin America’s possession of abundant natural resources and raw materials that certainly meet China’s growing demands for crude petroleum oil, iron and cooper. Further, there are concerns over food security and agricultural goods from the region that are equally important for China. Another major reason that highlights China’s interests in expanding BRI in Latin America could primarily be the need for a stable investment climate to reduce risks posed by several African countries. Latin America also provides a huge market for Beijing to export its high-end mechanical, electrical and high-tech products. ³⁸



Source: Global Development Policy Centre

China has invested about US \$10 billion through state-to state financing in infrastructure projects, railways and ports in countries like Costa Rica, Argentina and Trinidad and Tobago. In 2015, Bolivia's ambassador to China stated that the BRI is "extremely important to Bolivia's future development." Other Latin American countries like Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua & Barbuda, and Uruguay later reaffirmed this position for their respective countries. Latin American countries seek to gain from increased infrastructure investment.³⁹ While the China's BRI has been accused of 'debt-trap' the Latin American regions do not voice the same concern as often advocated by the West led bloc.

Dawn of Neo-Colonialism?

Neocolonialism can be understood as devising the elements of economics, globalisation, cultural imperialism that would achieve the objectives to influence a country/region rather than the traditional method of direct military control (imperialism) or in some cases indirect political control (hegemony).⁴⁰ Neocolonialism varies from traditional globalization and development aid in that it often makes a country dependent, submissive, or financially obliged to the neo-colonialist nation.⁴¹ This can lead to excessive political control and debt responsibilities, similar to the mercantilist relationship between empires and their colonies.⁴²

The question of neo-colonialism becomes particularly prominent in discussing China's vetted interest in Latin America especially how it is leveraging Resource diplomacy through BRI. China has invited Latin American countries to participate in the BRI that will finally focus on spreading China-backed and sponsored infrastructure development. It can be understood that China leverages the tool of resource diplomacy to secure Latin American financial dependence on the country while also simultaneously allowing for a prolonged Chinese presence in Latin America. Furthermore, these interactions have provided the Latin American countries with investment and infrastructure opportunities in 5G technology, smart cities, energy and transportation.⁴³ Despite continuous backlash from the US and other countries, China continues to persuade Latin American countries to join BRI through "other opportunities."

A close example to substantiate this would be the efforts by China to engage Argentina through a 'comprehensive packaged of deliverables' that ensured large-scale projects for constructing ports, dams, railroads, and nuclear power plants.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, BRI

branded or not, virtually most significant projects in the region are now funded by Chinese commercial loans which often carry ambiguous terms and conditions leading to a trap. These contracts usually carry clause that allow long-term Chinese engagement for funding, construction and even maintenance that allow China's sustained control, reducing autonomy of the country where the projects are usually developed.

Interestingly, China uses tools that reflect neocolonialism is how it attempted to create Special Economic Zones in the region. The best case study for it was when China had proposed a "series of projects" in El Salvador that ambiguously involved construction of port facilities with also establishment of another six SEZs that would also eliminate as large as 14% of the country's territory.⁴⁵ There are focussed projects on converting existing ports in Latin America into strategic logistics hub that would be operated solely by Chinese companies.⁴⁶ In the entirety, the provisions of these projects proposed how China would have a sustained control over these SEZs. Furthermore, these developing Latin American countries by exchanging primary products for Chinese manufactures ones have resulted in most countries becoming "heavily indebted to the PRC".⁴⁷

Furthermore, in 2021 China enacted a National Defence Law that highlighted the nation's military strategies that would allow "the mobilization of military force to protect overseas Chinese citizens, organisations and other facilities." This new law also allowed building a legal framework that would "expand the PLA's overseas mission to secure Chinese BRI projects and overseas basing". The provisions of this law also lay ground for "full or partial military sovereignty, unification, territorial integrity, national security, and overseas interests." ⁴⁸

China's goals towards Latin America ultimately reflect the foreign policy intentions being leveraged by President Xi Jinping where the policy focus has shifted towards preserving the Chinese culture and people through prioritizing long-term sustainability through all initiatives. Therefore, as China's resources diminish within the country, the nation is "forced to expand outward." China's neocolonialism has been most visible in Africa and Latin America, highlighting global power rivalry. China has developed tactics, strategies, and procedures in Africa and is now developing similar roots in Latin America.

Can India Engage better with Latin America?

China's growing footprints in the Latin American region and great power contestation between China and the US against the backdrop of the post-COVID world, there remains prolonged fear for Latin America to remain "caught between two major global forces that threaten the region's growth: a potential drop in capital flows from the U.S. as pandemic stimulus tapers off; and decreasing growth in China, where an energy crunch is hitting just as the country's exhausted property markets begin to go into reverse." The disruption in supply chain crises following the pandemic and ongoing conflicts in Europe and West Asia have added "layers of uncertainty" which creates an argument for Latin America to hedge its bets and reduce risks by diversifying its international exposure.⁴⁹ India provides a balanced opportunity for the region as it is emerging as a preferred partner in IT, pharmaceuticals and automobiles for the Latin American region.

China remains and operates in Latin American differently and ahead of any country in terms of engagement. In terms of overall investment, trade, or loans, China's presence in Latin America is far ahead of India's.⁵⁰ Despite the statistics, India remains an important partner for Latin American countries with a "benevolent presence and goodwill" unlike China. The rapid economic progression by India has also captured great attention from many countries in the Latin American region that have allowed them to "recalibrate India into their foreign policy priorities as a key player in Asia."

Key Recommendations for India

- **Supply Chain Diversification.** India needs to revisit its ties with Latin America, especially for diversification of supply chains. India remains one of the top importers of Lithium from China. The Latin American countries offer an abundance of these minerals for India to collaboratively develop a partnership. Further, it can harness strategic collaboration on critical and rare earth minerals.
- **Interactive Market.** India has a growing economy and a big market that no country can afford to ignore. Although investments and interactions between India and Latin American countries remain limited, the Indian market offers economic diversification,

while Latin America, India forms part of a larger and overarching Asian strategy. India can provide alternative investment plans without 'debt trap'.

- **Capacity Building and Streamlining Skills.** India carries weightage for its IT, healthcare and education that can be strategically used by the Latin American countries through several tailored training programs, vocational courses and also knowledge sharing platforms. Further, it could also bring about investments through public-private partnership between India and the Latin American countries.
- **Global-South Advocacy.** India's increased involvement in Latin America indicates a national desire for global influence and a seat at the table with big powers.⁵¹ Engagement with Latin America would energise trade, investment and diplomatic support for India in this region. Last year at the G20 New Delhi Summit, it was highlighted how India would champion a new voice for Global South.
- **Cooperation on Energy and Climate.** There is untapped potential for India and Latin American countries to engage in energy transitions and climate agenda. Output on production of "strategic commodities" like lithium can provide a push for India and the region to increase momentum for renewable energies, driving ultimately towards addressing climate concerns.
- **Leveraging Soft Power.** India and Latin American countries must exercise more cooperative efforts by leveraging soft power that would ultimately create synergy between Latin American countries and India. Although the relations so far have remained economic in character, there should be more encouragement for deeper people-to-people engagements with diaspora management.

Conclusion

Understanding Chinese presence in Latin America is very significant today. The relation between the two countries have overlapped facets of economic and security ambitions. Resources Diplomacy tools have become the highlight of the ties shared by most Latin America countries with China. It can be understood that China's sharp

objectives with Latin America revolves around economics, while Latin America remains interested in accessing investments in technology and infrastructure. This dual relationship is benefitting and also validating their desire to broaden their international and commercial relations.⁵²

China's engagement in the region can also be understood from a perspective of meeting its national interests as stated. Securitization of Resources diplomacy has also emerged as an evolving facet of the China-Latin American relations. The BRI in Latin America has championed a new 'neo-colonial imperialism' that is yet to be fully ascertained. But characteristics draw parallelism. China's neocolonialism has been most obvious in Africa and Latin America, emphasizing global power dynamics. China developed tactics, methods, and procedures in Africa and is now establishing a comparable presence in Latin America.

DISCLAIMER

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- ⁴⁹ Seshasayee, Hari. 2022. "India Vs. China in Latin America: Competing Actors or in Separate Leagues?" *The Diplomat*, May 20, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/india-vs-china-in-latin-america-competing-actors-or-in-separate-leagues/>.
- ⁵⁰Ibid, 49.
- ⁵¹ "India Turns to Latin America." n.d. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/india-turns-latin-america>.
- ⁵² ICWA. n.d. "China's Approaches Towards Latin America - Indian Council of World Affairs (Government of India)." https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&lid=6299&ls_id=9851.