

LATIN AMERICA'S CHINESE NEW FRIEND: PERCEPTIONS, IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES.¹

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SUMMARY. Introduction. 1. Why Latin America. 2. Assessing China's impact on the region. 2.1. The "negative" view. 2.2. The "positive view. 3. Latin America, China and the United States: challenges and myths. 4. Final remarks and policy recommendations.

RESUMEN

Este artículo se propone de fomentar la constancia del impacto que supone la creciente presencia de China en América Latina. Dicha presencia, como argumentamos, causa un mixto de percepciones positivas y negativas en la región, que se niegan a ser consideradas como un conjunto homogéneo. Al respecto consideramos que estos sentimientos, en lugar de representar de forma vaga las percepciones que en se manifiestan respecto de China, son más acertadamente el resultado de las políticas que Pequín mantiene con cada Estado sudamericano, pues en cada uno de éstos últimos se llevan diferentes impresiones. Un ulterior elemento de complicación se deriva de la cuestión de los recursos: petróleo, gas natural y varios minerales más o menos abundantes según el país o la región y algunas actuaciones, tal vez no exentas de críticas, de algunos grupos chinos (de propiedad pública o privada) que operan en el área. A través de un método cualitativo, media un análisis hermenéutico, evidenciamos los inconvenientes de una concepción "triangular" de las relaciones entre China – America Latina – Estados Unidos, terminando con algunas recomendaciones geoestratégicas al fin de fomentar la cooperación en la región.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to increase knowledge about the impact of China's growing presence in Latin America. Such presence, as we argue here, causes a mixture of positive and negative perceptions in the region, which cannot be considered a homogeneous whole. Thus, instead of a positive or a negative feeling widespread in the region vis-à-vis China, we postulate that it is the nature of the relationship that Beijing maintains with each Latin American country, which explains that different States in the region display different perceptions toward China. Complicating the chess of the perceptions there is a history of oil, natural gas and several ores, more or less abundant according to each state in the region, and some practices, eventually susceptible of criticism, intrinsically linked to the behaviour of the various Chinese groups and companies (State-owned and non-State) which operate in the region. Based on a qualitative method, via the hermeneutic analysis, we underline the drawbacks inherent to a 'triangular' conception of the China-Latin America-United States relations, ending with some geostrategic recommendations in order to improve cooperation in the region.

Palabras clave: China, América Latina, Estados Unidos, percepciones e impactos

Keywords: China, Latin America, United States, perceptions and impacts.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this article we will address the impact, challenges and perceptions of Chinese presence in Latin America. We postulate that there is a mixture of perceptions and feelings, both positive and negative, resulting from such a presence, being that it is important to clarify that Latin America is not a homogeneous whole. Therefore, we cannot talk about a positive feeling, or, instead, a negative one – vis-à-vis China – widespread in the region, but rather about multiple perceptions that differ according to the nature of the relationship that Beijing maintains with each Latin American country.

We believe that the subject is relevant and current. In a context in which literature about the *Going Abroad* Chinese strategy has focused essentially the contours of Chinese involvement in Africa, Latin America has been, until its recent (re) discovery by China, sidelined. However,

far from being an ‘extra’ in the framework of Chinese interests, although to all purposes, geographically remote, the region has a vast mineral and energetic potential, which a growing power like China cannot ignore. It is not surprising that Latin America is, therefore, a target for investors and Chinese companies, and that it, also, is the target of similar problems and challenges – a kind of *déjà vu* – which happen on the African continent, where the reactions to the Chinese presence are also not consensual. Aware that the economic aspects are certainly crucial in the rise of a great power at the regional and global scale, we decided to focus, in this article, another facet, equally important but sometimes underestimated or even ignored by *policy makers* and *opinion makers*: soft power. In fact, as Nye would say, the power of attraction of a certain culture, the ability to seduce, is an important indicator, although less obvious, perhaps, than hard power or the State economic potential. Whether we like it or not, no matter how extraordinary the economic growth of a country is, this does not necessarily create empathy. However, aware of this fact, Xi Jinping’s ‘new’ China has been actively engaged in improving the way it makes itself known to the world, although there is still a long way to go, as it will be seen, in the specific case of Latin America, we discuss here.

Aware that the analysis undertaken here needs to be developed, because the Latin American reality is too extensive, such as the Chinese, to be condensed into just a few pages, we recommend that other researchers should explore harder the perceptions that the Middle Kingdom generates in the Latin American subcontinent. We believe that science can, although gradually, contribute, through a survey of weaknesses and strengths, to the rethinking and improvement of the strategies for China’s gradual openness to the world, as evidenced by its *New Silk Road* ambitious project, which advocates a collective and *win win* prosperity.

We will point out the faults inherent to a ‘triangular’ conception – and, therefore, reductive – of the China-Latin America-United States relations, finally, making strategic recommendations to Latin American, Chinese and American policy makers, towards a healthy cooperation in the region, rather than a damaging game with zero-sum results.

Convinced that the behaviour of the states, the power or influence are not likely to translate into tangible realities, mathematical formulas, or mere statistics, we assume, from this point, that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is, certainly, the methodology supporting the present investigation. In this sense, it is imperative to penetrate the sphere of subjectivity, i.e. the understanding of causality inherent in the action of the various actors, that reaches us through the analysis of a whole panoply of scientific articles, monographs, theses, among other available sources regarding the subject of this study, in order to try to understand what drives China to act in this or that way.

1. WHY LATIN AMERICA?

With regard to other continents (such as Africa or the great Asian periphery), Latin America has only aroused China's interest in recent years. Unlike Africa, where China has consolidated a strong presence, Paul Taylor believes that "Latin America appears to be a lower priority, perhaps owing to the region's strong identification with the West", which somehow explains that Beijing has, until now, regarded the region as "marginal or peripheral in political and economic terms" (2004: 86). Nevertheless, the tendency has been reversing.³ Dosch and Goodman cite Li, according to whom "China is taking advantage of a power vacuum in the region that was created by the United States' and Russia's declining interest in Latin America" (2012: 4). Of course, the pursuit of energy and mineral resources play an important role within the Chinese policy of *going abroad*, since, as Swaroopa Lahiri suggests, "Asia and Africa are simply not enough to feed China's ever growing appetite for natural resources such as oil, minerals, metals and food, especially soy beans" (2014: para. 3).

In what concerns the political sphere of influence, Beijing has prioritised, among other aspects, Taiwan's isolation, in Latin America. As Dosch and Goodman explain, "Central America plays a key role in Taiwan's quest for international recognition because it is one of the few regions where the country is welcome as an official member of international organisations" (2012: 7). Apart from Taiwan's issue, Beijing has, together with Latin American countries, privileged the promotion of cooperation in the political-strategic field in order to develop joint strategies in international forums. But, returning to the economic issues, as these are paramount and driving forces in the relations with the countries of the region, the gains seem to be fruitful for the Middle Kingdom. Then, let us consider: in addition to the mineral and energy resources that Beijing gets there, as a complement and alternative to other world suppliers, Lahiri reports that "China is a major exporter of manufactured goods to the region due to its need to tap new export markets after the EU and US slowdown" (2014: para. 4).

³According to Dosch and Goodman, "the Kissinger and Nixon visits to China in 1971-72 eventually paved the way for pragmatic and issues-oriented relations between Beijing and Latin American capitals, free of any ideological ballast (2012: 7). Dosch and Goodman mention that "by the end of the decade, China had established diplomatic relations with most major Latin American states, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Peru; Chinese-Latin American relations in the 1970s and 1980s were predominantly politically motivated and were driven by quid pro quo strategies" (2012: 7).

2. ASSESSING CHINA'S IMPACT ON THE REGION

2.1. The 'negative' view

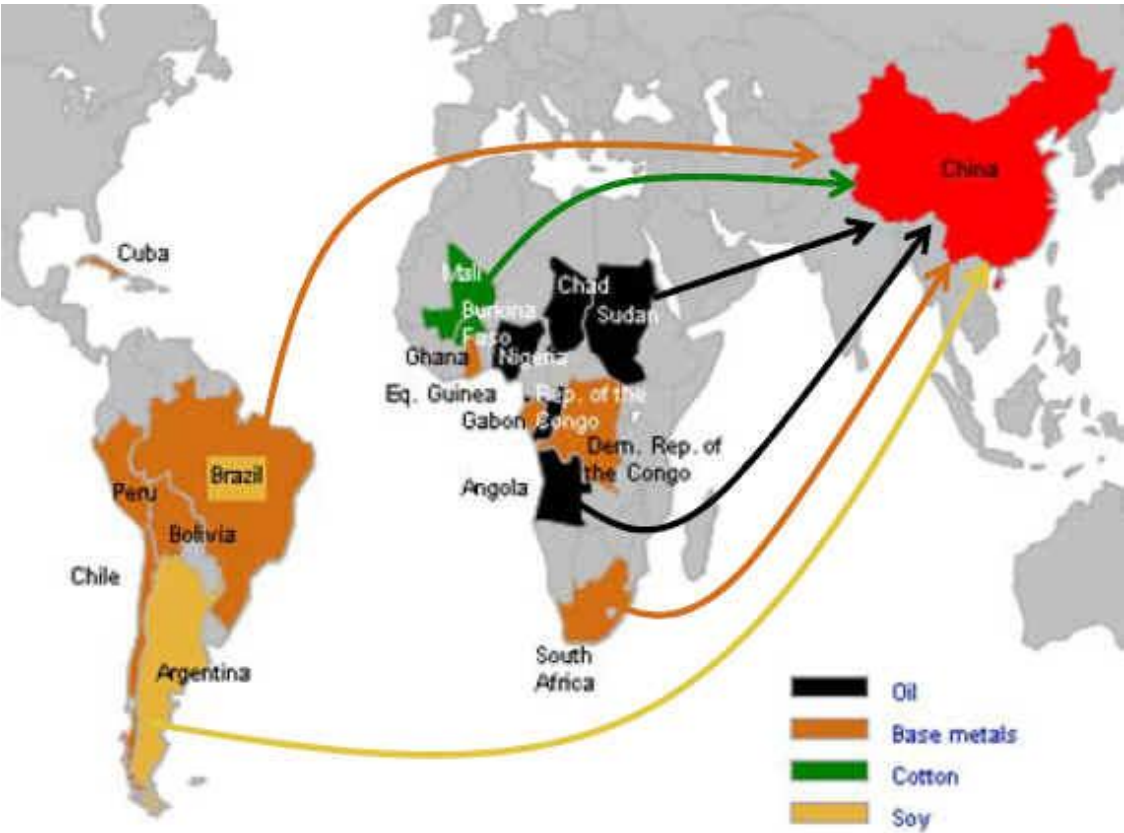
In the case of Latin America, the impact of the Chinese presence is not consensual. There is, effectively, a climate of uncertainty and even suspicion, about the real benefits, in the medium or long term, Latin American countries will gather regarding the Chinese enterprise in terms of investments, hard power and soft power in the region. This less optimistic vision, or perhaps, imbued with a certain skepticism, is possibly well summed up in the title of an article by Gabriel Domínguez (2014): *China's support of Latin America doesn't come for free*. The supporters of the Beijing Consensus, in turn, "applaud China's pragmatic, unorthodox development strategies and portray China as a successful model for developing countries and as a welcome counterweight to U.S. economic and political hegemony" (Gonzalez, 2010: 10171).

Among the arguments that account for a China potentially harmful to Latin America, it is quite common and widespread, for example, the discontent of local manufacturers towards the inability to compete with Chinese products, which has fostered the promotion of anti-dumping and protectionist measures regarding them (Facchini *et al.*, 2010). Hilton refers here that "the Chinese products are flooding domestic markets to the detriment of local manufacturers" (2013: 2). Such a pessimistic point of view also accuses China of being the main responsible for the so-called process of *de-industrialisation* – which "causes the reversal of growth and of industry participation in the production and creation of jobs" – which has been taking place in the region (DIEESE, 2011: 2). On the other hand, as Antonio Sesin notes, "low added value in exported products and the lack of national manufacturing production, are creating problems not only in trade balances, but also in the level of development of [Latin American] countries" (2011: para. 1). Jenkins adds the fact that "the Latin American economies are caught in the middle between low-cost Chinese production and high-tech production in the North, resulting in a shrinking of their development space" (2010: 818).

Another negative aspect is the asymmetry inherent to economic relations between China and Latin American countries, which greatly resembles a model of North-South trade, having as a consequence "the possible return of the centre-periphery trade pattern that has long been at the core of scholarly and political discourses in the region since the 1940s" (Barker, 2013: para. 15). Barker also stresses the fear on the part of Latin American countries that "gains associated with natural-resource-intensive exports are not widely spread" (2013: para. 17). In fact, and taking

advantage of this, it is important to recognise that Latin America is not a homogenous block, but rather a broad subcontinent, which consequently generates an interest also heterogeneous by Chinese investors, according to the idiosyncrasy and natural and/ or energy resources of each country in the region. To this respect, Jenkins informs that “some authors [...] have drawn a distinction between the South American countries, which have been the main beneficiaries economically, and Mexico and Central America, and the Caribbean, where the negative impacts have been concentrated” (2010: 835).

Figure 1. China’s trade relations with the South



Source: <http://www.4thmedia.org/2015/04/latin-america-china-and-usa/>

Evan Ellis, one of the great experts on the Chinese presence in Latin America, argues that “the greatest impact of [People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Latin America] has been to advance the emerging split between nations of the Pacific coast of Latin America, and those of the Atlantic” (2013: 24). Ellis explains that

“while the dichotomy has its exceptions (e.g. Ecuador), the states of the Pacific have generally adopted a pro-market, free-trade approach in relation to the opportunities and challenges represented by the emergence of the PRC as an economic actor in the region. Their approach has generally emphasized lowering tariffs and transaction costs, generating a stable and predictable

investment environment to both attract Chinese investment and trade and serving as a bridge between Asia and other parts of the hemisphere” (2013: 24).

As for the nations of the Atlantic coast of Latin America, such as Argentina or Brazil, Ellis says that they persecute “less market-oriented approaches vis-à-vis China”, increasing, for example, the rates applied to Chinese products or adopting other measures which hinder the entry of those products in their markets (2013: 25). However, it is not correct, according to this author, to speculate that the Latin American countries of the Pacific will have a tendency to attract more Chinese investment than those located in the Atlantic basin, since Ellis (2013) predicts that, on the contrary, the latter will reap most of the Chinese investment and credits in the region. Given the volatility and uncertainty of any speculation or tendency, Ellis believes, however, it is not inappropriate to say that “a rift of economic, and to an extent, political ideology is forming down the centre of the South American continent that is only likely to deepen as the continent expands its relationship with the PRC” (2013: 25).

The negative perception of China’s impact on Latin America is still reinforced by local discontent regarding certain practices – including environmental and ethical⁴ – of Chinese companies operating in the region. Illustrative in this respect is the case of the Chinese mining company Shougang Group, which “has significantly contributed to the poor reputation of Chinese companies over fines for environmental damage for the contamination of water supplies, low wages and dangerous working conditions” (Hilton, 2013: 3). As Gonzalez notes, the way Chinese companies operate in Latin America has led to the “erosion of genetic diversity, unsustainable levels of pesticide use, agrochemical contamination of lakes, rivers, and groundwater, increased human exposure to toxic pesticides, depletion of aquifers, and deforestation (due to the conversion of forests to crop land)” (2010: 10178). It should be noted, on the other hand, that “the Chinese companies lack experience of compliance with much higher environmental or community relations standards than prevail at home” (Hilton, 2013: 3). But despite the efforts to adapt to the practices and reality of Latin American countries – as evidenced by, for example, the hiring of local managers, public relations and law firms, Chinese companies still have a long way to go, as a result of “the cultural gaps and the lack of understanding of local concerns and political considerations” (Hilton, 2013: 3).

Insecurity is, curiously, another factor that contributes to exacerbate the negative perception that China causes in Latin American countries. Why do we say here ‘*curiously*’? Because although the Chinese communities in diaspora through Latin America are often the

⁴ In this regard, Isabel Hilton informs that “local opinion surveys reveal that most companies, whether large or small, state owned or private, suffer from anti-Chinese sentiment and the perception that they put profit above environmental and social concerns” (2013: 4).

target of violence, murder, kidnapping and discrimination – “according to a recent report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Latin America is the most violent region⁵ in the world, with an average 25 murders per 100,000 population, as compared to a global average of 6.2 per 100,000 population in 2012” – the truth is that some Chinese groups also end up, paradoxically, contributing to these statistics (in Business Insider, 2014: para. 1). It is, namely, the case of the Chinese mafia, whose *modus operandi* is still little known in the region, although it is known that this uses “extortion⁶, human smuggling rings⁷, and the occasional murder”, being natural that “as China deepens its economic relationship with Latin America, it’s possible these mafias may become ever more prominent” (Gagne, 2014: para. 1). This is, in practice, one of the side effects, though, undesirable, resulting from the growing Chinese presence in Latin America.

However, it is not always easy to distinguish the Chinese mafia from other Chinese structures that operate in the region, and that provide a legitimate support to local Chinese communities. In fact, according to Evan Ellis, “such mafias provide capital to help Chinese entrepreneurs establish businesses, a wholesale network for the goods sold in those stores, ‘organization of the market’ assuring individual shopkeepers individual segments of the neighbourhood, and, of course, protection services” (2012a: 67). The criminal activity of the Chinese mafias is concentrated around four major outbreaks – which involve “extortion of Chinese communities in Latin America by groups with ties to China, trafficking in persons from China through Latin America into the united States or Canada, trafficking in narcotics and precursor chemicals, and trafficking in contraband goods” – and two emerging areas: “arms trafficking and money laundering” (Ellis, 2012a: 65).

Although the Latin American security forces have sought, since the 90s, better understand how these Chinese criminal groups work, in order to better annihilating them, the truth is that there are still several obstacles to the qualitative and quantitative identification of their ramifications, cells and victims throughout the region. Among the main reasons that “have kept Chinese mafias largely in the shadows”, giving them “near total impunity to carry out criminal activities in the region”, it is important to stress “the language barriers among Latin

⁵ According to the Business Insider, “mounting crime related to drug-trafficking and maras (youth gangs), together with widespread availability of weapons and high levels of impunity are some of the root causes of violence” (2014: para. 2).

⁶ In fact, as Gagne informs, “extortion is one of the most common sources of revenue for Chinese mafias in Latin America. In one typical strategy, mafias will send Chinese business owners letters in their native dialect, demanding money in return for ‘protection’ services” (2014: para. 5).

⁷ Gagne explains that “human smuggling is an especially lucrative business for Chinese mafias in Argentina and beyond, as Latin America is an important transit point for Chinese nationals seeking to enter the United States without visas [...]. Chinese mafias reportedly charge up to \$60,000 per person and can potentially earn as much as \$750 million per year bringing Chinese immigrants to countries along Latin America’s Pacific coast, including Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru [...]. Once in Latin America, many Chinese continue their journey north using overland routes, travelling through Central America and Mexico before entering the United States” (2014: para. 7).

American police forces, as well as the fear of retribution that has prevented many in Chinese communities from reporting abuses” (Gagne, 2014: para. 9). It is therefore essential, as the economic, political and cultural ties between China and Latin America develop, that Beijing bets on more intense security cooperation with its Latin American partners, in order to enhance the security of Chinese communities and workers residing in the region, as well as of the locals. In this sense, China must, among other aspects, look for a more active collaboration between its secret services and those of Latin America, but also, if necessary, in what concerns sending security forces⁸ to the areas (more) plagued by violence and crime, in which companies, interests, investments and Chinese workers, eventually, run risks.

The analysis of risks and impact of the Chinese presence in Latin America must be held, as Barker advocates, at the individual level, i.e., according to each country in the region, but also, “within each country’s economic sector” (2013: para. 29). Barker considers, in a macro perspective, that “the biggest losers of the increasing economic exchange are labour intensive industries that have suffered at the growth of capital intensive resource extraction industries” (2013: para. 29). On the opposite pole, and in the light of the ‘winners vs. losers’ speech, Jenkins argues that “the winners have been mainly large mining conglomerates (both state-owned and privately owned), commercial farmers and large-scale agribusiness” (2010: 836).

Considering such pessimistic diagnosis mentioned above, China can hardly be taken as a model for Latin America. In fact, the Chinese footprint in the region is characterised, according to this conception, by a kind of “neo coloniser”, as Gonzalez calls it, who believes that “China’s engagement with Latin America threatens to impoverish rather than enrich that region in the long term” (2010: 10178). Authors such as Maristella Svampa underline the entry of Latin America into a “new order, economic and politico-ideological simultaneously, sustained by the boom of international prices of raw materials and consumer goods more and more claimed [...] by emerging powers” (2013: 1). This new order, which Svampa (2013) calls *Commodities Consensus*, is based on a broad “reprimarization process of Latin American economies”, producing, however, “new asymmetries and inequalities”, as well as an entire dynamic of “expropriation of lands, resources and territories”, dependency and domination (2013: 1-2). This building scenario is potentially dangerous to Latin American countries, as a result of the

⁸ Not necessarily official forces (i.e. troops), in order not to ignite anti-China nationalist feelings in the host countries, but for example, private security forces, somewhat similar to what the United States have made in countries undermined by instability and crime, such as Colombia. In this way, China will be able not only to ensure it doesn’t harass official relations with the countries of the region, but also to honour its official policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of each State, operating at the same time, a smooth transition to a more active strategy of humanitarian and/ or security intervention (which may entail, ultimately, sending Chinese troops) whenever the lives of their fellow citizens are threatened, and in conditions in which local governments are too weak to ensure the safety of people and goods.

neoextractivist development model, of mono production and scarce economic diversification, with serious side effects at the level of disruption of economies and regional ecosystems, fruit of an intensive exploration process of mineral and energy resources by Chinese companies (Svampa, 2013).

In addition to the heavy economic and environmental bill that will plague the region, in the medium and long term, we should not exclude the sociological consequences, since the expropriation of lands from locals for resources extraction will tend to generate tensions and conflicts between “capital and labour”, as well as “social struggles concentrated on the defense of the territory and of commodities” (Svampa, 2013: 4). It is, nonetheless, curious to note that “the biggest strength of the China – Latin America economic relationship is also the biggest source of anxiety and potentially its largest weakness” (Ferchen, 2012: para. 36). This is Matt Ferchen’s understanding, who believes that “the optimism about the booming commodity-based trade and investment relationship is likely to remain high in the short term (two or three years), but in the medium term (three to ten years) and beyond, there are serious questions about how long-lasting the current complementarity actually will be” (2012: para. 36). This is in fact, a point of view that we share for the reasons presented so far.

2.2. The ‘positive’ view.

Despite the criticism and/ or less positive effects pointed above to the impact of the Chinese presence in Latin America, there is, however, a (more) optimistic point of view towards such a presence. In an article entitled *Latin America welcomes Beijing Consensus*, Antonio Castillo stresses the beneficial effects for Latin American economies of cooperation with Beijing. For Castillo, China is unquestionably the “reliable, moderate and pragmatic” partner susceptible to replace, through the Beijing Consensus, the Washington Consensus, since it [the latter] was no more than self-serving US policy and profoundly ineffective in Latin America” (2010: para. 3).

Castillo does not doubt that the region is disenchanted with the long American imperialism, characterised by “military intervention, unipolar attitudes and political interference”, which has kept so far Latin America in a “subservience position” towards Washington (2010: para. 5-6). China, instead, has been an extraordinary market for Latin American products, as well as a fundamental counterweight to American hegemony in a mutating order, in which the South-South alliance seeks to redraw the chess of world power, contributing to a more solid and faster multipolarisation. For now, Garzón explains that “the

world [...] is transitioning to a kind of decentred multipolar constellation in which economic and political interstate relations are [...] increasingly transcending the various regions' geopolitical boundaries in all directions in which regional actors manage to link up with extra regional poles" (2015: 27). Being an extra regional pole, China offers a financial power (credit, investments, etc.) complemented by a policy of non-interference that makes the Chinese model appealing to several Latin American countries, especially in the face of a highly predatory Washington Consensus. This is Castillo's opinion, according to whom "Washington came, exploited and left; in contrast, China stays and associates with local private and public enterprises in developing infrastructure and technological advancement" (2010: para. 14).

As a result of the heterogeneity of the Latin American subcontinent, it is natural that the perceptions of the various states of the region in the face of the Chinese presence show mixed feelings, from receptiveness, tolerance or mistrust. In this sense, it is not surprising that countries like "Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina [...] that have been either financially or politically isolated from the global community", demonstrate good response to the Chinese presence in the region, even because "[Beijing] has provided these countries sorely needed capital" (Brandt *et al.*, 2012: 19). A survey conducted by the BBC World Service reveals that "Peru and Brazil" are the two Latin American states more open to the Chinese incursion in the region, showing "above 50 per cent of positive views and less than 30 per cent of negative views in 2014" (2014: 37). On the other hand, "surveyed for the first time in 2014, Argentina has 45 per cent of positive views compared with 20 per cent of negative ones" (BBC World Service, 2014: 37). In another survey, conducted in 2012, "that involved 26 countries and over 41,000 individual interviews", the results indicate that "large majorities of people in countries across Latin America and the Caribbean believe China has at least 'some influence' in their region, and most see that influence as positive" (China Daily, 2013: para. 1). It should be noted that "asked about China's influence on their individual countries, an average of 63 per cent responded 'very positive' or 'positive', 23 per cent were neutral, 12.5 per cent said 'negative' or 'very negative', and 1 per cent said there was no Chinese influence where they live" (China Daily, 2013: para. 6).

The Confucius Institutes are an important tool of the Chinese soft power worldwide. In the specific case of Latin America, and in particular of Brazil, they have been welcome.⁹ The growing economic relations between China and the countries of the region have been accompanied by an increase in interest in learning Mandarin and the Chinese culture,

⁹ The conclusions of a study released by China Daily – "conducted from November to December 2014, based on a total of 4,500 respondents from nine countries representing different geographic regions and stages of economic development" – reveal that "people in Brazil (also) give positive evaluation of China's scientific and technological innovation capacity, with 78 percent of the interviewees in Brazil who highly evaluate the capacity, followed by Russia at 90 percent and India at 80 percent" (2015: para. 7 & 23).

contributing to the expansion of the Confucius Institutes in Latin America. This tendency explains that “the Office of Chinese Language Council International, known as Hanban, has vowed to make the region one of the priorities in overseas expansion” (China Daily, 2015: para. 18). Therefore, “the number of Confucius Institutes in Latin America has grown 400 percent to 25 institutes in 12 countries in the last 5 years” (Brandt *et al.*, 2012: 18). 2011 data show that “the number of registered students in Latin American Confucius Institutes surpassed 14,500, with about 600 in each Confucius Institute on average, representing a 55% increase from that of 2010” (Brandt *et al.*, 2012: 18).

3. LATIN AMERICA, CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES: CHALLENGES AND MYTHS.

An important aspect with regard to the Chinese presence in Latin America, and that should be praised, is the fact that Beijing does not want to antagonise its relationship with Washington within the framework of its advances in the region (Marcella, 2015). In this sense, China has been particularly cautious, including in the cooperation with some Latin American countries – in particular with Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia – whose agenda, policy and ideology are traditionally perceived as anti-North-American. It is not unreasonable to argue here that, as for the logic inherent in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in whose foundation China was a precursor at the level of Asian regionalism (which should not be understood as an anti-Western pole but, instead, non-Western), also the contours which underlie Chinese incursions in Latin America should not be seen as imbued with an anti-Western ideology, but only non-Western (Duarte, 2015). In fact, the Beijing Consensus is not intended to dismiss the Washington Consensus in the region, but rather to propose another worldview and economic growth model, devoid of internal interference, democratic or other requirements (Duarte, 2015). It is, therefore, to the discretion of each state to choose to follow this or that via, without China imposing anything.

However, the ideology underlying the Beijing Consensus raises frequently, and more than ever, certain concerns and uncertainties. This is due mainly to the fact that it is no longer ‘accepted’, either for the International Community or, curiously, for China itself, to continue to accept a model of the ‘we came to negotiate, nothing else’, because, to be precise, the pure and simple profit no longer ‘works’ without being created other complementary structures first. In other words, China begins to question the limits of non-interference in the internal affairs of

other States, since Chinese workers and companies are often the target of violence, vandalism, kidnapping and even murder.

Aware, thus, that it is as or more important than securitise its access to raw materials and energy resources, to ensure the physical security of its own companies and workers, Beijing understands the importance of working together with fragile states – and, in this case, those of Latin America – in order to sketch out reforms likely to fight scourges such as poverty, insecurity, drug trafficking, human trafficking, among others. In this way, China aims to ensure that the *win-win* economic development is parallel and simultaneously accompanied by social and security stabilisation of the countries where it has interests. And, in this sense, China needs the United States, because these have an *expertise*, experience and *intelligentsia*, which can benefit both the Chinese and American interests in Latin America and regional countries themselves, which after all constitute Washington's near abroad. China knows that the United States would not resign Latin America, as the logic of geography teaches us and, by the way, the own Monroe doctrine, although the Obama Administration has explicitly abandoned this last one¹⁰. But Beijing also knows that the Latin American space is neither locked, nor the stage for only two actors, but rather a reflection of the future of International Relations, and the consequent multiplication of power spheres and actors. Therefore, it is important to demystify the 'triangular vision *United States – China – Latin America*', which is often repeated in literature, although, strictly speaking, it does not reflect the reality and dynamics of events in the region.

Firstly, as Evan Ellis notes, "the triangle masks other important actors that must be considered in the dynamic"; secondly, "the triangle incorrectly encourages a view of Latin America as a unitary actor"; and finally, "the triangle is a subtly neocolonialist way of approaching Latin America and its external relations" (2012b: 3). In what concerns the first argument, in fact it would be reducing to consider not only Latin America as a single actor, since there is not one Latin America, but several, where each state has its own identity, and it may or may not be endowed with (significant) energy and/ or minerals resources. On the other hand, the triangular perspective *Latin America-China-United States* also fails as it devalues or even ignores the existence of other actors also interested in the Latin American subcontinent, as it is the case of the European Union, Russia, India, Iran and Taiwan (if we conceive the latter as sovereign entity). Even the relations that Beijing maintains with the Latin American States are largely asymmetrical insofar as they do not all have the same importance within the framework

¹⁰ Of course, one could argue that the return of a Republican Administration in power in the United States will bring a new force and a return to the Monroe doctrine; that is why in politics reality is constantly changing, reflecting the perspectives and ideology of each actor.

of the Chinese *Going Abroad* strategy. Finally, why would a triangular vision of the interrelationship between Latin America, China and the United States be incorrect? Since it is “morally offensive”, to the extent that, according to Ellis,

“it subtly advances a neocolonialist paradigm by suggesting that the best way to understand Latin America’s complex relationships with important parties beyond the region is to focus on two countries, the United States and China. It also implies that the actions and decisions of these two actors will largely define outcomes for Latin America as the third ‘leg’ of the triangle. It is flawed on two counts. First, [...] it conceals other possibilities, including a dynamic relationship between Latin America and multiple other global actors, creating space to have multi-dimensional relationships and achieve benefits from interactions that permit the growth of all parties. Second, it implies a logic, and perhaps even a legitimacy, for the United States and China to ‘coordinate’, not only with respect to their policies toward and activities in Latin America, but also in their ‘management’ of Latin America as the two dominant stewards of the global order, just as Great Britain, France and Spain negotiated over colonies and ‘subordinate’ states in a prior era” (2012b: 4-5).

Returning to China’s caution (as we stressed above) not to antagonise its relationship with Washington in the framework of its incursion into Latin America, we consider, therefore, to be unfounded and perhaps excessive, the fears that certain more alarmist authors, like Michael Fumento (2014), express with regard to the potential harmful effects to the United States resulting from the Chinese advances in the region.¹¹ But not only, because from the Republican wing itself also arise echoes of presage, or mere agitation, perhaps, when the republican congressman Dan Burton suggests that the United States should consider “China’s actions in Latin America” as “a movement of a hegemon in our hemisphere” (in Cintra, 2011: 12). On the other hand, it is frequent for the supporters of a realist conception of international relations to envisage the existence of “tensions, mistrust and conflict” as “the United States’ comparative position erodes and China gets more powerful [in Latin America]” (Hsiang, 2009: 36).

However, this article shares the moderate, or perhaps, more optimistic perception, from authors such as Ferchen. Indeed, although he argues that, given China’s advances in Latin America, Washington must rethink its strategy in the region, Ferchen believes, nevertheless, that “there are also benefits and opportunities for the United States” arising from the Chinese presence in the Latin American subcontinent (2012: para. 33). Ferchen admits that “to the extent that increasing trade and investment ties with China have helped boost economic growth in some Latin American countries”, and given that China has helped the region “build badly needed infrastructure”, which is “a public good that facilitates transportation and development”, Washington “should welcome such a Chinese role” (2012: para. 33). Especially because, as we

¹¹ Fumento uses expressions imbued with serious concern, such as “Time is running out”, or “The costs to the U.S. are obvious”, or even “Soon that heat wave coming up from the south will be fire from the mouth of the dragon”... (2014: para. 2, 4 & 18).

have explained, Beijing does not want to antagonise its relationship with the US. And, moreover, as Cintra stresses, “it is very unlikely that China and Latin America seek an alliance that restricts the United States’ access in the Latin American region”, since “Washington is more important to China than any Latin American country, or even the entire Latin America” (2011: 12). On the other hand, as the author concludes, “it would be a mistake if Washington pursued a geopolitical strategy that would force Latin America to choose between the US and China”, since, in the end, “the last thing the region needs is a new zero-sum game” (Cintra, 2012: 13).

The interdependence itself between Latin America, China and the United States, makes disastrous and unfeasible any attempt, either on the part of Beijing, or on the part of Washington, to cancel and/ or block each other’s advances in the region. This is because, as Ellis mentions, “beyond economic issues, trilateral engagements that involve the United States, China and Latin America may also be useful for a subset of defense and security topics, from medical cooperation and disaster response to dealing with organized crime” (2012b: 12). Being Latin America the periphery of the United States, these will only profit from the Chinese support in combating the scourges that plague the region, such as drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings and weapons (preventing the latter from falling into the hands of criminal groups like local mafias, drug traffickers or Colombia’s revolutionary armed forces, among others).

It would be a serious fault to finish this article without making a brief comment about the possible impacts of the recent, but extraordinary, decisions taken by the Obama Administration concerning Latin America. As an example, the openness demonstrated by Obama towards Cuba has behind it the beginning of the end of large economic losses both for Washington and for Havana, since “the embargo costs the U.S. around \$1.2 billion in lost business every year - around twice the estimated losses suffered by Cuba” (CCTV América, 2015: para. 4). This diplomatic initiative coincides with the abandonment of the Monroe doctrine, which can, in the medium or long term¹², bring more or less substantial changes to the power triangle composed of the countries in the region, of the American superpower and the Chinese superpower in development. For now, it looks a little premature to speculate about the real impact that the rejection of the Monroe doctrine, in force since 1823, may have in any (re) definition of China’s Latin American policy and strategy. However, with regard to a pragmatic and assertive China, which emphasises above all the energy and food securitisation, the non-obstruction of the sea routes and the freedom of trade, a pillar of the *New Silk Road*, it’s not unreasonable to expect

¹² Always depending, of course, on the continuity, or not, of such a strategy by the next North-American Administration.

that a resignation of the American superpower on its Latin American periphery may bring more ‘audacity’ to Chinese incursions in the region.

The horizons seem, nevertheless, unclear, raising several questions: would China be able to demonstrate such an audacious assertiveness towards Washington’s near abroad – regarding the end of the Monroe doctrine – similar to the one it shows in the South China Sea? Or is this sudden turnaround in Washington’s Latin American policy pure rhetoric or soft power, to more easily monitor and restrict the force of the Chinese advances in Latin America? Let us not forget, after all, that several Latin American States (still) experience several problems (whose intensity varies, for example, in the case of Bolivia, Ecuador or Brazil) regarding what is often described as North-American ‘imperialism’. Is Washington truly renouncing the Monroe doctrine in practice, or just in speech, in order to better stop China and the so-called Beijing Consensus, appealing to many States, in the region? Possible questions, uncertain answers that only the future can illuminate, but which do not cease to challenge and make sense to ask vis-à-vis the new balance of power that gradually emerges in the region, where the China factor cannot be ignored by Washington, whether a democrat or republican Administration in power.

4. FINAL REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

Let us focus our attention here, not on going over what we have analyzed so far, but, instead, on making a few geostrategic comments aimed, in particular, to Latin American, Chinese and American policy makers.

A conclusion is, however, possible to withdraw after all arguments presented so far: it is reducing to consider, from an analytical point of view, the existence of a triangle *United States-Latin America-China* while plausible explanation for the intra and interregional dynamics that links the Latin American subcontinent economically, politically, militarily and culturally to the American superpower and the Chinese ‘superpower’ in gestation.

In a context in which other actors, State-owned and non-State, compete directly or indirectly – as China itself and the United States (since the region is, after all, Washington’s natural sphere of influence) – it would be interesting if other researchers and articles explored the intricacies, interests and challenges inherent to the involvement of Russia, Iran, India and Taiwan¹³, for example, in the Latin American sphere. And, in particular, how can the agenda of each of these actors overlap, diverge and/ or affect the Chinese and American interests in the

¹³ In case we consider Taiwan a sovereign actor at the State level.

region? These are just some of the many tracks and paths that it is certainly possible to clear in a space in transformation, and that only for the last few years has been seizing an increasing interest on the part of China.

However, we do not believe to be unreasonable to postulate that the growing demand for alternative energy sources to the traditional Middle East or even regarding other regions, like the North Sea (where the production of hydrocarbons has been decreasing), will tend to give greater importance to Latin America within the framework of energy security of the so-called emerging countries. Faced with this changing scenario – such as the chess of world power (the target, itself, of metamorphoses that lead to a more and more evident multipolarity) – it will be equally relevant and interesting to observe how Washington reacts to these continuous and predictable incursions of third parties in its natural sphere of influence. The future will show us if the Latin American regionalism will be target of one or several incursions of multiple and diverse actors, and to what extent the logic of conflict will tend to prevail or, instead, to fade with regard to cooperation tendencies between ‘home teams’ and ‘foreign visitors’, and even among the latter.

Although, according to Dosch and Goodman, Latin American Governments conceive their partnership with China “as a welcome means of *soft balancing* or hedging against traditional US hegemony in the region”, we advocate here that the relationship between Beijing and Washington is too strong and important in the (world) macro plan not to justify that in the (micro) specific case of Latin America these two actors engage in a damaging competition for resources and influence (2012: 11). I.e. rather than determining a behaviour based on the realism postulates, where survival and struggle for power will tend to feature relations between Washington and Beijing in the region, we prefer, instead, to emphasise the importance of a commitment to complementarity of efforts of both powers in the Latin American space. Thus, instead of the traditional zero-sum game, or the *winner vs. loser* speech, the United States and China can and must work together for the development of Latin America, while responsible stakeholders, as well as for mutual gains at the economic and political level, but also in terms of *soft power* and *hard power*.

We recommend that the Latin American countries actively commit themselves to channel the economic income resulting from Chinese investment – among others – in their energy and mineral wealth, in order to avoid the adverse effects of the known syndrome of the ‘natural resources curse’. A country that does not diversify its economy and services, beyond the mere export of oil, gas and minerals, or that doesn’t bet on “long-term industrial policies”, accompanied by “investments in education, science, research and innovation”, is, of course,

doomed to a complicated future, where the negative *spillover* of the economic sphere will tend to undermine, likewise, politics, social stability, and so forth... (Cintra, 2011: 13).

As for China, it is recommended that its leaders endeavour to improve Chinese *soft power* in the Latin American subcontinent (although Xi Jinping is aware of the importance of the power of attraction of the culture of a country, a topic that Nye emphasises so much). But it also suggested that Beijing reconsiders certain environmental and ethical practices often assigned to Chinese companies and workers all over the world (and not only in Latin America).

On the other hand, it is recommended that Washington conceives China more as a useful partner in combating the scourges of human (in)security, the trafficking of people, arms and drugs, organised crime, among many other factors that affect the United States' *near abroad*, and, by extension, indirectly the United States themselves. Washington, we believe, has more to gain – as China and Latin America, in fact – if instead of considering the Middle Kingdom a strategic competitor, it makes him an important ally in what concerns the challenges mentioned above. This is, strictly speaking, the spirit underlying the Chinese *New Silk Road*: a *win win* cooperation for collective prosperity.

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