

The US-China Rivalry in Latin America After 2000

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, the rivalry between the United States and China has been generally perceived as a threat to American hegemony in the international system. Alongside Asia, Latin America has turned into one of the battlefields of geostrategic rivalry. China has been steadily increasing its influence and presence in the region where the US has regarded as its backyard since the declaration of the "*Monroe Doctrine*". The US has taken some actions to deter China from having a more influential position in the region. China is being considered as a political and economic alternative to the US by Latin American countries. The main argument of this study is that *China* has gained an undeniable footprint in Latin America thanks to its long-term, well-planned policies; Beijing can use its growing influence in the region as leverage in case of a conflict with the US in the South-Asia area within the context of a hegemonic war.

Keywords: The US-China Rivalry, Hegemonic War, Latin America, Taiwan Crisis, Chinese Foreign Policy

2000 Sonrası Dönemde Latin Amerika'daki ABD-Çin Rekabeti

Öz

Yeni yüzyılın başından itibaren Çin ve ABD arasında yaşanan rekabet genellikle uluslararası sistemdeki Amerikan hegemonyasına karşı bir meydan okuma olarak değerlendirilmektedir. İki büyük gücün arasında yaşanan rekabetin en yoğun olduğu Asya'nın yanısıra, yakın dönemde ABD'nin Monroe Doktrininden beri arka bahçesi olarak görüldüğü Latin Amerika'da bu stratejik mücadelenin görüldüğü alanlardan biri haline gelmiştir. Çin, ABD'nin bölgeye olan ilgisini kaybetmesinden de yararlanarak, son yirmi yılda bu bölgedeki ekonomik, politik ve askeri gücünü önemli ölçüde artırmıştır. Çin'in bölgedeki artan etkisini tehdit olarak algılayan ABD, bu durumu önlemeye yönelik adımlar atsa da şu ana kadar kendi adına olumlu bir sonuç alamamıştır. Çin bölgede her geçen gün artan bir şekilde ABD'nin politik ve ekonomik alternatifi olarak görülmektedir. Çalışmada Çin'in bölgede uzun vadeli, iyi planlanmış politikaları sayesinde inkar edilemez



Özgün Araştırma Makalesi (Original Research Article)

Geliş/Received: 10.09.2022

Kabul/Accepted: 02.08.2023

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.17336/igusbd.1173368>

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bir etkinlik kazandıđı ve Çin'in bu durumu Güney Asya'da patlak verebilecek hegemonic bir savaş durumunda ABD'ye karşı bir koz olarak kullanabileceđi sonucuna varılmıřtır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ABD-Çin Rekabeti, Hegemonik Savaş, Latin Amerika, Tayvan Krizi, Çin Dıř Politikası

Introduction

According to neo-realist understanding, the dismal recurrence of wars, as well as other types of conflicts, results from the anarchic characteristic (*lacking any legitimate overarching authority*) of structure and the interaction of units in this structure. Under these conditions, states try to assure their survival either through domination (hegemony) or alliances (Waltz, 1998, pp. 617-19). The balance of power, or evenly distributed power among states, is an important mechanism to prevent conflict and keep the system stable in this respect. However, if this power distribution shifts, as *Thucydides* predicted thousands of years ago, diplomatic crises and then wars will inevitably emerge. If these wars occur between the Great powers, they are called *hegemonic wars*. In this regard, the hegemonic wars are essentially the direct result of the challenges of rising powers to the dominant power in the existing system, and they eventually lead to massive destruction and a new international order (Gilpin, 1988, pp. 591-2). As seen many times throughout human history, hegemonic wars mark significant turning points.

For many IR scholars, the world is undergoing a similar experience nowadays due to the rivalry between the United States of America (the USA) and the People's Republic of China (PRC-China hereafter). After being humiliated by Western powers and Japan for 150 years, China has consolidated its power and is demanding its great power status back now. China's increasingly assertive policies ring alarm bells and are interpreted as China's long-held ambitions to establish its ancient "*Middle Kingdom*" primacy. In response to China's assertiveness on maritime and territorial claims, the US has launched its "*US pivot to Asia*" policy to keep China's rise in check.

The US decided to increase its military presence in South Asia and initiated a containment policy towards China, but this policy gave rise to counterproductive outcomes by raising China's concerns about US intentions (Glaser, 2013, pp. 22-3). From a realist standpoint, none of these developments are surprising because whenever a power transition occurs, the rising power asserts itself and the dominant power attempts to restrain it (Nye & Welsh, 2017, p. 279). In many aspects, the current state of affairs is similar to pre-World War I Europe (Gompert, Stuth, & Cristina, 2016, p. 4).

Since China initiated a reform and opening program in the 70s, the country has experienced unprecedented economic growth and became the second (the first, according to Purchasing Power Parity) largest economy in the world (Yu, 2015, p. 1050). Nye and Welsh (2017, p. 278) describe this rise as the most significant geopolitical development in the post-Cold War period. It is the first time in recorded history that such a big power has risen so swiftly in the various spheres (Allison, 2015). Indeed, Beijing's growing influence is being felt in almost every corner of the earth presently (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19). For many years, Western powers have believed that China had no intention of challenging the current US-led global order on the grounds that it has benefitted a lot for its economic and political growth, particularly after its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 (Roy, 2023).

Nevertheless, since President *Xi Jinping* came to power in 2012, China has been pursuing more assertive and revisionist policies commensurate with its growing economic and diplomatic powers to reshape the world order in a more multipolar

direction (Allison, 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative (B&R) constitutes the backbone of China's long-term ambitions in this respect (Rolland, 2020, p. 3). President Xi has articulated this new assertive policy as "*the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*" or "*the Chinese Dream*", representing China's long-term national ambitions: to restore China's great power status (Allison, 2015). To achieve this goal, China also launched a comprehensive military modernisation programme in 2015 to have "*world-class*" armed forces (US Department of Defense, 2020, p. 24). In the meantime, by seeking regional hegemony, China has increased its territorial claims in East Asia, where the current balance of power lays between China and the US (Ross, 2013, pp. 20-1).

These developments are regarded as signs of an ongoing power transition from the USA to China. Indeed, President Biden stated that "*the US is in competition with China to win the 21st century*" in his address to Congress (Hass, 2021). As has been seen many times before (Allison, 2015), China began to challenge US hegemony, and Beijing can no longer continue its rise peacefully (Mearsheimer, 2014). China has been increasingly demanding a greater role in international politics, albeit cautiously. On the one hand, China has been avoiding any direct confrontation with the US so far (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 1); on the other hand, it has been trying to undermine the US dominance in different regions either through economic policies or its veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Rivalry between the two sides has become more salient and reflected in official documents recently. While China was named as its "*long-term strategic competitor*" by US officials in the National Security Strategy in 2017 (Perthes, 2021, p. 2), the US and China are described as the *competing superpowers* in China's National Defense White Paper published in 2019 (Cordesman, 2020, p. 1). For some analysts, the harsh exchanges and recriminations between the US and Chinese delegations during the recent meeting in Anchorage, Alaska is the dawn of the new cold war between the world's two most powerful countries (Heydarian, 2021; Wright, 2021). Some others argue that these developments are part of a new global cold war: *the U.S., Europe, India and Pacific allies on one side; China, Russia, Pakistan, Central and Southeast Asia on the other* (Nugent & Campell, 2021).

In this regard, a potential Sino-Russian alliance would be the worst-case scenario for the US (Sushentsov, 2021). Whereas China has been testing the credibility of US security assurances in South-East Asia by building up military power and carrying out military exercises off the coast of Taiwan (Bordachev, 2021), Russia has shown a similar attitude defiantly by invading Georgian soil in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, and militarily intervening in the Syrian civil war in 2015. Besides, most importantly, Moscow has been violating NATO airspace systematically to test the deterrence and solidarity of this US-led organisation (Woźniak, 2016, p. 90).

More recently, ignoring the US threats and sanctions against his country, *President Putin* ordered the launch of a so-called "special military operation" on Ukraine, and at the time of writing this paper, Russian Army had taken control of one-third of Ukrainian territory. Not only Moscow but the rest of the world noticed that the US military superiority was not adequate to hold an energy-rich major power enjoying nuclear capacity. The US has been generally permissive and all of these are evaluated as the US is a declining power and a power shift towards China or a Sino-Russian alliance is inevitable in the context of a new cold war.

There are some counterarguments, though. China is still far behind the US in terms of economic competitiveness, production capacity, and human development indexes. In addition, there is a gulf between the ratios of their defence spending in the US's favour. Hence, the power transition discussion is exaggerated because China is not yet in a position to challenge the US financially and militarily (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 1). Mara

Oliva (2020) also suggests that the economic relations between these countries are so intertwined and interdependent that neither of them can engage in another Cold War. In addition, the current conditions are different from those prevailing in the previous century, and China does not look like the USSR in terms of its policy and priorities. For this reason, despite the harsh rhetoric between sides, both of them are aware that such a deadly competition would lead to destructive consequences for the stability and well-being of the world.

Nevertheless, the US has already shifted its China policy towards a more confrontational approach and started to take measures to impede China's rise by launching a full-scale trade war under the Trump administration. If the situation continues to escalate, this struggle for hegemony could result in a bipolar international system or even a military conflict between these superpowers. However, this new Cold War would be different from the previous one since the US has failed to form an anti-Chinese coalition due to its allies' close economic relations with China (Van der Togt, 2020, pp. 54-5; Heydarian, 2021). Besides, this time China is trying to challenge not only the West's economic and security interests but also the international rules-based order (Rolland, 2020, p. 4). Evidently, democratic values like freedom of speech, rule of law, minority rights, etc. are less important than China's interests. Hence, the US has been accusing Beijing of establishing a global hegemony through territorial expansion and diplomatic coercion (Qingguo, 2021).

China is a newcomer to the global system, and it does not want to portray itself as a challenger to the existing system yet. What is more, the integration of the current global system has been lucrative for China (Rolland, 2020, p. 2). Nonetheless, according to Mearsheimer (2014) and Allison (2015), China is on the way to establishing regional hegemony in South Asia by using coercive means where deemed necessary, and for this reason, the US and China will be caught in the Thucydides trap (*a rising power will inevitably clash with an incumbent dominant force, leading to war and conflict*) sooner or later. This potential risk has been felt very recently with a diplomatic and security crisis sparked by US House of Representatives Speaker *Nancy Pelosi's* visit to Taiwan. By assuming this visit as a blatant violation of its sovereignty as well as territorial integrity, Beijing retaliated in kind by launching large-scale military exercises and positioning short-range ballistic missiles on Taiwan (CSIS, 2021).

South Asia is not the only region in which these major powers compete. China has been increasing its clout in other regions, from Central Asia to the Middle East, by filling the void left by the US. In this respect, Latin America¹ is another area where China has been deepening its ties and investing heavily during the last two decades. China's growing influence in Latin America is much more critical for the US than in other places because this hemisphere has traditionally been regarded as its own backyard. Since the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the US has attempted to prevent any foreign interventions in the region except its own. The French intrusion towards the end of the 19th century, and the USSR's activities to expand red wave in the region during the Cold War were prevented by using all available means (Simmons, 1907, pp. 540-3; Gilderhus, 2006, pp. 9-11). However, it seems to have been allowing the penetration of China into Latin America. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyse the underlying reasons for Beijing's penetration as well as its growing influence in the region and US's reactions to this rise concerning its policies and priorities.

¹ In this paper, **Latin America** refers to the whole region, including South America and the Caribbean.

Historical Background The US-Latin American Relations

The US was founded as a result of an independent war against colonial power in the 18th century. For this reason, since its establishment, the US has adopted an isolationist policy in order not to take part in the conflicts among the European powers. After having consolidated its power, the US unilaterally declared the Monroe Doctrine, which was a red line for European colonial powers' interfering in the affairs of the American continent and also a symbol of the US's regional ambitions (Ross, 2013, p. 24). The Monroe Doctrine was welcomed by Latin American countries at the beginning due to the fact that they had just gained independence from the Spanish Empire at the same time.

Under the guise of pan-Americanism (Gilderhus, 2006, p. 9), the US expanded its trading ties with the regional powers throughout the next period. The US adopted a stronger and more aggressive attitude, the so-called "*Big Stick*" policy, towards the region as it became the world's most industrialized nation at the turn of the 20th century. The US Navy was crucial in the implementation of this strategy, using a hard-power approach to maintain control over the area as necessary. The US and Nazi Germany fought each other for control of the area during that time (Paz, 2012, p. 27). However, just before World War II, the US changed its stance toward Latin American nations in an effort to win their support for an impending conflict by halting its use of force.

In the wake of WWII, alarmed by developments in Europe and the Far East, the US adopted a more assertive and security-based Latin American policy once again. Throughout the Cold War period, the US's Latin American policy was dominated by the fear of an expansion of communism. The first-ever US-led regional military alliance structure, the *Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Treaty)*, was activated in 1947, and the existing Pan-American system was turned into the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948. In this regard, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 marked a significant turning point. As Communism was regarded as the principal security threat in the region, the US did almost everything, overtly and covertly, to prevent the USSR's penetration in the region (Palacio, 2022).

Washington resorted to all available instruments to counter communism's expansionism in the western hemisphere, from coercive economic means through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) to military coups. As understood from released CIA documents, the US played a critical role in almost all of the military coups that occurred in Latin America in the context of the Cold War (Gök, 2018, pp. 18-21). Towards the end of the Cold War, the US decreased its support for military regimes and began to promote democratisation processes and market economy across the region in order to integrate them into the neo-liberal world order.

It was widely believed that US-Latin American relations would develop significantly in the post-Cold War period since there would be no perceived security threat to the US in the absence of any other global power and Latin American countries were moving towards democracy and market economy (Hakim, 2006, p. 39). Nonetheless, those expectations did not come true for various reasons. First, since no other nation was able to threaten the US's crucial interests, it lost interest in the region as a whole. Second, Latin American countries failed to finalise democratic and economic reforms, which yielded dramatic socio-economic inequities among the masses and eventually illegal activities such as drug trade, illegal immigration, etc., which posed a security threat not only to Latin American countries but also to the US. Third, the vested interests of different groups (i.e., agricultural circles) in the US prevented further economic integration, namely the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, similar to NAFTA). Fourth, the US gave its

priority to the central and Eastern European states, which had been the USSR's satellites during the Cold War, to save them from falling into the sphere of Russian influence.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, *the Global War on Terror* that began in the early 2000s following the 9/11 attacks was the main cause of the US's lack of interest in Latin America. The Middle East was the main focus of US foreign policy at the time. Relations between the US and Latin America became even more tense when Latin American nations refused to support the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan (ibid., p. 42). Since the 2000s and beyond, China has grown its economic, political, and military involvement in Latin America as US interests in the region have waned. In light of this, one could claim that China essentially filled the gap left by the US in Latin America.

The Obama administration attempted to reengage with Latin American nations after realizing that China's growing influence had undermined US interests in the region (Marcella, 2012). On November 18, 2018, then-Secretary of State *John Kerry* announced the end of the Monroe Doctrine Era in order to foster genuine partnership with Latin Americans. However, President Trump, who succeeded Obama, adopted a position that was hostile to Latin Americans, and his government returned to more conventional practices. On April 17, 2019, while on one of his travels to the region, National Security Council Advisor *John Bolton* declared that the Monroe Doctrine was still in effect.

China's Relations with Latin America

Even though the history of Chinese-Latin American relations goes back to the 16th century through maritime commerce and indentured Chinese workers (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19), China had a limited influence in this region before the 2000s (Trevisan, 2021, p. 1). After the communist revolution in 1949, the Chinese leadership opted to side with the Soviet Union rather than pursue an independent foreign policy. In the context of the Cold War, China focused on its domestic issues and had limited ties with Latin American countries, which were mostly governed by pro-American military regimes (Piccone, 2016, p. 3). During that period, Cuba was the only Latin American country that officially recognized the new regime; nevertheless, the bilateral relations between Cuba and China cannot be described as a genuine friendship because of Sino-Soviet antagonism (Yu, 2015, p. 1055). With the intensification of Sino-Soviet rivalry, China had an opportunity to normalise its relations with the Western camp in the early 70s. Thanks to this development, China established diplomatic relations with certain Latin American countries, and trade volumes began to increase with these countries.

Normalised relations with the US and other western powers also paved the way for China's economic reforms towards the market economy and modernisation of its outdated industry under the leadership of *Deng Xiaoping*. With the help of western capital and technology, China managed to transform its economy (ibid, p. 1053) and adopted an export-driven economic model. Since then, China has experienced great economic success domestically (particularly in poverty reduction) and internationally. Nevertheless, the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, as well as the end of the Cold War, brought an end to close Sino-Western relations.

As the west took a more critical posture against China's undemocratic practices, Chinese policymakers began to believe that they would be the next target of the western-driven democratisation wave at the expense of their sovereignty. In response to the western powers' policy shift, China sought to develop its relations with the rest of the world. Similarly, for driving its economic development, which requires energy resources and raw materials (Cardona, 2019, p. 83), China placed a premium on expanding its engagements with the developing countries, particularly south-to-south relations including Latin America. Nevertheless, China did not attempt to take the USSR's role,

which had followed an ideological policy in the Cold War era, but Beijing pursued a pragmatic, trade-oriented economic approach instead (Piccone, 2016, p. 19).

Within this context, China's growth has become more salient in almost every part of the world since the 90s, especially after joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Thanks to its investments in strategic sectors like energy and infrastructure through state enterprises (Dollar, 2017, pp. 7,19), China has become one of the most influential actors from South Asia to Africa, and in return, the developing countries in those regions have become more reliant on China (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19). Comparing its relations with the African countries, where China achieved great success by forging strong economic and diplomatic ties via its economic diplomacy policy, China's relations with the Latin American countries did not develop too much in the 90s, partly because of geographical distance partly because China did not wish to challenge the US's undue influence in the region (Marcella, 2012).

China's Increasing Growth in Latin America after 2000

In line with its grand strategy, *rejuvenation of its great empire*, China has various motivations for expanding its sphere of influence in Latin America, as discussed below in detail (Aslan, 2018). First, as the world's 2nd largest economy, China needs natural resources to sustain its economic development, foreign markets to sell its manufactured goods, and a needy destination for its investments. Latin America is the suitable address for all three purposes. Second, China seeks to diversify its trade partners in order to alleviate its dependency on the Western powers (the US and EU) and Japan, which makes China's economy vulnerable to imposed sanctions. Third, gaining the diplomatic support of Latin America is crucial for China to single out Taiwan (Wedell, 2019), and challenge the US global hegemony, and create a multipolar and fairer world order in the end. This is the vision that is shared with most Latin American countries as well (Yu, 2015, pp. 1061-5).

As stated above, China has expanded its economic, diplomatic, and military clout in Latin America in the last two decades (Tokmak, 2022). China has become the top trading partner for South America and the second for Latin American countries as a whole (Nugent & Campell, 2021). The trade volume between China and Latin American countries during this period increased 18 times and hit a record \$450 billion in 2021; it is predicted to exceed \$700 billion by 2035 (Roy, 2023). Moreover, China is the largest export destination for Latin America. China's share of the region's exports has risen to 21 percent in 2018 from 1.1 percent in 2000, surpassing that of the US with 15 percent (Trevisan, 2021, pp. 1-2).

During this period, China has provided \$137 billion in loans and \$122 billion in investment to Latin American countries (Nugent & Campell, 2021), which exceeded the numbers provided by the WB, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Development Bank of South America (Trevisan, 2021, p. 6). As suggested by the figures above, China has imitated its previously successful African policy in Latin America by establishing its presence through intensive economic relations and then translating its influence into political and security spheres (Yu, 2015, p. 1049).

China's growing influence in Latin America has evolved into three phases depending on its economic capacity and global incidents in the past two decades. In the first phase, between 2000 and 2009, China prioritised its economic interests to satisfy its energy, raw material, and foodstuffs needs (beef from Uruguay, copper from Chile, oil from Colombia, and soya beans from Brazil, for instance) to sustain its economic growth (Nugent & Campell, 2021). These commodity sales helped Latin American countries deal with the financial shocks and reduce widespread poverty across the region (Piccone,

2016, p. 3). The emerging markets of Latin America were also a good destination for China's manufactured goods (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 20).

In the second phase, between 2009 and 2014, having proved its economic resilience against the 2008 global financial crisis (Wibawa, 2019), which harmed the Western economies significantly, China initiated more assertive economic policies by increasing its investment in strategic sectors like energy, metallurgy, and transportation (Trevisan, 2021, p. 2). As China's economic weight expanded in the region, its capacity to achieve its geopolitical interests increased as well (Ellis, 2021). During these periods, China's engagement with the region was generally viewed positively by the Bush and Obama Administrations (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 2).

In the third and present phases, China has been challenging more explicitly the US influence in the region by using various means, including increasing its military and security engagement with the regional actors (Ellis, 2021), dominating the regional telecommunication infrastructure via its companies like Huawei and ZTE (Nugent & Campell, 2021), extending its B&R Initiative to the region, etc. Thanks to these strategic moves, China's growth has become more salient in the western hemisphere, and that rang alarm bells for US officials. In 2008, China published its first-ever White Paper, and a special emphasis was laid on Latin America in this document (Yu, 2015, p. 1058). It is now widely believed that China's swelling geopolitical and strategic ambitions in the region are not only undermining US influence but also posing a serious security risk to the US (Wibawa, 2019). In this regard, the establishment of the China-CELAC Forum in 2015 was a turning point illustrating China's efforts to develop political and strategic ties with Latin America in accordance with China's ultimate goal: transforming the US-dominated unipolar system into a multipolar one (Yu, 2015, pp. 1048,1060).

China's growing influence in the economic, political, and security domains during these three phases will be discussed separately below. However, before turning to details, it is worth stating that China has pursued a cautious, very well-planned, pragmatic, and increasingly aggressive policy in its engagement with Latin American countries while increasing its presence. The policy has been cautious because China has been extremely careful not to harm the US's core interests from the beginning (Piccone, 2016, p. 23). It has refrained from portraying itself as a challenger to US hegemony until 2015. China's Latin American policy was planned and pragmatic because it attempted to strengthen its economic ties prior to strategic and military cooperation, and China sought to develop its ties with almost all countries regardless of their ideologies and foreign policy tendencies. China has used any emerging opportunity to solidify its footprint in the region, and it has ventured towards more risky policies as it consolidates its power.

China's Growing Economic Relations with Latin American Countries

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the US diverted its interests to the Middle East. China, by grasping this opportunity to fill that power vacuum, has started to increase its influence in the region exponentially from the 2000s onward. During that period, the so-called "*pink tide*" in Latin America provided favourable conditions for China to advance its clout in the region. Whereas China used anti-American, populist regimes like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba as a springboard to establish initial economic and diplomatic ties in the hemisphere, those countries and their leaders also benefited from China's presence to balance US pressure on them and to reduce traditional economic reliance on the US and other western powers (Piccone, 2016, pp. 6,20). As a matter of fact, China's oil and commodity trades enabled these states to stand against the US (Hakim, 2006, p. 46); Venezuela captured the lion's share of Chinese trade in that period, for instance (Dollar, 2017, p. 7).

After transforming its economy in the late 70s and early 80s, China experienced rapid economic growth, with more than a 9 percent annual GDP increase before the 2000s, and became one of the largest economic powers (Jenkins, Peters, & Moreira, 2008, p.235). Because of this growing economy, Chinese officials were in search of new trading partners at the beginning of the 21st century. Latin American markets, being natural resource-rich and enjoying openness to global trade, were good candidates for China's efforts to diversify its trading partners. Through free trade agreements with different countries, China tried to increase economic interdependence between itself and middle-class Latin American economies (Yu, 2015, pp. 1048,1058).

The bilateral trade was mutually beneficial; while China's exports to Latin America increased three-fold, imports from the region increased seven times from 1999 to 2005 (Jenkins, Peters, & Moreira, 2008, p. 236). The Santiago APEC summit in 2004 was a significant turning point for Chinese-Latin American trade, which surged from \$49 Billion in 2005 to \$238 billion in 2011 (Ellis, 2014, p.3). Growing commercial ties with China enabled Latin American countries to address the deteriorating socioeconomic inequalities they faced after joining the globalised world economy (Trevisan, 2021, p. 8).

As indicated above, despite its mid- and long-term geostrategic goals, China's trade with Latin American states initially focused on finding raw materials and energy for sustainable economic growth (Yu, 2015, p. 1056), and ensuring food safety for its rapidly increasing middle class and urbanised population. As of 2009, agricultural products and minerals accounted for 83% of Latin American exports to China (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 20). Because of China's purchases, Latin American commodity and mineral prices rose swiftly, which facilitated regional governments' dealing with economic difficulties. China, by overtaking the US, became the leading trading partner in Brazil, Chile, and Peru in 2006 (Reid, 2015, p. 47). In addition to that, China signed bilateral trade agreements with almost all countries in the region (Abbasi, 2007, p. 121) and the volume of trade between China and Latin America rocketed in the first decade of the 21st century.

Furthermore, China has begun to act as a foreign investor and lender to regional states in an increasing manner without imposing strict conditions like the IMF or other western providers (Reid, 2015, p. 47). The demand and expectation for Chinese investment in Latin American infrastructure increased. With the help of this economic penetration into the region, China's successful state-capitalist model vis-à-vis the US free-market model inspired some Latin American countries (Buxton, 2011, p. 32). Although China's economic power in Latin America was not comparable to that of the United States prior to the 2008 financial crisis (Abbasi, 2007, p. 122), many people in the region began to perceive China as a viable alternative to the United States, raising concerns among US officials (Hakim, 2006, pp. 46-7).

China was less impacted by the 2008 global financial crisis compared with western economies. Its purchases of minerals and agricultural commodities helped Latin American countries' speedy recovery from that financial crisis (Reid, 2015, p. 47). In the wake of the crisis, however, the nature of China's engagement with the region has changed towards strategic investments such as oil production and hydroelectric, and huge infrastructure and road construction projects like ports, roads, dams, and railways (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19). From 2005 to 2019, China has invested around \$191 billion in those projects in the region via its state-owned enterprises, 91% of which were devoted to South America only (Trevisan, 2021, p. 2). In other words, China diversified and intensified its economic engagement with the region through other financial means, including aid and loans (Trinkunas, 2016, pp. 8-9).

More recently, especially since *President Xi* came to power, China has been pursuing more assertive and strategic economic policies in a way to support its geostrategic goals in Latin America. Beijing extended its Belt and Road Initiative to Latin

America in 2018 (Wedell, 2019), and to date, 21 Latin American countries have joined the project (Roy, 2023). Through its financially strong institutions, China has taken control of national and international companies' assets (Ellis, 2020, p. 9); for instance, 30% of the Portuguese firm "*Mota-Engil*", which has been traditionally a powerful construction company in the region, was bought by Chinese Communications Construction Company (Ellis, 2021). By investing heavily in the telecommunication infrastructure and 5G networks of the region, China's firms, namely *Huawei*, *ZTE*, *Dahua*, and *Hikvision*, have established a *quasi*-Monopoly on the continent despite the US's fierce opposition (Nugent & Campell, 2021). China has started to use its increasing economic leverage to persuade regional powers to support its position on global issues (Ellis, 2020, p. 4).

China's Growing Diplomatic and Political Relations with Latin American Countries

China has accelerated its diplomatic endeavours in Latin America in the last 20 years on the basis of non-intervention and mutual respect principles (Piccone, 2016, p. 21) and attempted to grow its political profile in the western hemisphere by deepening its economic ties. Its objectives can be divided into three categories in terms of the ultimate goals. Beijing has been aiming to isolate Taiwan diplomatically (Medeiros, 2009, pp. 147-8) and alleviate the international pressure on it regarding human rights issues in the short-term (Piccone, 2016, p. 16); to secure an influential position in the regional and international organisations in the mid-term (Yu, 2015, p. 1058) and to balance the US regional and global dominance by winning Latin American countries' support in the long-run (Abbasi, 2007, p. 122).

Prior to China's normalization of relations with the Western Camp in the 1970s, Latin American countries recognized Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the Chinese state. Since then, the Latin American governments have played two Chinese states off each other for their economic and diplomatic interests (Piccone, 2016, p. 16). Thus, in line with its one-China policy, the Beijing government has been making deliberate efforts to reduce the number of Latin American states who recognise Taiwan officially in the last 20 years (Ellis, 2021). Thanks to China's appealing financial incentives in the form of economic bribery (Medeiros, 2009, p. 159), this number decreased from 14 in 2004 to 7 in 2023; Grenada (2005), Dominica (2004), Costa Rica (2007), Panama (2017), El Salvador, the Dominica Republic (2018), Nicaragua (2021) and Honduras (2023) switched their diplomatic recognition and established diplomatic ties with China (Strathairn, 2020; Roy, 2023).

China has also strengthened its political and diplomatic position through bilateral or multilateral relations. Since 2004, successive Chinese presidents have paid many visits to the region in order to establish high-level diplomatic ties (Hakim, 2006, p. 45; Yu, 2015, p. 1048). China developed a strategic partnership with Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela in 2003 and 2004 (Medeiros, 2009, p. 159). China has shown intensive effort to participate in the regional organisations both to have a greater say regarding regional issues and to seek a non-confrontational relationship with the US (Giusto, 2020). It has been a formal member of the Organization of American States (OAS) with observer status since May 2004 (Abbasi, 2007, p. 121). Similarly, Beijing has attached significant importance to developing ties with ideologically like-minded, anti-US ALBA (*Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America*) bloc countries (Piccone, 2016, p. 16). China's agreement with the Inter-American Bank in 2008 opened the way to major infrastructure projects in the following period (Medeiros, 2009, p. 160).

Similar to its economic efforts, China has intensified its diplomatic ties with Latin American countries in a more strategic manner to achieve two goals essentially:

undermining the US influence in the region and obtaining the support of regional countries for global issues and in international organisations, both of which serve China's long-term objective: **a multipolar world system in which China has a greater voice**. China has apparently been successful so far in terms of realising its initial diplomatic goals. While President Donald Trump took a negative stance against Latin America and paid only one visit to the region for the 2018 G-20 summit (Nugent & Campell, 2021), his Chinese counterpart, President Xi, has been one of the most frequent visitors to the region. He has been not only pushing for strategic friendships with the regional leaders but also coordinating critical international issues through summit diplomacy (Yu, 2015, p. 1058). Thanks to increasing Latin American backing, China has been increasing its profile and taking on critical posts in the international organisations. In 2019, *Qu Dongyu* was elected as the Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the first-ever Chinese diplomat in this position, with the support of Latin American countries despite US opposition (Trevisan, 2021, p. 6).

More recently, Beijing has skillfully used the COVID-19 pandemic as a vehicle of public diplomacy to reinforce its political weight in the region. China has proven its proficiency not only in dealing with the pandemic itself but also in ensuing financial difficulties with its relatively swift economic recovery. In other words, the Communist-party-led political system emerged as a solid alternative to the western democratic models in handling such global crises (Perthes, 2021, p. 4).

While the US and European powers are dealing with their own stagnating economies, China would help Latin American economies recover from economic difficulties, and these countries would be more dependent on China in the following period (Ellis, 2021). Furthermore, contrary to the US, which denied taking a leading role in coping with the crises globally, China was also quick to deliver medical aid (protective gear and testing kits) and vaccines under the banner of "*mask diplomacy*" (Perthes, 2021, p. 5). China has delivered more than 400 million doses of its vaccine (*Sinovac*) to the region (Roy, 2023). As a result of the effective use of this soft power, even Brazil's President Bolsonaro, who is known for his pro-American position, changed his anti-Chinese rhetoric (Trevisan, 2021, p. 6).

China's Growing Military and Strategic Relations with Latin American Countries

The US is more concerned about China's growing military cooperation with Latin American countries than its economic and diplomatic ties. Thus, this issue has been the subject of congressional hearings a few times. China's growing military presence in the region is perceived as a potential threat to the US's long-lasting defence strategy, the Monroe Doctrine, in the hemisphere (Hakim, 2006, p. 45). The US Department of Defence has been publishing reports regarding the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) developing capacities globally, with an emphasis on Latin America. China is still falling further behind the US in terms of hard-power capacity and military bases in the region. However, the PLA has been increasingly active in the hemisphere in different fields such as *humanitarian, peacekeeping, military exchanges, arms sales and donations, and technology transfers* (Ellis, 2021). Given these growing and deepening military-to-military ties, US officials widely believe that China could become a military rival in the region at some point in the future (Britzky, 2023).

As indicated above, China tasked the PLA with taking a more active role in achieving its national interests globally (US Department of Defense, 2020, p. 4). China's Defence Strategy White Papers dated 2008 and 2015 underlined the importance of developing military and technological engagement with Latin American actors (Ellis,

2017, p. 3). In line with this approach, China has deepened its military ties by following a more or less similar pattern to its economic and diplomatic ones: steadily increasing and assertive. While China was selling non-lethal military gear and participating in peace-keeping missions at the beginning of the century, presently it is exporting sophisticated military platforms to the region (Piccone, 2016, p. 8), carrying out joint military operations and having observation stations in the region, all of which pose a real security risk to the US nowadays.

Noticing defence cooperation and military sales to Latin American states as an effective way to consolidate bilateral relations (Yu, 2015, p. 1059), the Chinese government has intensified its endeavours to develop military ties with almost all Latin American states. Remarkably, China has no standard policy for its military interaction with Latin American states. Depending on the political inclinations of the regime and emerging opportunities, the PLA uses different means to increase its presence. Anti-US regimes like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Cuba are the leading importers of Chinese armament and have institutional military relations with China, but China has placed special importance on the Caribbean countries lately because of their geographical proximity to the US (Ellis, 2020, pp. 3-8).

Arms exports and donations are important elements of China's military engagement in the region. Chinese military sales have diversified in terms of sophistication of arms and recipient countries in the last 20 years. Unlike the USSR, which sought ideological aims, China's main motive is to expand relations in the region through arms exports. In the beginning, China sold only military clothing and non-military gear to politically sympathetic countries. With time, however, China began to export more sophisticated equipment, such as military trucks, radars, and aircraft, Z-9 helicopters, the ZN-1 APC, P-18 offshore patrol vessels, and the Type 90B Multiple Launch Rocket System, to some pro-US states like Uruguay and Colombia (Ellis, 2017, p. 5). China and Argentina signed agreements to produce the CZ-W11 ultra-light helicopter in 2011 (Marcella, 2012) and for the construction of new warships in 2015 (Yu, 2015, p. 1059). Apart from these sales, China has donated a huge amount of military materials to different states so far (Marcella, 2012). Such sales and donations pave the way to long-term relations between PLA and Latin American armies in the areas of training, maintenance, and technology transfer (Ellis, 2020, p. 2).

Alongside the military sales, training, and professional military education, as well as the joint exercises, are other aspects of China's growing military activities in Latin America. Almost all countries in the region that have diplomatic relations with China send their military personnel to Chinese military academies or training centres, including *China's National Defense University in Changping (Beijing)*, *China's Army and Navy Command and General Staff colleges in and near Nanjing*, and a special-forces school near Shijiazhuang. In return, China also sends PLA personnel to some Latin American military schools and training centres such as the *Lancers course in Tolomaida*, Colombia, and the *Brazilian jungle warfare school in Manaus* (Ellis, 2017, pp. 5-6). Apart from personnel training exchanges, senior defence officials from both sides have been paying routine visits to each other. Through these activities, not only mutual trust and confidence are built (Marcella, 2012) but also military officers' acquaintance with doctrine, procedures, and logistic systems increases, which is vital for the planning and execution of joint operations in the future.

Regarding PLA military operations in the hemisphere, China made its presence felt with humble steps first and then became more visible afterward. In 2004, China took part in the UN's MINUSTAH peacekeeping forces in Haiti with 130 riot police, which was the first Chinese uniformed formation on the continent. The Chinese navy's activities are more worrisome for the US in this respect. In 2011, a Chinese hospital ship, *the Peace Ark*,

entered the Caribbean to carry out a humanitarian mission like the US's. By anchoring the ports of Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Costa Rica, it provided medical services to the local people and military personnel of those countries (Marcella, 2012). In 2013, a Chinese naval flotilla crossed the Pacific and the Strait of Magellan for the first time to conduct joint military operations with Chilean military units, then visited ports in Argentina and Brazil. In 2015, the 20th Chinese Task Force, an intelligence-gathering unit, visited Cuba's Havana Harbour (Ellis, 2017, p. 6).

Beijing's security cooperation with regional powers in strategic domains such as espionage, intelligence gathering, and cyber warfare is a serious source of concern for US officials, too. With financing from its Development Bank, China has launched two satellites for Venezuela, *Simón Bolívar* in 2008, and for Bolivia, *Tupac Katari* in 2013 (Marcella, 2012). The construction of the ground control facilities and the training of personnel were also undertaken by China (Ellis, 2017, p. 6). Alongside its secretive satellite tracking space radar station in *Neuquén*, Argentina, on which Argentina has virtually no control (ibid, p.6), the former Soviet *Bejucal and Lourdes* bases in Cuba are reportedly being used by Chinese officials for cyberattacks (Abbasi, *Changing Dynamics of US Influence in Latin America*, 2007, p. 121).

Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE have secured a dominant position in the telecommunication infrastructure of the hemisphere, which provides a perfect opportunity for China for intelligence gathering and cyber warfare in the years to come (Ellis, 2017, p. 6). According to US military analysts, Beijing has already been conducting intellectual property theft, disinformation, and propaganda campaigns to ensure its long-term objectives in the region (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 2). The formation of the China-CELAC Forum in 2015 was a clear indicator that the military cooperation between China and its Latin American partners would develop towards more strategic domains (Yu, 2015, p. 1060).

China has neither a military base nor territorial claims in Latin America yet (Piccone, 2016, p. 21), but it would have to increase its military presence in the region to protect its gigantic investments, or Chinese decision-makers might use their military presence in the western hemisphere as a balance to the US presence in South Asia. These extreme scenarios would automatically increase the likelihood of a direct confrontation with the US. In this case, due to their economic dependence on China, anti-American regimes could grant permission to China to use their ports and bases (Ellis, 2021), which would lead to a prolonged war between China and the US. Even though China is not yet in a position to challenge the US, if it has to engage in a direct conflict with the US, the increased military and strategic relations, as well as the espionage and intelligence gathering capacities that China has patiently developed so far, will be to its advantage. It should be borne in mind that the Chinese Navy has already proven its expeditionary capability to carry out operations in Latin America after all.

China's and the US's Advantages in the Rivalry

Latin America has been generally considered the 'backyard' of the US since the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine in the 19th century (Giusto, 2020). However, in retaliation for the US containment policy in Asia, China has expanded its presence on this continent substantially, as detailed above, since 2000. It has become the leading trading partner and investor for many Latin American countries (Myers, 2021). Although China is still further behind the US in terms of military power in the region and the US is still seen as the top economy in Latin America (Pew Research Centre, 2019, p. 6), China has emerged as the main challenger to the US regional hegemony recently. US policymakers are deeply concerned about Beijing's growing influence in the region (Britzky, 2023).

Some argue that China is posing the most important threat to US interests in the region since the Cold War era (Hakim, 2006, p. 45).

While consolidating its footprints, China has generally been an opportunist. It took advantage of the US's indifference to the region in the post-Cold War era. Reid (2015, p. 45) contends that the US has slept while China has been doing this. Assuming it was unrivalled in the region, the US devoted its economic and military forces to the other more strategic corners of the world. After the 9/11 attacks, the US turned its attention to the Middle East in particular. As its interests in the region diminished, so did its influence. China made its first penetration in the region in this particular period by intensifying its commercial relations, especially with the leftist, anti-US regimes, which were, in a way, direct results of the failure of the Washington Consensus and ensuing financial crises in the region (Giusto, 2020).

After coming to power in 2012, President Xi has given significant importance to the region (Yu, 2015, p. 1058), and China has elevated its already-developing relations with its regional partners to a strategic level. This time, President Trump's low regional popularity stemming from his negative attitude towards the region and his anti-immigrant discourse provided a golden opportunity for Beijing to enhance its strategic ties with the regional actors (Trevisan, 2021, pp. 8-9; Ellis, 2021). In response to this development, the Trump administration reactivated the Monroe Doctrine and declared China a "*threat*" to the region. Since then, Latin America has turned into one of the fronts of an ongoing strategic rivalry between the most powerful powers in the world (Giusto, 2020).

Even though China does not want to explicitly challenge the US in its backyard (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19), US officials are extremely concerned about China's increasing growth in strategic realms such as security, space, telecommunication infrastructure, etc. (Giusto, 2020). In order to restrain Beijing's growing influence in the region, the US has taken a set of punitive measures, such as cutting aid or putting countries on the grey list, against those that have close relations with China. Despite its limited success in some specific cases, this approach has turned out to be a fruitless attempt so far. Latin American countries have increasingly turned their faces towards the East rather than the North (Nugent & Campell, 2021).

In this strategic rivalry, both sides have certain advantages over each other. Despite China's increasing economic presence, the US has a more than century-long trading and investment history in the region (Trevisan, 2021, p. 2). The US still appears to be the most important power in the region with its \$1.9 trillion trade volume and \$250 billion FDI stock as of 2019 (Nugent & Campell, 2021). On the other hand, the volume of Chinese trade with Latin America reached its peak, exceeding \$300 billion in the same year (Myers, 2021). Nonetheless, China has some specific advantages over the US as far as commercial relations are concerned. First of all, the Chinese and Latin American trade is complementary in nature: while Latin America is providing natural resources and energy to satisfy the urgent needs of the Chinese economy (Giusto, 2020), China is helping the regional governments reduce their budget deficits by means of booming commodity prices (Reid, 2015, p. 47).

In the same vein, Chinese investments in the region are mutually beneficial. Thanks to large-scale construction or energy investments, Latin American countries are improving their infrastructure capacities. In the meantime, China is hitting more than one bird with one stone: reducing the transportation costs of its imports from the western hemisphere (Cardona, 2019, p. 86), ensuring long-term partnerships with the regional states, and increasing its image in the eyes of indigenous people through these investments (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 19).

Nevertheless, US officials call this policy "*debt-trap diplomacy*" (Wibawa, 2019). They accuse China of imperilling the sovereignty of Latin American nations and making them dependent on it in order to exploit the natural resources of the area (Roy, 2023). Indeed, a sizeable share of Venezuelan oil is being exported to China to pay off the country's debt (Strathairn, 2020). However, the US's warning about China's ventures is hypocritical because the US and other Western powers imposed free-market practices and demanded "structural adjustments" in Latin American countries before opening WB and IMF loans in the 80s and 90s. Democratic norms and national sovereignty were neglected most of the time (Manuzzi, 2023). China is also accused of causing environmental disasters, as happened in the Ecuadorian hydroelectric dam project in 2016, and bribing the local officials to facilitate its companies' work in dealing with the bureaucracy (Nugent & Campell, 2021).

Nevertheless, the US authorities make these allegations without providing any viable alternative, broadly speaking. Latin American states suffer from a huge infrastructure gap. The region is only ahead of sub-Saharan Africans in terms of quality in this respect, and they desperately need investments in their infrastructure for sustainable development. The need is estimated at \$150 billion annually (Parrado, 2019), and the US is not in a position to provide loans to the region to bridge this gap considering its own infrastructure gap, as stated by President Biden during his first address to Congress (Hass, 2021). However, under the auspices of President Xi's signature initiative, the B&R, China has been making strategic investments in government-backed projects through its state-owned companies without seeking profit most of the time so as to obtain a dominant position in key sectors (Ellis, 2021) and generate goodwill among people. Conversely, US private companies prefer not to venture into these risky projects.

Seeing this comparative advantage of China, the US launched its \$60 billion América Crece initiative in 2018 as a private sector-led alternative to Chinese corporation-led investments to promote transparency and open-market practices (Nugent & Campell, 2021). Upon taking office, President Biden pledged greater economic cooperation with Latin America. The Biden administration, together with other G-7 allies, launched *Build Back Better World (B3W)* to counter Beijing's B&I by developing infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries, including Latin America (Scul & Haily, 2022, p. 5). Nonetheless, the US government committed only \$6 million to B3W in its first year (Roy, 2023), and it was later renamed the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.

These initiatives are far from being competitor to China's gigantic investment potential, because just in 2010, Chinese banks provided loans of \$35.6 billion for those projects (Giusto, 2020). Unless the US re-establishes its economic ties with the region by reducing tariffs on key agricultural products and increasing its aid (Hakim, 2006, pp. 50-1), it is really hard to compete with Chinese incentives. Maybe that is the reason why only fourteen regional governments have joined the US initiative, while 21 of them have already joined the Chinese alternative B&R Initiative (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 1). Even though some economies in the region, like Brazil and Mexico, have not joined the B&R yet, they also provide support to local projects and benefit immensely from China's investment in the region (Strathairn, 2020).

Irrespective of the ideological identity of its trading partners, China has been pursuing a pragmatic and aggressive economic agenda in the region to realise its national interests. This approach gives rise to a set of concerns among Latin American observers, too. As previously stated, some argue that close cooperation with China undermines market-economy principles such as "*free competition, legitimacy, and transparency*" (Nugent & Campell, 2021); as such, it contributes to widespread corruption (Trinkunas, 2016, p. 20). The tendency for authoritarian populism across the region is posing a risk to

the US's security and prosperity (Ellis, 2021). Some others also claim that the huge amount of cheap Chinese goods imports hinders the industrialisation and economic growth of the region (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 20). Myers (2021) puts forward that there is a nationalisation rather than privatisation process ongoing in the region because of the investments of the Chinese state enterprises, but not on behalf of Latin American states but China itself. Latin America seems to be one of the regions most negatively impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent financial difficulties. China's support would help regional states recover from the crisis. Nevertheless, well-positioned Chinese companies are highly likely to take over the strategic assets² of local economies by using this opportunity (Giusto, 2020; Manuzzi, 2023)

Despite these reservations, China's non-interference principle-based mercantilist approach (Yu, 2015, p. 1067) is generally welcomed in the region in terms of creating job opportunities, raising people's living standards, and reducing economic inequities. Without interfering in the domestic politics of Latin Americans in principle, China has successfully portrayed itself as the "*largest emerging economy*" and emphasized the importance of south-to-south cooperation so far (Trinkunas, 2016, p. 2). By presenting itself as a soft alternative to the US, China has immensely benefited from the long interventionist history of its rival to establish economic and political ties with the regional actors based on a "*win-win*" principle (Medeiros, 2009, p. 158).

Yet this policy would backfire in the long run. Because, alongside the US and other Western powers, Latin American countries are sensitive and staunch advocates of universal democratic principles like human rights, rule of law, freedom of expression, etc. (Piccone, 2016, p. 13) due to their own traumatic fascist military regime history (Gök, 2018, p. 22), and China prioritizes its economic and political interests vis-à-vis these principles. If China persists in this policy, this would lead to an emerging anti-Beijing sentiment in the region, and the US would find more room for manoeuvre to dissuade Latin Americans from not engaging in close cooperation with Beijing.

In spite of this potential risk, the traditional Chinese strategy of non-interference, respecting the sovereignty of other states, provides the biggest advantage against the US, which has a long history of intervention in Latin America (Yu, 2015, p. 1066). As a newcomer to the region, China is not carrying a heavy "*baggage*", laden with bad memories of the colonial and Cold War eras, like the US and other European colonial powers. The US has a bad reputation for "*stick and carrot*" policy in the region, interwoven with hard-power policies through direct or indirect military coups or coercive economic diplomacy through the Washington Consensus (Paz, 2012, p. 25). Contrary to the negative interventionist perception of the US, China presents itself as a cooperative partner by addressing the prevailing anti-US and anti-Imperialist stances in the hemisphere (Myers, 2021) and emphasizing mutual benefit, egalitarian partnership, and peaceful coexistence (Piccone, 2016, pp. 4-5).

China's deep commitment to sovereignty has been found appealing by Latin American countries that have experienced US interventionism and repressive policies during and after the Cold War (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 20). It is feared that China's increasing engagement with these regimes may lead to a decreasing belief in democracy and the emergence of new anti-democratic and populist regimes similar to Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia (Buxton, 2011, p. 32; Ellis, 2021). Although Beijing does not have such a vision, these regimes would take the Chinese state-led development path as a model for themselves and pay very little attention to democracy and liberal norms

² African case proved that China was willing to restructure more than \$15 billion in debt between 2000 and 2019 rather than capture those countries' assets as part of its larger geostrategic objectives (Manuzzi, 2023).

(Piccone, 2016, p. 21). Such a turn not only poses a serious threat to the US-led liberal world system but also brings about some destructive consequences for the well-being of the region. Because the region has not achieved economic and democratic stability and suffers from populism and deep polarisation (Palacio, 2022).

Trump's unilateralist and isolationist foreign policy agenda tarnished the US image in Latin America and alienated its allies. As soon as coming to power, his administration withdrew from the *Trans-Pacific Partnership*, which caused resentment in the hemisphere (Myers, 2021). Also, the US decision to cut aid to the region because of Trump's anti-migration policy presented a chance for China to develop its diplomatic ties with the US allies in the region (Nugent & Campell, 2021). Meanwhile, China has accelerated its multilateral diplomatic efforts to reach out to any Latin American country, particularly during President Xi's rule, in order to achieve its ultimate goal: forming a solid bloc of developing nations in international organizations, and voting in China's favour where necessary (Medeiros, 2009, p. 158).

As mentioned above, Chinese authorities used the COVID-19 pandemic as a very effective diplomatic means, namely the "*Health Silk Road*"; thus, even the most anti-Chinese circles of Latin America have expressed their appreciation for China's efforts in this respect (Myers, 2021). As a matter of fact, Chinese decision-makers believe that China and Latin America have overlapping interests on a basic level with respect to global affairs. Both sides desire a fairer and more multipolar world system. Therefore, China seems ready to challenge the US diplomatically in the region thanks to its deepening diplomatic ties with the region.

One of the initial confrontations in the diplomatic arena took place during the election of the president of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). By violating long-term tradition and ignoring the other countries' suggestions, Trump proposed a US diplomat, *Mauricio Claver-Carone*, as the candidate. The Trump administration was able to gain the support of the vast majority of regional governments, but some countries, such as Chile and Argentina, remained absent for the first time, demonstrating two things: the US remains diplomatically powerful in the region, but China has already made significant progress. Similarly, whereas five Latin American states (*Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua* and *Venezuela*) declined to condemn Russia's attacks on Ukraine, many of them did not join the West in imposing sanctions on Moscow, which is another indicator of the West's declining influence (Palacio, 2022). In addition to anti-US regimes' persistent support for China in the OAS (Giusto, 2020), the public opinion of China is shifting in a more favourable direction. About half of Latin Americans view China's growing influence in the region as a positive development (Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 9).

Besides the economic and diplomatic domains, security is another field of competition between China and the US. In the absence of a major competitor and nuclear threats, the US withdrew most of its military personnel and assets from Latin America. Nevertheless, the US still maintains its military superiority (Ellis, 2021) in the region through its Southern Command (*SouthCom*) and different naval bases under its command. In the face of a looming Chinese threat, the Pentagon has decided to increase its military presence in the region anyway (Babb, 2020). Moreover, the US army has been active in the region for the last two centuries and has extensive knowledge of geography and climate.

China, on the other hand, does not have a military installation in the region, but its aim to establish military bases in Chile and Peru is known by US officials (Aslan, 2018), which would be a watershed case in terms of stepping on the US red line in the region. Ellis (2020, p.3) argues that even though Beijing does not enjoy a military base in the region yet, it can use the ports and other facilities in which it has invested heavily so far for its military purposes in the case of a direct confrontation with the US or protecting its

investments in the region. The US keeps its navy in the South China Sea as part of its containment policy. China would like to do the same thing by having a navy in the Caribbean when the time comes, for sure (Nugent & Campell, 2021).

Among others, the greatest leverage of the US is its soft power in Latin America. Despite all of its intensive diplomatic endeavours, steadily increasing economic interdependence, sizable investments, as well as security partnerships with regional actors, China is still lagging behind the US in terms of exerting soft power. The US and Latin America have deep-rooted cultural, political, and religious ties due to the large Latin American population living in the US. Apparently, the lack of historical and cultural ties presents barriers to China's penetration into the region (Sullivan & Lum, 2022, p. 2). According to the results of a poll, approximately 41 percent of respondents consider the United States to be the most influential country in the region, while only 21 percent named China (Azpuru and Zechmeister, 2014, as cited in Steinmüller, 2014, p. 22). In comparison to Chinese culture and media, American culture and media continue to dominate the region. 54 percent of Latin American students still prefer studying in the United States (IESALC, 2019, p. 12).

Being aware of this gap, China has intensified its efforts recently. By means of the Confucius Institutes, of which 40 branches have popped up in different corners of the region lately, China tries to promote its language and its culture across the continent (Aslan, 2018). Student exchanges and cultural diplomacy are other dimensions of this strategy (Steinmüller, 2014, p. 22). The Chinese government organises fully-funded visits to China for Latin American politicians, scholars, journalists, etc., to commercialise its successful economic growth and poverty reduction stories, all of which serve the same goal of creating a positive image of visitors (Yu, 2015, p. 124).

The hard-working Chinese diaspora, estimated at around 300 thousand, living across Latin America also plays a positive role to this end (Nugent & Campell, 2021). High-profile visits are another means used by China to promote a positive image of itself. President Xi has been to Latin America many times since assuming power. Maybe because of this, he has gained a positive image in the region recently (Giusto, 2020). China also devotes great importance to the selection and training of diplomats and businessmen who deal with Latin American officials (Myers, 2021). In addition to these, Beijing places a special emphasis on the media. The Chinese State Channel, CCTV (under the local name CGTN), started its Spanish broadcast in the region in 2016 to support China's grand strategy (Aslan, 2018).

In the last twenty years, China has made impressive progress in the Latin American economy and politics and has emerged as an alternative to US hegemony with its gigantic resources and active diplomacy tools. However, Chinese officials also know very well that the US is still the most powerful actor in the region with its immense economic, diplomatic, and military power (Yu, 2015, p. 1066). Yet, China has been bridging the gap between itself and its rival by taking an opportunistic approach and adopting a more confrontational position against the US in the region. Irked by these developments, the US took some measures to check China's growth in the region, and the geostrategic rivalry escalated. It is too early to predict whether Latin America will fall behind the "*silk curtain*" or not, or in which direction this rivalry will evolve— a *peaceful coexistence* or a *direct conflict*.

Some analysts foresee that this competition will result in a "*pacific triangle*" among Latin America, Beijing, and Washington with increasing cooperation and collaboration (Giusto, 2020). It is claimed that the economic stakes are so high that none of these can dare to harm them. The growing cooperation would be beneficial to each party. While China is trading and investing, it not only satisfies its own needs but also brings more

prosperity to the region. As a result, more prosperity decreases illegal immigration and other illicit activities like the drug trade, which is also a serious threat to US well-being.

There are some further obvious indications of harmonious coexistence. China has carefully avoided doing anything that may endanger US interests in the area and lead to a direct confrontation between the two countries. In exchange, the US has allowed China to amplify its economic and political might in the area, so long as it does not cross predetermined red lines. US policymakers are aware that they will utterly lose Latin America if they put too much pressure on them not to cooperate with China (Nugent & Campell, 2021). Additionally, without China, the second-largest trading partner in the area, the local economies would stagnate, which would eventually have a detrimental impact on the US economy.

These optimistic views notwithstanding, the likelihood of confrontation seems realistic in view of conflicting interests. The actions taken by the US to contain China have turned out to be useless so far. In this sense, the US is a *de facto* declining power in the region. As for China, it has pursued a cautious, multifaceted approach, which has enabled it to increase its influence in the hemisphere (Trinkunas, 2016, p. 2). Firstly, it has established commercial ties with regional actors to satisfy its needs and forge strong bilateral relationships in the region. After consolidating its footprints, Beijing elevated relations to the political realm, and then, in the last and final stage, it translated its deepening economic and political ties into strategic partnerships.

Looking at this trajectory, it can be argued that all these steps seem to be preparatory moves for the looming confrontation between these two great powers. Even though US officials claim that Beijing is striving to establish a global hegemony (Perthes, 2021, p. 3), and Latin America will be one of the springboards of this policy, Beijing's intrusion into the region may not be seen as an imminent threat to US hegemony yet. Nevertheless, the increasing Chinese presence in the region might shift the existing balance of power by undermining US influence and thus have implications for global power distribution (Cardona, 2019, p. 82). China's rise also gives Latin American countries an opportunity to overcome or at least balance US hegemony (Paz, 2012, p. 33).

If China really wants to establish a bi-polar or multi-polar system, this competition will turn into a zero-sum game sooner or later. The Chinese authorities are fully aware of the rules of such a game: "*Any challenger is not welcomed by the dominant power, irrespective of its good intentions or ambitions*". China has been preparing accordingly. Most probably, in response to the US's increasing military presence in Southeast Asia, China will use its growing influence in Latin America as a counter-containment policy for the US (Abbasi, 2007, p. 122). That's why China strives to increase its naval forces (US Department of Defence, 2016, p. 44) and anti-ship ballistic missile capacities (Ross, 2013, p. 25). As these moves suggest, the setting is ready for an escalating regional rivalry. Since the US clearly indicates it will do whatever is necessary, the level of escalation, whether a low-intensity regional conflict or a wide-scale engagement, will depend on how China will react to the US actions.

Conclusion

In accordance with the IR realist paradigm, any change in the balance of power or the emerging of a new great power would give rise to a hegemonic war first, and restructuring the system after that. Having achieved impressive economic development in the last 50 years, China has become today's emerging power as an alternative to the US and the liberal, unipolar world system under its hegemony. In line with President Xi Jinping's long-term objective of "*making China great again*", Beijing has been pursuing a more assertive policy and demanding a greater voice regarding global affairs

commensurate with its growing power. The US reacted to this by taking a more confrontational attitude. It has launched a containment policy in Asia against Beijing.

In response, China has initiated a massive modernisation project for its Army and increased naval capacities. Apparently, China is attempting to take advantage of the golden opportunity that has emerged after the US chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and its inertia during Russia's Ukrainian invasion. By exploiting this new situation, Beijing might try to change the *status quo* by force in Southeast Asia to achieve its long-term objective: *One China*. For many analysts, all of these are signs of a new Cold War between these two greatest powers, triggered by China's increasing self-confidence.

Looking at the preparations of both sides, Asia is likely to be the main battlefield of the approaching new Cold War, like Europe in the previous century. Nevertheless, with China's remarkable penetration into Latin America, traditionally regarded as the backyard of the US, this region has also turned into another front of the geostrategic rivalry. By employing a pragmatic and patient policy, China has increased its clout in almost every sector of the region, from the economy to defence. China first strengthened economic relations with Latin American countries and then established strategic partnerships.

Considering its economic and military capacities, the US still stands as the most powerful actor in the region. However, China has made substantial progress, and with its undeniable presence, Beijing is already posing a threat to US regional supremacy. With China's penetration, the US realised the strategic importance of the region in a sense. As a result, in order to contain China's rise, the US has pushed for regional countries not to cooperate with Beijing; however, this policy has yet to bear fruit. Because having economic and political relations with this growing economic giant is mandatory for Latin American countries in terms of diversifying their relations as well as alleviating its financial difficulties, mostly due to the US's indifference to the region in the post-Cold War period.

In light of these facts, it is fair to argue that China's presence will increasingly continue in the region unless the US makes substantial modifications to its regional policies. In fact, the US does not have effective tools to offer the region vis-à-vis China's considerable financial resources and practical state-led economic model. The regional actors are virtually reliant on China economically, and any deterioration in these economic relations would be detrimental to local economies. Being aware of this, China has been fortifying its partnerships in defence and other strategic domains in the hope of using these strategic ties as leverage against the US where deemed necessary. For this reason, it seems that Latin America might be one of the battlefields of a seemingly inevitable Cold War between China and the US. Most probably, even though it will be the last resort, China plans to employ its long-term preparations in the western hemisphere to force the US to allocate some of its forces in case of any war in Southeast Asia.

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Özet

Yeni yüzyılın başından itibaren Çin ve ABD arasında yaşanan rekabet genellikle uluslararası sistemdeki Amerikan hegemonyasına karşı bir meydan okuma olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Özellikle Devlet Başkanı Xi Jinping'in 2012 yılında göreve başlamasından sonra, daha iddialı bir dış politika izleyen Pekin Hükümeti uluslararası meselelerde daha fazla söz hakkı istemektedir. Cibute'de 2009 yılında askeri üs açması ve orduda giriştiği modernizasyon çalışmaları Çin'in uzun dönemli iddialı dış politikasına işaret niteliğindedir. ABD tüm bunlara Güney Asya'daki askeri varlığını artırarak ve Çin'e karşı ticaret savaşı açarak cevap vermiştir. Bazıları bu gelişmelerin klasik güvenlik ikilemi ya da "Thucydides Tuzağının" tetiklediği bir güç kayması ya da "Hegemonik Savaş"la sonuçlanacağını iddia etmektedir.

İki büyük gücün arasında yaşanan rekabetin en yoğun olduğu Asya'nın yanı sıra, yakın dönemde ABD'nin Monroe Doktrininden beri arka bahçesi olarak gördüğü Latin Amerika'da bu geostratejik mücadelenin görüldüğü alanlardan biri haline gelmiştir. Çin, ABD'nin bölgeye olan ilgisini kaybetmesinden de yararlanarak, son yirmi yılda bu bölgedeki ekonomik, politik ve askeri gücünü önemli ölçüde artırmıştır. Güney Amerika'nın en önemli ticaret ortağı haline gelen Çin, bu süre zarfında Tayvan'ı resmi olarak tanıyan Latin Amerikalı devlet sayısını 20'den 9'a indirmeyi başarmıştır. Pekin'in bölgedeki ihtiyatlı şekilde artan askeri varlığı da silah satışları, müşterek tatbikatlar ve uzay projeleri yoluyla daha görünür hale gelmiştir. Çin'in bölgedeki artan etkisini tehdit olarak algılayan ABD, bu durumu önlemeye yönelik adımlar atsa da şu ana kadar kendi adına olumlu bir sonuç alamamıştır. Çin bölgede her geçen gün artan bir şekilde ABD'nin politik ve ekonomik alternatifini görmektedir.

Bu gerçeklerden hareketle, bu çalışma iki spesifik soruya cevap aramaktadır: Neden Çin Latin Amerika'ya böylesine büyük önem atfetmektedir? Ekonomik çıkarları nedeniyle mi yoksa uzun dönemli hedefleri ile ilgili mi? Neden ABD Çin'in bölgedeki artan etkisini sınırlamakta yetersiz kalmaktadır? Bunu yapacak etkin araçlarının olmaması nedeniyle mi? yoksa Çin'in bölgedeki yükselişinden kendisi de faydalandığı için mi? Bu sorulara ışık tutacak veriler ışığında, çalışmada Çin'in bölgede uzun vadeli, iyi planlanmış politikaları sayesinde inkar edilemez bir etkinlik kazandığı; ve Çin'in bu durumu Güney Asya'da patlak verebilecek hegemonik bir savaş durumunda ABD'ye karşı bir koz olarak kullanabileceği sonucuna varılmıştır.