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China's Covid-19 Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean: Motivations and Methods

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Beginning in February 2020, China's diplomatic community—together with Chinese provincial and municipal governments, businesses, and media outlets—set forth to shape opinions of China in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, when many in LAC had mixed views of China and its relationship with COVID-19. In the following months, China engaged not only in the delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE) and, more recently, vaccines to LAC countries but also launched an extensive messaging campaign, carried out through traditional and social media by Chinese embassies and media outlets across the region.

Analysis of trends in China's coronavirus-era engagement with LAC reveals striking developments in China's aid delivery and public messaging toward the region and also in China's broader approach to LAC relations. China's engagement with LAC amid the pandemic can be divided into two distinct phases.

- The first of these was most evident from February to around September 2020. It consisted of sales and donations of medical equipment and other forms of cooperation and assistance, such as advisory services and consultations between medical professionals from China and LAC nations, and some instances of cooperation on vaccine testing and development.¹
- Based on a review of 470 announcements of Chinese PPE deliveries announced in Chinese, Latin American, and other media sources—as well as Chinese embassy Twitter accounts²—the pace of PPE deliveries slowed considerably after summer 2020 (see Figure 1), as China focused more extensively on vaccine development and distribution—the second phase in China's COVID-19 outreach.

China's COVID-19 assistance is meant to achieve wide-ranging objectives. In addition to humanitarian motivations, which are frequently underscored by Chinese officials and generally supported at home by the Chinese public,³ China's COVID-19 aid and broader economic outreach have also sought to reinforce and strengthen bilateral ties throughout the region—to ensure, above all, that China emerges from the pandemic with its image generally intact, and to simultaneously advance some of China's commercial objectives and policy interests, including the political isolation of Taiwan.

For the companies involved in China's international outreach, the pandemic was an opportunity to highlight their commitment to those countries and communities where they operate. For China's tech firms, the

pandemic also provided an opportunity to showcase new biomedical technologies and artificial intelligence-enabled diagnostic capabilities.

In the early months of the pandemic, China employed a notably decentralized aid campaign, leveraging wide-ranging Chinese actors and on-the-ground networks to deliver medical supplies to LAC nations.

It entailed loosely coordinated engagement by wide-ranging Chinese actors, including Chinese embassies, companies, provincial government authorities, networks of overseas Chinese communities, and quasi-governmental organizations, such as the Chinese Red Cross. This approach was targeted and flexible, allowing for often-impromptu donations to hard-hit communities, local organizations, and individuals capable of influencing China's broader commercial and political interests.

China's initial "aid blitz," whether delivered by Chinese companies, embassies, overseas communities, the Chinese Red Cross, or other actors, was carried out at a pivotal moment for global opinion on China and COVID-19.

Amid mounting critiques and accusations, China sought to position itself in LAC and other regions as a responsible actor and proponent of cooperation at a moment of global crisis.⁴ Much of this work fell to China's embassies, which, in addition to coordinating donations and sales of PPE and vaccines, labored throughout the pandemic to convey specific messages about China's experience with the coronavirus and its pandemic outreach.

Of interest in China's communications campaign was an increase in assertive messaging in the early months of the pandemic, characteristic of the so-called "wolf warrior" diplomacy that featured prominently in academic and policy accounts of China's external communications in spring 2020. In most cases, China's sharp-edged defensive rhetoric was accompanied by promotional messaging, which, along with an emphasis on cooperation and multilateralism, has since dominated China's communications with the region.

Recent efforts to isolate Taiwan mark a clearer-than-ever departure in LAC from China's long-standing policy of noninterference. China has been effective, in the short term at least, in using its role as a provider of vaccines to the region to quell criticism of China and influence Taiwan-related policymaking.

China, directly and indirectly, encouraged Taiwan's allies to rethink their diplomatic allegiances. Beijing

suggested that Honduras seek a “diplomatic bridge” to purchase Chinese vaccines, for instance.⁵ China also sought to influence Taiwan’s relations with Paraguay by conditioning the transfer of vaccines on changes in those countries’ Taiwan policies. Guyana received 200,000 doses of Chinese vaccine after deciding to close a new commercial office with Taiwan.

Vaccines have also been used to reward or discourage other LAC government actions. In Brazil, China reportedly halted the shipment of raw materials necessary for the São Paulo-based Butantan Institute to produce China’s CoronaVac vaccine⁶ after President Jair Bolsonaro suggested that China disseminated COVID-19 as a tactic of biological warfare.⁷

Despite the efforts of wide-ranging Chinese actors, China’s COVID-19 diplomacy has been more successful in advancing some of China’s objectives than others.

- China’s extensive messaging campaigns and medical assistance arguably helped avoid an image crisis at the pandemic’s onset.
- China’s decentralized approach provided it with considerable flexibility and visibility when operating in LAC. By deploying on-the-ground assets to support China’s diplomatic objectives, China was able to respond in near real-time to developments in the region, changing course as needed.
- China’s LAC-based entities were also able to target the delivery of numerous, small donations to specific communities and individuals, in occasional support of broader commercial and political interests.
- China’s approach was also occasionally problematic, however. Francisco Urdinez has noted the challenges of coordinating China’s decentralized approach, including occasional miscommunications and diplomatic blunders.⁸ In Chile, poor coordination among Chinese actors resulted in a serious misunderstanding with Chilean officials.⁹ Courting LAC officials with PPE kits and vaccines is also a problematic and potentially corruption-inducing practice.
- China’s experiment with “wolf warrior”-type messaging may have had unintended effects, as Yale University’s Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist noted. Wolf warrior diplomacy, they say, has backfired on numerous occasions.¹⁰
- Our analysis of tweets from the LAC region suggests that while LAC audiences possibly view China as more impactful on LAC affairs than before the pandemic, they are still ambivalent about China and its

influence in the region. We noted a substantial overall increase in LAC tweets about China during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, 41,098 geo-referenced tweets mentioned China. More than three times as many (144,181 tweets) referenced China during the pandemic. The terms used in these tweets were not strongly positively or negatively weighted, however.¹¹

- The effects of China’s outreach may be more striking in the commercial realm in LAC, to the extent that Chinese companies have indeed solidified or generated new ties amid the pandemic. Any benefits to Chinese companies from their extended outreach could take considerable time to materialize, however, and will undoubtedly vary on a company-by-company basis. LAC Twitter users referenced Huawei fewer times during the pandemic (5,376 tweets) than before (7,870 tweets), despite the company’s relatively robust pandemic outreach.
- As Financial Times Latin America Editor Michael Stott noted in a May 2021 Inter-American Dialogue event, it is probable that neither China nor U.S.-China competition are foremost for most in LAC at this juncture. LAC leaders, in most cases, are seeking critical COVID-19 solutions, regardless of their source.

Ultimately, this exercise has been an experimental one for China, whether through the use of an impromptu and often-decentralized aid campaign, the development of new medical technologies, or by employing novel approaches to communications with the region. China’s approach has supported numerous objectives, whether economic or diplomatic, but wide-ranging factors will determine the overall impact of Chinese outreach. These include the effectiveness of Chinese vaccines and the extent of commitments by partner nations during the pandemic and after, as LAC prepares for a period of prolonged economic and social recovery.

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- ² Chinese embassies in Argentina, the Bahamas, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Peru, and Venezuela have active Twitter accounts.
- ³ Observation is based on author review of reader commentary in Chinese-language Weibo posts about China’s vaccine diplomacy. The vast majority of comments

by Chinese netizens reflected a positive view of China's overseas outreach. Numerous posts included the phrase, “大国担当” (“acting like a great power”).

⁴ Steven Lee Myers and Alissa J. Rubin, “Its Coronavirus Cases Dwindling, China Turns Focus Outward,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/world/asia/coronavirus-china-aid.html.

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⁸ Francisco Urdinez, “China's Improvised Mask Diplomacy in Chile,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 6, 2021, carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/06/china-s-improvised-mask-diplomacy-in-chile-pub-84251.

⁹ Urdinez, “China's Improvised Mask Diplomacy in Chile.”

¹⁰ Daniel C. Mattingly and James Sundquist, “Public Diplomacy and Its Limits,” Yale University, January 26, 2021.

¹¹ We compared monograms from mined tweets with the AFINN lexicon dictionary published by the Technical University of Denmark and the NRC Word-Association Lexicon published by Mohammad and Turney. We then assigned an emotional weight to the top 200 words featured in tweets about China, both pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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