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China's Charm Offensive in Latin America and the Caribbean: A comprehensive Analysis of China's strategic Communication Strategy Across the Region [Part III: Image, Academia, and Technology]

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MADE IN
CHINA

CHINA'S CHARM OFFENSIVE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGY
ACROSS THE REGION

PART III: IMAGE, ACADEMIA, AND TECHNOLOGY

PABLO BAISOTTI

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores China's public relations strategy in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) through diplomacy, promoting study networks, cooperation among academies, and establishing a significant number of Confucius Institutes. This is supported by a vast network of print, audiovisual and digital media owned by China or LAC groups. Yet, among the LAC population, knowledge of China is minimal. In sectors dedicated to research, politics, and the economy and finance, there is a slightly favorable image of China due to economic interest.

In the last decade, China has flooded the continent with exchange scholarships to attract and co-opt Latin American students, professors, journalists, and politicians. This trend accelerated during the pandemic. At the same time, the Chinese government used leading technology companies, especially Huawei, to increase its influence in the region and introduce a distorted, pro-communist narrative. The risk that Huawei will monopolize or quasi-monopolize the LAC market in the coming years is real, at which point continental communications will be compromised, as well as the region's democracies.

Recommendations for the United States

1. Use strategic communications more effectively and expand U.S. technology in LAC. For example, the U.S. Department of State must expand the American Corners program, Binational Centers, and Regional English Language Officers in the region. This would benefit the United States because its soft power is superior to China's.
 2. Leverage the U.S. diaspora living in LAC countries to further promote soft power.
 3. Increase donations to schools, hospitals, and research centers, and promote these efforts in all possible media channels.
 4. Increase higher education scholarships and funding for exchange programs such as the Fulbright Program, the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative, and the International Visitor Leadership Program.
 5. Propose a long-term partnership for scholarship recipients when they return to their countries to spread a positive message about their experience in the United States
- through interviews, podcasts, and op-eds in local LAC media.
6. Increase contacts between U.S. and LAC universities, small or large, to reach all levels of society. Many of the more than 4,000 U.S. universities and colleges seek to develop academic partnerships in LAC and vice versa. U.S. embassies could facilitate these connections.
 7. Promote agreements between Catholic universities to reinforce Western values against communist propaganda. China cannot compete in this area since the United States and the countries in the region share religious freedom.
 8. Denounce the religious persecution taking place in China. Attract Chinese who escaped from the communist regime to give testimony and reveal the reality of the Chinese government.
 9. Introduce U.S. technology in LAC higher education to compete with Huawei. It should be broad, free, and open. U.S. technology companies could fund departments and labs.
 10. Urge technology companies to act in solidarity throughout Latin America to open new markets and compete with Chinese companies that appear to have a free hand in LAC.
 11. Generate new research proposals and patents, and encourage start-up companies in need of funding that could be attractive to Microsoft, Google, Amazon, and Meta, etc. These companies could open new points of contact in LAC.

INTRODUCTION

To change its image, China began to engage overseas Chinese and diaspora partner organizations through information operations and cultural exchanges to influence Latin American political elites, civil society, academics, and students. The first charm offensive was launched in 1997, when China declared during the Asian financial crisis that it would not devalue its currency, and years later proposed a China-ASEAN free trade agreement, which lasted nearly 10 years.¹

In 2004, Hanban, an organization under the Ministry of Education, began establishing Confucius Institutes in universities worldwide. This was part of what President Hu Jintao described in 2007 as China's effort to enhance culture as part of soft power.² Peter Martin, author of *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*³, noted the 2008 Olympics were part of a diplomatic move that included economic reforms and a softening of China's stance on sensitive issues such as territorial disputes and human rights. This was an attempt to gain greater acceptance abroad.⁴ The Chinese charm offensive included meetings at the presidential level and among high-level politicians or political parties, professional diplomatic preparation and training, and the creation of state-to-state and region-to-region business summits.⁵

The second wave of China's charm offensive began with the October 2013 foreign policy working conference chaired by President Xi, in which he endorsed the diplomatic concept of "friendship, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness."⁶ Among the most successful initiatives were scholarships, courses, seminars, and invitations to events sponsored by the Chinese government or the Communist Party of China (CCP).⁷ There are multiple reasons for the deterioration of China's global public image: its growing authoritarianism, the cover-up of the start of COVID-19, and internal repression. Add aggressive international, economic, and even cultural policies, thus pushing soft power to the limits. Xi made diplomacy more aggressive based on threats and economic coercion.⁸

This report will analyze China's public relations strategy in LAC through diplomacy, study networks, academic cooperation, and the establishment of a significant number of Confucius Institutes. All of this is supported by a vast network of print, broadcast, and digital media owned by it or LAC groups. At the same time, it will study how the Chinese government relied on leading technology companies, especially Huawei, to increase its influence in these areas. To this end, China is working hard to convey a positive image through campaigns in all possible media, incorporating LAC journalists, academics, politicians, and all those who can improve its reputation as a reliable and supportive partner of the "Global South."

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on primary information, journalistic publications, reports, research articles, and interviews. Among the most important sources for this study are the works of Freedom House. In particular, Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022 had valuable information to frame China's influence in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Important sources of information came from research centers, academic journals, and university papers. The Chinese embassies and consulates' official releases were consulted, as were Chinese newspapers in Spanish and English: CGTN Español, Xinhuanet, people.cn, China Today, Cri Online, ChinaNews, CRI.es., and China.Org. Finally, LAC newspapers helped deepen and structure the topics investigated.

LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

A 2020 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center highlighted that the perception of China in 12 developed countries was negative (73 percent) due to its handling of the pandemic.⁹ However, in the Global South—particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)—its image had improved, and not only because of the pandemic, as researcher Parsifal D'Sola Alvarado noted in 2021. Chinese foreign direct investment generated more than 173,000 jobs, representing an increase of 357.7 percent over 2019. Didi, Huawei, and Xiaomi, companies that offer

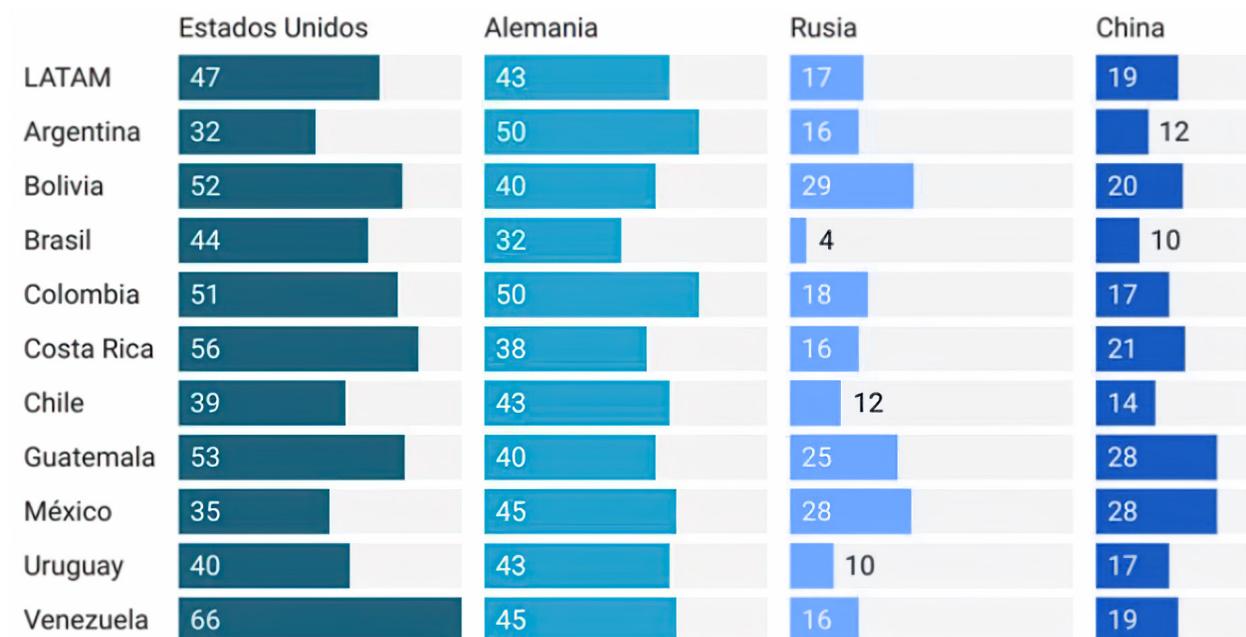
technology services, have become recognized brands, increasingly capturing a larger market share.¹⁰ According to research by Vanderbilt University, Latin American public confidence in China between 2014 and 2021 is highest among respondents in the Dominican Republic and lowest in Brazil. Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay experienced a drop in confidence. On the other hand, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru experienced an increase.¹¹

Another survey by Latinobarómetro (2022) revealed the governments of Putin and Xi had less than a 20 percent positive image in LAC against 47 percent for the United States and 43 percent for Germany. Mexico and Bolivia ranked Russia and China more highly, but neither reached 30 percent, while respondents in Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay expressed the greatest rejection. Regarding political systems and democracy, LAC generally identifies with key North Atlantic nations and development models. The survey shows that China and the United States are considered the most influential countries economically, but the region generally prefers to further establish ties with Europe.¹²

According to Jorge Malena, China's positive image is due to its approach as a trading partner, lender, and investor and as an alternative to the U.S. economic development model. The Director and Founder of the Confucius Institute of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, Rubén Tang, said in an interview that the Chinese image was not very positive and the region's population generally considered the Chinese "profiteers" interested in Latin American commodities.

As a result, China began to seek and generate empathy by appealing to the diaspora as its interlocutors. According to Tang, they implemented, at least in Peru, a system of donations for schools, hospitals, humanitarian assistance after an earthquake, and cultural centers. Three other interviewees, Jorge Guajardo, senior director at McLarty Associates and former Mexican ambassador to China; Gustavo Ng, director and founder of *Dangdai magazine*; and researcher Parsifal D'Sola Alvarado¹³ had opinions on China's image in Latin America. Guajardo said that China had not done well in spreading a positive image and attracting the local population to its point of view. While it was perceived as a successful country in lifting

Graph 1 Of which of the following countries do you have the best opinion?



Source: Infobae, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2022/03/28/un-estudio-revela-que-rusia-y-china-son-los-paises-con-peor-imagen-entre-los-latinoamericanos/>

many of its people out of poverty, its soft power *vis-à-vis* the United States had failed. On the other hand, Ng stressed that China used various tools to reach Latin American audiences, such as the Xinhua News Agency and social networks, and that these were the same communication strategies it deployed for its own population: "On the one hand, information comes down from the authority [...] to inform is understood as giving orders, and therefore, to receive information for the public is to obey."

The Chinese method of communication is so frontal that it provokes "a strong rejection in the media and the Western public." Moreover, the top-down order "Ignores any doubts from the public and eliminates any criticism [...] it does not admit any weaknesses," he said. The result was that Western readers were suspicious of the information coming from this country. Ng argued this strategy was typical of communist propaganda. In LAC, it was perceived (encouraged by the United States and other Western countries) negatively as "authoritarian, violating human rights, threatening, polluting, invasive."

Nevertheless, China is recognized for its economic growth and scientific and technological progress. D'Sola Alvarado considered that the Chinese image has a negative connotation, and historically, there has been a lot of xenophobia, stereotyping, and prejudices in Latin America. These attitudes have partially changed in recent years due to two main factors: China's technological growth and its massive commercial presence, which helped change the perceptions of the Latin American public. In addition, younger people¹⁴ in the region consider China more from a technological point of view and, therefore, their gaze is more benevolent than in previous decades.

By 2020, the Chinese-born social network for sharing short videos, TikTok, had 64.4 million active users in Latin America aged 16 to 25, of which 19.7 million were in Mexico, 18.4 million in Brazil, and 1.5 million in Argentina.¹⁵ According to the *Statista* website, by January 2023, the numbers had soared to 82.2 million users in Brazil, 57.5 million in Mexico, 20.1 million in Colombia, and 16.87 million in Peru.¹⁶ A Data.ai study, *State of Mobile 2023*, identified that in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, TikTok was preferred over other apps, including Instagram and Facebook.¹⁷

Chinese state media could not penetrate the Argentine media market directly, instead relying on partnerships with local media. In November 2021, a survey conducted by researchers from Argentine and Chinese universities analyzed Argentine perceptions of the Chinese in Argentina. Among several conclusions, it highlighted that eight out of 10 people had little or no knowledge about China.¹⁸ A 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that about half of the respondents had no confidence in China based on its lack of respect for personal freedoms and human rights. Moreover, a 2018-2019 Latin American Public Opinion Project opinion poll showed that Argentina had the second highest level of trust in the Chinese government in LAC after the Dominican Republic. The impact of the pandemic and "mask diplomacy" did not have much impact despite China's effort to publicize it. Nor does Chinese media production or content have much impact on the Argentine public. Perhaps the China Media Group gained some audience acceptance through partnerships with local media outlets.¹⁹ Brazil is also wary of China, and there is a growing anti-Chinese sentiment sometimes driven by Brazilian leaders for political purposes. Chinese politicians, diplomats, and media tried to counter comments they considered xenophobic, instead presenting China as a generous and reliable partner.²⁰

In Chile, a 2019 poll by research group Cadem found that 51 percent of Chileans believed their country should focus on deepening trade relations with China, while only 25 percent said Chile should prioritize deepening trade relations with the United States. Surprisingly, 77 percent of Chileans have an overall positive impression of China. However, in May 2020, another survey stated that China was associated with more negative than positive themes. A *Latinobarómetro* survey that year concluded that Chileans had a 5 percent positive impression of the Chinese government.²¹ China's impact on Panama's media was limited despite self-censorship and economic and legal pressure. An *Americas Barometer* survey held that approximately 68 percent of respondents considered the Chinese government untrustworthy. Moreover, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Panama and China in 2017, public distrust of China increased.²² In Mexico, public opinion regarding China declined because of the pandemic, although a large percentage expressed a positive view of

the country and its influence in the region.²³ In Colombia, a 2020 survey showed that China's influence was negative at 53 percent, although most considered bilateral relations good for the country. Another survey from 2021 by academic Carolina Urrego-Sandoval showed that negative views on China focused on human rights and the environmental degradation caused by Chinese companies in Colombia.²⁴

ACADEMIC COOPERATION AND CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

The emergence of Chinese academic networks in Latin America began in the 1970s. In 1976, the Latin American Association of Asia and Africa was formed, with its secretariat located at the Colegio de México's Centre for Asian and African Studies. The objective was twofold: to promote reflection and analyze relations between China and LAC through multidisciplinary perspectives—and extend China's influence on the continent. Subsequently, branches opened in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. This academic network is the oldest and most institutionalized network linking China and Latin America.²⁵

Since 2010, research groups have emerged, including the Latin American and Caribbean Academic Network on China in Mexico (2012), the Virtual Asia-Pacific Observatory in Colombia (2013), the Brazilian Network of China Studies (2017), the Venezuelan Association of China Studies (2018), the Sinolatina Network in Costa Rica (2020), and the Latin American Association of China Studies in Argentina (2021).²⁶ The China-Celac cooperation plans (2015-2019, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024) granted thousands of scholarships, training slots, and talent programs to Latin Americans to study and learn about China.²⁷ Among them, exchange programs like "Bridge to the Future" and the "Thousand Talents program" were used to attract future regional leaders to China with training and workshops to turn them into "friends of China." There were also exchanges between research institutes through the China-Latin America Think Tank Forum (created in 2010 and integrated into the China-Celac Forum in 2015), the China-Latin America High-Level Academic Forum (2012)

under the auspices of the Institute of Latin American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the participation of other institutions, including the Confucius Institutes.²⁸

UNIVERSITIES

The Chinese government scholarship program to Colombia began with an agreement signed in 1981 and successively expanded. Until about 1993, it focused on medicine, physical education, and fine arts, then broadened to include social sciences and other areas, including technical careers. With the 2019 visit of President Iván Duque to China, the number of scholarships was again expanded with an emphasis on creative industries and technology. During the pandemic, cooperation agreements were signed between Colombian research institutes and universities and Chinese entities, including state research centers, universities, and companies.²⁹

In 2013, The Universidad del Pacífico in Lima founded the Peru-China Studies Centre to carry out joint research projects, promote academic exchanges, disseminate knowledge through planned events, and consolidate networks of contacts with Chinese institutions.³⁰ Peru participated in the Silk Road Forum 2018 (also Belt and Road) and joined the Silk Road Think Tank Network through the National Centre for Strategic Planning. The network has more than 55 members and provides academic support for constructing the Belt and Road. It strengthens collaboration, exchange of knowledge, and common development among its members and partners.³¹ Between 2016 and 2019, 768 Peruvians traveled to China to participate in seminars and courses. In 2019, 140 Peruvian professionals participated in the "Technological Research of Geography and Mineral Resources in Peru" seminar.³²

The University of Buenos Aires has a Center for Chinese Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences and a seminar on Chinese literature in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. The University of La Plata has an Institute of International Relations with a Center for Chinese Studies. In addition, the Universities of San Martín, Tres de Febrero, Lanús, Rosario, Córdoba, del Salvador, and Católica de Salta have China-related research groups, studies, and specializations.

The National Council for Scientific and Technical Research and the University of Shanghai created the International Joint Research Center.

The former President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, visited China in October 2019. At that time, Brazil's Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) signed an international collaboration agreement with the National Natural Science Foundation of China.³³ Among the envisaged actions were exchanges of scientists, academics, and students; the promotion of joint research and inter-university partnerships; and the sponsorship of seminars, workshops, and conferences. The Federal University of Goiás and the University of Hebei also signed an agreement to establish a Confucius Institute at Goiás.³⁴

Since the Free Trade Agreement between Chile and China was signed in 2006, more than 600 Chileans have participated in various seminars and master's and doctoral programs in China. The Chinese ambassador to Chile said, "these training programs are not only carried out to train Chilean professionals [...] they serve as cultural exchanges that help strengthen ties."³⁵ The Catholic University of Chile has collaboration agreements with Tsinghua University, as do other Chilean universities. One of its training programs focuses on sending professors and graduate students from the communications faculty to Tsinghua University for a joint training program. In 2018, the Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication and the Institute of Communication and Image of the University of Chile signed an agreement. Another agreement had been signed in 2011 between Tsinghua and the Faculty of Law of the University of Chile.

The then-Chinese Ambassador to Chile, Xu Bu (2018-2020), stated that establishing a Latin America center in Santiago would promote cultural cooperation between China and Latin America. For his part, Chilean Rector Ennio Vivaldi said the agreement "will have an enormous impact and will be a turning point for our relations [...] an implication from academia, toward the world of culture and the world of innovation."³⁶

In June 2019, a delegation from the University of Concepción traveled to China to establish the China-Chile Joint Information and Communication Technology Laboratory, uniting the university with

the Harbin Institute of Technology and Datang Telecom, a Chinese public company focused on producing information and communication technologies. The Department of Electrical Engineering's Deputy Director Jorge Pezoa indicated the origin of this project stemmed from the Belt and Road Initiative, noting, "One of the scientific axes has to do with the installation of joint laboratories between China and some of these [Latin American] countries."³⁷

The University of Costa Rica has six agreements with Chinese universities. Recruitment and training programs have been launched mainly by the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology.³⁸ At the end of 2021, China and Nicaragua reestablished diplomatic relations. Ramona Rodríguez said, "the ties of friendship and cooperation in all areas, particularly in education, science, and technology between Nicaragua and the People's Republic of China will play an important role in the development of our education and particularly in our higher education."³⁹

In recent decades, China has been an important supporter of the Venezuelan government, especially in trade relations, loans, and investments. More than 400 trade agreements have been signed since Hugo Chávez was in office. The agreements included several concerning scientific and technological cooperation, such as those financed by the China-Venezuela Joint Fund (2007) in science and technology, strengthening international networks of researchers, and greater rapprochement.⁴⁰ For example, the Ayacucho International Network in China was created, which initiated a process of meetings and gatherings.⁴¹

The number of international students studying in China has grown substantially. Margaret Myers and Brian Fonseca's research shows that, since the Chinese Ministry of Education's 2010 launch of the "Studying in China Initiative," some 492,185 international students from 196 countries were studying in China in 2018. This initiative was designed to develop soft power while promoting the Chinese concept of global harmony outside its borders. In comparison, in 2017, 2,200 LAC students were studying in Chinese universities, accounting for roughly 1.5 percent of all international students. In 2018, approximately 6,000 LAC students studied in China compared to 80,000 African students in the same year.⁴²

Since January 8, 2023, and for the first time in almost three years, China opened its borders to international students after the COVID-19 pandemic, while education specialists have been forecasting a gradual return of the 450,000 international students waiting to enter the country for months.⁴³ The China-CELAC 2022-2024 Action Plan states that between 2022 and 2024, the Chinese government will provide Celac members with 5,000 scholarships and 3,000 training places in China. In addition, the action plan states that it would promote exchanges between young leaders, implement the “Bridge to the Future” Training Program for 1,000 Chinese and Latin American Young Leaders, and schedule the China-LAC Youth Development Forum. China will also support Celac member countries that offer Chinese language education, incorporate the Chinese language into their national curricula, and open Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms on a reciprocal basis.⁴⁴

As journalist Andrés Oppenheimer observed, the Fulbright scholarship is the U.S. government's largest scholarship for international students and only supports 700 Latin American students annually. Meanwhile, other scholarships offer a few dozen per year for students from the region. Still, there are far more Latin American students (around 73,000) at U.S. universities than in China. Many Latin American students in the United States pay for their studies and living costs, which can reach US\$65,000 per year. In contrast, most students who study in China belong to working-class families and have everything or almost everything covered by the Chinese government. Oppenheimer noted that a considerable number of Latin American students at U.S. universities study business administration and enter the private sector. On the other hand, many Latin American students studying in China choose international relations. This makes them experts on China. Once they return home, they start a career in government, academia, or journalism. In this way, China is gradually gaining influence in Latin America.⁴⁵

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES AND CLASSROOMS

Confucius Institutes are non-profit public institutions affiliated with China's Ministry of Education whose stated aim is to promote the Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching worldwide, and facilitate cultural exchanges. The first was established in Seoul in 2004. By 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes and nearly 2,000 Confucius Classrooms (K-12 schools) in 154 countries, mostly in universities or institutions. The institutes are an important tool for promoting China's image and soft power. After an accusation of being an instrument of the CCP, the Ministry of Education changed the name to the Ministry of Education Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (2020).⁴⁶

By 2023, there were 43 institutes in Latin America.⁴⁷ The regional headquarters was founded in Santiago, Chile, in 2014, playing a strategic role in deepening the relationship between China and Latin America. These institutes organize and finance trips to the region for renowned economists, writers, filmmakers, and other artists.⁴⁸ Chile hosts three Confucius Institutes: The Catholic University of Santiago, the University of Santo Tomás in Viña del Mar, and the University of La Frontera in Temuco (Araucana). Including satellite campuses and classrooms, Chile has 21 Confucius Institute sites nationwide, more than any country in the region. Its University of Santo Tomas hosts the regional center of Confucius Institutes for all of Latin America.⁴⁹

Most of the institutes are in the region's public universities, with some in private ones, such as the Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano in Bogotá and the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic.⁵⁰ In Colombia, there are three Confucius Institutes, two in Bogotá and one in Medellín. There are also five Confucius Classrooms in the country. Along with the institutes, they have signed agreements with other academic entities to teach the Chinese language and culture.⁵¹

In the Dominican Republic, the Chinese decided to avoid the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (the country's main university) for fear

it would be influenced by Taiwanese interests. Indeed, as the country's Taiwanese Ambassador Valentino Tang said, there had been friendly ties for years between the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo and the Taiwanese Embassy; this university had established a series of agreements with Taiwan.⁵² But after the Dominican Republic announced on April 30, 2018, that it would end diplomatic relations with Taiwan and establish relations with the People's Republic of China, many Taiwanese professors were replaced by Chinese professors in the Mandarin classes, for example. The Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo, one of the most prestigious public schools in the country, was where a Confucius Institute opened in May 2019.⁵³

In Peru, the first Confucius Institute opened in 2009 at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú and subsequent ones opened in Arequipa and Piura. In 2010, another institute was launched in collaboration with Ricardo Palma University.⁵⁴ There are two Confucius Institutes in Costa Rica, one that operates without any relation to an educational institution and another linked to the University of Costa Rica.⁵⁵ The Confucius Institute at the University of San Francisco de Quito, in Ecuador, is the only one in this country and is linked to the China Petroleum University in Beijing.

In June 2009, the first branch of the Confucius Institute in the Southern Cone opened in Argentina. Since then, ICUBA (Instituto Confucio-Universidad de Buenos Aires) has worked jointly with the economics faculty of the University of Buenos Aires and Jilin University in China. In November, a second branch of the Confucius Institute was inaugurated through an agreement with the National University of La Plata.⁵⁶ A third was subsequently opened at the National University of Cordoba. At the same time, institutes offer Chinese language classes, such as the Asociación Cultural Chino Argentina, which also functions as a cultural center and organizes tourism and educational trips to China.⁵⁷ During the inauguration of the Confucius Institute of Cordoba, Hugo Juri, the university's rector, said that a cultural bridge was being created with China and predicted it would take many forms.⁵⁸ In 2015, the first House of Chinese Culture was inaugurated in Argentina under the University of Congress.⁵⁹

In Panama, one Confucius Institute is located at the University of Panama. The academy's head, Eduardo Flores, stated, "It is going to be a wellspring, a source of dissemination of Chinese culture in Panama."⁶⁰ In Uruguay, as the University of the Republic Rector Roberto Markarian observed, it was a "fundamental step in the increase of cultural and scientific relations with the Chinese people."⁶¹

In Venezuela, the Confucius Institute opened its doors at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela in Caracas to strengthen ties between the two countries. Vice-President for Planning and Knowledge, Ricardo Menéndez, said it was a "service of brotherhood," while the institute's Director, Andreina Bermúdez Di Lorenzo, stated it was a "bridge to strengthen intercultural strategies between two peoples."⁶²

TECHNOLOGY AS A BARGAINING CHIP

In 2013, Xi officially launched the Belt and Road Initiative. Over time, this initiative was divided into three principal routes: land, maritime, and digital. The first two sought sources of supply and energy and financing infrastructure, and the last sought the expansion of China's technology (including 5G technology and satellite and fiber optic networks), communications, and services. The first instance in which Latin American countries were invited to the Belt and Road was in May 2017 and subsequently at the 2018 China-Celac Forum.⁶⁴ The Digital Belt and Road, through fiber optics, mobile networks, satellite relay stations, data centers, and smart cities built by global Chinese technology companies, triggered a flurry of Chinese loans and investments of US\$17 billion, including funding for global telecommunications networks, e-commerce, mobile payment systems, and big data projects.⁶⁵ Several countries expressed concern that China could further its model of technological authoritarianism through internet control, data localization, and surveillance.⁶⁶

Chinese academic and official documents show the CCP considered the digital arena a crucial part of its "discourse" power strategy against Western hegemony, in which China uses local information ecosystems, social

and digital media platforms, CCP-approved norms for digital governance, and international technical standards developed by China, such as the International Telecommunications Union, to promote itself. The Chinese government recognized the strategic value of standards in its “China Standards 2035” document.⁶⁷ Control over strategic digital sectors allows China to access personal, corporate, and government data through telecommunications companies.⁶⁸

Despite a growing number of countries excluding Chinese companies, such as Huawei, from their telecommunications infrastructure or expressing concerns about surveillance, the Chinese government is using its influence at the United Nations to develop potentially substantial access to satellite information and data streams worldwide.⁶⁹ The Center for Strategic and International Studies released a report on May 17, 2021, stating that Huawei had concluded 70 cloud infrastructure and e-government transactions with 41 governments or their state-owned enterprises between 2006 and April 2021. Freedom House classified most of these countries as “not free” (34 percent) and “partly free” (43 percent), concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (36 percent) and Asia (20 percent), mostly low-income countries.

Huawei’s cloud infrastructure and e-government services handle sensitive data on citizens’ health, tax, and legal records. These services also operate critical infrastructure, from oil production and fuel distribution in Brazil to the operation of power plants in Saudi Arabia. In 2019, Huawei created 96,450 jobs in Latin America, a 9 percent increase from 2014, more than 80 percent of which are local. As Huawei carves out a niche as a supplier to governments and state-owned enterprises, its activities could provide the Chinese authorities with intelligence and even coercive power. Huawei’s sales pitch effectively combines three elements that resonate with decision-makers in developing economies. First, the company advertises significant benefits from the use of its cloud solutions. For example, Huawei claims that its e-government cloud network installed at Brazil’s Planalto Palace helped reduce the government’s administrative costs by 20 percent. Second, Huawei offers a wide range of cloud infrastructure solutions, from container-sized modular data centers to dedicated multi-level buildings full of servers. Third, Huawei introduces financing from a Chinese financial institution when it can.⁷⁰

In Latin America, Huawei grew from 2.3 percent of the mobile market in 2013 to 9.4 percent in 2018. In 2019, it operated in 20 countries on the continent; in four, it had more than a 20 percent presence. In Brazil, it holds 50 percent of the telecommunications equipment market. It is among the top three cellular brands in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Central America.⁷¹ Huawei is leading the way in providing equipment for 5G networks, especially in Chile, Peru, and Brazil. In Argentina and Colombia, it is well-positioned. Many of its phones, servers, routers, and other equipment are embedded in Latin American retail providers such as Claro, Movistar, Personal, and Tigo. Other Chinese companies (China Telecom Americas, ZTE, RNB Digital, Oppo, and Xiaomi) also provide components and services directly to state-owned telecoms entities, such as Antel in Uruguay or Indodel in the Dominican Republic.⁷²

Huawei is also investing resources to obtain a privileged position in Latin America in cloud data traffic, which will account for 95 percent of the world’s data center traffic. In recent years, Huawei Mobile Cloud centers opened in Chile, Mexico, and Brazil, and more than 30,000 people have had training in information and communications technology (ICT) since 2009.⁷³ Zhang Ping’an, senior vice president of Huawei, CEO of Huawei Mobile Cloud BU, and president of Huawei Consumer Cloud Service, said that “80 percent of enterprises will use cloud-native technologies by 2023, and by 2025, 97 percent of large enterprises will use AI [...] and all enterprises will use cloud technologies.”

In November 2021, Huawei Mobile Cloud and Laiye, a provider of intelligent automation, announced a strategic partnership to drive digital transformation in Brazil through cloud computing, artificial intelligence (AI), and big data. Laiye and Huawei Mobile Cloud will implement the partnership in the rest of Latin America. Peter Dalen, CEO of Laiye Latin America, said he looked forward to working together to explore how evolving AI and cloud technologies impact and strengthen digital transformation in retail, logistics, education, and healthcare. In Brazil’s growing innovation and technology-focused economy, banking, healthcare, and manufacturing are the sectors most interested in AI solutions. In manufacturing, Brazilian startups from agriculture to retail are developing AI solutions to improve productivity and growth.⁷⁴

During 2020 and 2021, Huawei Mobile Cloud invested heavily in Latin America. In addition to Chile, Mexico, and Brazil, it invested in Argentina and Peru and has the largest number of nodes in LAC.⁷⁵ The first cloud in Mexico was implemented in 2019 and the second in 2021, increasing local sales by more than 80 percent, making it the fastest-growing public cloud company Latin America. In 2022, the company said it planned to open new cloud data centers and content delivery networks in the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Guyana, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Suriname, and Uruguay.⁷⁶ According to Huawei Mobile Cloud's President for Latin America, Fernando Liu, they were looking to drive digital transformation in the region as "Huawei believes in a cloud-native future and we want to be a leader in this technology."⁷⁷

Huawei is offering to subsidize companies in the region to place their intellectual property and processes in their cloud. Another major company, Tencent, an affiliate of Alibaba, set up a data center for its operations in Brazil. Data centers in these clouds are accessible to Chinese owners.⁷⁸ In 2021, Huawei invested more than US\$22 billion in research and development to continue innovating in different sectors, including research, health, environment, sales, the economy, education, fintech, and government.⁷⁹

In 2019, Huawei accused the U.S. government of launching cyberattacks to infiltrate its networks and threaten its employees. Then-President Donald J. Trump issued an executive order barring U.S. firms from using foreign telecoms believed to pose national security risks, which became the center of a U.S.-China trade dispute.⁸⁰ According to its Chief Security Officer, John Suffolk, Huawei is the most targeted Chinese company, suffering around one million cyberattacks a day on its computers and networks. Suffolk said the attacks centered on intellectual property theft. The U.S. accusations focus on the fact that, besides receiving Chinese state support, Huawei is vulnerable to Chinese intelligence work in foreign markets, whether to steal or disrupt.⁸¹ Shortly after Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou was arrested in Vancouver, there was a spike in sophisticated cyberattacks attributed to Huawei devices in Canada, according to a 2019 Canadian government report. The report outlines how China allegedly systematically exploits computer networks and technology espionage in the Canadian public and private sectors.⁸²

As for LAC, there are about 1,600 cyberattacks on businesses every second, according to a projection of data collected in reports by Fortinet and Kaspersky that analyze this crime in the region. The outbreak of the pandemic, with the consequent increase in teleworking and remote connections, brought with it a significant increase in cyberattacks. These attacks can have major consequences in an economy where small- and medium-sized enterprises account for 99.5 percent of all businesses in the region. The countries with the highest rates of cyberattacks are Brazil at 50 percent, Mexico at 23 percent, Colombia at 8 percent, and Peru at 6 percent.⁸³

In Chile, Huawei has a significant presence in the telephone and telecommunications equipment market as a large supplier of the new operator WOM (which depends almost entirely on Huawei equipment), a main supplier of Movistar (Telefónica) and an important supplier of Claro. In a January 2021 5G bandwidth auction in Chile, WOM won significant bandwidth in the 5G spectrum, giving Huawei an important role as WOM, Movistar, and Claro build out 5G networks in the near future.⁸⁴ During the pandemic, Huawei also gained an advantage in Panama as Latin America became increasingly digitized. Huawei's Public Affairs and Communications Vice President Karl Song noted they were working with the industry to "identify all the use cases for 5G, and these use cases will be the ones that will make 5G deployment faster than previous technologies."⁸⁵ In Chile, Huawei controlled about 30 percent of the mobile market by the end of 2021.⁸⁶

In July 2021, Huawei inaugurated a 5G solution test center in São Paulo. As mentioned, the company owns more than 50 percent of Brazil's mobile networks (3G and 4G) that operate with its equipment.⁸⁷ In March 2022, during the Mobile World Congress 2022, TIM Brazil and Huawei announced the signing of a partnership agreement to develop a "5G City," a smart city through 5G networks that can predict technological evolution, monitor networks, and improve the user experience.⁸⁸ The city chosen was Curitiba. The two companies are collaborating to build the world's largest technology network to extend the signal transmission range using many antennas to help deliver higher-quality data (a network called M-MIMO). This network, within the 5G City project, could, according to the companies, maximize 5G transmission speed with little delay.⁸⁹

Juan Pablo Salazar, a founding partner of CyberLaw, a Colombian law firm specializing in cyber law, said this technology could violate people's rights by generating or consolidating digital dictatorships, as is happening in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. According to the U.S. publication, *The Hill*, Huawei functioned as a security extension of the CCP. Researcher and IT expert Pablo Gámez Cersosimo stated in his book *Depredadores Digitales: Una historia de la huella de carbono de la industria digital* [Digital Predators: A history of the digital industry's carbon footprint]⁹⁰ that the Chinese regime had a strong dominance in 3G, 4G (in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba) and 5G networks (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay), deepening its influence in Latin America. A 5G network in Latin America would give China control over documents, communications and files, geolocation, and other sensitive elements of the more than 620 million inhabitants of the region, including their governments.⁹¹ This aligns with China's National Security Law (2017) that obliges subject entities to hand over information relevant to national security⁹² or even allow intellectual property theft, hacking, and other forms of digital espionage abroad. In December 2021, Microsoft exposed hacking by the Chinese group Nickel, which targeted companies in 16 Latin American countries.⁹³

In e-commerce, the Chinese company Alibaba plays a prominent role in the supply of Chinese products in Latin America in the business-to-business (B2B) role and less in the business-to-consumer (B2C) market, particularly in Brazil. Alibaba does not have the same logistical capacity in Latin America as Amazon has in the United States. Moreover, competition from other e-commerce giants in LAC, such as Mercado Libre, hinders Alibaba's efforts. However, a 2020 *Statista* survey shows 53 percent of e-commerce consumers surveyed in Brazil rated AliExpress (part of the Alibaba group) as the international e-commerce brand they trust most.⁹⁴ Jay Wang, director of marketplace operations for Alibaba.com North America, observed that Mexico had great opportunities in cross-border e-commerce because it is a relatively new area and that, despite close ties to the United States, the internet could change that. Wang predicted that LAC would rank first in the world in e-commerce retail between 2023 and 2027 due to the rapid development of air and sea transportation.⁹⁵

This issue also includes the ridesharing company DiDi Chuxing, which expanded its regional presence through its 2018 acquisition of a Brazilian ridesharing company. Before the pandemic, DiDi had around half the ridesharing market in Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Brazil, but also in Colombia, Chile, and the Dominican Republic. DiDi is integrated into some 30 Chinese smart city projects and proposals globally, expanding the risk of the data collected. Regarding financial technologies in a region like Latin America with poor banking structures, AliPay's advances in Mexico stand out. In 2018, Tencent acquired a stake in the Brazilian Fintech NuBank, allowing it to know the financial situation of millions of people.⁹⁶

The development and refinement of technologies for digital health services within China increased surveillance of the population, paving the way for the consolidation of CCP digital authoritarianism.⁹⁷ This was partly made possible by advances in communication technologies, artificial intelligence, and 5G networks. The regime's total willingness to advance freedoms allowed it to forge an effective surveillance and social control apparatus.⁹⁸ Huawei promoted the sale of surveillance systems through dialogues such as the "First Latin American Safe Cities Summit."

During the pandemic, China marketed and donated new surveillance systems, such as DaHua thermal cameras, to Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Panama.⁹⁹ Ecuador participated in a smart cities program designed to reduce crime, using a system based on images from more than 4,000 Chinese-made cameras installed throughout its territory. The ECU-911 national surveillance system, built by Chinese companies for former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa's government, was intended to monitor the population. In addition, several Ecuadorian hospitals began using artificial intelligence-based COVID-19 diagnostic tools developed by Huawei.¹⁰⁰

In 2021, a group of organizations presented a report, "Reconocimiento facial en América Latina: Tendencias en la implementación de una tecnología perversa" [Facial recognition in Latin America: Trends in the implementation of a perverse technology], analyzing 38 facial recognition systems in nine Latin American countries. The report highlighted the growth of

this technology in relation to citizen security policies, although it emphasized how the technology is used for border control, immigration, transportation, and social assistance. They warned about the lack of public discussions before implementation and clear information on how these systems affect privacy and human rights. In the regional context, the technology was accompanied by weak regulations on personal data protection and access to public information, insufficient controls on public spending and technology implementation, and a history of authoritarianism and disdain for human rights, high social insecurity, and austerity policies.¹⁰¹ An investigation led by *AccessNow*, the Association for Civil Rights, reported that in Argentina, information on surveillance mechanisms and systems used by the various levels of government lacked availability through public channels. The research concluded that Argentina's legal framework was insufficient to protect citizens' privacy rights in the face of increasing government surveillance.¹⁰²

In Panama, Huawei and Chinese surveillance company Infinova provided facial recognition and smart surveillance technology that could include a CCTV network with AI-powered facial recognition capabilities and integration with social media platforms.¹⁰³ In 2018, China installed security cameras in a commercial area in the Colon Free Trade Zone.¹⁰⁴ In Bolivia, monitoring was carried out to detect people with COVID-19 and incorporated into the government surveillance BOL-110, built by China during the pandemic. Thermal cameras were also donated to identify potentially infected persons in Latin American airports and other public buildings.¹⁰⁵ Similar control occurred in Cuba, where Huawei helped the ruling dictatorship implement a mobile phone and telecommunications architecture used to cut off communications between protesters during the July 2021 nationwide uprising against the Cuban government.¹⁰⁶

HUAWEI ACADEMIES

Chinese influence is also extensive concerning technology and higher education. In 2021, the Regional Bureau of Education for Latin America and the Caribbean, part of UNESCO, and Huawei announced an agreement for the joint promotion of digital talent development in Latin America

by identifying potential areas of cooperation, such as digital skills development and digital literacy programs for teachers.¹⁰⁷ The Chinese company highlighted its partnership with some 200 universities in the Huawei Academy program, training more than 50,000 students and teachers in recent years. The first Regional ICT Talent Summit brought together specialists in Mexico City in November 2022, supported by Huawei, UNESCO, and the Spanish news agency EFE. President of Huawei for Latin America, Zhou Danjin, highlighted the educational work carried out by the company in Latin America through the global program "Seeds for the Future," which is part of its ICT talent development plan that it promotes with various projects.¹⁰⁸ Such contact has been taking place for more than a decade.

Since 2013, there has been a cooperation agreement between Huawei and the University of Buenos Aires engineering faculty for a joint regional innovation program for the research and development of telecommunications services.¹⁰⁹ In 2021, the National University of La Rioja, Argentina, became part of the Huawei Academy network to bring academia closer to the business sector, where students and professors can "put into practice the knowledge acquired in a real environment with Huawei Enterprise and Huawei Mobile Cloud enterprise solutions and services."¹¹⁰ That same year, Huawei reopened the "Academias 2021" program for Argentina, which sought cooperation with the academic world by providing ICT training and certifications to professors and university students. The program included several Argentine universities, including Abierta Interamericana, Nacional de La Plata, Nacional de Tucumán, Nacional de La Rioja, Nacional de Avellaneda, Nacional de Lanús, and Tecnológica Nacional.¹¹¹

The University of São Paulo, Brazil, has had a technical and scientific cooperation agreement with Huawei Brazil since 2016. In 2017, the University of Brasilia signed a similar partnership to train and certify students and IT professionals and implement technological development structures. University Vice-Chancellor Enrique Huelva said of Huawei, "The future of the twenty-first century will depend on partnerships, and technological cooperation will be decisive." Huawei has indicated it has partnerships with 90 other Brazilian universities and educational institutes through the Huawei ICT Academy

Program and has trained 36,000 students over the past 10 years. These include the Federal University of Campina Grande, the Federal University of Alagoas, and the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul. In addition, through a partnership with CAPES—a foundation linked to the Ministry of Education, Brazil is part of Huawei’s global Seeds for the Future program.

Huawei provides travel for an exchange period in China to select Brazilian students.¹¹² The company even has a broader program called Huawei Competition, in which young students who are part of the ICT Academy compete regionally.¹¹³ With Peru’s Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Huawei established relationships starting in 2018 through student participation in programs and competitions on ICT tool development. In that and the following year, students and faculty of both Systems and Software Engineering and Electrical and Electronic Engineering won first place in the Seeds for the Future inter-university competition. Huawei recognized the university as a Huawei Authorized Information and Network Academy for cooperation between industry and academia.¹¹⁴ In November 2018, a framework cooperation agreement was signed between Huawei and the University of Costa Rica to foster research and teaching processes at the university, opening up new possibilities for developing and implementing smart city models in this country. In June, the Monterrey Institute of Technology of Mexico joined the Zhejiang Technology Development project to improve innovation and entrepreneurship.

The agreement was signed with officials from the Ministry of Education of Zhejiang and directors of the Zhejiang University of Technology and Hangzhou Dianzi University to create a Mexico-China Innovation Center and promote technology-based companies developed at the Monterrey Institute of Technology.¹¹⁵ In April 2021, the National Autonomous University of Mexico and Huawei, with the support of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Economy, announced the creation of a laboratory to promote AI in the country. Huawei Mexico CEO Liu Jiude said open collaboration was the only way to help create an inclusive and sustainable development system for AI technologies.¹¹⁶

In Bolivia, the University for Development and Innovation became a member of the Huawei Academy in 2019, with access to various free certification programs, continuous training, and Huawei Enterprise knowledge.¹¹⁷ That year, the Universidad del Valle was nominated as the first Huawei Academy in Bolivia.¹¹⁸ In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Huawei Bolivia signed an agreement for a training program in ICT and implementation of the fourth version of Seeds for the Future.¹¹⁹

In Colombia, the Chief Director of the Technical Committee of Virtual Reality and Visualization Technology, China Computer Federation (subsequently ChinaVR [Virtual Reality]), Luo Xun, highlighted the collaboration with Colombian partners to organize the first International Belt and Road Symposium and Summer School on Emerging Information Technology (2019). According to Xun, the purpose was to share research, educate students and researchers on technology, and promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding. It later evolved into an annual conference focusing on virtual reality and artificial intelligence, supported by the Chinese Embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Valle del Cauca and Cali municipal governments. China’s fourth virtual reality competition was held in Nanchang, China, in October 2021, with Latin American and Caribbean countries providing the competition’s theme. Xun also said that 11 virtual museums in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela had been built to help the Chinese public learn about the region.¹²⁰

Huawei also inserted itself into Nicaraguan higher education. A memorandum of understanding was signed in August 2019 by the company and the universities Nacional Agraria, Nacional de Ingeniería, de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense, and Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University. The National Autonomous University of Nicaragua- (UNAN)-Managua and UNAN-León also signed. The UNAN-Managua Rector and National Council of Universities President, Ramona Rodríguez, said the alliance strengthened the academic activity of public universities and provided the opportunity to access state-of-the-art technology. The UNA Rector, Alberto Sediles Jáen, said the alliance would allow the university “to have access to technologies and knowledge that will strengthen and increase

technological capacities.” The Director of Information Technology and Communications at UNA, Benedicto García, said, “The impact that Huawei has on the telecommunications industry worldwide, together with its technology, can be transferred to our universities.”¹²²

The same happened in Chile in 2020, when Huawei established various alliances with institutions, including the Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences of the University of Chile, Federico Santa María, Austral de Chile, de Concepción, Adolfo Ibáñez, and the Departamento Universitario Obrero Campesino of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile to train students from universities and technical training centers. The company’s objective is to establish relationships with 15 universities and technical training centers by 2025.¹²³

Huawei collaborated with the Technological University of Panama and inaugurated an academy in August 2020. Allen Chen, public affairs and communications manager of Huawei Panama, highlighted the importance of cooperation between companies and institutions: “With the rise of digitalization in various sectors, the need to adapt educational training and ensure that their courses are up to date and aligned with industry practices is also increasing.”¹²⁴ In 2021, the second and third ICT academies were inaugurated on the state-owned Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá campus and at the public Instituto Técnico Superior Especializado headquarters. A digital hub was previously developed at the University of Panama.¹²⁵ Huawei Panama also announced the extension of its “Seeds for the Future” program for young people in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Venezuela. According to Minister Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Panama Li Wuji, this program has benefitted more than 700 students from over 22 LAC countries in recent years.¹²⁶ In the Caribbean, there is a partnership between the University of the West Indies and the Suzhou Global Institute of Software Technology, where students spend two years studying in China.¹²⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States can leverage its substantial diaspora community and family ties with LAC to amplify messaging to bring LAC closer to the United States and vice versa. Mexico, for example, hosts 25 percent of all U.S. emigrants. In LAC, we find diasporas in Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Costa Rica, and Panama. Many U.S. emigrants work as professors in English, business, or higher education institutions and can therefore be considered valuable assets for promoting soft power.
- Like China, the United States should encourage donations to schools, hospitals, and research centers. If it donates, it should promote it in all media channels, like China does. For example, few higher education students know about scholarships in the United States, such as the Fulbright program. In the last decade, China has flooded the continent with exchange scholarship offers to attract potential leaders from the region. Research institutes, think tanks, and universities are ideal for this purpose. The United States should increase funding for existing exchange programs like Fulbright, the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative (YLA), and the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). That way, more LAC students will have the chance to experience the United States, learn English, and return and spread the good news about the neighbor to the north. There is no better way to shape trends than by entering the academic and journalistic environments. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, China stretched its lead over the United States in influencing Latin American students, professors, journalists, and politicians. If this trend does not change in the coming decades, countering China’s influence on the continent will be exceedingly difficult.
- The United States should encourage relationships between universities and their Latin American peers, not only with leading universities but also with those in poorer and more remote areas. Many of the more than 4,000 U.S. universities and colleges are looking to develop academic partnerships in LAC. The U.S. embassies should facilitate these connections. In 1955, the United

States supported the establishment of John Hopkins University in Bologna, Italy. It also supported and created new centers for the study of English and U.S. culture along the lines of the Confucius Institutes. The United States did not proselytize like China through these institutes or its “American Corners”; its soft power is so superior it would be redundant.

- Most countries have a negative view of China. Therefore, the United States should not focus on trying to persuade countries of this. Instead, focus on true solidarity with the rest of the continent. The positive view of the United States is twice that of China and will remain so for a long time. Better dissemination of U.S. actions on the continent would have a greater effect on the LAC population. Participation in the aforementioned exchange programs (Fulbright, YLAI, and IVLP) is an excellent channel to achieve this. Upon return, scholarship recipients will conduct interviews and podcasts and write op-eds in the local media to discuss their experience in the United States and how it changed their lives, for example.
- Religion is important to LAC countries. Agreements between Catholic universities would reinforce Western values. For example, Contacts Notre Dame, Boston College, Georgetown University, College of the Holy Cross, the University of Santa Clara, or Villanova University, with LAC Catholic institutions, would represent a restraining wall against communist ideas and propaganda. The United States should take advantage of its shared religious freedom with LAC. China cannot compete in this area. A good strategic communications campaign denouncing religious persecution in China would be powerful. Perhaps the U.S. government could bring Chinese people who claimed asylum in the United States due to religious persecution to LAC to share their stories.
- If Huawei does not decrease in influence, it will not only monopolize the market, but continental communications and democracies could be at risk. U.S. technology must be introduced into Latin American higher education to compete with Huawei. It must be broad, free, and open. U.S. technology companies could fund LAC university departments and technology

labs as another restraining wall in the face of China’s communication strategy. Proposals for research and patents from emerging companies in need of financing could be attractive to Microsoft, Google, and Amazon, for example. Technology firms could create web pages to upload such proposals. These companies could also serve as new points of contact in the region. U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris has brought together several U.S. private sector companies to pledge US\$4 billion to Central America to address the root causes of migration.¹²⁸ “As part of this public-private partnership, approximately 47 companies and organizations are collaborating across financial services, textiles and apparel, agriculture, technology, telecommunications and nonprofit sectors to strengthen the region’s economic security.”¹²⁹ This is a step in the right direction.

CONCLUSIONS

China’s control over strategic digital sectors has given it access to personal, corporate, and government data through telecommunications companies such as Huawei. Before the pandemic, Huawei operated in 20 LAC countries and dozens of universities and promoted a data cloud in Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. The same applies to other Chinese companies, such as Tencent Holdings Ltd., which is affiliated with Alibaba. The data of these companies stored in clouds is accessible to the Chinese owners, becoming a potential security problem for the United States. Huawei has become the Chinese regime’s outpost on the digital route and in the limitless expansion of technology, particularly 5G, satellite networks, and fiber optics, particularly in Chile, Peru, and Brazil, which are leading the region in implementing 5G.

Huawei—with the CCP and Xi behind it—drives or benefits the implementation of technological authoritarianism models through internet control, data localization, and surveillance. Attempts are also being made in academia to attract students to marvel at the new technologies without understanding what lies behind them. The “Seeds for the Future” program is particularly focused on this. In little more than a decade, the program has financed hundreds of students in 22 LAC countries.

Chinese propaganda has played a large role in higher education since the launch of the China-Celac cooperation plans in 2015-2019, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024. Since then, thousands of scholarships, training places, and dozens of plans to study in China have been made available. The clear objective is to gain followers and create "friends of China." Even before the pandemic, cooperation agreements between research institutes and universities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Costa Rica, and Peru have multiplied. Another means of promoting China's image are the Confucius Institutes (later renamed the Ministry of Education's Centre for Language Teaching and Cooperation), with more than 40 in 2022, mainly in public universities in LAC. The institute's propaganda strategy is teaching Chinese and organizing and financing trips.

The relative success of this strategy was due to the amount of resources China poured into communication and its relentless quest to "please" foreign politicians, diplomats, academics, and journalists. The result has been partial because China's international image has not improved as much as it would have liked. Indeed, in many LAC countries, it has declined, partly due to free presses, engaged civil and democratic societies, and other independent actors that helped mitigate the negative effects of unreliable Chinese propaganda. Surveys on the perception of China in LAC in recent years showed mostly negative results, which is partly a product of the stereotypes and xenophobia toward "Orientals." The mistrust of the region's population is high. According to the Latinobarómetro survey (2022), the United States had more than twice the positive image of China (47 percent to less than 20 percent). Still, China's propaganda and media power, along with its followers in LAC, could mitigate this difference. Likewise, China's soft power cannot compete with that of the United States. U.S. popular culture has more soft power than China's propaganda can offer. Nevertheless, it is recognized for its economic growth and scientific and technological advancement. This is an important fact because the younger generations are beginning to see China as a technological power with a strong physical presence in LAC (hundreds of technology shops in large cities, but also banks and other businesses) and are less concerned about human rights violations, authoritarianism, and commercial and environmental degradation,

among other things.

Soft power with Chinese characteristics has generally not taken root on the continent, as it cannot be imposed, and most of the Latin American population still perceives China as a state alien to their culture and traditions. The promotion of Chinese cultural benefits and the exaltation of its fight against poverty or technological advances are not as important in LAC as the investments and economic power China deployed on the continent. Potential economic recovery in the coming years will increase China's influence in LAC but could also diminish its claimed soft power.

Latin American audiences also view Chinese media like Xinhua, the China Global Television Network, and CGTN with suspicion. Hence, the "indoctrination" of influential reporters was accelerated through, among other things, trips to China, so they would report positively on the country and have an impact on Latin American audiences.

China's power is increasing by leaps and bounds due to the resources it pours into the continent. Its lack of soft power is being supplanted by scholarships, travel, investments, loans, purchases, and all kinds of economic benefits that, in the long (and not so long) run, will ruin the economies and democracies of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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