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[Global Power Shifts](#)

The Art of Making Friends

How the Chinese Communist Party Seduces Political Parties in Latin America

[Juan Pablo Cardenal/Sebastian Grundberger](#)

China is increasingly turning its attention to Latin America's political parties. Beijing is using lavish official visits and diplomatic pressure to yoke Latin American party officials to its geopolitical ambitions. Without critical public debate, the rhetoric of bilateral "friendship" threatens to undermine democracy in Latin America. Any belief that the Chinese Communist Party will engage in an equal dialogue with Latin America's democratic parties remains a dangerous illusion.

At the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, many political parties in Latin America received a letter from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹ Transmitted by the Chinese ambassadors in each country, the CCP urged them to sign the "joint open letter from world political parties concerning closer international cooperation against COVID-19".² This seemingly constructive rhetoric concealed the note's true purpose. China emphasised its "open, transparent and responsible attitude" in the pandemic, and rejected "stigmatisation" and "discriminatory comments and practices"³ – an implicit reference to the international criticism that the country was attracting for its information control policy. But it did not end there. The missive stated that the crisis had highlighted the weakness of global governance, which is why it was time to reassess the world order. The statement was accompanied by a diplomatic offensive on the part of the CCP to enable political parties to "impartially evaluate the sacrifices and contributions China has made to the global fight against epidemics and underlying manifestations, and refute false statements by a few political forces"⁴, as unequivocally summarised by the CCP's party newspaper *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth). Official sources claimed that the joint statement was signed by "more than 240 parties from 110 countries", including 40 from Latin America.⁵ A remarkable endorsement that is at odds with the fact that the list of signatories was never made public. Consulting a variety of sources reveals that the statement was signed by the following Latin American parties, among others: the Peronist Partido Justicialista and the Partido

Propuesta Republicana in Argentina, the Workers' Party in Brazil, the left-wing Frente Amplio in Uruguay, and the Socialist Party of Chile. It was hardly surprising when Fu Jie, vice-director of the Latin American and Caribbean Bureau of the CCP's International Department, celebrated the stronger allegiance as deepening "friendship, mutual understanding and support" between the two sides.⁶ In this respect, it is important to mention that the word "friendship" always has a political dimension in the language of the Chinese regime, and denotes a strategic, rather than personal, relationship.⁷ It is not for nothing that, at a party event in 2015, China's President and party leader Xi Jinping urged delegates to practice the art of "making friends".⁸

The Vision: Turning Latin America's Parties into Geostrategic Allies

China is building Latin America firmly into its geopolitical plans as a way of asserting its power. Since taking office in 2013, Xi Jinping has visited twelve countries in Latin America – more than US Presidents Obama and Trump combined.⁹ It is not a new phenomenon for Latin American parties to be the focus of Chinese foreign policy. In the late 1970s and 1980s, more and more Latin American parties shifted away from recognising Taiwan to establishing relations with the CCP. The ties between political parties in China and Latin America have deepened over recent years, providing a foundation for Beijing to build on during the coronavirus pandemic. According to data from the Central Committee's International Department, the CCP held at least

326 meetings with political parties and legislators from Latin American parliaments between 2002 and 2020. There were at least 24 formal contacts between January and October 2020 alone, mainly in digital form.¹⁰

In December 2017, at a first global “high-level meeting of political parties” in Beijing, China’s President and party leader Xi Jinping also called for a “new type” of party relations in which parties concentrate on their “commonalities”, and “respect” each other instead of focussing on their differences.¹¹ With regard to Latin America, the CCP had already established the China-CELAC Political Parties Forum in 2015. At the peak of the “pink tide” in Latin America, delegates from 27 mainly left-wing but also more centrist and conservative parties in the region were invited to Beijing for the conference.¹²

Interparty relations present the CCP with more flexible opportunities to pursue China’s interests than intergovernmental relations.

This stronger affinity with leftist political alliances such as the Foro de São Paulo and the Grupo de Puebla, the “progressive” Permanent Conference of Political Parties of Latin American and the Caribbean (COPPPAL) and the Latin American branch of Socialist International has not prevented the CCP from also establishing relations with the Christian Democrat Organisation of America (Organización Demócrata Cristiana de América, ODCA), the centre-right Unión de los Partidos Latinoamericanos (UPLA) and their member parties, as reflected in the visits of their delegates to China (see below).

Latin American parties are strategic partners for the CCP, both in implementing the hard, geostrategic goals of Chinese foreign policy, and in establishing a benevolent, idealised Chinese narrative. Key elements of this include

China’s aggressive call for Latin America to support the Belt and Road Initiative,¹³ which it likes to sell – not only in Latin America – as a global development project rather than a geostrategic power play, and the One-China policy that seeks the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan. The CCP has held at least 38 meetings since 2002 with the four Central American countries that, successively since 2007, decided to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan: Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama. Party relations are often a precursor to official political initiatives. For instance, before Panama officially recognised China, the Chinese ambassador to Panama claimed that the CCP maintained “very close and warm ties”¹⁴ with the ruling centre-left party PRD. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this relationship was cemented by a three-day virtual seminar attended by around 60 people (according to the PRD), including “senior officials from both parties”¹⁵, along with the announcement of an imminent visit to China by a party delegation, and Chinese donations of masks and medical equipment. In Costa Rica, five political parties of different stripes were caught up in a legal wrangle because electoral law forbade the acceptance of Chinese donations of masks.¹⁶ In Paraguay, the last Latin American country to maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the CCP has a close relationship with the leftist Frente Guasú. In April 2020, this party presented a formal motion in the Paraguayan Senate to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing, a proposal that was rejected.

In the more informal environment of Latin American politics, the CCP’s interparty relations present an opportunity to pursue China’s interests in a more flexible manner than that offered by intergovernmental relations. A recent example is when the head of the CCP’s International Department, Song Tao, took part in a video conference on COVID-19 with several Latin American Communist parties. He took advantage of the opportunity to assert that the Hong Kong National Security Law was sacrosanct, and resolutely opposed any interference in China’s internal affairs.¹⁷





Also available in Spanish and Portuguese: Books by Chinese leader Xi Jinping are on display at the first High-Level Dialogue with World Political Parties in Beijing 2017. Source: © Fred Dufour, Reuters.

The intertwining of party and state leadership in China leads to a merely rhetorical dividing line between the two spheres in Beijing. Not least because of this, every party contact for the CCP is directly linked to China's massive political and economic interests. This clear connection is not always obvious to Latin American party representatives, who tend to be accustomed to the strict separation of party and state activities.

It is no coincidence that the CCP feels most comfortable with Latin America's autocratic ruling parties. Supporting the regimes in Cuba or Venezuela always means supporting the ruling party – and vice versa. The CCP also perfectly understands the desire of such parties to prevent any move towards democracy or challenges to their monopoly on power. Therefore, it was not a surprise when, in 2017, China supplied

the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) with equipment to help it subdue democratic protests.¹⁸ The CCP finds regimes supported by authoritarian ruling parties to be more predictable than democratically legitimised governments of changing party-political hues – and, thus, in the long term better suited to promoting its geopolitical interests.

Against the backdrop of the fact that China understands state and party as a unity it is hardly surprising that China also has a particular interest in maintaining close relations with the governments and governing parties of democratic states in Latin America. Examples of this are the CCP's links to the governing parties in the particularly resource-rich countries of Brazil (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2003–2016), Ecuador (Alianza

País, 2007–2017), and Peru (Partido Nacionalista Peruano, 2011–2016), as well as to Argentina’s Propuesta Republicana (PRO, 2015–2019).

The Strategy: Lavish Invitations and Diplomatic Pressure

Personal diplomacy through invitations to visit China is perhaps Beijing’s key instrument when dealing with political parties in Latin America. At the High-Level Dialogue with World Political Parties held in 2017, Xi Jinping announced plans to bring 15,000 party members to China for “exchange” by 2023.¹⁹ Party politicians are either invited to various forums and study programmes, or the CCP organises trips for delegations from particular parties or alliances.

The remarkable network of informal “friendships” provides the CCP with a strategic treasure.

While invitations to China are extended to individuals across the political spectrum, they are very strategically selected. The focus is on active and former legislators, members of parties in power or in opposition, active parliamentarians and young politicians who seem destined to play key roles in future. According to an expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the links are so close that certain Latin American party officials have even been invited “to spend their vacations in China”.²⁰ This strategy seems to be proving effective. By 2012 China had invited around 20 leading Latin American politicians who went on to be elected presidents of their countries.²¹ These kinds of all-expenses-paid trips to China seem to mesmerise many of the guests. They fly business class, are accommodated in five-star hotels, and are overwhelmed by Chinese hospitality. But what impresses them the most is the “Chinese miracle”. Filtered by the CCP, they are presented with the history of the transition from Maoism to the present day, the cultural monuments, the vibrant

commercial atmosphere, the imposing infrastructure, the poverty reduction figures, the economic growth, the country’s many millionaires, and, to top it all, the prospect of a Chinese moon landing. According to one Latin American politician: “They buy mediocre people by taking them to China, where they show them the country’s majesty. Those who can’t get their heads around it all, fall to their knees.”²² Interviews with other delegates who have been on such trips also reveal that Latin American politicians are driven into the waiting arms of the CCP because they are made to feel so important and esteemed. This experience makes a welcome change from the often hard grind of political life, the daily hostility at home and the sense of losing political significance as a person or party. It has a major impact when, as happened at the second China-CELAC Political Parties Forum in 2018, they are shown how the city of Shenzhen went from being a small fishing village to a modern metropolis in just three decades; visit the 55-kilometre-long bridge and tunnel system that connects Hong Kong with Macao; and are welcomed to the Zhuhai special economic zones as VIP guests. One of the delegates on this trip comments: “The Chinese sold us their development model implicitly. They didn’t need to make it explicit but they projected the idea that things can be done if the political will is there.”²³

This remarkable network of informal “friendships” provides the CCP with a strategic treasure in the form of loyal and often influential interlocutors throughout Latin America. The ongoing honeymoon between the Latin American political class and China is accompanied by the regional elite’s astonishing ignorance about China’s history, its state capitalism, the dark side of its development model, and the general nature of the CCP’s modus operandi. This provides the CCP with an opportunity to ensure the benevolent Chinese narrative is embedded in their target individuals with minimal external interference. In this way, the visits are more educational trips than friendly contacts. Javier Miranda, leader of Uruguay’s left-wing coalition Frente Amplio, describes his trips to China as “lessons that have enabled us to understand

the construction of a nation”²⁴ and which led him to conclude that the CCP is a “trustworthy party”. This camaraderie between the CCP and Uruguay’s former governing party from 2005 to 2020 was forged by Miranda’s three trips to China in just two years, and the reception of several Chinese delegations in Montevideo.

The purpose of these invitations is not to promote exchange, show the delegates different facets of China, or allow them to get to know the people. On the contrary, the visitors are only allowed to talk to people who are affiliated with the CCP and intensively treated to the same mantras of “friendship”, “mutual respect”, the “shared future of humankind” and to the legitimisation and praise of the Chinese state model. The aim is to gain uncritical multipliers of these narratives in support of China’s geostrategic ambitions. At the same time, the foreign visitors are instrumentalised in the service of the regime’s domestic propaganda via reports in the state-run media.

There is widespread concern among Latin Americans about a new economic dependency.

Although relations with China are far from prioritised in the public debate of Latin American countries, research shows that the people of Latin America do not share the enthusiasm for China that is felt by certain political elites. On the contrary, in an analysis of numerous surveys, Morgenstern and Bohigues found that many Latin Americans still have no firm opinions about China.²⁵ Interestingly, in a 2014 LAPOP survey only 16 per cent of respondents approved of the authoritarian Chinese development model.²⁶ There is also widespread concern about a new economic dependency.²⁷

In contrast, many members of the Latin American political class see their relationship with Beijing primarily through the prism of economic opportunities. The authoritarian nature of the

Chinese regime and its serious human rights violations are rarely mentioned. It is also remarkable that there is almost total silence about the often far from beneficial conditions tied to Chinese investment in Latin America, and the asymmetry in trade relations. Furthermore, the tense – and emotional – relationship of many Latin American political elites with the US contributes to China being seen as a welcome alternative for establishing a geostrategic balance with their northern neighbour.

At the same time, in Latin America the CCP is increasingly displaying a facet that is fundamentally different from the “friendship” between equals that it has been proclaiming for years. An example of this is an incident that occurred during the 2016 APEC summit in Lima, when Marco Arana, a congressman for the leftist Frente Amplio, objected to Xi Jinping being awarded a medal of honour by the Peruvian Congress due to the “neocolonial” nature of the Chinese regime. According to Marco Arana, the Chinese ambassador accused him not only of “inadequately assessing the importance of Chinese investments” and demanded that he should not interfere in China’s internal affairs,²⁸ but also threatened the APRA party, which has been closely linked to the CCP for years, to stop all invitations for Peruvians to China as well as all investment projects if there were any unpleasant incidents surrounding Xi Jinping’s visit to Peru. The fact that the congressman involved was in a different political camp to the APRA party had no bearing on the issue. Jaime Naranjo, a Socialist legislator in the Chilean parliament and a fierce critic of China also denounced the “complicit silence”²⁹ of Chile’s political parties on human rights violations, the status of Hong Kong or China’s economic activities in the country, linking it to the “steady parliamentary tourism” to China.

The Temptation: A Development Model Without Democracy

The blatantly assured propagation of the Chinese development model as a superior system to a pluralistic democratic state system is becoming increasingly visible in Chinese activities in Latin

America. A particularly striking example of this is a June 2020 seminar organised by the CCP on the “Superiority of Communist Parties’ Values in the Fight Against COVID-19” to which delegates from various Latin American countries were invited.

The fundamental purpose of international party summits in China is to legitimise the regime’s rule and political system through propaganda. An example of this is the High-Level Dialogue with World Political Parties held in 2017, when democratic Latin American parties seemingly had no problem signing the statement drafted by the CCP that read: “We highly praise the great effort and major contributions made by the Chinese Communist Party with General Secretary Xi Jinping as its core leader to build a community of shared future for mankind and a peaceful and fine world.”³⁰ At the China-CELAC Summit in 2018, representatives of 58 parties, the majority of which can be called democratic, promised to “respect the different development paths” of the “political parties of Latin America and the Caribbean and the Chinese Communist Party”.³¹ On such occasions, the Chinese state party enjoys the appearance of being a party among parties – on the same level as established democratic parties in Latin America.

Recently, in its propaganda in Latin America, the CCP has been moving away from a focus on the parity of different systems, and instead highlighting its own superiority, propagating a “new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization”.³² At a mainly virtual summit in September 2020, attended by 200 representatives of 70 Latin American parties, the CCP stressed the importance of Latin American countries learning from China’s experience in poverty reduction. According to Song Tao, head of the CCP’s International Department, CCP leadership is the “fundamental guarantee” and “China’s wisdom” is the driving force behind successfully alleviating poverty, as he told delegates from more than 100 developing countries at another seminar, in early October 2020.³³ As pointed out by Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, the regime “wants international support for the idea that



the CCP is the sole party fit to rule China. It also craves recognition that its political and economic system is superior to Western democracy and the liberal-capitalist economic order.”³⁴

According to this logic, China’s work with representatives of Latin American democratic parties is nothing more than an attempt to undermine



Not representative: Members of the Chinese community in Buenos Aires gave President Xi Jinping a friendly reception in November 2018. Nevertheless, many Latin Americans have a more reserved stance on the Chinese engagement in their region. Source: © Marcos Brindicci, Reuters.

the processes of democratic decision-making. It is all the more striking that democratic party representatives are also singing lustily from the same Chinese hymn sheet, as shown by the example of Argentina. José Luis Gioja, a Peronist deputy and avid visitor to China, declared that China is “in its own way, a democracy”.³⁵ During a party debate on alleviating poverty in

August 2020, his party colleague and Secretary of State for Defence, Francisco Cafiero, justified his party’s relations with the CCP by saying that it was his party’s strategy to maintain “relations with different democratic parties around the world”, adding that they also have ties to the US Democrats and with other parties, and do not want to “favour anyone”.³⁶ And in 2016,

Humberto Schiavoni, leader of the centre-right PRO party, praised China in an article for Argentine newspaper Clarín, calling it a “compass for our development”.³⁷ Between 2016 and 2018 alone, representatives of Argentina’s two main parties, from which the aforementioned representatives hail, flew to China at least seven times.

Latin America’s recent history is replete with attempts by individual politicians to secure their own personal power by undemocratic means. In some cases, as was recently seen in Venezuela and Nicaragua, this led to authoritarian forms of government. Often, however, such attempts failed because of democratic and constitutional institutions, and a critical public. It is to be feared that the Chinese temptation of authoritarian development without democracy could give such efforts a new basis for legitimacy. The massive decline in approval ratings for democracy in most Latin American countries³⁸ over the last few years is an additional alarm signal in this regard.

The Challenge: Talking to Latin American Parties about China

China has long been the most important trading partner of numerous Latin American countries – with explosive growth in investments by Chinese state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors of the economy. Between 2001 and 2019, China invested around 135 billion US dollars on the subcontinent.³⁹ Beijing’s global rise is therefore seen by many Latin American politicians not only as an inevitability but also as a source of opportunities that other foreign powers would struggle to provide. It is difficult to assess how much incomprehension, ignorance or deliberate distortion of the facts lie behind statements such as those mentioned above.

In Latin America’s daily political life, which is characterised by short, erratic political cycles and elections in rapid succession, political actors tend to lack an understanding of China’s long-term global strategy. In particular, however, there is also a lack of understanding that this strategy does not simply stop at the country’s

own borders, but that the acceptance of Chinese “offers of friendship” threatens to undermine the country’s own democracy and institutions from within. In this respect, statements such as that made by the aforementioned Argentine deputy Gioja to the effect that one should not interfere in China’s internal affairs because Beijing does not meddle in Argentina’s internal affairs⁴⁰ are inaccurate. This also leads to the seemingly banal realisation that it is a dangerous illusion to believe any dialogue between the CCP and democratic parties can be a dialogue of equals.

There are few political costs for Latin American politicians who fling open the gates to Chinese investors.

China is well down the list of public concerns, which means there are few political costs for Latin American politicians who sign declarations of solidarity, or seek to fling open the gates to Chinese investors. There is far too little discussion in Latin America about the small print, how politicians lay themselves open to political blackmail, or even the effects on their own democracy. Public opinion is largely uncritical about China, in stark contrast to the subcontinent’s relationship with the United States, with whom it has had a rollercoaster relationship for centuries, and whose foreign policy activities can spark passionate debate among the Latin American public.

There is an urgent need for Latin America’s parties and the public sphere to debate their relationship with China in order to be in a position to conduct a realistic and morally and intellectually sound dialogue with the CCP. Politicians are normally sensitive to the public mood, so the fact that the image of China is still fairly vague in the minds of many Latin Americans could provide an opportunity. For example, if buzzwords like “neocolonialism” and “imperialism” were no longer applied solely to the United States, this would represent an initial, important step towards a more objective engagement with China.

If Germany and Europe want to create lasting ties with Latin America as strategic partners in the fight for freedom, democracy, and human rights, it is high time that they talk to these countries about Chinese activities on the subcontinent. In particular, there is a need to ensure that Latin America's party elites gain a much deeper understanding of the situation. International stakeholders who are active in Latin America also have to realise that the "friendly" exchanges between the CCP and democratic parties in Latin America are part of the global competition between liberal democracy and the authoritarian Chinese model. It is, therefore, important to convey the fact that Europe is far from indifferent about how Latin American countries, and especially Latin American political parties, respond to some of China's offers and demands.

If Europe, in its official and unofficial diplomacy, fails to counter the China narratives that the CCP is so skilfully embedding at different levels, it will give the CCP the upper hand in the discourse as it seeks to propagate a new anti-liberal, anti-democratic development model. This is why Europe has to talk to Latin America about China as a matter of urgency.

- translated from German -

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