



# Sino-Latin American space cooperation: A smart move

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## ABSTRACT

Sino-Latin American space cooperation has grown in the past several years, contributing to debates over China's rising influence in the region. Much of what has been written about this phenomenon is overly simplistic and denotes a lack of understanding of the interplay between the domestic and the international when decisions of international cooperation are taken. This paper argues that calculations of both domestic and international interest are important in Sino-Latin space relationships, with the former of particular importance to Latin American countries. It explores these interests as demonstrated in the cooperative programs of four Latin American countries. It concludes that, while the US relationship is not a major factor in their decisions to cooperate or not with China, the USA could benefit from a greater understanding of this phenomenon to expand its relationships with the emerging space nations of the region to its benefit.

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## 1. Introduction

In August 2011 China and Bolivia launched a program for the development of the South American country's first satellite, the Tupac Katari, to be designed, built, tested and launched by the China Great Wall Industry Corporation (CGWIC) [1]. The agreement recalls the successful development of Venezuela's own first satellite, the Simón Bolívar, as well as the longstanding space cooperation between China and Brazil. At a time of shifts in the US leadership role in space, Sino-Latin American space cooperation is an important phenomenon to consider, as it continues to leave a growing imprint in the emerging space activities in the region.

Interestingly, except in the context of larger Chinese engagement in Latin America – which includes aggressive investment in sectors like manufacturing and extraction, loans and the pursuit of new markets – and then only briefly, few have considered this aspect of the relationship. A quick glance at this situation, where a space power spends time and resources nursing space programs in developing countries, could force one to assume one of two extremes: either China is very generously helping these countries

as a nod to South–South cooperation,<sup>2</sup> or it is taking advantage and using space as a carrot to lure Latin American countries closer. The latter assumption could also lead one to think of Chinese growing influence in the region as a veiled message to challenge US influence in its backyard, not inconsequently, through access to dual-use technologies.

Using Robert Putnam's analogy of board games, which reminds us that domestic issues have considerable weight in international politics, this paper offers a more nuanced analysis of the situation by looking at the examples of two countries that have engaged in space cooperation with China – Brazil and Venezuela – as well as two countries that may choose to do so in the future, Mexico and Argentina. An analysis of their experiences suggests that what we are seeing is a series of bilateral relationships where both actors are making decisions by weighing costs and benefits from the perspective of their domestic and international policies. From the lesser known standpoint of the Latin American countries, it suggests that important in these decisions is the relative value given to their national priorities, as well as the impact of regional

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<sup>2</sup> Beyond the strictly economic considerations of the traditional North–South division, the Latin American adoption of the “South–South cooperation” concept assumes a “new kind of regionalism, where the strategy goes beyond economic integration for addressing problems that the South faces”. It is based on the voluntary activities of countries drawn together by shared challenges and goals. Ojeda T. La cooperación sur-sur y la regionalización en América Latina: El despertar de un gigante dormido. *Relaciones Internacionales*. 2010; 15: 91–111.

trends that characterize the space endeavor and international cooperation in general. Because of these considerations, cooperation with China is an option, not a given. Finally, this implies that the advent of cooperative ventures with China has more to do with these factors than with the relationship of both sets of actors with the USA. While therefore not a message to the USA, expanding Sino-Latin American ties offer lessons as to how it may work this political calculus to its benefit, establishing meaningful cooperative links with the emerging space actors in the region as consistent with the 2010 US National Space Policy.

## 2. Background: expanding Sino-Latin American relationships

Cooperative space activities have grown in light of a deepening Sino-Latin American relationship. After decades of sparse interaction, by 2007 China had become the third largest trading partner in Latin America, with shared trade value exceeding \$100 billion in 2007, ten times what it had been a decade earlier [2]. On the Latin American side, there was a period of convergence that helped highlight the benefits of the association – from shared political and economic stages of development and highly complementary economies, to common desires to diversify economic and political relations [3]. Before considering specific examples and how space fits into broader relationships, we can briefly discuss China's interest in the region.

In 2008 China issued a *Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean* which describes the relationship with the region as the pursuit of a “win–win” strategy to tap into the “development potential” of these countries.<sup>3</sup> It states that the “two sides are at a similar stage of development”, that China views the relationships on a “strategic plane” and seeks to build partnerships “featuring equality, mutual benefit and common development” [4]. Drawing on this sense of similarity, China, the self-described “world's largest developing nation” [5], succeeded in framing the relationship as the result of shared interest: achieving development, enlarging the role of developing countries, and meeting common challenges together. Cooperation between them seemed only natural.

The literature divides Chinese primary interests in the region as either economic (the need for resources and expanding markets) or political (particularly the One-China policy, as most of the countries that recognize Taiwan are in the region). Most experts agree that China's demand for raw materials and natural resources has been the primary driver. The need for oil has been a major factor informing Chinese foreign policy as it seeks to secure and diversify its sources of crude oil and develop alternative energy sources internally [6].<sup>4</sup> At the same time, oil is not the only thing China needs and Latin American countries contribute resources that span the gamut from minerals and metals to diverse foodstuffs. Copper-rich Chile for example is an important source of that mineral, while the soybean industry in Argentina is an important supplier of that commodity. As one China–Latin America expert put it “Latin America simply has too many commodities that China needs in quantities too large for the Asian giant to ignore” [7].

<sup>3</sup> Latin America is not China's main region of interest. It follows the hierarchy of (1) major power relations (i.e. the United States), (2) neighboring states, and (3) developing nations – divided between strategic partners and cooperative partners. (See Ref. [5]).

<sup>4</sup> Rubiolo describes the new concept of energy security as “redefining” the foreign policy strategies of the PRC; Another author writes: “evidence suggests that energy demands...appear to reinforce the cooperative aspects of Chinese foreign policy,” with emphasis on Latin America and African oil-producing states. See Ziegler CE. The energy factor in China's foreign policy. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 2006; 11(2): 14.

The political aspect of the relationship is a secondary driver as a result,<sup>5</sup> despite what some conservative authors assert.<sup>6</sup> Most agree that the relationship should be described as “pragmatic,” “non-ideological,” “politically neutral” and “dovish,” where government ideological affinity is “of limited concern”.<sup>7</sup> For example, in his review of the first 35 years of the Sino-Argentinean relationship, Alfonso Cesarín highlights the irrelevance of the “ideological variable” as the partners continued moving closer despite marked shifts in the political spectrum on both sides.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the “countries that matter the least for China are those whose overriding motivations in their policy toward China are political”: Venezuela and Cuba [3]. While certainly not ignoring leftist governments in the region, these are not the most important players for China and its relationships with some center-right democratic countries stand on even more solid ground. The argument that China's primary goal may be to strengthen populist or leftist governments through activities such as space seems limiting as a result.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Many board games

The phenomenon described above corresponds to a number of distinct bilateral relationships that exhibit varying degrees of closeness and that cannot be successfully explained by looking at the region as a whole. This is based on the findings of authors such as Manfred Mols, who questions the applicability of using macro-level theories to understand the divergence of results between countries in similar contexts and subjected to the same conditions, yet whose relationship with East Asia has been met with varying success. Mols urges instead the consideration of local arrangements and issues to understand these differences [9].

This paper uses the analogy of board games to talk about the moves made by different actors at the domestic and international level. This analogy was first developed by Robert Putnam in 1988. He argued that political leaders have two boards to play at – the national one (where coalitions need to be struck between domestic groups that are not always in agreement) and the international one (where “national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments”). Because neither game can be played in isolation, there is “unusual complexity” and “moves that are rational for a player at one board...may be impolitic

<sup>5</sup> It is unclear how much impact the One-China policy has. The Latin America policy paper states that “China is ready to establish and develop state-to-state relations with all Latin American and Caribbean countries based on the One-China principle.” Yet some experts argue that Taiwan and China have recently entered into an implicit truce to move on from the diplomatic battle for recognition. This would explain for example, China's stable relationship with Panama, despite its recognition of Taiwan.

<sup>6</sup> Practically alone in looking at Sino-Latin American space cooperation, Ellis divides China's partners between “populist regimes” and “other countries.” But he later talks about such agreements as potentially helping smooth out issues between less-ideologically similar countries, which simply questions the relevance of that whole aspect of the relationship. See Ellis RE. *Advances in China–Latin America space cooperation*. ChinaBrief X 2010: 5–7.

<sup>7</sup> For some examples see, Watson [3,39], Hsiang AC. China rising in Latin America: More opportunities than challenges. *Journal of Emerging Knowledge on Emerging Markets* 2009;1: 41.

<sup>8</sup> All Spanish and Portuguese translations by author.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis argues, unconvincingly, that while the relationships are driven primarily by economic motivations, supporting leftist and populist governments is also a priority for China. See Ellis RE. *The Military-Strategic Dimensions of Chinese Initiatives in Latin America*. China–Latin America Task Force. Miami: Center for Hemispheric Policy, 2007; Ellis RE. *La Relación de Venezuela con China: Implicaciones para el Régimen de Chávez y la Región*. Air & Space Power Journal (Spanish version), 2010; 12.

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