China and Latin America: What Sort of Future?

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The explosive expansion of China into Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) during the early years of this century has raised many hopes and some fears that would have seemed unthinkable a few decades ago. China’s metamorphosis into becoming the world’s largest and most rapidly developing economy is manifest in its soaring bi-lateral trade, its foreign direct investments (FDI), and the scope of political and commercial visits made in both directions across the Pacific. China will be a challenge for Latin Americans, but it can be constructively transformative in most countries if people and their leaders take responsibility for making it so.

In November 2008 China put Sino-LAC relations in a broad “strategic” perspective by releasing a Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean (Policy, 2008), following similar papers on the European Union (EU) in 2003 and Africa in 2006. In this document China proclaimed that the entire region is of “strategic” importance to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), meaning mainly that sales in the region, and particularly the purchase of natural resources, are becoming critical in Beijing’s eyes (Xiang, 2008, p. 52). The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) editorialized on November, 17 that the Policy Paper signaled a “new chapter of China-Latin America relations.” Chinese Latin Americanists noted that for the first time the Chinese government was looking at Latin America as a whole in “strategic” terms (Hsiao, 2008; Jiang, 2008b). The Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Latin America Bureau chief Yang Wanming reported that the Policy Paper was put together during an extended period of time after informal consultations with Latin American leaders (Hsiao, 2008). In early 2009 a foreign affairs expert at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations wrote that a multi-pronged foreign policy program like that outlined in the Policy...
would enable China to “seize the high vantage point [in handling] the future world order.” He added that China wanted to “show its hand early” in international relations so as “to send out China’s voice, maintain China’s image, and extend China’s interests” (Lam, 2009b).

Since it is impossible to be “up-to-date” on breaking news in a book devoted to current Latin American responses to globalization, I often use the Policy Paper as a framework for my analysis, though moving beyond its sometimes propagandistic yet instructive content. I begin with a focus on Chinese views, interests, and activities in Latin America and then move on to what many Latin Americans think about China’s rapid expansion in the region and the PRC’s actual or potential impact on security, politics, economics, and cultures in the region. In the end, I attempt a more holistic look at the interrelationship between these two distinct regions.

China’s foreign relations and the Policy Paper

In his report to the 17th Congress of the CCP in October 2007, President Hu Jintao stressed that “scientific development and social harmony” are essential to the construction of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and China’s international relations (Hu, 2007). China “is ready to carry out friendly cooperation with all countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” says the 2008 Policy Paper. Many Chinese officials today imply incorrectly that PRC foreign policy since 1949 has always been based on the “Five Principles” that gained international attention in 1955 when then-Premier Zhou Enlai advanced them at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. The five principles are: mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. These are principles that generally appeal to governments and peoples who have experienced colonialism and imperialism, including Latin Americans. But as Professor Zhao Suisheng notes: “Chinese leaders believe in a set of principles in international affairs, but consideration of its national interest causes Beijing to make pragmatic compromises” (Zhao, 2006, p. 15). More bluntly, Edward Friedman writes that the CCP “tends to act on narrow notions of political realism packaged in a public relations discourse of eternal continuities and unchanging, principled behavior” (Friedman, 2010, p. 1).

As the Cold War was ending, Deng Xiaoping laid out a “low profile” approach to foreign policy in China, sometimes termed “tāo guāng yāng