

China in Central America:

Strategies, Influence, and Operations in the 21st Century

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Executive Summary

The presence and influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Central America¹ have intensified over the past two decades through the strengthening of trade relations favorable to Beijing and the formalization of diplomatic ties with countries in the region, except for Guatemala, which maintains relations with Taiwan.

The following report provides an analysis of the outcomes of Sino-Central American relations and examines the expectations, promises, and concerns they have generated, along with the results in trade, investment, cooperation, and governance, based on a systematic review of academic and journalistic research, statistical data, and interviews with qualified experts on the subject.

This rapprochement between Central America and the PRC has been marked by a series of narratives portraying China as a reliable and supportive partner with no apparent ulterior motives, with whom the region's countries can expand their exports and attract substantial investments and generous, unconditional cooperation.

However, the findings of this study challenge these premises. Trade relations have continued and exacerbated their asymmetric trend in favor of China, leading to a primary-export dependency for Central American countries. Investments have been scarce, and cooperation has lacked transparency, often conditioned by requirements such as the mandatory hiring of Chinese companies, labor, and suppliers for its implementation, especially in infrastructure projects, whether they involve donations or loans.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, Central America comprises the group of countries made up of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Although Belize, geographically, is part of the region, historically, culturally, politically and economically it has maintained greater links with the United Kingdom, from which it became independent in 1981. Except for a certain significance of trade with Guatemala, trade with the rest of Central America is scarce. In addition, it should be noted that, to date, Belize maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Additionally, China's influence raises several governance concerns in the region by conditioning the foreign policy of its Central American partners to align with its interests, fostering opaque bilateral relations, and using its communication apparatus to promote arbitrary narratives, aiming to deliberately influence public opinion in the region.

Based on these findings, this report presents recommendations for civil society, development partners, academia, the business sector, and governments in the region to strengthen their position vis-à-vis China, considering their own strategic interests.



Introduction:

At the beginning of the 21st century, relations between Central America and the People's Republic of China were almost nonexistent, with limited trade exchanges and no formal diplomatic relations. Today, China has become the region's second-largest trading partner, after the United States², and except for Guatemala, the rest of the countries have established diplomatic relations with Beijing: Costa Rica (2007), Panama (2017), El Salvador (2018), Nicaragua (2021), and Honduras (2023).

The region's rapprochement with China has been accompanied by narratives promising vast development opportunities through increased trade, substantial investment inflows, and supposedly unconditional cooperation. However, in light of the evidence, significant doubts have emerged, calling these promises into question. They have revealed clear strategic motivations on China's part, such as weakening diplomatic support for Taiwan, enhancing its geostrategic presence, and securing access to a new market, sometimes at the expense of local interests and democratic governance in the region.

This report aims to account for the main outcomes Central America has achieved in its relations with China, as well as the economic and political-institutional vulnerabilities (in terms of governance) these relations have entailed for the region. Additionally, it offers recommendations to strengthen the performance of Central American nations in their relations with Beijing.

This study is based on a review of a wide range of research, journalistic reports, data from the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (SIECA), the Latin America and Caribbean Academic Network on China (Red ALC-China), and the Observatory of China in Central America by Expediente Abierto, as well as interviews with specialists.

² When comparing trade with economic blocs, trade with China lags behind Central American intraregional trade and ahead of trade with the European Union since 2021.

The following pages present a brief overview of the relations between Central America and China prior to their diplomatic formalization, as well as China's interests in the region and its engagement strategy. Next, the expectations of Central American governments in these dealings, China's promises of equitable and mutually beneficial relations, and the concerns various actors have expressed regarding the region's rapprochement with the Asian country will be examined. Subsequently, the outcomes in terms of trade, investment, cooperation, and the effects of these ties on governance will be analyzed. Finally, conclusions and recommendations based on the findings will be offered.



1. Background

Previous Relations

When analyzing the relationship between Central America and the People's Republic of China (PRC or China), 2007 is often used as the starting point. This was the year when Costa Rica and China announced the establishment of diplomatic relations. However, this timeframe overlooks the earlier developments that are essential to understanding the current dynamics of the region's relationship with the PRC.

Between 2007 and 2017, Costa Rica was the only Central American nation to have diplomatic relations with China, while the others maintained ties with Taiwan. However, Costa Rica was not the first. In 1985, the Sandinista government, led by Daniel Ortega, established diplomatic relations with the PRC (Rodríguez, 2013).

The motivations behind this initial rapprochement between Nicaragua and China were primarily political and ideological. According to Carlos Fonseca Terán³, the Ortega administration had expectations “that [China] would support them out of ideological solidarity and established official relations without having negotiated anything in advance.” However, China was not interested in this and did not want “to strain its relationship with Washington because of Nicaragua,” which caused significant dissatisfaction in Ortega and a certain distancing from the PRC (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 518). In 1990, after defeating Ortega at the polls, President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro reestablished relations with Taiwan (Rivero Soto, 2023). The country would once again establish relations with China in 2021.

The absence of diplomatic relations between the nations of Central America and the PRC did not preclude the development of other types of ties, such as business, political, cultural, and commercial ones. These laid the groundwork for later relationships.

³ Assistant Secretary of International Relations of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

Panama serves as an excellent example. Since the 1990s, various Chinese entities began establishing a significant presence in the country. In 1994, the Bank of China⁴ opened its first branch (Cornejo & García, 2010), although it had had a representative office since 1987 (CGTN, 2022). In 1996, the PRC established a Trade Representation Office (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Panama, 2011), which, in addition to promoting “investments, trade, and tourism,” carried out “certain consular functions” and acted “as a political-diplomatic trade representation” (Rivero Soto, 2023, p. 60).



⁴ State-owned commercial bank.

In 1997, the Hong Kong-based company⁵ Hutchison-Whampoa, now known as CK Hutchison Holdings, obtained the concession for the Balboa and Cristóbal ports, strategically located on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts near the Canal (Illueca, 2023). In the following years, other Chinese companies in sectors such as food, electronics, energy, mining, and construction continued to establish themselves (Dussel Peters, 2023b; Illueca, 2023).

This demonstrates the special interest the PRC has in Panama, largely explained by the strategic importance of its canal “for international logistics in both peacetime and wartime” (Ellis, 2023). China, it should be noted, is one of its most important users (Cornejo & García, 2010). Furthermore, the isthmus nation is home to a significant Chinese community, whose origins date back to the mid-20th century when the interoceanic passage was built (Ellis, 2023).

Since the second half of the 2000s, China-affiliated organizations have proliferated in the region, promoting party and business rapprochements. These have been identified in various studies as key elements in facilitating the establishment of official relations (Rodríguez, 2013). Vinicio Sandí Meza (2015) emphasizes that “within this dynamic, trade has been the central point, and the establishment of Cooperation and Trade Chambers, Commercial Development Offices, among other mechanisms, has been implemented to strengthen relations with China” (p. 149).

⁵ The award took place on January 5, 1997, almost six months before the United Kingdom returned sovereignty over Hong Kong to the PRC, on July 1 of that year. At the time, it was considered that Hong Kong democracy would serve as a stimulus for the democratization of the PRC, however, this is now questioned. Since 2021, Illueca (2023) points out, the influence “on the part of the PRC and the CCP has increased, as well as their intervention in private companies” (p. 21), despite the region’s autonomous status.

Costa Rica's rapprochement with the PRC was not unrelated to this trend. According to Rodríguez (2013), presidential candidate Óscar Arias of the National Liberation Party (PLN) no longer viewed China as a “destabilizing factor” (p. 517), as he had during his first term (1986–1990), when Beijing did not contribute to the peace process in a war-torn Central America and maintained a strained relationship with the United States. However, heading into his second term (2006–2010), Arias saw the PRC as an opportunity to boost trade and business without jeopardizing relations with Washington.

After traveling to China in 2004 and meeting with “Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, who expressed Beijing’s willingness to establish diplomatic relations with San José,” Arias returned “convinced of the need to strengthen ties with China” (p. 522). Additionally, within the PLN, there was support for this idea due to dissatisfaction with Taiwan over its financial backing of opposition candidates, which “was reflected in its Fifth Ideological Congress, where it was decided that in the next government of this party, diplomatic relations with Beijing would be sought” (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 520).

After his trip, Arias gradually developed the idea of establishing relations with the PRC, unaffected by the pressure of associations like China Ya or the Chinese-Costa Rican Chamber of Industry and Commerce. However, according to Alberto Güell, director of China Ya, his organization “never aimed to change recognition,” but “Arias was able to do so partly because of the work that this organization had done in raising business awareness of the opportunity to strengthen ties with China” (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 522)

In **Nicaragua**, with Daniel Ortega’s victory in the 2006 elections, speculation arose that he would establish relations with the PRC due to ideological affinities. In fact, he tried, signaling interest to Beijing during his campaign and after the elections, expressing willingness to restore relations, with the sole condition of receiving cooperation similar to that from Taiwan. However, China responded ambiguously, unwilling to take “specific commitments” and choosing to prioritize its rapprochement with Costa Rica, with which it was negotiating the establishment of diplomatic relations. The Costa Rican government had asked China not to negotiate “with any other Central American country until reaching an agreement with them,” as they believed “it would be much more costly politically to make the recognition shift [from Taiwan to China] if Nicaragua did so first” (Rodríguez, 2013, p. 524).

Despite this new setback, numerous pro-China associations and businesses linked to members of Ortega's political party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), proliferated in Nicaragua (Rodríguez, 2013).

In 2012–2013, there was a significant shift in Sino-Nicaraguan relations. In February 2012, Ortega announced plans to build an interoceanic canal, and 16 months later, in June 2013, the parliament granted the project concession to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development (HKND) group. This company, established in the Cayman Islands months before the concession, is owned by Chinese citizen Wang Jing, who is connected to the military sector and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). That same year, Ortega's government granted Wang permission for his telecommunications company, Xinwei, to begin operations in Nicaragua. Of these two concessions, only Xinwei has materialized its operations, although it has not completed the substantial investment promised (Hochleitner, 2015; López Baltodano & López Baltodano, 2023; Vásquez, 2020).

El **Salvador's** rapprochement with the PRC is more recent, with its initial milestones during the presidency of Mauricio Funes (2009–2014) and its consolidation under Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2017–2019), both members of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), ideologically sympathetic to China.

Funes stated in 2010, during a trade fair with Chinese companies, that he might establish relations with the PRC. That same year, both countries established chambers of commerce in their respective territories (Aguilar, 2014). However, it was not until 2018, during Sánchez Cerén's presidency, that diplomatic relations between San Salvador and Beijing were formalized, accompanied by the PRC's commitment to developing various cooperation projects (Alamilla Trejos, 2023).

This diplomatic decision suggests that while ideology may have played a role in Sánchez Cerén's decision, it also appears to have been a desperate, and ultimately unsuccessful⁶, measure to secure victory in the 2019 elections by promising to implement various projects under the umbrella of Chinese cooperation.

⁶ In the 2019 elections, Nayib Bukele, who was previously a member of the FMLN, won.

Honduras is the most recent Central American nation to establish relations with the PRC, doing so in March 2023. Significant precursors to this rapprochement date back to 2012, during the presidency of Porfirio Lobo (2010–2014). In May of that year, Lobo announced that the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC⁷) would provide a loan of USD 300 million to develop the second phase of the Patuca III hydroelectric dam (La Tribuna, 2012). Months later, in December, Lobo hinted at the possibility of establishing relations with the PRC without severing ties with Taiwan, something China found unacceptable (La Prensa, 2012).

In 2013, shortly after Nicaragua awarded the interoceanic canal construction project, Porfirio Lobo announced plans to sign a memorandum of understanding with Harbour Engineering Company Ltd. (CHEC) to build an interoceanic railway (dry canal), a refinery, two ports, and other infrastructure, at an estimated cost of USD 20 billion (AFP/El Faro, 2013). Although none of these projects have materialized, following the establishment of relations with China by Xiomara Castro’s administration, some of these ideas seem to have regained traction (Romero, 2023).

In May 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, then-president Juan Orlando Hernández stated that Honduras might open a trade office in the PRC to acquire Chinese vaccines. However, this never came to fruition (Reuters, 2021).

In contrast, **Guatemala** remains the only Central American nation that maintains relations with Taiwan rather than the PRC. However, this has not been an obstacle to the establishment of the China-Guatemala Chamber of Commerce and Cooperation in 2008 (Sandí Meza, 2015) or to a growing exchange of goods. According to Evan Ellis (2023), a researcher at the U.S. Army War College’s Institute of Strategic Studies, “the deep distrust among the conservative elites in that country toward the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party” has limited Beijing’s influence (pp. 2–3).

⁷ Commercial bank owned by the People’s Republic of China.

Nonetheless, this could change under the administration of Bernardo Arévalo (2024–present). Before taking office, he expressed interest in maintaining relations with Taiwan while also working with China (Ardon & Madrid, 2023). More recently, in February 2024, his foreign minister stated that the Guatemalan government is interested in deepening trade relations with China, including the possibility of establishing a commercial interests office there. The official indicated that “the president has pointed out that we cannot ignore the weight and power that China represents” (Juárez, 2024).



China's Interests in Central America

The PRC's interests in the region can be summarized into three categories, ranked by importance:

1. *Political Interests*

Until recently, Central America was one of Taiwan's key allies and spheres of influence globally, granting it recognition as an independent nation and support in various international forums.

With this in mind, the primary incentive driving China's engagement with the region has been to diminish Taiwan's international recognition (Aguilar, 2014), promote the "One China" principle, and secure diplomatic support for itself.

According to Margaret Myers, director of the Asia and Latin America Program at the Inter-American Dialogue, in statements to Expediente Público (2023e), the expert emphasized: "We have seen an interest in Central America, but more regarding the competition between China and Taiwan in the region (...) but in terms of trade, investment, capital flows, or financing, we see almost nothing in Central America."

2. *Strategic Interests*

From a geostrategic perspective, Central America is of interest to China "as a transit zone between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans" (Expediente Abierto, 2024). It is important to remember that the Asian nation is a leading exporter and one of the main users of the Panama Canal.

With its presence in the region, China can bolster its expansionist policy, consolidating its projection and influence in the Pacific area (Aguilar, 2014), while also seeking to "balance and, in some cases, limit the power and influence that the United States might have" in Latin America (Expediente Público, 2021a).

3. *Economic Interests*

The PRC's ties with Central America are much more modest compared to those it maintains with Mexico or South America, yet they follow similar logic. China is characterized as a supplier of manufactured goods⁸ and a buyer of low-complexity goods or raw materials to “secure basic resources for its industrialization and food for its population” (Bonilla & Milet García, 2015, p. 14).

China's Strategy in Approaching Central America

The relationship between Central America and the PRC has gradually evolved, transitioning from purely commercial ties at the start of the millennium to broader and more complex collaboration encompassing diplomatic, political, and cooperative aspects, forming part of China's overall strategy (Bonilla & Milet García, 2015).

As part of this strategy, the PRC has sought to fill the void left by the United States in the region⁹, following shifts in U.S. priorities after the terrorist attacks of 2001 (Chávez, 2015). While some experts argue that China has advanced by avoiding involvement in issues sensitive to Washington, such as the war on drugs, the Cuban trade embargo, and human rights (Bonilla & Milet García, 2015), acknowledging that the isthmus is part of the U.S. sphere of influence (Alamilla Trejos, 2023), others question this apparent passivity. They argue that Beijing takes an active and assertive stance in defending and promoting its commercial and strategic interests, as well as projecting its worldview through foreign policy (Ellis, 2020; Meléndez, 2023a).

⁸ It is important to note that Central American governments and businessmen do not have the capacity to evaluate and certify that the technological offer presented by Chinese companies is the best possible option, since the conditions seem to be advantageous only superficially. This aspect deserves further attention in future research.

⁹ As a donor, lender, investor, diplomatic partner, etc.

Aligned with this, China has leveraged its foreign policy by using “diplomacy and cooperation as mechanisms to shape attitudes” (Alamilla Trejos, 2023, p. 16) in third countries, while also seeking to “reduce animosity or suspicion about its rise” (Rodríguez Aranda & Leiva Van de Maele, 2013, p. 9).

In its approach to Central America, China has gone beyond trade by establishing semi-official relations through party contacts, trade chambers, and allied business associations (Rodríguez, 2013). It has promised development opportunities and significant, unconditional cooperation, contrasting itself with Western counterparts (Maggiorell, 2019).

China’s entry into Costa Rica, marked by the development of several projects, including the construction of the National Stadium, “had a demonstrative effect” on the region regarding “the benefits of diplomatically recognizing the Chinese government” (Alamilla Trejos, 2023, p. 52).



2. Expectations, Promises, and Concerns

Expectations of Central American Governments Regarding Relations with China

Central American governments have justified their determination to establish ties with the PRC by citing potential benefits. They often highlight the strategic value of partnering with Beijing to stimulate economic growth and diversify international relations (Chávez, 2015; Ellis, 2023; Roca, 2023; Sandí Meza, 2015).

Their expectations can be grouped into four broadly shared categories, each with specific nuances, viewing China as:

1. *An Option to Boost Trade*

The Chinese market is one of the largest globally, whether due to its population, its industry's demand for goods, or its productive capacities. In light of this reality, emerging countries, including those in Latin America, often adopt an “optimistic view [that] emphasizes the importance of the Chinese market for exporters, the business sector, and potential economic contributions from increased demand” (Chun Lee & Guo, 2017, p. 179).

In this context, governments in the isthmus emphasize the potential opportunities of engaging with China to diversify and/or boost their exports (Alamilla Trejos, 2023; El 19 Digital, 2023b; Madrid, 2023b). This is evident in the urgency with which they have pursued free trade agreements following the establishment of diplomatic relations (see Table 1).

2. *A Significant Partner in Cooperation:*

One of the main attractions of the PRC for Central American governments has been the expectation of receiving substantial unconditional cooperation¹², whether through monetary or in-kind donations, or access to financing.

¹² Both China and its allies often stress that Beijing's cooperation is offered without conditions, without being linked to compliance with “good practices, democracy and respect for human rights” (Maggiorell, 2019, p. 11).

Table 1.

Central America and the PRC:

Diplomatic Relations and Free Trade Agreements

Country	Establishment of Diplomatic Relations	Free Trade Agreement (FTA)
Costa Rica	June 1, 2007 (President Óscar Arias, 2006–2010)	In effect since August 1, 2011
Panama ¹⁰	June 13, 2017 (President Juan Carlos Varela, 2014–2019)	Negotiations started in 2018, suspended in 2019.
El Salvador	August 21, 2018 (President Nayib Bukele, 2019–present)	Negotiations started in November 2022.
Nicaragua	December 10, 2021 (President Daniel Ortega, 2007–present)	In effect since January 1, 2024
Honduras	March 26, 2023 (President Xiomara Castro, 2022–present)	Negotiations started in May 2023, *Early Harvest Agreement 2024 ¹¹

Source: Compiled using data from EFE (2017, 2023, 2024), El 19 Digital (2023), Expediente Público (2022), García Armuelles (2022), Infobae (2024), La República (2022), Costa Rica's Ministry of Foreign Trade (n.d.).

¹⁰ In 2019, President Laurentino Cortizo (2019–present) decided to reevaluate the FTA negotiations with the PRC initiated during the term of his predecessor, who was allegedly accused of receiving a millionaire bribe from China in exchange for establishing diplomatic relations. Cortizo has emphasized his desire to make the process transparent. To date, there are no indications of progress in the negotiations (Expediente Público, 2023g; Panama America, 2019).

¹¹ This is an agreement prior to the signing of an FTA between Honduras and China, which grants tariff benefits to the parties.

For this reason, cooperation has been a recurring theme in negotiations for establishing relations, official announcements, and associated public narratives, particularly highlighting the potential for developing infrastructure projects (Alamilla Trejos, 2023; Sandino, 2023; Ventas, 2024; Xinhua, 2024).

An example is El Salvador, where President Nayib Bukele frequently highlights the benefits of Chinese cooperation, its scale, and the projects developed (Ventas, 2024). In his words, “Chinese cooperation comes without strings attached, and I’m not saying this as propaganda because I’m sure they don’t need it, but it’s the reality. At least for us, they’ve never imposed any conditions” (AFP, 2022).

This explains the rapid adoption of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global Chinese government project launched in 2013 that, through its national companies, offers to develop major infrastructure projects in transport, energy, and other sectors under flexible terms (Osterloh, 2019). Panama was the first nation to join in 2017, followed by Costa Rica and El Salvador in 2018, Nicaragua in 2022, and Honduras in 2023 (Nedopil, 2023).

Another factor that has recently underscored the relevance of Chinese cooperation was its role as a supplier of resources during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, through donations and sales (Expediente Público, 2021b).

These donations included masks, personal protective equipment, respirators, rapid tests, and other resources received by Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Panama. Vaccines were also included and administered in El Salvador and Nicaragua (Expediente Abierto, 2023)¹³.

Additionally, the PRC emerged as one of the primary sources for purchasing supplies and equipment to address the pandemic. A review of trade statistics between 2020 and 2022 reveals significant increases in regional imports of

¹³ El Salvador and Nicaragua stood out among the main recipients of donations from Chinese cooperation in Central America, in the context of the pandemic.

healthcare items such as masks, respirators, and laboratory reagents (SIECA, 2024)¹⁴.

3. *A Source of Investments:*

Following the establishment of diplomatic ties, the region's governments have harbored expectations of attracting Chinese investors to their national economies.

In Costa Rica, there were aspirations for Chinese capital to see the country as an investment opportunity for expanding into Central America and the United States (AFP, 2007; Rodríguez, 2013). In the case of Panama, it was hoped that Chinese investment would be drawn by the dynamism of its logistics sector and the presence of already-established Chinese companies (ACAN-EFE, 2017; AFP, 2017).

In El Salvador, before and during the initial establishment of relations, great expectations arose that China might invest in port infrastructure, particularly in the southern region and at the Port of La Unión, making the country a regional trade hub (Ellis, 2021).

Meanwhile, the governments of Nicaragua and Honduras, in addition to expressing general hopes of attracting Chinese investors, have sought to revitalize stalled megaprojects through their rapprochement with expectations of securing investments to bring them to fruition. In Nicaragua, this pertains to the development of the interoceanic canal project (Expediente Público, 2023a), and in Honduras, the idea of a dry canal (Romero, 2023).

¹⁴ It is worth noting that although El Salvador declared the process of application and purchase of vaccines against COVID-19 as reserved information (EFE, 2021), research by the Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies (ICEFI) pointed to China as the main supplier in the Central American country's vaccine purchases that year (Castañeda Ancheta, 2022). For more details, see Ricardo Castañeda's opinion article published in *El Mundo*: <https://diario.elmundo.sv/opinion/las-vacunas-y-las-pandemias>

4. *A Notable International Ally:*

The PRC is one of the world's leading economies, a major importer and exporter of goods globally, and a significant source of international financing. Additionally, it holds prominent positions in various international platforms, such as the United Nations Security Council. The interest in having the PRC as an ally among Central American governments reflects these factors.

Countries like Costa Rica and Panama have viewed the PRC as an ally that can facilitate their international projection and recognize its global influence (EFE, 2017; Rodríguez, 2013). Meanwhile, leftist governments such as those of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Xiomara Castro in Honduras see Beijing as an alternative ally to the United States (Ellis, 2023; Medina, 2021; Xiaoping, 2015). This ally supports autocratic and populist leaderships in Central America by backing them in various international forums despite ongoing violations of human and civil rights.

In the case of El Salvador, its continued friction with the U.S. government over its rapprochement with the PRC and accusations of corruption have prompted the Salvadoran administration to strengthen its ties with Beijing (Ventas, 2024).



Promises of an Equitable and Beneficial Relationship

In its official rhetoric and that of its officials, the PRC portrays itself as “a non-hegemonic power, cooperative and promoting international peace, and as a reliable trade partner as well as a responsible global actor” (Rodríguez Aranda, 2015, p. 350).

The PRC frequently references the principles of peaceful coexistence, formulated in the 1950s, as guiding elements of its foreign policy. These include respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, mutual benefit (win-win), and peaceful coexistence (Chávez, 2015).

This discursive tone has been reiterated and reinforced in China’s white papers from [2008](#) and [2016](#), which outline the public guidelines of its policy toward Latin America, advocating for a relationship based on equality and shared benefits (Chávez, 2015; Vattuone, 2022). An excerpt from the 2016 white paper reflects this stance:

Persisting in equal treatment and reciprocal assistance with sincerity is the fundamental premise for China-Latin America and Caribbean relations. Adhering to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, China advocates that countries, regardless of size, strength, or wealth, are all equal members of the international community. China respects the right of Latin American and Caribbean countries to sovereignly choose their path of development and is willing to strengthen exchanges of governance experiences, deepen strategic mutual trust, and continue reciprocal understanding and support on issues of vital interest and high concern related to state sovereignty, territorial integrity, sustainable development, and more. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016)

In this same white paper, China states its commitment to, “in accordance with the principle of mutual benefit,” “establish stable, long-term trade relations, negotiate various trade facilitation agreements including free trade agreements¹⁵ [...] for the healthy and balanced development and structural diversification of trade between China and LAC” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

These and other issues will be addressed and contrasted in subsequent pages.

Concerns About Closer Ties with China

Despite the positive aspects of relations with China often highlighted by Central American leaders and Beijing, there are concerns that question the touted benefits, particularly in trade, cooperation, investment, and governance. There are also worries about the potential for these ties to foster corruption, environmental damage, or security risks. The following are key arguments:

Over the past two decades, **trade asymmetries** between Central America and China have widened. Between 2003 and 2022, the trade deficit with Beijing grew 32.68 times. At the same time, the nature of these trade exchanges has also deteriorated. While imports from China are increasingly dominated by manufactured goods, exports to China have become concentrated in a limited number of products, with raw materials playing a central role.

Various studies have warned that this dynamic may be causing the displacement of local production by Chinese goods in national and international markets, including in the United States and Europe (Dussel Peters, 2015).

It has also been suggested that this could stimulate the primarization of the economy, which is not conducive to the growth and development required in the isthmus. This process exacerbates external dependency by increasing

¹⁵ While China has made rapid progress with the countries of the region in establishing negotiations and concluding free trade agreements, to date it has not shown any genuine commitment to equity and diversification of trade with Central America.

exposure to the price volatility of raw materials, which yield lower and less predictable profits compared to manufactured goods, and to the dynamics of the Chinese economy (Agramont, 2023; Chun Lee & Guo, 2017). This challenges “China’s narrative about the mutual benefits of these relations” (Alfonso et al., 2021, p. 160).

Central American specialists and business leaders have expressed concerns about the haste and, in some cases, lack of transparency with which the governments of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras have reached or are negotiating free trade agreements with China. They fear these agreements may exacerbate the dynamics described above (Expediente Público, 2022c, 2023e, 2023f; Madrid, 2023c).



They note that there is significant lack of knowledge about the PRC, which limits the development of local proposals and the evaluation of those presented by Beijing (Bonilla & Milet García, 2015). Some experts warn that

Central American countries are unable to effectively promote a sophisticated national framework to position their products in the Chinese market, nor do they have the resources or production volumes necessary to attract the interest of Chinese buyers. This is further complicated by the fact that the products offered by Central America can be sourced by China from nearby countries, avoiding high import costs. (Expediente Público, 2023e)

Furthermore, as Victoria Chonn Ching, a non-resident member of the Adrienne Arsht Center for Latin America at the Atlantic Council, has pointed out, governments in the region have also failed to develop a consistent strategic agenda regarding China, one that would enable them to implement the necessary policies to maximize the benefits of this relationship. On the contrary, bilateral relations with the PRC have been characterized by a lack of long-term political continuity (Ardon, 2024d).

In line with this, Fernando García, executive president of the National Association of Industrialists (ANDI) in Honduras, emphasized in an interview for this study that what his country needs is to “work on its industrial policy and its cost structure¹⁶. If Honduras doesn’t do this, it won’t matter who the trade agreement is with, Honduras will remain in deficit” (personal communication, April 23, 2024).

- *Concerns about Chinese Cooperation*

Chinese **cooperation** has also come under scrutiny. Some experts argue that Beijing “uses assistance to advance its overseas economic goals and political objectives, including securing natural resources and reducing the influence of its rivals” (Erthal Abdenur & Neto, 2013, p. 175). This contradicts its stated principle of noninterference in other states’ internal affairs. Critics suggest

¹⁶ In reference to the costs of production, transaction, transportation, security, fiscal, and administrative procedures.

that China is engaged in a modern version of colonialism, offering foreign aid to build infrastructure like roads and deep-water ports to facilitate the extraction of resources (Agramont, 2023, p. 17).

In addition to donations, Chinese cooperation often involves loans. These loans have been criticized for pushing countries—especially those already facing creditworthiness issues due to democratic deficits and pervasive corruption—into a “debt trap”, as they are often unable to repay them (Expediente Público, 2021a). Relatedly, it has been argued that: The absence of any conditions attached to Chinese aid could undermine democracy, governance, and human rights, limit development, weaken social and environmental standards, and increase corruption (Maggiorell, 2019, p. 12).

Other criticisms focus on inconsistencies with the rhetoric of South-South cooperation and mutual benefit. Specific concerns include the limited support provided for critical areas of development for countries like those in Central America—for instance, increasing the added value of their exports and making investments in China (Stallings, 2020, as cited in Agramont, 2023, p. 15). The almost nonexistent transfer of technology, which would enhance export value, and the conditionality of Chinese donations and loans requiring the hiring of Chinese labor, companies, and suppliers also limit benefits for recipient countries (Agramont, 2023).

- Doubts About Investment Promises

Expectations that Central American nations will become recipients of significant Chinese investments are questioned by experts. They point out that Beijing’s interests are directed toward much larger economies, such as those in South America (Dussel Peters, 2023a; Expediente Público, 2021b, 2024). This can be corroborated by consulting databases like the [China Global Investment Tracker](#) by the American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation (2024) or the [China OFDI¹⁷ Monitor for Latin America](#) developed by Dussel Peters (2023b).

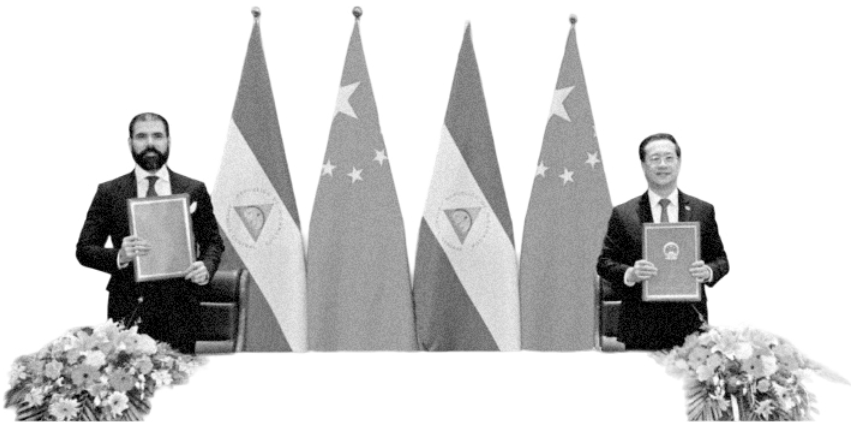
¹⁷ OFDI refers to FDI outflows.

Concerns related to both Chinese cooperation and promised investments also include the potential for corruption and environmental harm, as evidenced in other regions (Expediente Público, 2021a, 2023d). “Empirical studies on the increasing economic relations with China show an association with negative environmental and social impacts” (Agramont, 2023, p. 17).

- *Security and Governance Risks*

Other experts have raised **security** concerns, pointing to the dual-use potential of infrastructure like ports for military purposes. Examples include China’s influence in the Panama Canal zone or its investment promises in the Port of La Unión in El Salvador (Ardon, 2024b; Illueca, 2023).

Additionally, governance-related concerns have been voiced due to the closeness of authoritarian governments, such as those in Nicaragua and El Salvador, to China. Issues include the opaque development of diplomatic relations and Beijing’s influence over local media¹⁸, which could limit the public’s ability to conduct effective social audits of their governments’ ties with Beijing (Alberro, 2023; Expediente Público, 2022d; Meléndez, 2023b).



¹⁸ Chinese media have signed numerous collaboration and cooperation agreements with media outlets in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.

3. Outcomes of Central America's Relations with China

Trade

Over the past two decades, China has transitioned from being a distant trade partner to becoming the region's second-most important trading partner, behind the United States since 2013.

Between 2003 and 2022, exports to China increased 15.87 times, imports grew 28.93 times, and the trade deficit expanded 32.68 times, accounting in 2022 for one-fifth of the region's total trade deficit. While the most significant deficit remains with the United States, it only increased 3.31 times over the same period, with its proportional share declining (see Table 2).

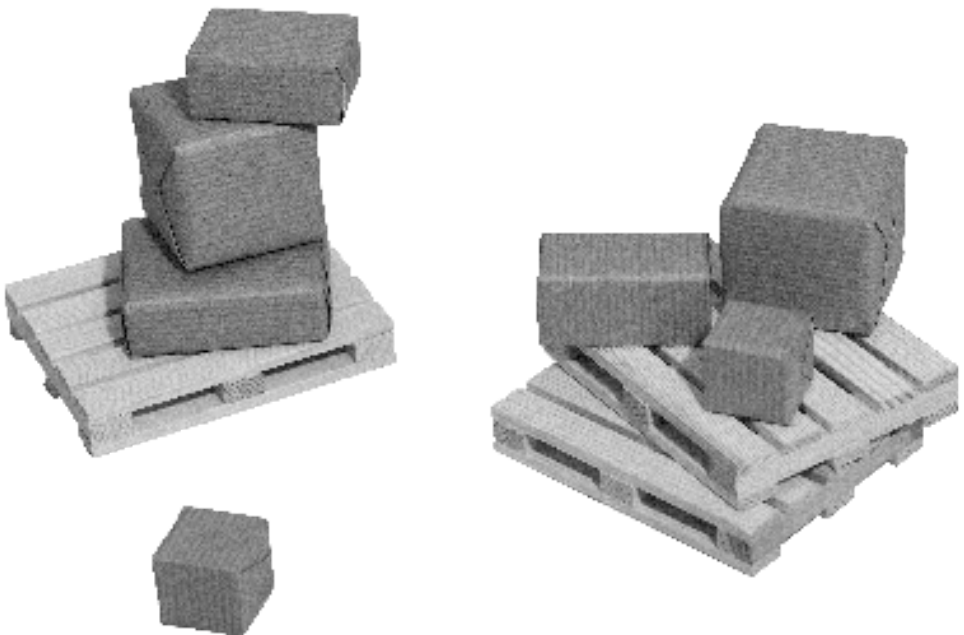


Table 2.

Central America:

Trade with the PRC and the United States (USD Millions and % of Regional Trade)

Trade with	2003		2022		Variation
	Million USD	%	Million USD	%	2003-2022
Trade with China					Times
Exports	112.04	0.9%	1,777.54	3.8%	15.87
Imports	502.98	1.9%	14,552.81	13.8%	28.93
Trade Deficit	-390.94	2.7%	-12,775.26	21.6%	32.68
Trade with United States					
Exports	4,863.56	39.1%	14,948.30	32.1%	3.07
Imports	11,014.92	41.0%	35,279.37	33.4%	3.20
Trade Deficit	-6,151.36	42.6%	-20,331.07	34.4%	3.31

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024). Note: Maquila data not included.

Randall Arce (2016) identifies the beginning of Sino-Central American trade growth in 2003 and 2004. Before that, trade levels were minimal (see Graph 1).

Graph 1. Central America: exports, imports, and trade deficit with the PRC



Source: Own elaboration with data from the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024).
Note: maquiladora data and special categories were not included.

- Trade Dynamics with China

This trade dynamic has been characterized by an increasingly asymmetric trend, favoring China and resulting in trade deficits for Central America. Consequently, China's importance as a trade partner has primarily been as a source of imports rather than as an export destination. This is evident in its rapid rise as a supplier to the region (see Table 3).

Table 3. Central America: PRC's Rank as a Trade Partner

	Exports				Imports				Global Trade			
	2000	2007	2017	2022	2000	2007	2017	2022	2000	2007	2017	2022
Costa Rica	34	2	17	10	13	2	2	2	23	2	2	2
El Salvador	51	17	11	11	22	4	2	2	22	6	3	3
Guatemala	46	14	25	12	19	3	3	2	27	6	4	2
Honduras	61	16	24	31	20	7	2	2	25	9	3	2
Nicaragua	36	23	22	31	20	4	2	2	25	5	2	2
Panama	30	3	3	1	23	3	2	2	28	3	2	2
Central America (extrarregional)	38	2	13	3	15	3	2	2	21	3	2	2

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024).

Note: Data does not include maquila activities or special categories

When analyzing the individual contributions of each country in the region to trade with China, notable particularities emerge. Exports have been concentrated in two countries: Costa Rica was the leading exporter to China until 2018, a position it ceded to Panama starting in 2019 due to the dynamism of its copper mineral exports in recent years.

- Composition and Structure of Trade with China

Regarding imports, their distribution is less unequal, with Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador being the main importers. In terms of the trade deficit, Guatemala has been the largest regional contributor, followed by Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras (see Table 4).

Table 4.
Central America:
Trade with the PRC (2003–2022)



	Million de USD				Percentage (columns total 100%)			
	2003-2007	2008-2012	2013-2017	2018-2022	2003-2007	2008-2012	2013-2017	2018-2022
Exports								
Central America	2,242.8	3,015.1	2,059.0	2,059.0	Total	Total	Total	Total
Costa Rica	1,888.1	2,268.4	948.9	948.9	84.2	75.2	46.1	21.9
El Salvador	24.9	17.4	105.7	105.7	1.1	0.6	5.1	5.5
Guatemala	142.8	150.3	428.2	428.2	6.4	5.0	20.8	7.9
Honduras	53.7	350.2	251.4	251.4	2.4	11.9	12.2	1.7
Nicaragua	18.8	43.5	85.0	85.0	0.8	1.4	4.1	2.4
Panama	114.6	175.3	239.9	239.9	5.1	5.8	11.7	60.6
Imports								
Central America	6,724.3	17,966.5	36,893.6	53,440.2	Total	Total	Total	Total
Costa Rica	2,124.3	5,284.9	9,401.1	12,589.1	31.6	29.4	25.5	23.6
El Salvador	986.2	2,201.1	6,293.0	9,649.3	14.7	12.3	17.1	18.1
Guatemala	1,497.2	3,895.4	6,905.6	12,075.7	22.3	21.7	18.7	22.6
Honduras	536.4	1,808.0	4,600.9	8,849.8	8.0	10.1	12.5	16.6
Nicaragua	835.1	2,005.2	4,082.1	3,772.8	12.4	11.2	11.1	7.1
Panama	745.1	2,770.9	5,610.9	6,503.5	11.1	15.4	15.2	12.2
Trade Balance								
Central America	-4,481.5	-14,951.4	-34,834.5	-48,125.0	Total	Total	Total	Total
Costa Rica	-236.2	-3,016.5	-8,452.3	-11,427.7	5.3	20.2	24.3	23.7
El Salvador	-961.3	-2,183.7	-6,187.3	-9,354.9	21.5	14.6	17.8	19.4
Guatemala	-1,354.4	-3,746.2	-6,477.4	-11,663.3	30.2	25.1	18.6	24.2
Honduras	-482.7	-1,447.9	-4,349.5	-8,757.6	10.8	9.7	12.5	18.2
Nicaragua	-816.3	-1,961.6	-3,997.1	-3,647.6	18.2	13.1	11.5	7.6
Panama	-630.5	-2,595.6	-5,370.9	-3,284.0	14.1	17.4	15.4	6.8

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024).
 Note: Data does not include maquila activities.

Regarding the composition and structure of trade with China, and in agreement with other researchers (Arce Alvarado, 2016; Dussel Peters, 2018), data reveals a significant technological gap. Central American exports are characterized by lower complexity (except for Costa Rica) and concentration in a few goods, while imports from China feature higher technological content and greater diversity (see Table 5).

Costa Rica stands out as an exception due to the high technological content of its exports to China, which also reflects in the combined results for the region, as Costa Rica remains one of its largest exporters to the Asian country.

Costa Rican exports were significantly influenced by the presence of chips and microprocessors that Intel assembled in the country until 2014, when these operations were relocated to Asia. In subsequent years, the technological level and value of Costa Rican exports dropped sharply. It was not until 2018 that the technological content of Costa Rican exports began to recover significantly, primarily due to the expansion of medical product exports. This trend has been further strengthened since 2021 with the return of Intel's assembly operations to the country (Intel Corporation, 2022; Núñez Chacón, 2020, 2023)¹⁹.



¹⁹ If you exclude from Costa Rican exports the electronic products produced by Intel or the exports of medical products made by some companies in Costa Rica (especially notable as of 2018), its export structure is similar to that of the rest of Central America, consisting mainly of basic goods.

Table 5. Central America: Technological Content and Trade Concentration with the PRC

Medium and high technological content (% of total) (Chapters 84-90 of the Harmonized System).

Concentration in the top 3 chapters of the Harmonized System (% of total).

Exports	2003	2007	2012	2017	2022
Central America	75	83	54	6	11
Costa Rica	94	98	86	15	54
El Salvador	3	1	1	0	1
Guatemala	1	11	1	0	0
Honduras	2	5	0	1	0
Nicaragua	0	2	0	0	0
Panama	0	0	0	0	0

2003	2007	2012	2017	2022
81	88	72	46	83
96	98	94	49	86
90	85	83	94	97
96	74	84	69	85
79	87	90	76	88
91	79	89	74	95
95	90	83	86	99

Imports	2003	2007	2012	2017	2022
Central America	26	35	41	40	41
Costa Rica	25	39	46	41	42
El Salvador	24	25	32	44	46
Guatemala	24	30	42	33	38
Honduras	39	42	38	42	43
Nicaragua	34	49	51	48	45
Panama	14	30	33	33	34

2003	2007	2012	2017	2022
30	36	40	40	39
36	38	44	42	41
34	36	32	44	49
27	33	41	31	36
40	40	38	47	47
39	47	48	45	41
30	54	41	42	36

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024).

Note: Data does not include maquila activities.



- Vulnerability of Export Concentration

Based on the results in the previous table, it is important to note that the concentration of the region's exports²⁰ makes it vulnerable to more competitive nations and to a slowdown in the Chinese economy (Arce Alvarado, 2016). This vulnerability becomes more pronounced when these exports, as in recent years, involve a high proportion of raw materials (see Table 6), which tend to experience price and demand instability, unlike manufactured goods, which dominate imports from China.



²⁰ Arce's study focuses on the Central American Common Market (CACM), excluding Panama. However, based on the evidence, his inferences can also be extended to the canal country.

Table 6.

Central America: Top Ten Trade Chapters with the PRC in 2022

Chapter	%						
	CA	CR	ES	GU	HN	NI	PA
Exports							
26 Metal, ores, slag and ash	66.4	0.0	0.0	25.8	0.0	45.7	94.9
90 Instruments and apparatus for optics, photography...	10.0	50.6	0.4	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
2 Meat and edible offal	7.0	29.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	1.8
17 Sugars and confectionery products	6.0	0.0	87.6	40.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
9 Coffee, te, mate and spices	2.2	0.7	0.5	18.5	8.9	0.0	0.4
23 Waste and residues from the food industries...	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4
20 Preparation of vegetables fruits, or other fruits...	1.2	5.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
74 Copper and its manufactures	1.1	2.0	0.0	2.3	75.3	0.0	0.0
85 Machinery, equipment, and electrical materials...	0.8	3.7	0.6	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
44 Wood, charcoal, and wooden manufactures	0.7	1.0	0.0	1.4	0.6	11.0	0.4
Subtotal	96.9	93.5	89.1	88.6	84.9	58.2	99.9
Imports							
85 Machinery, equipment, and electrical materials	16.2	18.5	19.4	12.9	15.5	18.1	13.4
84 Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery...	14.9	13.6	19.8	12.0	16.4	15.5	12.8
72 Foundry, iron, and steel	8.3	9.1	5.6	6.4	14.9	3.3	9.1
87 Motor vehicles, tractors, bicycles...	8.1	7.9	5.3	11.3	8.8	7.0	6.1
39 Plastics and their manufactures	6.6	5.2	10.1	7.0	5.0	4.5	6.4
73 Iron and steel foundry products	4.2	3.7	3.0	3.1	3.6	4.4	9.9
29 Organic chemical products	3.2	4.2	1.7	5.9	1.5	1.4	1.2
94 Furniture, medical surgical, furniture...	2.9	4.2	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.7	4.1
40 Rubber and its manufactures	2.9	2.5	1.7	4.0	2.7	4.0	2.6
76 Aluminum and its manufactures	2.3	1.3	1.5	4.3	1.1	1.3	3.6
Subtotal	69.6	70.1	70.6	69.1	71.9	62.2	69.2

Source: Compiled from data provided by the Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration (2024).

Note: Data does not include maquila activities.

- Limited Dynamism in Exports to China

In general, Central American exports to China have experienced limited dynamism compared to imports, largely due to the lack of complementarity between the region's productive structure and that of the Asian nation (Arce Alvarado, 2016).

As previously noted, the region lacks sufficient resources and production capacity to attract the interest of Chinese buyers. Additionally, China can source similar products from nearby countries, thereby avoiding high import costs (Expediente Público, 2023e). Central American business leaders have also expressed a lack of knowledge about the Chinese market, including its culture and language, which limits their ability to develop business opportunities (Madrid, 2023b; Madrid & Ardon, 2023).

Chinese Investments

Despite the encouraging promises and narratives surrounding Chinese investments, various sources indicate that such investments have been minimal. According to a publication by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), between 2000 and 2016, Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)²¹ accounted for just 0.34% of the total received by Central America during that period (Dussel Peters, 2018). Similarly, a report by the Central American Monetary Council stated that Chinese FDI received by Central America and the Dominican Republic between 2010 and 2021 accounted for only 0.3% (USD 330 million) of the total received during that time (USD 103 billion) (González H., 2022).

Due to its small scale, it can sometimes be challenging to obtain data on Chinese FDI in the region. When present and recorded, it is often categorized under "other."

²¹ Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is an investment made in a country by foreign persons or entities. FDI is reported from the host country.

Nevertheless, academic efforts to identify and characterize Chinese investment worldwide have resulted in databases such as the [China Global Investment Tracker](#) and the [Monitor of China's OFDI \(Outward Foreign Direct Investment ²²\) in Latin America and the Caribbean](#). While these sources may present discrepancies with each other or with official data, they remain valuable tools for studying Chinese investment.

For the purposes of this report, the second source was chosen, as it provides more detailed information on Chinese investments in the region and a broader data set.

The Monitor of China's OFDI identified 17 investments in Central America between 2000 and 2022, one-third of which were made by Chinese state-owned enterprises (see Table 7). These investments totaled USD 1.5052 billion, distributed as follows: 49.8% in Panama, 23.9% in Honduras, 13.3% in Nicaragua, 12.8% in Costa Rica, and 0.3% in El Salvador. During the same period, Chinese entities made 600 investments worldwide, including those in Central America, amounting to USD 184.619 billion. Thus, Chinese investments in Central America represented only 0.82% of total Chinese OFDI flows to Latin America.

- Employment Impacts

In terms of job creation, these investments have not led to substantial outcomes. Investments in the region have generated an estimated 7,948 jobs, concentrated in Costa Rica (73.3%), Panama (14.2%), Honduras (6%), Nicaragua (5%), and El Salvador (1.5%). These jobs account for just 1.3% of the 629,239 jobs that Chinese investments are estimated to have generated across Latin America.

²² OFDI, which stands for “outflows of foreign direct investment”, is the investment that national individuals or entities make abroad. The OFDI is reported from the issuing country.

Table 7.
Central America:
Chinese Investments (2000–2022)

Recipient	Year	Investor Company	Type of investor	Destination Sector	Investment Million USD	Jobs Quantity
Costa Rica	2006	Aoxing Pharmaceutical Company, Inc.	Public	Hospitality	5.0	126
Costa Rica	2016	Shanghai Feilo Acoustics Co. Ltd	Private	Electronics	180.0	270
Costa Rica	2018	Feilo Sylvania	Private	Electronics	3.5	370
Costa Rica	2019	Didi Chuxing Technology (Didi)	Private	Transportation	3.0	5,000
Costa Rica	2019	Anhui Jianghuai Horticulture Seeds Co	Public	Agriculture	0.7	50
El Salvador	2008	Shenyang Rrzk Co Ltd	Private	Chemical	4.0	120
Honduras	2011	Yuanchi Rubber Sporting Goods	Private	Chemical	10.0	200
Honduras	2018	Sinohydro Corporation Limited	Public	Energy	350.0	280
Nicaragua	2014	Xinwei Telecom Enterprise Group	Private	Communications	200.0	400
Panama	2007	China Fishery Group Ltd	Private	Food and fishing	29.0	29
Panama	2011	Huawei Technologies	Private	Telecommunications	58.0	58
Panama (ZLC)	2014	ReneSola	Private	Electronisc	4.2	120
Panama	2015	Solar Power	Private	Energy	377.7	175
Panama	2015	China State Construction Engineering	Public	Business Services	193.7	250
Panama (ZLC)	2015	Huawei Technologies	Private	Telecommunications	26.4	200
Panama (ZLC)	2018	Huawei Technologies	Private	Telecommunications	40.0	200
Panama	2018	Huawei Technologies	Private	Telecommunications	20.0	100
Total					1.505.2	7.948

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Chinese OFDI Monitor in Latin America and the Caribbean (Dussel Peters, 2023b). Note: ZLC stands for Colon Free Zone



- *Concerns Over Chinese Investors*

Some of the investor companies from the previous list have been the subject of investigations by Expediente Público and other media outlets due to well-known and concerning business practices:

- **Xinwei (private):** This telecommunications company is owned by the opaque businessman Wang Jing, who is linked to the Beijing government and was supposed to build an interoceanic canal in Nicaragua. The company obtained licenses through a process alleged to be rigged and, after promising investments of over USD 2 billion in the country, some claim it has only invested USD 200 million. To date, it has ceased offering mobile internet and telephone services, reportedly due to a lack of viability (Expediente Público, 2023d; Vásquez, 2020)
- **SinoHydro, part of the PowerChina group (public):** A company dedicated to energy project development. In Ecuador, it has been accused of running a corruption network that hired fake consultants and of being involved in structural problems with a dam it helped build (Expediente Público, 2023d).
- **Huawei (private):** A telecommunications company accused of conducting espionage on behalf of the Chinese government. Recent investigations by Expediente Público revealed that this company established confidentiality clauses in memorandums signed with the Honduran state-owned telecommunications company Hondutel. This has raised concerns, as through this arrangement, Huawei could gain access to Hondutel's client information and have control over cameras and emergency lines offered by the Honduran company (Ardon, 2024a).

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that Chinese investments have not met expected dimensions, and their local impact has been negligible or even questionable. This is due to the association of some of these investors with practices that could harm the interests of Central American nations.

Official Chinese Cooperation

Regarding official Chinese cooperation, narratives often highlight its virtues, emphasizing the lack of conditions and mutual benefits for the parties involved. One challenge in studying PRC cooperation has been the limited availability of information due to the discretionary manner in which it is managed. This practice benefits non-transparent governments, such as some in Central America.

In response to this challenge, Expediente Abierto has dedicated efforts over the past two years to generate information on this topic, developing a database of official Chinese cooperation projects in Central America. For this purpose, it drew inspiration from the methodology developed by AidData for tracking underreported financial flows (TUFF, its acronym in English) and used some data identified by this source for the period 2000–2017 as a starting point. Afterward, new records and updates have been carried out exclusively by Expediente Abierto. The database is updated as of February 2023, with new updates expected in the coming months.

To date, the Expediente Abierto database has recorded 186 projects²³, including various indicators for each to allow detailed characterization. Due to space limitations, we will not delve into methodological issues, but we invite readers to visit the website of the [China Observatory in Central America](https://www.expedienteabierto.org/proyectos-rpc-ca/)²⁴ developed by Expediente Abierto. There, the database is available, along with explanations of its use and research and analysis on China's influence in the region.

Based on the available data in the aforementioned database, PRC cooperation in Central America for the period 2007–February 2023 is estimated at USD 1.4896 billion. This figure includes both completed projects (119) and those in

²³ These records include projects that are completed, in implementation, suspended or cancelled, officially committed, and projects for which there have been only promises. They also include umbrella or general project records, which cover specific projects.

²⁴ If you have problems with the hyperlink, copy and paste the following link into an internet search engine that will take you to the China Observatory in Central America: <https://www.expedienteabierto.org/proyectos-rpc-ca/>

the process of implementation (25). Of the total amount, 52.9% corresponds to completed projects, and 59.4% to loans.

By country, Costa Rica has been the main recipient of Chinese cooperation in the region, which is not surprising, given its long-standing diplomatic relationship with Beijing. However, in recent years, El Salvador has emerged as a prominent recipient of cooperation from the Asian nation (Table 8).



Table 8. Central America

Official Chinese Cooperation in the Region (2007–February 2023)

– Completed or In-Progress Projects

AMOUNT IN MILLIONS US\$

Region or country	Status	Donations	Loans	Sub total	%	% of cooperation Received in relation to Central America
CENTRAL AMERICA	Completed	401,2	386,7	787,9	52,9	
	Implementation	203,5	498,1	701,7	47,1	
	Sub total	604,7	884,9	1.489,6	100,0	100,0
	%	40,6	59,4	100,0		
COSTA RICA	Completed	240,0	25,0	265,0	12,8	
	Implementation	14,5	448,1	462,7	22,4	
	Sub total	254,5	473,1	727,7	100,0	48,9
	%	35,0	65,0	100,0		
EL SALVADOR	Completed	136,0	20,0	156,3	12,8	
	Implementation	129,0	-	129,0	22,4	
	Sub total	265,3	20,0	285,0	100,0	19,2
	%	93,0	7,0	100,0		
HONDURAS	Completed	-	301,7	301,7	100,0	
	Implementation	-	-	0,0	0,0	
	Sub total	0,0	301,7	301,7	100,0	20,3
	%	0,0	100,0	100,0		
NICARAGUA	Completed	-	5,0	5,0	7,7	
	Implementation	60,0	-	60,0	92,3	
	Sub total	60,0	5,0	65,0	100,0	4,4
	%	92,3	7,7	100,0		
PANAMA	Completed	24,9	35,0	59,9	54,5	
	Implementation	-	50,0	50,0	45,5	
	Sub total	24,9	85,0	109,0	100,0	7,4
	%	22,6	77,3	100,0		

Source: Own elaboration with data from the database of Official Chinese Cooperation Projects in Central America (2007–February 2023) (Expediente Abierto, 2023)

Through Chinese cooperation, countries in the region have been able to promote various projects. Noteworthy among these are infrastructure projects that are heavily publicized by Central American leaders as part of their political legacies²⁵. However, despite the benefits that may be attributed to these projects, recurring concerning or at least questionable practices deserve attention, such as:

1. *Mandatory hiring of Chinese companies for infrastructure development*

In infrastructure works, whether financed through donations or loans, the PRC often imposes a condition that Chinese labor, companies, and suppliers be the primary implementers (Slipak, 2014). This challenges their rhetoric about the non-conditionality of their cooperation and the narrative of mutual benefits, as it excludes or limits the participation of local actors, hinders the exchange of expertise with them, and can increase costs due to the associated transfer of personnel and materials from China.

Considering that construction is one of the most dynamic sectors for stimulating an economy, given its broad local demand for inputs and services, the fact that these elements are provided from abroad significantly reduces its impact and calls into question the magnitude of the economic benefits associated with a project, as is the case with infrastructure developments under Chinese cooperation.

An example illustrating this is the construction of a tourist pier in Puerto de La Libertad, El Salvador, at a cost of USD 24 million financed through PRC cooperation. The project is being executed by the state-owned China Harbour Engineering Company Limited (CHEC, Ltd.). Regarding this ongoing project, despite its announced completion by late 2023 (Arévalo, 2024; Ministerio de Turismo de El Salvador, 2023), an [Expediente Público investigation](#) found that 90% of the hired personnel are Chinese, violating Salvadoran legislation that mandates prioritizing local personnel to generate jobs and income (Lemus, 2023).

²⁵ Some examples are the National Stadium of Costa Rica, in the case of former President Óscar Arias, or the National Library of El Salvador, in the case of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele.

2. *Inefficient project execution*

Chinese companies developing infrastructure projects worldwide have frequently faced allegations of cost overruns, delays, or quality issues in their works. This can be confirmed with a quick internet search.

In the region, a notable example is the state-owned CHEC, Ltd. and the problems it has encountered in the expansion of National Route 32, connecting the cities of San José and Limón, in Costa Rica (Expediente Abierto, 2024). The project, which began in November 2017, had an original cost of USD 485.6 million, of which the Costa Rican government was to directly cover USD 90 million, with the remaining amount being a loan from China. However, it is estimated that the works, initially scheduled for completion in September 2020, will now finish in December 2024, with a cost increase to USD 552.5 million, including a USD 157 million contribution from the Costa Rican government to address budgetary adjustments (Pomareda García, 2024).

The Minister of Finance, Nogui Acosta, stated in a recent interview that the continuous delays and cost overruns are attributed to “problems related to the contractor, such as an outdated schedule; lack of personnel; lack of coordination with the executing unit; failure to comply with recommendations made by the unit on works that should have been completed; and the fact that they have yet to design the drainage systems” (Pomareda García, 2024).

3. *Lack of transparency*

Projects funded through Chinese cooperation are often developed with considerable secrecy, without disclosing the criteria (technical, economic, social, etc.) used to determine them. A notable example is the failed project between Costa Rica and China to jointly operate a refinery, for which they planned to invest USD 1.3 billion to improve the infrastructure of an existing plant in the province of Limón, Costa Rica.

The project, known as SORESCO (a joint venture between Costa Rica’s Refinadora Costarricense de Petróleo, Recope, and China National Petroleum Corporation International, CNPCI), failed amid numerous allegations and

criticisms, including one from Costa Rica’s Comptroller General’s Office (CGR), which stated that the joint venture violated current laws granting Recope a monopoly over oil and questioned the objectivity of the project’s feasibility report (Expediente Abierto, 2024).

On this matter, former Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís said in a recent Expediente Abierto investigation (2024):

“I never quite understood the point of having an oil refinery in Costa Rica when we were trying to eliminate its footprint. If it had been a pilot project for generating new fuels [...] hydrogen [...], it would have made more sense.” He added that SORESCO was a “refinery that did not align with the logic of our development in energy matters”.

Another characteristic of projects backed by Chinese cooperation is that the terms upon which they are based and the information regarding their development are not typically made public. This limits access to information and hinders social auditing efforts by citizens. One example is the construction of the National Library of El Salvador. The Salvadoran government avoided providing details, even declaring the information related to the project as classified. It only publicized the general features of the building and stated that its total cost of USD 54 million would be covered by China. However, a journalistic report revealed that the Salvadoran government allocated USD 3.35 million to acquire land for the new building (Flores, 2022).

Another example of non-transparent practices is the donation of housing by China in Nicaragua. In January 2022, the Nicaraguan government announced that China would donate USD 60 million for the construction of 12,084 houses over three years. However, despite reports of housing deliveries under this project in 2023, there is no budgetary evidence to date that Nicaragua has received funds from China for this purpose. The funds were not even included in the General Budget of the Republic for 2024 (La Prensa, 2023).

An additional example of secrecy and lack of transparency is the donation of USD 285 million by China for the reconstruction of schools in Honduras. This initiative was announced by President Xiomara Castro in November 2023 and formalized through an agreement signed in March 2024, although no concrete details have been disclosed. Only vague estimates from officials suggest that approximately 1,200 schools would benefit (Madrid, 2024; Poder Popular, 2024; Secretaría de Gobernación Justicia y Descentralización de Honduras, 2024).

An investigation by Expediente Público revealed that this donation was not included in the 2024 General Budget, raising concerns about the integrity of its management (Madrid, 2024).

4. *Debt Trap?*

As previously noted, concerns persist about loans extended by China due to their flexible conditions, which may not adequately consider the repayment capacities of recipient countries, especially those with democratic and institutional deficits.

A notable example is Sri Lanka. Over the past few decades, China lent the country millions of dollars to develop unprofitable infrastructure projects, including an airport, a port, and a conference center (Infobae, 2022). In 2017, Sri Lanka was unable to service its USD 1.4 billion debt for constructing the Hambantota port. When Beijing refused to restructure the debt, the agreed solution was to transfer port operations to a Chinese company for 99 years. In exchange, the Sri Lankan government received USD 1.12 billion, which was used to bolster reserves and address short-term debt payments (Infobae, 2022).

Analysts and experts have warned that China may have a dual-use interest in the port for military purposes or might already be utilizing it as part of its influence projection strategy (América, 2022; Infobae, 2020).

Although Chinese loans in Central America have been relatively limited compared to other regions like Africa or South America, and defaults have

not occurred, the so-called debt trap became a renewed concern in the region by late 2023. The Nicaraguan government announced a loan of approximately USD 400 million to construct a new international airport, which was ratified by Nicaragua's parliament in February 2024 (Centroamérica 360, 2023; Olivares, 2024b).

Beyond concerns about corruption allegations against CAMC Engineering Co. Ltd. (CAMCE)—the company assigned to develop the project—and accusations of noncompliance with public procurement laws in how the project was awarded, the necessity of the new airport has been questioned. The airport is expected to have an annual capacity of 3.5 million passengers, a figure far exceeding the 634,807 passengers²⁶ received in 2022 by the Augusto C. Sandino International Airport, the country's main airport located in Managua. This raises doubts about the investment's profitability and, consequently, the ability to repay the associated loan, which could ultimately fall on taxpayers (Divergentes, 2023).

Although Nicaragua's public debt, equivalent to 58.1% of its GDP (USD 10.021 billion) as of the most recent data from September 2023, remains within parameters considered acceptable, its steady increase has been a concern for years. Adding to this is the possibility that China could exacerbate the situation by facilitating significant loans with questionable viability, as mentioned above²⁷ (Ministerio de Hacienda y Crédito Público de Nicaragua, 2023; Olivares, 2024a).

These concerns also extend to El Salvador, which faces a high level of public debt estimated at approximately 87% of its GDP (USD 29.59 billion)²⁸ at the end of 2023 (Banco Central de Reserva de El Salvador, n.d.-c, n.d.-b, n.d.-a). Given the close ties between Nayib Bukele's administration and China, there are possibilities that Beijing could offer the financing his government needs, potentially increasing debt and the PRC's influence in the country.

²⁶ This figure has been underpinned by the increase in African, Caribbean, and South American migrants, among others, in recent years, who have been using Nicaragua as a shortcut to reach the United States, given the migratory facilities granted by Managua to their countries (Divergentes, 2024).

Governance

To this point, special attention has been given to the material dimension of Sino-Central American relations; however, these have other political and institutional ramifications. While space constraints prevent a more comprehensive discussion here, and acknowledging the need to explore the topic further in the future, this section addresses some relevant aspects of relations with China that are impacting governance in the region.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify that governance refers to the “system of values, policies, and institutions by which a society manages its affairs” (UNDP, 2000, as cited in INEGI, 2017, p. 6).

During the research for this work, three aspects of the relationship between Central America and the PRC were identified that, in our view, have had and continue to have an impact on governance in the region. These aspects have given rise to dynamics that manifest as follows:

1. *Influence on Foreign Policy*

When establishing relations with the PRC, Central American countries were required to adhere to the One-China policy (Aguilar, 2014). This meant severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan, an important partner and an expanding market for their exports, leading to significant economic and social consequences that

²⁷ As a point of comparison, we can consider the debt data of 2017, prior to the pandemic and socio-political crisis of 2018 that have kept the country isolated since then: public debt was equivalent to 47.1% of GDP or, in other words, to USD 6,486.7 million (Central Bank of Nicaragua, 2023).

²⁸ Currently, the Central Reserve Bank of El Salvador omits from its Total Public Debt statistics what the Government owes in pensions from the defunct Pension Obligations Trust (FOP), resulting in an artificially low public debt/GDP ratio. Within the framework of this work, both concepts have been added. A more extensive explanation can be found in the following article published in *El Diario de Hoy*: The red numbers of finances that the Government nuances or hides.

neither the region's countries have managed to address adequately nor the People's Republic of China has shown interest in helping resolve.

In this regard, the experience of Honduras, the most recent Central American country to sever ties with Taiwan to establish relations with the PRC in March 2023, provides two notable examples. The first concerns shrimp exporters, who have faced increased export costs to their main market, Taiwan, due to a 20% tariff imposed by the latter. The PRC is not a viable alternative to Taiwan as it offers 50% lower prices (Madrid, 2023d). According to the National Aquaculture Association of Honduras (ANDAH), this situation has resulted in the loss of 10,000 jobs and USD 15 million in foreign exchange for the country (Centroamérica 360, 2024).

The second case involves 92 Honduran students who were on scholarships in Taiwan provided by the local government. After the diplomatic break, Xiomara Castro's government had committed to covering their expenses. However, as of early April 2024, this had not occurred, leaving the students and their families without answers (Ardón, 2024c).

Other manifestations of China's influence on Central American foreign policy include the region's governments adopting favorable or uncritical stances regarding allegations of human rights violations in Tibet, Hong Kong, or Xinjiang attributed to Beijing's regime. Most recently, Nicaragua led the expulsion of Taiwan from the Central American Parliament (Parlacen), facilitating the PRC's entry as an observer (Castillo Vado, 2023; Doublethink Lab, 2023; Embajada de la República de Nicaragua en Beijing, 2023).

An additional instance of such influence is El Salvador's rapprochement with authoritarian African countries where Beijing has significant presence and sway, as noted by international relations specialist Napoleón Campos (personal communication, April 11, 2024)²⁹. While these countries hold little economic relevance for El Salvador, they could be politically significant for Bukele's government in garnering international support against its critics.

Lorenzo Maggiorel (2019), a researcher specializing in relations between Latin America and the Indo-Pacific, warns that: "By strategically utilizing its foreign aid and trade relations, China has been able to increase its influence in global affairs to advance its interests in developing regions such as Africa, South Asia, and Latin America" (p. 2).

A foreign policy conditioned by the interests of third-party states can lead regional countries to deprioritize the interests of their citizens and fail to capitalize on the potential benefits of developing an independent diplomacy tailored to their strategic goals.

2. *Opacity in Bilateral Relations*

Relations with the PRC have been conducted with considerable discretion. They have often taken on a markedly personalistic character, involving family members of the presidents. In El Salvador, Karim Bukele has been reported to lead relations with China; in Nicaragua, Laureano Ortega and his siblings, children of the president and vice president, play a similar role. Likewise, in Honduras, the president's children have participated in official visits to China (Expediente Público, 2022d; Madrid, 2023b; Meléndez, 2023b).

²⁹ Nicaragua has also recently experienced a rapprochement with African countries, which do not stand out for their democratic qualities. Although its analysis goes beyond the purposes of this work, it would be useful to delve into the subject in future research.

In an interview with Expediente Público (2022d), Salvadoran academic Ricardo Valencia stated that China perceives diplomatic bureaucracy as slow and, as part of its strategy, prefers to develop relations through the presidents' families, leaving foreign ministries to handle the “legal and administrative support” of such relations. He further explained:

It is quite clear that Bukele and Ortega have very little trust in their diplomatic apparatus and manage everything personally (...) The Chinese know that political decisions will not be made through the foreign ministry but rather through the presidents' envoys. [...]

It is no coincidence that as Ortega and Bukele become more authoritarian, they rely increasingly on China [...]. For this reason, these two governments have attempted to make their relationship with China highly familial (Expediente Público, 2022d).

On the other hand, after establishing diplomatic relations, Central American and Chinese governments have signed numerous agreements on various matters, including diplomacy, economic cooperation, and more. However, there are concerns that the contents of some agreements remain undisclosed or that attempts have been made to prevent their publication. Allegations of noncompliance in processing these agreements and their lack of specificity have also been raised. Some examples:

In the case of Panama, Alonso Illueca (2023) noted that between June 2017 and December 2018, the country signed 47 agreements with the PRC, some in secret or with confidentiality clauses disclosed only under pressure from local civil society. Illueca also pointed out: “The vast majority of these agreements were not subjected to the approval process mandated by Panama’s National Assembly as required by the Political Constitution” (p. 17).

To worsen matters, in 2019, then-President Juan Carlos Varela was accused—though not proven—of accepting a bribe of approximately USD 142 million from China in exchange for breaking ties with Taiwan (Illueca, 2023).

In El Salvador, an example of the vagueness of agreements signed with China is evident in the framework cooperation agreement signed in 2019 and ratified by its parliament in 2021. President Nayib Bukele claimed that the agreement, valued at USD 500 million, would fund various projects. However, the ratified document specifies neither this amount nor the mentioned projects (Divergentes, 2021).

In Nicaragua, while official media often report on agreements with the PRC, their contents are rarely accessible to the public unless ratified by the National Assembly, which then publishes them on its website. As mentioned earlier, Nicaragua's relationship with China is largely shaped by the terms negotiated between Chinese diplomats and Laureano Ortega, who similarly manages relations with Russia.

Regarding Honduras, an investigation by Expediente Público revealed a memorandum of understanding between the Honduran Telecommunications Company (Hondutel) and Huawei, which included a confidentiality clause mandating secrecy about negotiations (Madrid, 2023a).

Thus, opacity undermines the integrity of public institutions and fosters an environment prone to corruption, personalism, and lack of accountability to citizens' interests. Instead of strengthening democratic governance, these practices exacerbate inequality and limit informed public participation.

3. *Dissemination of Biased Narratives*

The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, providing information, and influencing perceptions.

This has not gone unnoticed by the PRC. Experts have highlighted that under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, Beijing has pursued an aggressive communication strategy to promote its strategic interests, leveraging a broad range of state-run media such as China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Xinhua News Agency. These outlets have collaboration agreements with Central American public media (Alberro, 2023; Meléndez, 2023b; Rodríguez Aranda, 2015). On this topic, Javier Meléndez (2023b) warned:

“China’s presence should concern us [...] we will see a notable increase in anti-Western rhetoric through local elites and pro-government media, which will amplify the benefits of the Chinese model and discredit the values of liberal democracies.”

A telling example is the [Document 9 – Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere](#), a classified internal CCP document leaked to the press in 2013, shortly after Xi Jinping took office. The document highlighted seven Western influences deemed dangerous to Chinese society for their subversive potential, such as constitutional democracy, Western values, civil society activism, neoliberalism, press freedom, and critiques of China’s history and political system (Buckley, 2013; Cardenal, 2022; ChinaFile, 2013).

As part of its communication strategy, the PRC has, in recent years, invited hundreds of journalists from Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras to visit China, with all expenses paid. During these visits, Chinese officials present itineraries emphasizing the One-China Principle, the benefits of Chinese cooperation, and rebuttals to human rights accusations, such as those concerning the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. The expectation is that, upon returning home, these journalists will produce favorable articles about China (Expediente Público, 2022b, 2023b, 2023c).

In El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, China's rhetoric has been warmly received. It resonates with these governments' criticisms of perceived U.S. hegemony and their desire to construct an alternative order, rooted in multipolarity under China's leadership (Meléndez, 2023a).

The misinformation promoted by China creates a polished image of itself and its regional relations, severely harming Central American citizens' interests by undermining their ability to form critical, evidence-based public opinions. By presenting a skewed and partial view of the benefits of these relationships, the purported virtues of the Chinese model, and downplaying or ignoring associated problems, citizens are left unable to fully grasp the implications of policies and agreements with Beijing or the agendas promoted by their own governments.

The three dynamics described negatively impact the governance of countries in the region, especially those with greater democratic deficits and institutional weaknesses. Matt Schrader, an expert on Chinese affairs at the International Republican Institute, told *Expediente Público* (2022a) that *only if your country has truly good journalistic institutions, a strong press, a robust judiciary, and really solid transparency, disclosure, and accountability laws, are you much less likely to see all these worrying effects, such as the reinforcement of cronyism and corruption.*

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the PRC has transitioned from being an irrelevant actor with no diplomatic recognition in Central America to becoming its second-largest trading partner, establishing relations with all nations in the region except Guatemala, which maintains ties with Taiwan.

This rapprochement has been shaped by a series of promises and expectations. The PRC often portrays itself as a reliable, altruistic, and supportive partner committed to mutual benefit, claiming not to impose conditions on its allies or interfere in their internal affairs. On the other hand, Central American countries have approached China with the aim of boosting exports, attracting investments, obtaining generous cooperation, and securing a significant international ally. In cases like El Salvador, Honduras, and especially Nicaragua, the alignment with China is framed within contexts of severe democratic deficits, weak accountability, and clearly authoritarian and populist projects.

However, in light of evidence from the 2003–2022 period, the results for the region can be considered disappointing, as most expectations for access to new markets and investments have either not been met or only partially achieved.

On the commercial front, the relationships have been marked by asymmetry. The trade deficit and the worsening terms of trade have shown a growing trend during the analyzed period. Central American exports have concentrated on a few goods, with a significant share of raw materials, which are characterized by price volatility. In contrast, imports from China are more diverse, with a strong presence of manufactured goods.

The case of Costa Rica could be an exception due to its exports with high technological content. However, this characteristic is fragile due to its dependence on a small number of companies.

Despite the significant trade deficits with China, most countries in the region have established free trade agreements or are in negotiations to do so. This raises concerns as it may further exacerbate trade imbalances. Experts and business leaders have noted a significant lack of understanding about China in the region, which is reflected in the difficulties Central America faces in boosting its exports to the Asian nation.

In terms of investments, the massive inflow of Chinese capital anticipated after the establishment of relations has not materialized. Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) remains minimal, making it difficult to analyze, as it is often overshadowed by more prominent investors such as the United States or Europe.

Regarding cooperation, the results can be considered mixed. While donations and loans from China have enabled the region to advance some projects—particularly in infrastructure—they have been implemented with little transparency, inefficiencies, and under conditions. This contradicts China's narrative that its cooperation is unconditional and focuses on mutual benefit (win-win).

Whether through donations or loans, China often imposes the condition that projects, particularly infrastructure-related ones, are developed primarily by Chinese labor, companies, and suppliers. This limits the participation of local actors and the transfer of knowledge, while also leading to cost overruns due to the transportation of materials from China.

In terms of governance in the region, China has demonstrated an influence that raises concerns. It has conditioned its Central American partners' relationships with Taiwan, a key donor and export destination for several countries in the region. It fosters—or at least does not discourage—bilateral relations conducted under a veil of opacity, characterized by heightened nepotism, especially in the cases of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Moreover, it promotes a narrative favorable to its interests in the region, cultivating a polished image of the PRC and its relations with Central America through partnerships and connections with local media and journalists.

The PRC, like any other global power, pursues strategic interests and does not hesitate to use diplomatic, economic, and media tools to achieve them, even if this conflicts with the interests of other nations, including its own allies.

Given all this, it is necessary to critically and comprehensively review the terms of the relationships between Central America and the People's Republic of China to ensure better outcomes for the region.

Recommendations

To Central American Civil Society and Cooperating Partners

Given the secrecy and opacity that have characterized the diplomatic and cooperation relations between Central America and China, civil society plays an important role in promoting transparency. Therefore, organizations, media outlets, and other democratic actors are urged to:

- Pay greater attention to Sino-Central American relations, promoting social auditing processes of their agreements, the actors involved, and the projects being implemented, whether these involve donations or loans.
- Foster training processes for activists, researchers, journalists, policymakers, and other democratic actors to improve critical understanding of China's influence and operations in Central America. This would aim to promote greater transparency and accountability in these relations and, in turn, contribute to strengthening regional governance.

- Oversee the development of Sino-Central American relations to identify potential cases of covert or even coercive influence that the PRC may be exerting on local actors and their effects.
- Monitor influence efforts by the PRC and the CCP in media outlets, including social media platforms.

The above recommendations require technical capacities and financial resources, which are often scarce among Central American actors, organizations, and media outlets. Therefore, the support of cooperating allies is essential to effectively address the effects of China in Central America. Hence:

- The community of cooperating partners in Central America is urged to provide technical assistance and resources so that local actors can enhance their capacities for analysis, monitoring, and response to the adverse influence of the PRC in the region.

To Academia

Although there has been some interest in relations with China in recent years, the research conducted for this work revealed the persistence of significant knowledge gaps on the subject. Studies with a Central American or local perspective are limited, while those with Latin American or South American viewpoints are more common. However, their conclusions are often difficult to fully extrapolate to the isthmus due to its unique characteristics. Furthermore, the available studies have paid little attention to the microeconomic, social, or political dimensions of these relationships.

Given the above, universities, think tanks, researchers, and academia in general are encouraged to:

- Form multi- and interdisciplinary research teams to analyze Sino-Central American relations.

- Conduct research with national and regional approaches that go beyond macroeconomic aspects to also consider the effects of trade exchanges with China and its investments, as well as their impact on wages and employment, production chains, governance, development, among others.
- Develop comparative studies on negotiation experiences with China across various countries and sectors (political, economic, social, etc.).
- Promote the development of synergies between academia and other actors such as civil society organizations, media outlets, political groups, business leaders, policymakers, among others, to strengthen collective understanding of China, its influence in the region, and the potential opportunities that Central America could leverage.

To the Business Sector

There are significant concerns within the region's business circles regarding commercial engagement with China. This has been particularly evident in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, whose governments have actively promoted free trade agreements. Business leaders fear that local production could be displaced by Chinese imports and find it extremely challenging to do business in the Asian country due to a lack of knowledge about its language, customs, legal procedures, among other factors.

In light of this, it is suggested that Central American business associations:

- Develop strong collective positions regarding commercial engagement with China. This involves conducting thorough analyses of the potential economic benefits and risks involved and adopting a proactive stance to defend the interests of their bloc or sector (industrial, manufacturing, agricultural, etc.).
- More assertively demand that their respective governments include them in the processes of trade negotiations with China.
- Foster training spaces where the region's business leaders can improve their understanding of the Chinese market, business culture, legal and bureaucratic aspects, among others.

To Governments

Central American governments have lacked an objective stance in their relations with China, maintaining a series of unrealistic expectations about potential benefits, which, as previously mentioned, have generally not been realized. Furthermore, they seem to ignore that China, like any other nation, pursues strategic objectives that may conflict with national interests.

In light of this situation, it is recommended that the region's governments:

- Develop a strategic agenda for relations with China with short-, medium-, and long-term goals (Dussel Peters, 2015), including clearly defined and flexible priorities and actions to adapt to the changing dynamics of international relations. This agenda should consider the country's own experience, the experiences of others, and the participation of a wide range of social actors to ensure its comprehensiveness. The agenda must also be capable of identifying and mitigating any negative influence from China.
- Promote productive and industrial development policies to improve competitiveness, diversify, and expand national exports to China and beyond.
- Advocate for China-supported cooperation projects to substantially involve local companies and labor in their implementation, whether through donations or loans. This would benefit the economies of Central American nations, enable local actors to acquire new experiences (knowledge transfer), and potentially reduce project costs by minimizing expenses related to the transportation of labor and materials from China.

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