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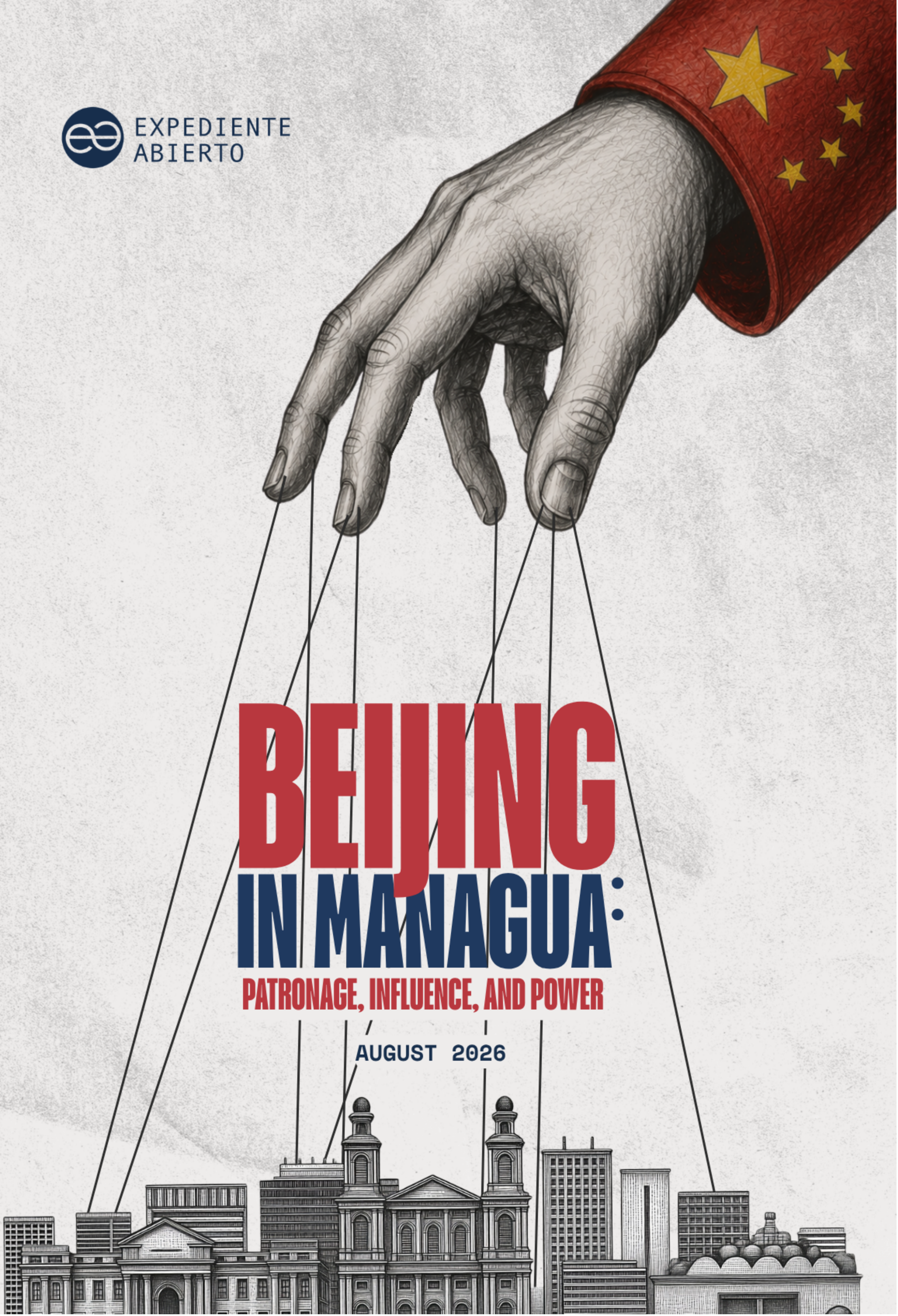

BEIJING IN MANAGUA:

PATRONAGE, INFLUENCE, AND POWER

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EXPEDIENTE
ABIERTO

The mission of Expediente Abierto is to produce and disseminate high-quality investigative journalism and content that strengthen critical analysis, civic engagement, and the defense of democracy in Central America.

CREDITS:
Author: Expediente Abierto
Coordination: Javier Meléndez
Design: Expediente Abierto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in 2021, the relationship between Nicaragua and the People's Republic of China has evolved far beyond trade and investment. The evidence examined points to the consolidation of a **strategic patronage relationship**, through which Beijing combines economic, technological, institutional, and ideational resources to expand its influence while contributing to the resilience of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

Key Findings

- **Insertion into strategic sectors:** Chinese corporate presence is concentrated in infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, logistics, and mining—sectors that are critical to the functioning of Nicaragua's economy and state apparatus.
- **Growing economic dependence:** Bilateral trade and financing mechanisms have produced an increasingly asymmetric relationship, deepening Nicaragua's dependence on Chinese goods, technology, and capital.
- **Elite capture and socialization:** Cooperation includes training programs, party-to-party exchanges, judicial cooperation, university partnerships, and people-to-people diplomacy that strengthen ties between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and key sectors of the Nicaraguan state.
- **Centrality of the Ortega-Murillo family:** Management of the relationship with China is highly concentrated within the ruling family, which serves as the principal political, economic, cultural, and media interlocutor in bilateral relations.
- **Media cooperation and narrative production:** Agreements between media organizations, journalist training programs, academic exchanges, and the expansion of institutions such as the Confucius Institutes contribute to the dissemination of narratives centered on

sovereignty, non-interference, and China's vision of international order.

- **Strategic technological dimension:** Chinese firms are involved in digital connectivity, telecommunications, emergency management, and energy infrastructure projects, creating long-term dependencies while expanding the presence of Chinese technological standards and platforms in critical sectors.
- **Geopolitical implications:** The expansion of Chinese influence in Nicaragua forms part of a broader competition between China and the United States over strategic infrastructure, digital governance, technological standards, and influence in the Western Hemisphere.

The Nicaraguan case demonstrates how China combines trade, financing, infrastructure, technology, institutional cooperation, and narrative production to build durable influence and strengthen ties with like-minded governments. This makes China a strategic challenge not merely because of its expanding economic footprint, but because these relationships can translate economic and technological dependence into lasting political leverage, strengthen authoritarian partners, and expand Chinese standards and platforms in sectors critical to regional security and governance. In Nicaragua, these dynamics acquire additional geopolitical significance given the country's location in the Western Hemisphere and the Ortega-Murillo regime's willingness to deepen strategic ties with Beijing.

Rather than a conventional economic partnership, the Sino-Nicaraguan relationship therefore constitutes an example of strategic patronage with implications extending beyond Nicaragua itself. It illustrates how Beijing can use bilateral relationships with politically aligned governments to establish long-term economic, technological, institutional, and political footholds, potentially reshaping the regional balance of influence and intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States in Latin America.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Nicaragua and the People's Republic of China in December 2021, bilateral ties have undergone a rapid expansion that extends far beyond the economic sphere. While public attention often focuses on infrastructure projects, trade agreements, or investment pledges, the relationship has evolved into a more complex form of cooperation involving political, institutional, technological, cultural, and media exchanges. In this context, China has emerged as one of the principal external partners of the Daniel Ortega–Rosario Murillo regime, progressively expanding its presence across strategic sectors of the Nicaraguan state.

This rapprochement has taken place amid Nicaragua's growing international isolation. Following the repression of the 2018 protests, the deterioration of relations with the United States and Europe, and the imposition of sanctions against regime officials and institutions, Managua has sought to diversify its external partnerships and reduce its dependence on traditional Western partners. For China, meanwhile, Nicaragua represents an opportunity to strengthen its presence in Central America, reinforce the One China principle, and expand its political, economic, and technological influence.

However, understanding the Sino-Nicaraguan relationship solely through the lens of investment or trade is insufficient. The available evidence suggests that China has deployed a broader strategy aimed at cultivating durable ties with governing elites, expanding its presence in strategic sectors of the state apparatus, and promoting cooperation mechanisms that strengthen the regime's institutional capacities. This process encompasses everything from the participation of Chinese firms in critical infrastructure and telecommunications projects to political cadre training programs, judicial cooperation, academic exchanges, and agreements between state-affiliated media organizations.

These dynamics acquire greater significance in the context of renewed strategic competition between China and the United States in the region. China's third White Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean, published in 2025, reaffirms Beijing's intention to deepen "comprehensive" cooperation with the region in areas extending beyond economics, including digital governance, technological innovation, security, political party exchanges, and media cooperation. At the same time, the Trump administration's National Security Strategy identifies China as the principal geopolitical challenge to U.S. interests and warns of Beijing's growing capacity to expand its political, technological, and economic influence in the Western Hemisphere. From this perspective, the relationship between China and Nicaragua represents a local manifestation of broader trends associated with competition over influence, technological standards, and political alignments in the region.

This report examines these developments through four interrelated dimensions: the presence of Chinese firms in strategic sectors of the economy and infrastructure; the characteristics of a deeply asymmetric trade relationship; the mechanisms of elite capture and socialization; and the expansion of media and ideological cooperation promoted by Beijing. Together, these elements make it possible to understand the China–Nicaragua relationship not merely as an economic or diplomatic partnership, but as a form of strategic patronage that simultaneously expands Beijing's influence in the region while strengthening the resilience of the Ortega-Murillo regime.

STRATEGIC INVESTMENT AND CHINESE CORPORATE PRESENCE

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in 2021, Chinese corporate activity in Nicaragua has become concentrated in sectors of strategic importance for the resilience of the Ortega-Murillo regime: critical infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, and mining. Rather than representing a conventional economic expansion, this pattern reflects a strategy aimed at strengthening state capacities, creating long-term dependencies, and consolidating China's position as an indispensable partner to one of its principal allies in Central America. Although many announced projects remain at various stages of implementation, the sectoral distribution of investments reveals a deliberate focus on areas of economic, political, and geopolitical value.

Infrastructure has become the primary vehicle for this engagement. Several of China's largest state-owned enterprises have secured positions in projects considered priorities by the Ortega-Murillo regime, ranging from hospitals and airports to highways, bridges, and energy generation. Among them, China CAMC Engineering (CAMCE) and its parent company Sinomach stand out. Present in Nicaragua since 2012, they initially focused on hospital construction and public works, establishing a significant presence before the restoration of diplomatic relations. Following normalization, both companies expanded into new strategic sectors and, during the Third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in 2023, Sinomach signed agreements related to the modernization and expansion of Punta Huete Airport (State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, 2023).

In transportation infrastructure, China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) signed a framework cooperation agreement in October 2023 with Nicaragua's Ministries of Transport and Infrastructure and Finance to participate in seven projects designated as national priorities. These include the expansion of the Chinandega–Somotillo, Mateare–Empalme Izapa, and Sébaco–Matagalpa highways, the modernization of the Portezuelo–Las Mercedes corridor, and the construction of the Lisawe, Labu, and Prinzapolka bridges (Ministry of Finance of Nicaragua, 2023).

Chinese involvement also extends to the energy sector. Huadian Overseas Investment was selected to develop the Tumarín and Mojolka hydroelectric projects, two highly strategic—and controversial—initiatives intended to expand the country's electricity generation capacity (Pelcastre, 2023). At the same time, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) signed a contract worth more than $69 million to design and build the San Isidro photovoltaic plant, one of the government's flagship solar energy projects (Swissinfo, 2023).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate a concentration of Chinese companies in sectors directly linked to the state's physical infrastructure: transportation, logistics, energy, and public works. Beyond their immediate economic value, these projects increase Beijing's presence in assets essential to mobility, connectivity, and national energy supply, reinforcing a long-term relationship of technological, financial, and operational dependence.

Some of these projects also exhibit characteristics associated with dual-use infrastructure—that is, civilian assets that could generate logistical, operational, or strategic advantages beyond their declared commercial functions. The most significant example is the modernization of Punta Huete Airport, awarded to Sinomach/CAMCE. Originally conceived during the Cold War to receive large military aircraft, the facility possesses a runway whose capacity far exceeds the current needs of Nicaragua's airport system. Moreover, it is located less than an hour from Managua, whose international airport operates well below capacity, raising questions about the project's economic rationale and prompting some analysts to emphasize its potential strategic value in future scenarios (Ellis, 2026).

Similar considerations apply to the expansion of port and logistics infrastructure in Corinto. The Nicaraguan government contracted the Chinese company CHINAICTC to develop a new logistics hub valued at approximately $335 million and to carry out additional upgrades at the country's principal Pacific port. Beyond facilitating bilateral trade, these investments enhance Corinto's role as a maritime transportation node and strengthen the presence of Chinese firms in a strategic facility within regional supply chains. As Ellis (2026) argues, the significance of this type of infrastructure does not necessarily lie in any immediate military application, but rather in the creation of logistical capabilities and operational networks that could acquire strategic value in a context of intensifying geopolitical competition between China and the United States.

The technological and telecommunications sector represents another sensitive dimension of China's presence in Nicaragua, one that predates the restoration of diplomatic relations. Since 2016, the Chinese telecommunications company Xinwei has operated in the country through its commercial brand CooTel, a venture linked to businessman Wang Jing, the promoter of the failed interoceanic canal project. Although its commercial impact remained limited and it never succeeded in challenging the dominant operators in the market, CooTel foreshadowed a trend that would later deepen through connectivity, digitalization, and technological infrastructure projects promoted after the 2021 diplomatic rapprochement (Expediente Abierto, 2023).

In recent years, Chinese firms have assumed an increasingly important role in the digitalization and technological modernization initiatives promoted by the Nicaraguan state. Among them, Huawei has emerged as a key actor, participating in the formulation of the National Digital Transformation +5G Plan and maintaining close cooperation with institutions such as the Nicaraguan Telecommunications and Postal Institute (TELCOR) and the National Electric Transmission Company (ENATREL).

In 2025, for example, Nicaragua approved financing exceeding $85 million for the first two phases of the Digital Connectivity Project, aimed at expanding the country's telecommunications infrastructure. Although the loan agreement was formally signed with the Chinese company Zhengzhou Coal Mining Machinery Group (ZMJ), several sources identify Huawei as one of the project's principal technology providers (Olivares, 2025a). Cooperation has also expanded into the energy sector. In 2026, the government announced an agreement with Huawei to install lithium battery storage systems at electrical substations, further extending the company's presence in critical infrastructure linked to both connectivity and electricity supply (Nicaragua Investiga, 2026).

China's technological footprint also includes companies such as China Communications Services International (CCSI), which is involved in the development of smart logistics management platforms, and Percent Technology, responsible for technological components associated with the National Emergency Response System (SINAREM). The latter constitutes one of the most significant digital transformation initiatives undertaken by the Nicaraguan government in cooperation with China. Although officially presented as a tool for emergency coordination and disaster response, SINAREM integrates command centers, data platforms, communications systems, and real-time monitoring capabilities. In a context characterized by increasing concentration of power and weakened institutional oversight, this type of technological architecture carries implications that extend beyond public administration and may enhance the state's capacity for surveillance, monitoring, and control (Santos, 2026).

The significance of this technological dimension lies in the fact that it generates deeper and more enduring dependencies than physical infrastructure. While highways or power plants can be operated by a variety of providers, digital systems rely on continuous updates, specialized maintenance, technological interoperability, and access to data. As a result, the growing incorporation of Chinese platforms, equipment, and standards expands Beijing's influence over critical sectors of the Nicaraguan state and reinforces forms of cooperation that may prove difficult to reverse over the long term.

Mining, meanwhile, is the sector in which Chinese economic involvement has expanded most rapidly. According to a joint investigation by Expediente Abierto and Fundación del Río, Chinese-owned companies control at least 67 mining concessions covering approximately 966,000 hectares, equivalent to 8.12 percent of Nicaragua's national territory. Among the principal beneficiaries are Zhong Fu Development, Brother Metal, Thomas Metal, and Nicaragua XinXin Linze Mining Group, whose operations are concentrated primarily in the Caribbean Coast and other mineral-rich regions (see Ruiz, 2026).

The expansion of mining has acquired particular strategic significance in the context of U.S. sanctions targeting Nicaragua's gold sector. Gold has become one of the regime's principal sources of foreign currency and a key mechanism for mitigating the effects of international financial isolation. In April 2026, the U.S. government sanctioned several members of the Ortega-Murillo family and companies linked to the sector, arguing that since 2020 the dictatorship had restructured the gold industry through a complex network of front companies and intermediaries designed to generate foreign currency, move sanctioned assets, and reinforce the regime's political and economic control (U.S. Embassy in Nicaragua, 2026).

In this context, the growing presence of Chinese companies in Nicaragua's mining sector provides access to strategic mineral resources while helping sustain one of the most important sources of revenue for the regime. The opacity surrounding many of these concessions, together with their links to state entities and sanctioned actors, makes it difficult to determine the actual benefits obtained by the country and increases the risks of rent-seeking, corruption, and the concentration of wealth around the ruling circle.

It is also worth noting that, despite the concentration of Chinese corporate activity in the sectors discussed above, links are beginning to emerge in more sensitive areas. In May 2025, the Nicaraguan government signed a contract with Poly Technologies (PolyTech), a subsidiary of China Poly Group Corporation, for the acquisition of transportation, communications, technology, and defense-related equipment. Beyond its specific scope, the agreement introduces a security dimension into the bilateral relationship and expands channels for the transfer of strategic capabilities. Moreover, the involvement of a company such as China Poly Group—sanctioned by the United States in 2024 for facilitating transfers of military technology to Russian entities—adds a geopolitical component that reinforces the growing convergence between Managua and Beijing (Nicaragua Investiga, 2025).

China's corporate presence in Nicaragua therefore reveals a strategy of engagement concentrated in sectors that generate structural influence. The combination of critical infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, and mining enables Beijing to expand its access to strategic assets, promote technological and economic dependencies, and strengthen a politically aligned partner. For the Ortega-Murillo regime, these projects provide financing, reinforce state capacities, and offer alternatives to international isolation. For China, they constitute the material foundations of an increasingly deep patronage relationship based not only on trade and investment, but also on influence over sectors essential to the functioning of the Nicaraguan state.

This dynamic may deepen through Nicaragua's new Special Economic Zones associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, which are designed to attract Chinese investment through extensive fiscal and regulatory incentives (Olivares, 2025b). Rather than serving merely as instruments of economic promotion, these zones could consolidate an institutional framework favorable to the expansion of Chinese companies in strategic sectors of the Nicaraguan economy, reinforcing the material foundations of patronage between Beijing and Managua.

TABLE 1.

CHINESE CORPORATE PRESENCE

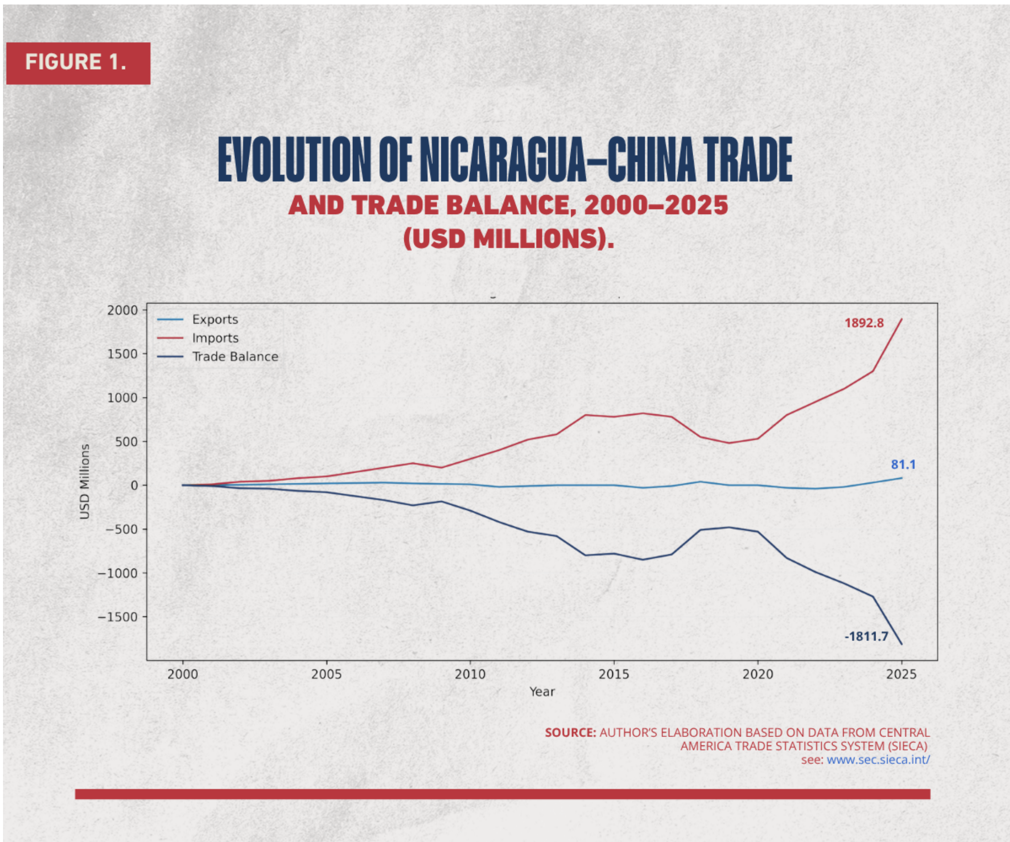
IN NICARAGUA'S STRATEGIC SECTORS (2021–2026)

SECTOR	MAIN COMPANIES	RELEVANT PROJECTS	STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS
Infrastructure and Logistics	**CAMCE, Sinomach, CSCEC, CHINAICTC**	Public hospitals, Punta Huete Airport expansion, Chinandega–Somotillo, Mateare–Empalme Izapa, and Sébaco–Matagalpa highways, Lisawe, Labu, and Prinzapolka bridges, Corinto logistics hub and port modernization	Access to critical infrastructure, strengthening of national logistics capabilities, and potential development of dual-use infrastructure
Energy	**Huadian Overseas Investment, CCCC, Huawei**	Tumarín and Mojolka hydroelectric projects, San Isidro photovoltaic plant, lithium battery energy storage systems	Technological and operational dependence in critical energy infrastructure
Telecommunications and Technology	**Huawei, CCSI, Percent Technology, Xinwei/CooTel, ZMJ**	Digital Transformation +5G Plan, Digital Connectivity Project, SINAREM, smart logistics management platforms, telecommunications network deployment	Technological dependence, data management, and potential enhancement of surveillance capabilities
Mining	**Zhong Fu Development, Brother Metal, Thomas Metal, XinXin Linze**	Gold mining concessions and strategic mineral extraction projects	Foreign exchange generation for the regime and Chinese access to strategic resources
Security and Defense	**Poly Technologies, China Poly Group Corporation**	Acquisition of equipment and technologies for national defense	Transfer of strategic capabilities and increased geopolitical tensions with the United States

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ELABORATION.

ASYMMETRIC TRADE DYNAMICS

Nicaragua’s trade relationship with China has historically been characterized by a persistent trade deficit, a trend that has only deepened in recent years as a result of the diplomatic rapprochement and the trade facilitation measures adopted by both countries, including the implementation of a Free Trade Agreement (see Expediente Abierto, 2026b).



From the Nicaraguan side, government officials have consistently framed the relationship in terms of export expectations that have yet to materialize. For example, in July 2022, then Minister of Finance and Public Credit Iván Acosta stated:

> China is the largest consumer market in the world, and we are food exporters. This means that we are going to expand rapidly and probably reach, even surpass, one billion dollars in exports within the next two or three years, thereby reducing the existing trade gap. (Canal 4 Nicaragua, 2022, 8:33)

Two years later, following the entry into force of the Free Trade Agreement between Nicaragua and China, Jesús Bermúdez, Minister of Development, Industry and Trade, reiterated the government's expectations during a pro-government television program: "Our goal is to export around one billion dollars to China within five years" (Archivo Informativo TN8, 2024). However, exports have not grown at the pace required to meet such projections.

Between 2021 and 2025, Nicaragua's exports to China increased from $12 million to $81 million, while imports from China rose from $901 million to $1.893 billion, according to SIECA data (excluding maquila exports). Under these conditions, the Free Trade Agreement risks consolidating, rather than correcting, a trade imbalance that is becoming increasingly unfavorable to Nicaragua.

Faced with this reality, it is not uncommon to hear the argument that Nicaragua maintains trade deficits with many countries and that, therefore, the negative balance with China is neither unusual nor inherently problematic. Such reasoning, however, tends to oversimplify the issue and overlook the fact that trade deficits may have very different implications depending on the magnitude and structure of the economic relationship involved. Nicaragua's deficit with China is substantial and has exhibited a sustained upward trend, driven by a rapid increase in imports that has not been matched by comparable growth in exports to the Chinese market.

Beyond volume, the composition of trade flows is also important. Nicaragua exports a relatively narrow basket of goods, consisting mainly of raw materials and agricultural products with limited value added and a high degree of substitutability. By contrast, imports from China are far more diverse and include manufactured goods, machinery, equipment, and consumer products, generally characterized by greater technological sophistication and more difficult to replace through domestic production or alternative suppliers.

Nicaragua imports from China products that it does not produce domestically, such as vehicles, computers, and mobile phones, but also goods similar to those manufactured locally, including footwear, plastic products, textiles, and other light manufactures. This exposes domestic producers to unequal competition from a manufacturing sector that benefits from economies of scale, lower production costs, state support, and a highly diversified supply base. As a result, Nicaragua faces the risk of seeing domestic production and associated value chains displaced, with negative implications for employment and income generation.

This dynamic reinforces a pattern of asymmetric exchange that constrains productive diversification while deepening Nicaragua's economic dependence on China and making it increasingly difficult to reduce the bilateral trade gap over the medium term.

In this context, official expectations of achieving massive export growth to the Chinese market appear largely unfounded and reflect political aspirations more than market realities. Government projections continue to confront persistent structural obstacles that remain largely unaddressed, including the limited diversification of Nicaragua's export basket, the country's productive constraints, and the challenges of accessing a heavily regulated and culturally distant market where local firms often struggle to establish commercial relationships.

The growing trade imbalance with China also raises questions about the external sustainability of Nicaragua's economy. A deficit of this magnitude implies a net outflow of foreign currency that must be offset through other sources, such as remittances, foreign investment, international aid, and external borrowing. This trend points toward a growing dependence on external sources of financing to maintain macroeconomic balance.

In addition to the financial vulnerabilities associated with the deficit, trade dependence on China also entails significant opportunity costs for domestic development. Every dollar spent on imported goods—particularly final consumer goods that do not necessarily contribute to expanding productive capacity—represents demand that is no longer directed toward local economic activity. While not all products imported from China can be produced competitively in Nicaragua, a portion corresponds to goods for which domestic production already exists or could potentially be developed.

Recognizing these opportunity costs does not imply an argument in favor of autarky or the assumption that imports are inherently harmful to economic development. On the contrary, international trade remains an important source of access to goods, technologies, and inputs that can support economic growth. The central issue is the absence of a strategy capable of reconciling trade openness with the strengthening of domestic productive capacities. In this regard, it appears naïve to assume—as the Nicaraguan regime often seems to do—that China, under its rhetoric of cooperation, mutual benefit, and "win-win" outcomes, will prioritize Nicaragua's development objectives over its own commercial and geopolitical interests.

Like any major economic power, China structures its trade relationships according to its own strategic interests. Consequently, the fundamental question is not simply how much Nicaragua trades with China, but rather what kind of economic relationship this trade is producing and what implications it may have for the country's future development prospects.

ELITE CAPTURE AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIPLOMACY

Institutional cooperation between China and Nicaragua operates through multiple channels of interaction involving political, administrative, judicial, academic, and media elites in both countries. Rather than being centered exclusively on economic agreements, the bilateral relationship has evolved into a framework of political socialization and governance transfer that strengthens ties between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the Ortega-Murillo family, and key sectors of the Nicaraguan state apparatus. Through these mechanisms, Beijing expands its influence over the country's principal decision-making centers while contributing to the cohesion and resilience of the elites that sustain the regime.

The central figure in this architecture is Laureano Ortega Murillo. Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in December 2021, the son of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo has become China's principal interlocutor within the regime. It was he—not Foreign Minister Denis Moncada—who signed the joint communiqué restoring diplomatic relations alongside Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu, subsequently consolidating his position as the privileged channel for negotiating agreements, investment projects, and bilateral cooperation mechanisms (Expediente Público, 2022). Since then, he has led meetings with senior Chinese officials, signed agreements linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, and participated in negotiations related to financing, infrastructure, and technological cooperation. This phenomenon suggests a growing personalization of Nicaraguan foreign policy, whereby relations with China are managed directly by the ruling family rather than through traditional diplomatic channels.

Laureano Ortega's centrality is not an isolated case. Cooperation with China has gradually expanded to other members of the Ortega-Murillo family, reflecting the concentration of political, economic, cultural, and media functions within the family nucleus that controls the regime. In 2022, Camila Ortega Murillo received full authority to sign a memorandum of understanding with the China–Latin America Cultural Exchange Center on behalf of the Nicaraguan government. Likewise, Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, coordinator of the Citizens' Communication and Citizenship Council, signed cooperation agreements with China Media Group to strengthen audiovisual content exchanges, deepening ties between the regime's propaganda apparatus and Chinese state media. In addition, Channels 4, 8, and 13 of the state broadcasting system, along with other pro-government outlets that function as proxies for China in Nicaragua, are controlled by members of the Ortega-Murillo family, including Juan Carlos, Camila, Luciana, and Maurice Ortega Murillo (ProBox, Expediente Público, and La Prensa, 2025).

These developments suggest that the bilateral relationship is not articulated solely through conventional state institutions. Rather, China has cultivated ties with different members of the family that concentrates political, economic, and communicational power in Nicaragua. This dynamic is consistent with the logic of the Ortega-Murillo regime, where the boundaries between state, party, and family have become increasingly blurred. As researcher Hernán Alberro observed, whereas in other countries China seeks to cultivate relationships with a broad range of political, academic, business, and media elites, in Nicaragua "it is enough to have the approval of the Ortega couple to operate without resistance" (Alberro, cited in ProBox, Expediente Público, and La Prensa, 2025).

Building ties with the ruling family, however, constitutes only one dimension of this strategy. China has also developed institutional cooperation mechanisms directed toward the ruling party and different segments of the Nicaraguan state apparatus. Cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party and the Sandinista Front has become one of the principal channels of political socialization between the two regimes. A notable example occurred in July 2023, when Li Mingxiang, Vice Minister of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee (ILD), received a Sandinista delegation led by Loyda Barreda in Beijing. During the meeting, the Chinese official presented the foundations of what is known as “Chinese-style modernization,” while the Nicaraguan delegation expressed interest in learning from the CCP’s experience in governing both party and state and in expanding cooperation through party-to-party exchanges (ILD, 2023).

These contacts form part of Beijing’s broader people-to-people diplomacy strategy, which seeks to cultivate long-term relationships with political parties, universities, local governments, media organizations, and public officials as a complement to traditional state diplomacy. Through these mechanisms, China builds networks of influence that transcend administrative changes and strengthen long-term relationships with actors occupying strategic positions within the state.

Cooperation also takes shape through systematic training programs directed at party cadres and public officials. In September 2022, Chinese Ambassador Chen Xi delivered a virtual lecture organized jointly with the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), targeting FSLN officials, public servants, and representatives of local governments. According to official Chinese sources, the event reached tens of thousands of participants and was designed to promote the achievements of China’s development model and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (Hong Kong China Review, 2022).

Training programs have increasingly extended to institutions directly linked to the CCP’s organizational apparatus. In September 2025, delegations of Sandinista cadres participated in courses organized by the Party School of the Hubei Provincial Committee, where they received instruction on Xi Jinping Thought, party-building, economic development, and state governance (Party School of the Hubei Provincial Committee, 2025). Likewise, Sandinista leaders, university authorities, and local government officials have participated in study visits to different regions of China to learn about public administration, rural development, and local governance. Participants have included Loyda Barreda, Ramona Rodríguez—former rector of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua—and Francisco Valenzuela, mayor of Estelí (see Santos, 2026). These activities facilitate the transfer of technical and administrative knowledge while also fostering personal and institutional networks between officials from both countries.

Educational cooperation constitutes another important mechanism for long-term engagement. In September 2024, UNAN-Managua inaugurated Nicaragua's first Confucius Institute in partnership with the Kunming University of Science and Technology. A second institute opened at UNAN-León in June 2025 in cooperation with Yunnan Normal University, making Nicaragua the first Central American country to host two Confucius Institutes simultaneously (Xinhua, 2024; Xinhua, 2025). Although these institutions officially promote Chinese language instruction and cultural exchange, some analysts regard them as part of Beijing's broader people-to-people diplomacy strategy aimed at strengthening ties with universities, students, and future professional elites. In this sense, they complement existing political and institutional training programs while expanding China's presence in spaces that shape Nicaragua's future elites—all under the influence of a governance model that combines development with political control.

The cooperation network also extends to the judicial system. In June 2023, Zhang Jun, President of China's Supreme People's Court, held a videoconference with Alba Luz Ramos, then President of Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice, to exchange experiences on judicial administration, judicial training, and criminal justice management (Supreme People's Court of the PRC, 2023). Chinese representatives have also held meetings with Nicaragua's Attorney General Wendy Morales, former Attorney General and later Supreme Court Justice Ana Julia Guido, and other members of the Nicaraguan judicial system (Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2022; 2025c). These exchanges broaden channels of communication between key institutions in both states and deepen ties with actors responsible for the administration of justice.

TABLE 2.

NETWORKS OF COOPERATION

AND ELITE SOCIALIZATION BETWEEN CHINA AND NICARAGUA

ARENA OF COOPERATION	CHINESE ACTORS	NICARAGUAN ACTORS	STRATEGIC FUNCTION
Presidential Diplomacy	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China	**Laureano Ortega Murillo**	Privileged channel for political negotiation and coordination
Party-to-Party Diplomacy	International Department of the CCP (ILD)	**FSLN, Sandinista Leadership Institute**	Ideological socialization and strengthening of ties between ruling parties
Cadre Training and Capacity Building	Party Schools, Chinese universities, and provincial governments	**Public officials, mayors, UNAN authorities, and Sandinista cadres**	Transfer of governance practices and development of influence networks
Judicial Cooperation	Supreme People's Court and Chinese judicial institutions	**Supreme Court of Justice, Office of the Attorney General**	Institutional exchange and legal training
Cultural Cooperation	China–Latin America Cultural Exchange Center, Confucius Institutes	**Camila Ortega Murillo, UNAN-Managua, UNAN-León**	Cultural diplomacy and projection of soft power
Media Cooperation	China Media Group, Xinhua, and other Chinese state media outlets	**Daniel Edmundo, Juan Carlos, Maurice, Camila, and other members of the Ortega-Murillo family**	Narrative coordination, journalist training, and strengthening of the official propaganda apparatus

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ELABORATION.

These initiatives suggest that institutional cooperation between China and Nicaragua operates as a mechanism for the training and socialization of political, administrative, judicial, and media elites. Through training programs, party-to-party exchanges, academic cooperation, and direct relationships with the ruling family, Beijing strengthens ties with actors who occupy strategic positions within the regime.

More than a simple transfer of technical knowledge, these processes facilitate the circulation of ideas, governance practices, and political frameworks associated with the Chinese experience, contributing to the consolidation of a community of interests among the governing elites of both countries. In this sense, elite capture and socialization constitute one of the most enduring mechanisms of China's strategic patronage, simultaneously reinforcing the political resilience of the Ortega-Murillo regime and Beijing's capacity to influence the principal centers of decision-making within the Nicaraguan state.

PROPAGANDA, MEDIA COOPERATION, AND IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE

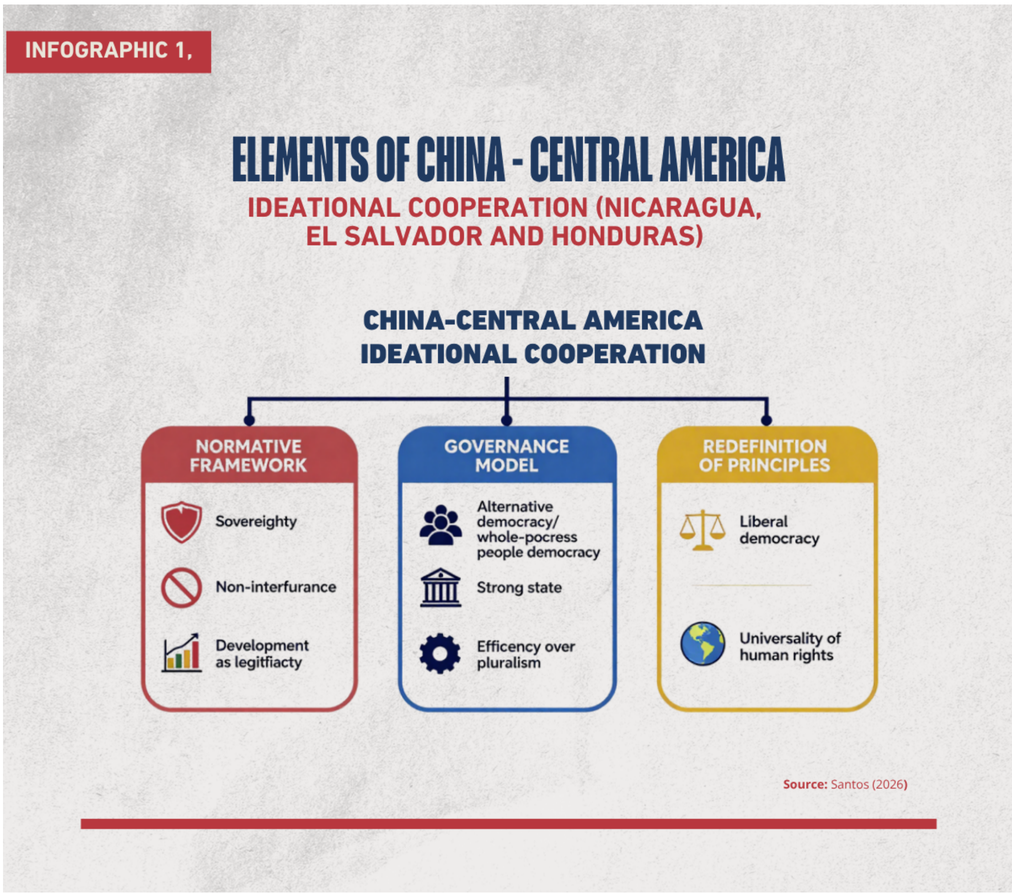
Cooperation between China and Nicaragua is not limited to the transfer of economic resources, infrastructure, or technical assistance. It also incorporates an ideational dimension aimed at producing shared frameworks for interpreting politics, development, and the international order. In this sphere, both governments have built a discursive community based on convergent narratives that serve functions of domestic legitimation, political coordination, and international projection.

At the core of these narratives lies a shared understanding of sovereignty and non-interference as guiding principles of international relations. China has repeatedly supported Nicaragua's right to "determine its own future and destiny," while denouncing Western sanctions as forms of political coercion incompatible with international law (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, 2022; Wei, 2022). From this perspective, international criticism directed at Managua is portrayed as an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs, while the defense of sovereignty becomes a shared language through which Beijing diplomatically supports the Ortega-Murillo regime and reinforces its own opposition to liberal norms promoted by the West.

This is accompanied by a growing convergence around the idea of a multipolar international order. Both Chinese and Nicaraguan authorities portray China's rise as part of a historic transformation of the international system that would reduce Western influence and expand the room for maneuver of countries in the Global South. Concepts promoted by Beijing—such as the "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," the Global Development, Security, and Civilization Initiatives, and opposition to "hegemonism" and "unilateral actions"—appear with increasing frequency in joint statements and bilateral cooperation forums (Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2025a; Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2025b).

Ideological convergence also encompasses an alternative vision of development and governance. Rather than prioritizing civil and political rights, narratives promoted by Chinese actors emphasize economic growth, social stability, and material well-being as essential foundations of human rights (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, 2022). Likewise, so-called “Chinese-style modernization” is presented as evidence that economic prosperity and state strengthening can be achieved without fully embracing the principles of Western liberal democracy. This perspective has been actively promoted by Chinese officials and diplomats in Nicaragua. In an article published in *El 19 Digital*, Ambassador Qu Yuhui argued that the experience of the Chinese Communist Party was fully aligned with the Sandinista vision of *Pueblo Presidente* (“People as President”), establishing an explicit link between the two conceptions of governance (Qu, 2026).

The dissemination of these ideas does not occur solely through diplomatic channels. Political concepts promoted by Beijing, such as “whole-process people’s democracy,” have been introduced through legislative exchanges and institutional cooperation initiatives between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022). These efforts suggest the circulation of alternative interpretive frameworks regarding democracy, human rights, development, and governance, which serve as the ideological foundation of an increasingly close political relationship.



INFOGRAPHIC 1,

The expansion of this discursive convergence has been accompanied by a process of institutionalizing media cooperation. Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in 2021, both governments have promoted communication agreements, training programs, professional exchanges, and content-sharing mechanisms aimed at strengthening ties between China's state media apparatus and the communication system controlled by the Ortega-Murillo regime.

One of the most significant milestones occurred in March 2022, just three months after diplomatic relations were restored, when representatives of China Media Group (CMG) and pro-government Nicaraguan media outlets signed cooperation agreements to promote the exchange of content and professional experiences (see Meléndez, 2023). Cooperation deepened further in October 2025, when Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, media coordinator of the Citizens' Communication and Citizenship Council, signed a new agreement with China Media Group designed to strengthen the exchange of audiovisual content between the two countries (ProBox, Expediente Público, and *La Prensa*, 2025).

The significance of these agreements lies in the fact that they directly involve the institution responsible for coordinating the regime's communication policy. The Citizens' Communication and Citizenship Council, led by Rosario Murillo and operated by Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, oversees the production of official content and coordinates the narratives disseminated through state media and Sandinista-aligned platforms. According to ProBox, Expediente Público, and *La Prensa* (2025), the dissemination of messages favorable to China forms part of a hierarchical structure led by the Presidency, amplified by pro-government media outlets, and subsequently reinforced through networks of activists and aligned accounts on digital platforms.

The second layer of this architecture is composed of media organizations closely linked to the Ortega-Murillo family. Among the main amplifiers are Canal 4, TN8, Canal 13, Radio 580, *El 19 Digital*, and JP+, all aligned with the official narrative. As noted previously, several of these outlets are controlled by Juan Carlos, Camila, Luciana, and Maurice Ortega Murillo, while *El 19 Digital* operates directly under the Office of the Presidency. This structure facilitates the systematic incorporation and reproduction of content originating from Chinese state media such as Xinhua, CGTN, and China Media Group.

Cooperation also includes training, exchange, and capacity-building programs aimed at journalists, media professionals, and university students. Between 2023 and 2025, at least seven initiatives sponsored by Chinese institutions were recorded, including specialized seminars, professional exchange programs, participation in international media industry events, and study visits to China (see Table 3). These activities have involved both journalists and media professionals from pro-government outlets, as well as students from UNAN-Managua and personnel from Channel 6, extending the scope of cooperation to future communication professionals.

These efforts form part of a broader strategy aimed at strengthening communication capacities and consolidating long-term relationships between media institutions in both countries. According to the *China Index 2024*, Nicaragua recorded one of the largest regional increases in indicators measuring Chinese influence in the media sector, rising from 13.6 percent in 2022 to 54.6 percent in 2024. According to researcher Hernán Alberro, no other Latin American country surpasses Nicaragua in the number of journalists invited by China to participate in seminars, training programs, and professional exchange initiatives (Alberro, cited in ProBox, Expediente Público, and *La Prensa*, 2025).

TABLE 3.

TRAINING AND EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

FOR NICARAGUAN JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA PROFESSIONALS SPONSORED BY CHINA (2023–2025)

Year	Activity	Participants	Responsible Chinese Institution	Objective
2023	Participation of Nicaraguan journalists in an international exchange program for media professionals	Nicaraguan journalists	Chinese Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA)	Professional exchange and strengthening ties with foreign media outlets
2024	Specialized seminar for 25 Nicaraguan journalists	25 journalists	Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (MOFCOM)	Training in communication, media, and international cooperation
2024	Participation of Nicaraguan journalists in professional exchange programs in China	Nicaraguan journalists	Unspecified Chinese government institution	Exchange of experiences in media and communication
2024	Meeting between communication students from UNAN-Managua and China Media Group	University students	China Media Group (CMG)	Academic engagement and training of future media professionals
2024	Training program for Channel 6 personnel in television production in Beijing	Channel 6 media professionals	Chinese state media institutions	Transfer of technical skills in television and audiovisual production
2025	Training program for 21 Nicaraguan journalists	21 journalists	Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (MOFCOM)	Professional development and strengthening of institutional ties
2025	Exchange program for Nicaraguan journalists in China	Nicaraguan journalists	Unspecified Chinese government institution	Media cooperation and professional exchange
2025	Activities related to digital education and communication during an official visit to Wuhan	Government officials, academics, and media professionals	Chinese educational and governmental entities	Dissemination of Chinese experiences in digital transformation and public communication

SOURCE: AUTHOR'S ELABORATION BASED ON THE OPEN SOURCE DATABASE ON CHINESE OFFICIAL COOPERATION PROJECTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA (2000–2025) COMPILED BY EXPEDIENTE ABIERTO (2026A).

On the other hand, Sino-Nicaraguan media cooperation finds its most visible expression in the digital sphere. According to ProBox, Expediente Público, and *La Prensa* (2025), between July 2024 and August 2025, 2,246 China-related mentions were identified across Nicaragua's digital ecosystem, concentrated around terms such as "cooperation," "brotherhood," "alliance," "friendship," "development," "scholarships," "exchange," "technological modernization," and the "Belt and Road Initiative."

The study shows that the main peaks in digital activity systematically coincide with diplomatic anniversaries, official visits, training programs, cooperation agreements, and academic events related to China. Each of these events is accompanied by coordinated communication campaigns highlighting bilateral friendship, the benefits of cooperation, and the technological advances associated with relations with Beijing. These dynamics reflect a strategy designed to generate "coordinated digital waves" capable of amplifying specific messages while reducing the visibility of alternative narratives.

The Chinese Embassy in Managua also plays an active role within this communication ecosystem. Between January and September 2025, the diplomatic mission published 89 paid advertisements on Meta platforms, becoming the most active foreign actor in digital advertising in Nicaragua. The content promoted messages related to Chinese modernization, bilateral cooperation, major milestones in the history of the People's Republic of China, and friendship between the two countries. Collectively, these campaigns generated millions of impressions and were primarily targeted at young audiences between the ages of 18 and 34.

The narratives disseminated through this network systematically combine messages of cooperation and development with broader geopolitical frames. Hashtags such as **#China**, **#InternationalCooperation**, **#UnitedInVictory**, and **#YankeeGoHome** frequently accompany content portraying China as a strategic, supportive, and sovereignty-respecting partner, while the United States is associated with sanctions, interventionism, and hegemonic practices.

Thus, media cooperation between China and Nicaragua extends far beyond conventional information exchange. Through institutional agreements, training programs, digital campaigns, and coordinated content production, Beijing and Managua have built a communication ecosystem that simultaneously strengthens the legitimacy of the Ortega-Murillo regime and the regional projection of narratives promoted by the People's Republic of China. Rather than serving as a complementary component of the bilateral relationship, the media sphere has become one of the principal vehicles through which the ideational dimension of China's strategic patronage in Nicaragua is consolidated.

CONCLUSIONS

The Nicaraguan case demonstrates that China's growing presence in Latin America cannot be understood solely through trade indicators, investment volumes, or infrastructure projects. The evidence examined points to the consolidation of a relationship of strategic patronage in which Beijing combines economic resources, technology, institutional cooperation, party diplomacy, and narrative production to strengthen ties with a politically aligned regime. This pattern goes beyond conventional interstate cooperation and is oriented toward establishing enduring relationships of dependence, influence, and political alignment.

For the Ortega-Murillo regime, this relationship provides both material and symbolic resources that reinforce its resilience in the face of international isolation. Investment in strategic sectors, access to financing, technology transfers, the training of political and administrative elites, and media and discursive cooperation strengthen capacities that extend beyond economic development and directly affect the mechanisms of legitimacy, coordination, and control upon which regime stability rests. In this sense, Chinese cooperation does not strengthen the Nicaraguan state in the abstract; rather, it strengthens the political structures that sustain the system of power built by the Ortega-Murillo family.

The Nicaraguan case also illustrates a broader trend in China's policy toward Latin America. As reflected in China's 2025 White Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean, Beijing seeks to deepen a comprehensive form of engagement that incorporates infrastructure, technology, digital governance, political exchanges, media cooperation, and elite networks. Nicaragua represents one of the most advanced examples of this strategy due to the convergence of interests between the two governments and the absence of institutional counterweights capable of limiting the expansion of Chinese influence in strategic sectors.

The implications of this dynamic extend well beyond the bilateral relationship. China's growing presence in critical infrastructure, telecommunications, logistics, digital platforms, and data management is embedded within the broader strategic competition between China and the United States for economic, political, and normative influence. Nicaragua thus constitutes a setting in which wider contests over strategic infrastructure, digital governance, technological standards, and long-term networks of influence converge.

The case illustrates how this competition is increasingly conducted not through traditional military or diplomatic instruments, but through investment, financing, institutional cooperation, technology transfer, and the production of narratives. In this regard, Nicaragua offers a revealing example of the mechanisms through which China seeks to consolidate durable positions of influence and strengthen its projection in the Western Hemisphere.

Consequently, analyzing China–Nicaragua relations solely as an economic partnership leads to an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon. What emerges instead is an architecture of strategic patronage capable of generating dependence, shaping political incentives, and expanding Beijing's influence over key actors and institutions. Understanding these dynamics will be essential for assessing both Nicaragua's future trajectory and the evolution of strategic competition between China and the United States in Latin America.

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Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in 2021, the relationship between Nicaragua and the People's Republic of China has evolved far beyond trade and investment. The evidence examined points to the consolidation of a **strategic patronage relationship**, through which Beijing combines economic, technological, institutional, and ideational resources to expand its influence while contributing to the resilience of the Ortega-Murillo regime.