

China's diplomatic outreach to Latin America: The growing influence and strategic mobility of Beijing's ambassadors

Benjamin Creutzfeldt

Research Affiliate

Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies

Universidad del Pacífico

Working Paper Series

N° 5

October 2022

About this initiative

The purpose of the *Working Paper Series of the Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies* is to publish studies in lines of research explored by this center in order to disseminate their findings and promote an exchange of ideas that could contribute to future publications. This working paper series will be composed of documents prepared by the direction, research affiliates, and invited experts. The content of the documents published, including findings, interpretations, and conclusions, are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the view of Universidad del Pacífico or the Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies of this university.

About the Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies

The Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies was established in January 2013. It constitutes a pioneering initiative of Universidad del Pacífico in the framework of its institutional internationalization, driven by the importance attained by China and the Asia-Pacific region in the world economy and for Peru in particular. It seeks to offer insights with a long-term and strategic perspective of China and Asia-Pacific on economic development, markets, and international relations, among other topics, while promoting close collaborations with experts from academic institutions from China and other Asian economies. To realize this objective, the center develops and promotes research; symposiums, conferences and workshops; academic exchanges; and training activities.

How to cite this working paper (APA Style 7th edition)

Creutzfeldt, B. (2022). China's diplomatic outreach to Latin America: The growing influence and strategic mobility of Beijing's ambassadors. *Working Paper N°5*. Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies, Universidad del Pacífico.

Abstract

China has become a leading force in global politics, and its diplomatic activity has gained prominence and earned greater scrutiny from foreign governments and scholars alike. This paper explores the extension and evolving capacities of Beijing's diplomatic network with a focus on Latin America, illustrating this through the biographical profiles of individual ambassadors. It makes evident that although China's loans and investments in Latin America have slowed drastically since 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced global travel and exchanges, and despite a heightened sense of competition between the traditional hegemon and the rising Asian power, Beijing's diplomats have built a reputation of goodwill and accessibility that makes large swaths of the political and economic elite of the region feel at ease. The ideologically driven competition between the United States and China is far less divisive in the Latin American region, and a focus on the "softer" skills of bilateral relationship-building honed by diplomatic envoys offers new perspectives on future dynamics.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, China's International Relations

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. The context of this study in the recent literature	4
3. The politics of China's overseas work in the 21st century	5
4. The case of Latin America	7
5. Methodology	9
6. Changing trends over time	10
7. Chinese diplomats at work.....	12
7.1. Yang Wanming 杨万明 – The Continuous Ambassador	13
7.2. Li Nianping 李念平 – The Regional Outsider.....	14
7.3. Xu Bu 徐步 – The Peripatetic Provocateur	15
7.4. Lan Hu 蓝虎 – The Confident Youngster.....	16
7.5. Wei Qiang 魏强 – The Tweeting Party Liaison	16
8. Organizations	17
9. Conclusions	18
Bibliography.....	20
About the Author	24

CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH TO LATIN AMERICA: The growing influence and strategic mobility of Beijing's ambassadors¹

Benjamin Creutzfeldt, PhD

1. Introduction

Along with China's rising influence in global affairs, its diplomatic activity has gained prominence and earned greater scrutiny from foreign governments and scholars alike. However, in contrast to the size of the country's economy, the scale of its overseas investments and its commercial relationships or the relative capabilities of its military forces, China's diplomatic efforts are harder to measure. The extension and growing capacities of Beijing's diplomatic network represent crucial measures to better comprehend China's global reach. There have been efforts to quantify and qualify China's public diplomacy more broadly (Custer et al. 2019), as well as studies on the professionalization of the diplomatic service over time (Martin 2021), but the role of China's diplomats in the evolution of the country's international relations has not been studied or mapped in any coherent detail. The US government has called for the creation of wide-ranging databases on governmental and educational connections between China and other regions of the world (USCC 2021) with a particular interest in Latin American countries (*ibid.*: 70; see also Padilla & Guzmán 2022; Ellis 2022: 18). The present working paper addresses this dimension of China's global presence, and outlines here some insights into the diplomatic dynamic in combination with a presentation of the Universidad del Pacífico's nascent online database of Chinese ambassadors to Latin America².

The goal of coherently identifying and profiling China's diplomats in the region arose in response to the recognition that these individuals are, today, more than mere functionaries or nameless bureaucrats of a larger political machine, but also increasingly well-trained and informed drivers of the relationships they oversee. Since 2018, media in the US and several European countries have highlighted a particular aspect of Chinese diplomacy: the phenomenon of the "Wolf Warrior" diplomats (McDonell 2021). The term was derived from a 2017 motion picture of the same title (Wu 2017) and has been used to describe assertive Chinese diplomats who use provocative language on social media and shout at or insult foreign counterparts (Martin 2021) – behavior previously considered acceptable only from representatives of some Western powers. This emphasis sits well with the US strategy of pushing back against a rising China, but is also misleading as it is not representative of the vast majority of Chinese diplomats,

¹ The author wishes to thank Zhang Jiayi, Mariel Hoshi Leon and Chen Duowei for their contributions to the sourcing and gathering of data, as well as several reviewers for constructive comments and suggestions. To contact the author: b.creutzfeldt@up.edu.pe or benjamin@creutzfeldt.net.

² The Wordpress website can be found at <https://chineseambassadors.wpcomstaging.com/> and has been edited and expanded since its creation in March 2021. The site has focused on Chinese ambassadors posted since 1990 to Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil, and will gradually be extended to include the remaining countries of the region, while also featuring less prominent diplomats, such as consuls and minister counsellors (i.e. future ambassadors), as well as Chinese scholars in the field of Latin American studies.

nor indeed a rising trend. The author's encounters since 2005 with many of Beijing's incumbent and retired emissaries allow an insight into the emerging profiles of culturally and socially ever more versatile 'engagers' charged with coordinating and even leading China's relationships overseas.

The following section embeds this project within the recent literature and leads into an overview of China's foreign policy. The third section homes in on the case of Latin America and an introduction to the database compiled. Section V connects the historical overview with trends seen in China's diplomatic engagement with Latin America, which transitions to a selection of profiles of recent and current ambassadors of particular interest, followed by a short section on relevant organizations. The conclusion draws the parts together to offer an outlook on possible future research and developments.

2. The context of this study in the recent literature

Chinese and foreign media alike invariably underscore the centrality of the Beijing government and the Communist Party (often interchangeably) in China's domestic affairs, but when it comes to the country's activities overseas, the focus shifts to state-owned corporations and, more recently, to organizations such as the United Front Work Department or the 'hidden agendas' of educational institutions such as the Confucius Institutes and academic exchange programs.³ This is inconsistent with the widely-recognized reality that China's government strategy and messaging are carefully crafted centrally, both at home and abroad, and even if it is true that large corporations have a more visible impact internationally, much of the agenda-setting, public commentary and person-to-person engagement at government and popular levels are activities led by Beijing's official emissaries – the diplomatic corps.

For decades, Washington had the most extensive diplomatic network in the world. However, as its size, scope, influence and morale steadily declined during the Trump administration and failed to recover fully under President Biden due to congressional roadblocks (Burns 2019; Feinberg 2022; Padilla & Guzmán 2022), the dynamics of influencing global affairs have shifted: according to a recent study by the Lowy Institute in Sydney, it is now the People's Republic of China that has the numerical lead, boasting 276 diplomatic posts—including embassies, consulates, and permanent missions to international organizations (Global Diplomacy Index 2019). What is more, the numbers of embassy staff have risen, their average age has decreased, and professional training and internal knowledge transfer is being enhanced across the board (Wang & Li 2017).

This development is due to the recognition by Beijing that China's rise as a major stakeholder and the expanding presence of its corporations and citizens the world over has put growing demands on its diplomatic service. The role and abilities of Chinese diplomats as representatives, communicators and negotiators on behalf of their government are increasingly tested, in many cases by less-than-sympathetic foreign publics and governments. Over the past ten years, the Chinese government has become aware of these challenges and has been seeking to restructure and strengthen its foreign

³ Chinese infiltration and espionage activities in the West have been a growing concern to secret services in the US and the UK, as expressed by MI5 Director General Ken McCallum and FBI Director Chris Wray (www.mi5.gov.uk/news/speech-by-mi5-and-fbi, 6 July 2022). While these trends are indeed alarming, the reaction can only be described as alarmist and part of a worrying pattern of the pot calling the kettle black, in a notable multi-pronged strategy to excoriate the Chinese government, causing jitters among global enterprises.

service in multiple ways (Huang 2015: 65-66). There is still much room for improvement to keep up with the rapid growth of the country's overall strength and responsibilities: in terms of diplomatic personnel relative to its population, or expenditure as a percentage of gross national product, China still lags the United States and Japan by a large margin (Doherty 2019, Wang 2016).

A case that illustrates this tendency as well as its continuing challenges, is the region of Latin America. As the most distant frontier in China's 'Going Abroad' strategy⁴, it has experienced the impact of China's dramatic economic growth only since the beginning of this century: an exponential growth in bilateral trade, a rapid rise of mergers and acquisitions by Chinese corporations, billions of dollars in loans, and a wide range of cultural, educational and scientific exchanges. Official visits to the region by China's top leadership have increased in frequency to becoming a near-annual event between 2008 and 2019, and forums for multilateral high-level cooperation have bloomed. This multidimensional trend (Shen & Blanchard 2010) has been supported by a growing and increasingly versatile body of diplomats on the ground, who have gained considerable visibility in the process.

The central question this paper seeks to address is, how has Chinese foreign diplomatic engagement in Latin America evolved since the turn of the century to keep pace with the country's goals, and how do the trajectories and profiles of China's senior diplomats fit into this strategy? By tracing the careers and movements of Chinese diplomats across Latin America since 1990 we can identify trajectories and patterns that illuminate Beijing's drive to enhance its pursuit of its domestic and international goals. By profiling some of its emissaries against the background of China's broader approach to the region, and comparing their public messaging during specific events, a picture emerges of a varied and increasingly refined diplomatic strategy (Liu 2001). The evidence suggests that China's diplomats, in spite of their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy (Heine 2014) and are working self-consciously and with considerable latitude from the Beijing headquarters to improve bilateral relations step by step. This offers a basis for further contributions to the heated debate as to China's likely forward trajectory as a responsible stakeholder, a spoiler, or a free-rider in the global system (Kastner, Pearson & Rector 2018) and suggests that even as China abides by the most existing rules and institutions (Heilmann et al. 2014), it is increasingly punching its weight in the realization of its own goals and more willing to take reputational risks in that pursuit.

3. The politics of China's overseas work in the 21st century

Modern Chinese diplomacy emanates from the phrase “外交无小事，大权在中央” [*In foreign affairs there is no small matter and the power resides in the center*], a phrase widely attributed to the supreme diplomat of the early People's Republic, Premier Zhou Enlai. It recognizes the importance of consistency in messaging and the value the Communist Party attaches to central control: in practice, this means that junior diplomats and early-career ambassadors typically spend long stretches at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) or the International Liaison Office of the Communist Party's Central Committee (IDCPC) in Beijing. That said, China's diplomacy has long been dominated

⁴ Often known by its Chinese name 走出去战略 *Zouchuqu* Strategy, this going-abroad drive was initiated by the administration of Jiang Zemin to expand the presence of Chinese businesses abroad and integrate more closely with the global economy in view of China's joining the World Trade Organization in 2001.

by 'economic diplomacy' and as Pang Zhongying has pointed out, this is only gradually shifting: until quite recently, Beijing's overriding goal was to keep a low profile and emphasize a neutral 'non-intervention' policy (Pang 2009), while its global corporations blazed the trail of securing commercial interests prioritized at home.

However, following the 18th National Party Congress in November 2012 and the instalment of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Communist Party, President of the People's Republic and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, we witnessed several important innovations in the country's diplomacy, under the headline of 中国特色的大国外交 [*Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*] (Chen 2014, 39) – a motto at once grand and somewhat vague, but not meaningless. It translates into giving greater prominence to diplomacy in China's global projection, an incremental prioritization of national interests, and the pursuit of greater influence in world affairs. In practice, it called on Chinese diplomats not only to maintain ongoing dialogues with foreign governments and deal with external crises and challenges, but to ensure a peaceful and stable external environment for China's development and actively participate in the shaping of the external environment in a strategic manner – an ambitious goal best summed up using Peter Katzenstein concept of *Sinicization*: making the world a more amenable space and more suitable to the center, i.e. China (Katzenstein 2012: 9). We may think of this as a more subtle and less invasive variation on the British introduction of their own educational and administrative institutions to their colonies.⁵ Beyond a shift in practice, this outlook further implies that China is willing to assume more "great power responsibilities"⁶ and aims to push back against the *Pivot to Asia* strategy presented by U.S. president Barack Obama in 2012 (Chen 2015).

The growing diversification of China's overseas activities – including especially the growing protagonism of non-government actors such as Chinese multinationals that came with the country's Opening-Up policy in the 1980s and the *Going Out* campaign of the late 1990s – brought with it difficulties in the central coordination of foreign policy and ensuring national priorities and desired outcomes. Incoming party and government leader Xi Jinping therefore urged major institutional reforms in the field of foreign affairs and diplomacy to strengthen overall planning and coordination. The administration restructured border and maritime enforcement agencies, began to establish a unified coast guard and established the Central National Security Council with Xi as its chairman. Following a carefully crafted publicity campaign celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* formulated at the Bandung Conference, China's diplomatic propaganda machine moved gradually away from former leader Deng Xiaoping's approach of "maintaining a low profile and biding one's time" (韬光养晦) towards a focus on "taking initiative and being enterprising" (主动进取). Chen Zhimin explains that China strove to achieve a progressive and proactive diplomacy: Beijing encourages its overseas to actively participate in shaping the external environment and consciously resolve or hedge external challenges from the source (2014, 40). To this end, the new government developed a new diplomatic discourse around themes such as the "Chinese dream", great power diplomacy, and the BRICS cooperation mechanism.

⁵ Of course, the French and the Spanish did the same in their respective colonies, and in all three cases, language was a centrepiece of the colonial effort. The British repeated this pattern when they, belatedly, introduced democracy to Hong Kong prior to the 1997 handover. Similarly, the U.S. imperialist project of the late 20th century has focused on installing the democratic system in as many countries as possible in an effort to make the world more amenable to American interests.

⁶ 大国责任, also translated more literally as "big country responsibility" as discussed several years earlier by the Singapore-based scholar Zheng Yongnian (2004).

Diplomacy is to be governed by the four themes of “friendship, good faith, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness (亲诚惠容), within President Xi’s trademark notion of a “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” and the more tangible frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road.

China’s structural emphasis on bilateral diplomacy and specifically on partnership diplomacy has been well documented (Feng & Huang 2014, cf. also Beck, Muller & Seabra 2020), but beyond that, Chen emphasizes how this has translated into diplomatic practice: partnership diplomacy strategically uses personal relations and network diplomacy to further differentiate relations with individual states, aiming to shift relations with some countries and regions under central direction. For countries that challenge China’s key interests, diplomats are encouraged to take the initiative to cool down relations and reduce perceived proximity (Chen 2014, 41). So while the recent phenomenon of China’s “Wolf Warrior diplomats”, referred to in section I above, may be in part an expression of individual preferences, it is also more likely an intentional “bark” encouraged centrally, than a series of diplomatic *faux-pas* (Xiang 2020, Martin 2019). It is what former Deputy Foreign Minister Fu Ying was referring to when she warned that a country’s discursive power to influence ideas and values of others depends upon the coherence and sincerity of its public discourse – and by extension upon the coherence and sincerity of its public representatives on the global stage (Fu 2020). We now turn to Latin America to explore what the changes in the structure and goals, discourse, style and formation of China’s foreign service might mean in practice.

4. The case of Latin America

Latin America was the last region to develop a significant and dynamic relationship with China. The nature of this relationship comparatively unburdened by history is the reason a study of contemporary China’s diplomatic strategy and activities in Latin America offers a fresh and instructive spotlight on how China views its role and its future path in the world. Although scholars like Nicola Philipps insist that the People’s Republic made no attempt “to construct either an ideologically driven or geopolitically purposeful strategy in Latin America” (Philipps 2010: 179), several scholars have in fact shown that political affinities between communist movements in Latin America and Mao Zedong’s revolutionary movement were quite tangible, and exchange for the purpose of mutual learning were actively encouraged (Ratliff 1969; also Connelly & Bustamante 1992). And if in the 1960s it was the left-wing movements of Latin America who looked to New China and Soviet Russia for lessons and guidance, the trend has been in part reversed in recent years, as Chinese academicians look to the broad range of socialist experiments found across Latin America (cf. Xu et al. 2017).

Be that as it may, the fast pace of the economic development over the past two decades and its dynamism – frequently referred to by Chinese scholars in terms of “gigantic leaps” or “leapfrog progress” – makes an informed analysis of this relationship relevant (Zheng Bingwen in Creutzfeldt 2012: 63). After establishing diplomatic missions in most major countries of the region in the 1970s, the People’s Republic adopted a practical approach to this transpacific *rapprochement* that began in 1980 with an agreement with Mexico. It sent over a hundred young officials to Mexico to learn Spanish and to become more attuned to Latin American cultures and realities. Several of these were later selected to become diplomatic representatives to the region (Harris 2007, 7). Beyond that, China committed funds to training, education and research on Latin America, principally through the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Central Party School. This focus has been incremental and

consistent: both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping recognized the importance of improving knowledge of world regions and financed initiatives to expand the discipline of Area Studies in China (Ren & Liu 2020). Since 2010, successive government policies have supported the development of increasingly high-quality Latin American and other area studies centers across the People's Republic, not only to research and teach, but as a targeted effort to inform China's foreign policy-making and its diplomatic corps. China now boasts as many as sixty centers focused on the Latin American region alone aimed at better understanding the chronic challenges of Latin American economies and societies (Myers, Barrios & Guo 2018).

It is this informed consolidation of goodwill and enhanced dovetailing of mutual interests that led Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, to state in October 2021 that "cooperation between China and Latin America and the Caribbean offers an opportunity to reduce global asymmetries and support a transformative, inclusive economic recovery that promotes sustainable development" (Cepal 2021). Most Latin American governments have begun to recognize Chinese expertise in the building of roads and railways, ports and energy plants –undeniable necessities for economic and social progress– and have understood that China is at the forefront globally in renewable energy sources and industry guidelines for sustainable development, as well as many cutting-edge technologies. The Chinese also came through as highly visible helpers in the COVID-19 pandemic when they delivered at least 130 million dollars' worth of face masks (Telias & Urdíñez 2020), and shipped vast quantities of vaccines to the region, breaking the crest of several waves of infection⁷.

China's interest in the region is driven primarily, of course, by sharply growing trade and investment flows and is illustrated by the number of top leadership visits. The first Chinese premier to travel to Latin America was Zhao Ziyang in 1985⁸, followed by Li Peng in the early 90s, but since 2004 high-profile visits have been more frequent and increased further to become an annual occurrence after the publication of China's first Policy Paper for the region in November 2008. In terms of the choice of countries visited by successive leaders (Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao until 2012, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang since then) no pattern is discernible in terms of political leanings or investment priorities, though inevitably international summits such as BRICS in Brazil, APEC in Peru, and the China-CELAC Forum in Chile determined preferences and afforded the visits greater prominence in the media. As bilateral visits and exchanges at all levels increased, so did the desire to offer concrete plans: during his visit to Latin America in July 2014, President Xi put forward a "1+3+6" cooperation framework – one plan with three engines in six areas. The plan was framed as a five-year Cooperation Plan between China and the Latin American and Caribbean Countries. The three engines were to place trade, investment, and financial cooperation as the driving forces to ensure a comprehensive development of transpacific cooperation with the goal of achieving a trade balance of US\$500 billion within 10 years and aiming for Chinese investment in the region of US\$250 billion. The focus was to be on six major areas: energy resources, infrastructure design, agriculture, manufacturing, technological innovation, and information technology. These formal frameworks set the agenda for bilateral and multilateral meetings and lend themselves to some analysis, but they fail to capture the strengths, weaknesses, or real prospects of China's engagement with the countries of Latin America. This is where

⁷ Much doubt has been cast on the effectiveness of Chinese-made vaccines, but leading science journals have highlighted the value of early provision of vaccines (Mallapaty 2021).

⁸ Zhao in Latin America 1985. Due to the fact that Premier Zhao fell from favour after his engagement with protesters at Tian'anmen Square in June 1989, was purged from the Party leadership and spent his remaining years under house arrest, his early visit to Latin America is frequently ignored, and omitted from the public annals.

tracing the careers and movements of Chinese diplomats across the region can be a tool to help illuminate Beijing's drive to enhance its pursuit of its domestic and international goals.

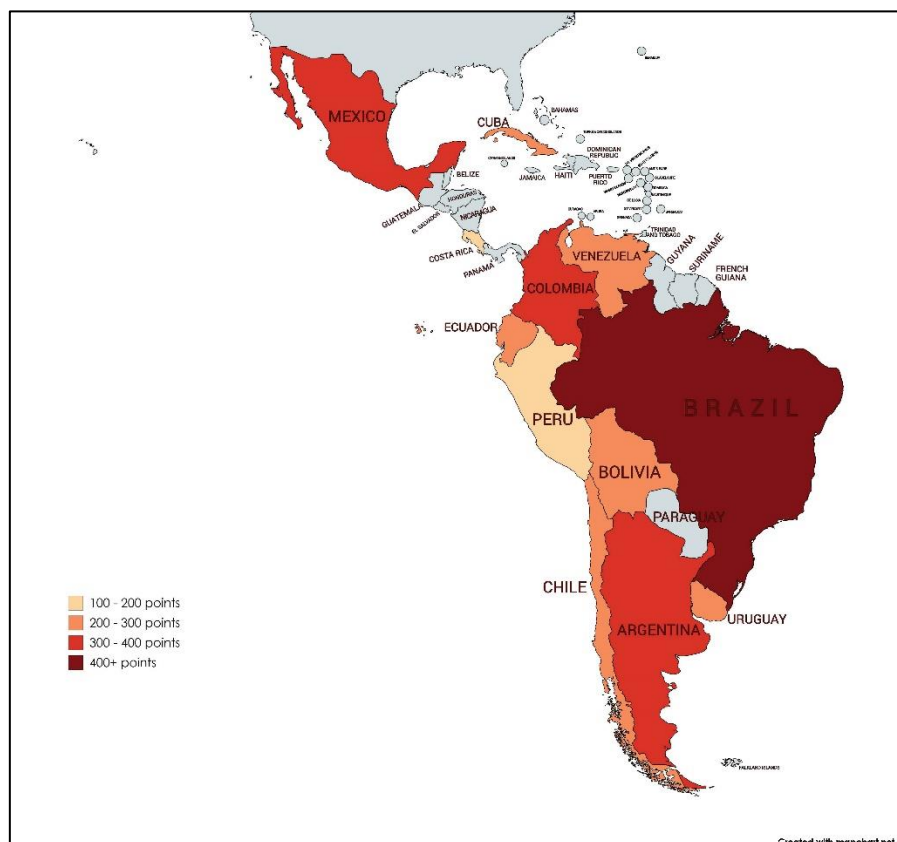
5. Methodology

My research conducted over the past ten years shows that although countries with larger populations and markets (Brazil and Mexico) or rich natural resources (such as Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador) typically loom larger in the economic data-driven research on China's policies, the experience, style and ability of diplomats –on either side– can point to more transformative stories: certain individuals seem to have a discernible impact on outcomes. For instance, Beijing's conspicuously large commitment to Venezuela in the shape of successive billion-dollar loans-for-oil coincided with the ten-year ambassadorial posting to Beijing of Rocío del Valle Maneiro González, as well as a series of seasoned diplomats from the Chinese side. Inversely, the lack of activity on any front between neighboring Colombia and the People's Republic until 2018 coincided with the presence of rather reserved and soft-spoken Chinese emissaries who kept a low profile in the national conversation. I proceeded to gather data on over eighty Chinese ambassadors posted to the principal twelve capitals of Latin America and the Caribbean since 1990 and ascribe point values to each based on their career trajectory and experience, and their diplomatic ranks at the time of each successive posting.⁹ With the support of a former Chinese diplomat to the region, I have been fine-tuning relative values for each individual as they rose through the ranks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 3rd or 2nd Secretary to 1st Secretary, Minister Counsellor and Ambassador, and what rank they held while ambassador (if any) ranging from Deputy General Director and General Director up to Under Secretary. For each professional profile I created individual files, noting the sequence of postings and successive roles between various ministerial departments and embassies, and compiling articles published and interviews granted, along with media reports and social media posts in the host countries.

What is evident is a high level of regional specialization by Chinese ambassadors, to a degree comparable to the United States foreign service, but not seen in the Latin American postings of other major economies: the vast majority of top diplomats from countries such as Germany, France, the UK and Japan have wide-ranging experience the world over, but are rarely posted more than once to the region. The regional specialization is expressed in consistently rising point values as careers have crisscrossed the continent. Postings in the positions of Secretary are typically between two and three years, while an ambassador remains in one position for a little over three years on average. Almost every posting abroad is preceded by a period of at least two years working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), usually within the Department of Latin American Affairs. Only the ambassadors to Brazil and Mexico routinely carry the high rank of Under-Secretary within the MoFA, and linking the seniority of individuals to specific countries on a map (see Graphic 1) suggests that the ambassadors to certain countries are consistently more senior: the figures for Brazil are highest, followed by Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. Given that Brazil is also the most populous country as well as the largest economy in the region, and it is followed by the three countries named in both parameters, this would suggest a purposeful correlation in terms of strategic priorities, much as can be found in the selection of diplomatic envoys of other major countries.

⁹ This is a work in progress and has not yet been included in the online database.

Graphic 1: Cumulative points per country (1990-2021) for Chinese ambassador ranks



Source: Author's elaboration

It should be noted of course that outside of Latin America, too, Chinese diplomats have made critical connections with Latin American counterparts in Washington, DC: in the Hall of the Americas at the Organization of American States, at the InterAmerican Development Bank, and in other regional forums (Myers 2020). China is keenly aware that the debates within these institutions, even on internal policy, shed light on countries' policy priorities and diplomatic dispositions, while also enabling them to gain insights into regional dynamics and individual country priorities, goals and needs.

6. Changing trends over time

Such strategic and well-informed engagement with other countries was not a feature of earlier generations of Chinese diplomats. In her 2001 book, Liu Xiaohong explored the evolution of Chinese diplomats from the formation of the PRC from its foundation in 1949 up until the 1990s. Leaning on Max Weber's notion of charisma, Liu argued persuasively that each generation is deeply marked by the human factor: this she understood to be relevant for understanding the relationship of diplomats with both their compatriots and the local population in the country of their posting, and also the impact of charismatic national leaders – starting with Chairman Mao. Liu showed how Chinese ambassadors transformed from the ideologically-driven, militaristic ambassadors of the 1950s to more cosmopolitan and experienced diplomats of the 1990s. This transformation signaled a

gradual professionalization of China's foreign service, reflecting both the nation's rise on the world stage and changes in China's internal political environment.

The professionalization, Liu explained, could be tracked through four generations of Chinese diplomats, each with their own distinct characteristics. The first generation, from 1949 to 1954, was represented by seventeen ambassadors, the majority of whom were recruited from the military (Liu 2001: 13). While they stood out for their loyalty to Chairman Mao and for leadership in the Revolution, they lacked education and foreign experience. The second generation, from 1954 to 1966, comprised 77 ambassadors as China expanded its diplomatic relations around the globe. These ambassadors were more educated and experienced than the previous cohort, and were recruited from the military, provincial governments, and universities. This generation also saw the increasing institutionalization of Chinese diplomacy, with the formation of a supporting interpreter system and Zhou Enlai's '3-3-3 system' (1/3 of diplomats in Beijing, 1/3 in embassies, 1/3 in personnel reserves) to ensure both foreign and domestic training. The third generation of diplomats, from 1966 to 1984, represented a transitional generation between the political appointees of the second generation and the career diplomats of the fourth. Although many of these 179 ambassadors started out in non-diplomatic careers, the majority accumulated experience in foreign affairs by the time of their appointment. In fact, despite the banishment of several experienced diplomats by the Cultural Revolution, the majority of third-generation ambassadors knew a foreign language, were recruited from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and had an average of twenty years' working experience.

Liu's fourth generation served as ambassadors from 1984 until the early 1990s. These ambassadors were professionals with expertise, area specialization, and a sophisticated understanding of international affairs. They were recruited from a pool of younger, better-trained diplomats at leading positions from within the MoFA. A majority were educated at China's foreign language universities and almost all had had foreign language capabilities. Characterized by broadminded and cosmopolitan attitudes, the fourth generation made efforts to objectively present events, develop rapport with diplomats from other countries, and convey an appreciation of other cultures. Liu suggested the emergence of a distinct fifth generation of diplomats in the 1990s, trained in foreign languages as well as the social sciences. Many, she hoped, would have gained a wide range of perspectives through graduate degrees abroad, be freer and bolder politically, and driven by pragmatic rationale instead of ideology.

Considering China's official representatives to Latin American countries over the past couple of decades, it is true that pragmatic considerations have been the priority in their day-to-day work, as they have accompanied an unprecedented expansion of trade and a rapid growth in Chinese corporate presence abroad. However, these twin phenomena directly impacted the quality of staff in two ways. Firstly, the best young linguists and university graduates were drawn into international business and finance, often relinquishing secure government careers in favor of well-paid postings abroad as interpreters and managers – China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing for instance, a prime training ground for the country's diplomats, saw the transfer of its graduates into MoFA careers drop as low as 30%.¹⁰ This in turn meant that those who did continue into diplomatic service commanded less respect among business representatives, making it harder for them to corral corporate leaders in the projection and promotion of national interests abroad. Seniority and party rank are crucial to smooth coordination of all

¹⁰ This information is based on my conversations with several CFAU students and graduates between 2012 and 2017.

aspects of policy and governance (both domestically and abroad), so when the overseas representatives of State-Owned Enterprises outrank the local diplomats within the Communist Party *nomenklatura*, the response and level of co-operation is lower.¹¹

To the extent that it is helpful and possible to identify overarching tendencies in China's foreign service staff, the fifth generation can be said to have come and gone without achieving the impact Liu had envisioned, a victim of China's commercial expansion globally and the country's integration into multilateral institutions. What followed at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, was a groundswell of national pride and an "assertive turn" in Chinese foreign policy in the wake of the Financial Crisis of 2008 – a watershed moment that coincided with the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party and the accession of Xi Jinping to the position of Vice President. Beijing published strategic policy papers for various global regions, Chinese energy and telecommunications companies became highly visible actors the world over, and public diplomacy regained its centrality in China's foreign affairs – the posterchild being the global roll-out of Confucius Institutes and various exchange programs from 2004. Embassies restructured their expenses by hiring local staff as drivers, receptionists and security staff (though *never* as cooks), freeing up funds for more specialized Chinese staff from a broader variety of agencies and even think tanks (Martin 2021, 161).

Better informed and with stronger backing at home, Chinese ambassadors fanning out from 2009 onwards had gained status and confidence: they can be said to constitute the People's Republic's sixth generation of diplomats. They have the backing of a more self-confident and financially sounder nation, and a more varied toolbox at their disposal. They have the wherewithal to travel more widely, garner greater attention in the media and among economic and political elites of their host countries, and form alliances with representatives of Chinese corporations for mutual benefit. This is evidenced in press mentions and the frequency of radio interviews, in the number of public appearances at social, educational and political events, the visibility in social media posts, and the increased cohesiveness of the business community. The following section illustrates some examples.

7. Chinese diplomats at work

Former U.S. diplomat William Burns observed that "diplomacy may be one of the world's oldest professions, but it's also one of the most misunderstood. It's mostly a quiet endeavor, less swaggering than unrelenting, oftentimes operating in back channels, out of sight and out of mind" (2019). By profiling some of its emissaries against the background of China's broader approach to the region, a picture emerges of a varied and increasingly refined diplomatic strategy. The evidence shows how China's diplomats, in spite of their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy and are working self-consciously to improve their cross-cultural communication. The personality and strategy of individual diplomats carries all the more weight as the "pervasive overstaffing" typical at many levels of China's government (Li 2016, 42), is not reflected at its embassies. As of 2021, no Chinese embassy in Latin America employed more than 55 staff (in Mexico City) and most hover around 20, not including local employees as receptionists, consular administrators, security guards, drivers and cleaners. This

¹¹ Several Chinese business representatives in Peru and Colombia made clear to me in interviews between 2011 and 2016 that they disregarded their diplomats' cues because their own superiors outranked the ambassador in Party rank. Cf. also Leutert 2018.

contrasts with as many as 600 employees at the United States' largest embassy in the region, in Bogota.

Given such comparatively limited personnel, what are the principal roles of China's diplomatic envoys of the current generation? Huang Zhong recommends their goals should be to "clarify the mutual benefit of economic cooperation [and] that China abides by the recognized international trade rules and those of the target country; China will allow Latin American countries to take advantage of China's economic modernization and industrial upgrading to ... share the dividends of China's development" (Huang 2015: 66). In the following, five profiles of senior diplomats are offered, along with samples and characterizations of their media presence in the context of significant events. In much the way "Wolf Warrior" diplomats are notable but not statistically representative, the individuals highlighted here are remarkable but are not meant to be typical: the selection does, however, show clearly that there is no single trend in China's diplomatic policy, least of all one that might be seen as controversial, let alone offensive.

7.1. Yang Wanming 杨万明 – The Continuous Ambassador¹²

Few public officials have courted controversy as aggressively as then-Education Minister Abraham Weintraub¹³ of Brazil, and when he suggested in April 2020 that the Covid-19 pandemic was "part of a Chinese strategy for world domination" China's foreign service community in Brazil felt compelled to respond. While Li Yang, Consul General in Rio de Janeiro¹⁴, responded heatedly to the Minister's tweets in the press, Ambassador Yang stepped calmly into the fray: those were two parallel responses aimed at appeasing indignant compatriots while simultaneously keeping the high-value Brazil-China economic partnership on a level. It is worth noting that Consul Li was relieved of his post after a stint of less than two years, while Ambassador Yang has lasted beyond the habitual three years and remained in his post until mid-2022.

Ambassador Yang arrived in Brasilia in December 2018, a month before the inauguration of the volatile new president Jair Bolsonaro, and his purpose was just that – to ensure that Beijing's most important relationship in Latin America was not derailed by that radical political shift. He was posted there directly after holding the top diplomatic post in neighboring Argentina for four years, and in Chile before that. He switched with remarkable ease from his Spanish environment to Portuguese, though he trips up occasionally during longer conversations with Brazilian business leaders. Born in 1964, Yang studied Spanish at Nanjing University in the 1980s and economics at the Academy of Social Sciences, before entering the Foreign Service where he moved swiftly through the ranks as he alternated postings in Mexico and Argentina with periods at the MoFA's Latin American Department which he directed from 2007-2012. His career stands out for another reason among his peers, in that he holds a doctoral title from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, where he completed his thesis under the supervision of the *eminence grise* of Latin America studies, the renowned scholar Xu Shicheng (Yang 2008, see also footnote in Creutzfeldt 2012: 63).

¹² Ambassador Yang tweets @WanmingYang since 2015, in Spanish until 2018, nowadays in Portuguese.

¹³ Weintraub resigned abruptly on June 20, 2020.

¹⁴ Counsellor Li left Brazil in early 2020 and now tweets @Li_Yang_China from MoFa in Beijing. Though he no longer provokes wars of words, he maintains a highly jingoistic tone.

Ambassador Yang's posting to Chile (2012-2014) coincided with Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Santiago, during which he made his memorable speech advocating for transpacific ties in the spirit of "Trusted Friends Forever" (Wen 2012). Chilean trade with China grew only modestly during his tenure, but he laid the groundwork for subsequent successes which allowed Chile to attract major asset acquisitions by Chinese companies: the purchase of Pacific Hydro by a Chinese corporation was an important breakthrough and two years later Tianqi Lithium acquired a US\$4 billion stake in one fourth of Chile's main lithium producer.

During his time as envoy to Buenos Aires (2014-2018) bilateral trade remained stable but investment grew at an astounding pace, and Yang became deeply involved in one of China's most consequential investments in the region: a space control station in Patagonia. There was considerable pushback from the Macri administration (2015-2019) with added pressure from the United States, but China stood firm. And just as Yang had arrived in Argentina well in advance of a change in government, in 2018 he was posted to Brazil's capital a year ahead of an election – in this case of the controversial populist Jair Bolsonaro.

Ambassador Yang, square-jawed and with a tall forehead, exudes confidence and professionalism, and though he rarely smiles he engages keenly and purposefully with his audience. He has adopted the greeting common among Latin American men of shaking the right hand of his opposite while grasping the upper left arm, and has thus become a true good-will striker in this arena of China's global strategy. The executors of Belt and Road Initiative – infrastructure, energy and mining companies – are hopeful that they might one day build routes across the continent, and Ambassador Yang has successfully navigated the political elites of Latin America's Southern Cone. This is a striking example of Beijing's strategy of nurturing highly qualified diplomatic staff, a pattern seen in many iterations over the past thirty years.¹⁵

7.2. Li Nianping 李念平 – The Regional Outsider

When Li Nianping was designated ambassador to Colombia in September 2015, his nomination broke with a long-standing tradition of posting fluent Spanish-speakers to represent Beijing in the Andean capital. Aware of this shortcoming in a country that prides itself on speaking the 'purest' Castilian accent in the Americas, he brought with him a highly trained interpreter. He went on to break with other traditions by traveling to parts of the country his predecessors had never dreamed of, and he encouraged his interpreter to give the voyages a high degree of visibility by posting them on her Facebook page. He toured farms and oil wells, attended coffee tastings and church services, climbed mountain peaks and danced with members of indigenous communities.

Though unfamiliar with the culture that surrounded him, he brought with him the suave and winning confidence of a man of the world, having spent most of his career in German-speaking countries – Colombians rather appreciated his "European" background. Ambassador Li's tenure coincided with the historic 2016 Peace Accord

¹⁵ Over the past three decades, a further 15 Chinese diplomats held as many as three – or in two instances, four – ambassadorial posts in Latin American countries, after multiple postings in the region at lower ranks. This count includes only one woman. All of these retired prior to the year 2016, and in this light the career of Yang Wanming is not entirely typical but quite remarkable: born in 1964, he has still several years shy of retirement age.

between the Colombian government and the FARC Guerrilla Group, allowing for greater freedom of travel and cautious interest from overseas investors. He ushered Chinese businesses in and doubled the number of corporations registered in the country, giving new impetus to cross-sectoral coordination and support through the creation of the 中资企业联合会 [Colombian-Chinese Business Association]. He capped it off by orchestrating the state visit of President Ivan Duque in July 2019, the first visit by a Colombian head of state to China in seven years.

Only a few months older than his colleague in Brazil, Li's extra-regional trajectory could not be more different, and yet it is not unique: other diplomats whose career took them through Europe are Chen Guoyou 陈国友, ambassador to Ecuador since 2019 after several stints in Italy; also Dong Xiaojun 董晓军 who rotated globally before becoming head of the mission in Uruguay from 2015-2018, whence he was posted as ambassador to Bulgaria; more recently Ma Hui 马辉¹⁶ was named chief envoy to Cuba following several years in London after having climbed the career ladder at the IDCPC's Section VII for northern Europe and the UK. Short of being a new trend, these examples nonetheless evidence an opening-up of career options for Chinese diplomats, and it would appear that in the MoFA's planning, considerations of personality and ability to deliver certain results outweigh linguistic or cultural familiarity.

7.3. Xu Bu 徐步 – The Peripatetic Provocateur

Chile was one of the first countries in Latin America (after Cuba) to recognize the People's Republic of China officially in 1970, and it stuck with that decision even through the subsequent military dictatorship. It was the first country to sign a "Free Trade Agreement" with China in 2005, and as the seat of the UN's ECLAC Commission it has long been a favourite destination for political leaders seeking regional visibility. It is perhaps the resilience of this relationship that led to a decision in Beijing in late 2017 to send Ambassador Xu Bu from Jakarta to Santiago, after stints in Canada and Korea, Pakistan and the UK. According to at least one Chilean journalist, Xu arrived with "express instructions from the highest authorities in Beijing to raise his voice" and escalate confrontations with Chilean officials on issues pertaining to China's national interest (Artaza 2019)¹⁷. His comments went beyond bilateral issues, when in April 2019 he described US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as "malicious" and having "lost his mind".

This man of slight build and receding chin whose dark-rimmed glasses added severity to his image of studied disdain. Like Yang Wanming, he holds a PhD, but unlike Yang, he was not versed in the national language and did not orchestrate a charm offensive along the lines of his colleague in Colombia. It is not clear what the goal of this approach may have been, but it fit in with the style of the "Wolf Warrior diplomat" sporadically seen amongst Beijing's envoys to Sweden and France. Xu ruffled many feathers and was

¹⁶ Ambassador Ma tweets @MahuiChina since October 2019, primarily in Chinese and English, rarely in Spanish. Similar to Counsellor Li Yang, his tweets frequently feature sarcastic critiques of Western, especially US, policies and politicians.

¹⁷ Although Artaza's piece is a highly readable account of some of the altercations during Xu's time in Chile, it is riddled with incongruities and wild guesses, including his assertion regarding Xu's mission style.

withdrawn precipitously after only two-and-a-half years before a replacement could be confirmed. After his retreat from Chile, Xu was nominated as the President of the China Institute of International Studies. His case indicates that the assertive style of “Wolf Warriors” has been as short-lived as the box office hit that lent them its name, and is not a trend, let alone a new generation, of Chinese diplomatic representation.

7.4. Lan Hu 蓝虎 – The Confident Youngster

Chinese telecommunications firms in Latin America are well-known for their brash young executives, and China’s mining and engineering giants like to send ambitious youngsters to cut their teeth bidding for projects in the region. Recently, the MoFA, too, has promoted younger men in their mid-forties to head up embassies. One of these is Lan Hu, who was nominated ambassador to Colombia at the end of 2019, at the age of only 46.¹⁸ Since his arrival, his appearances on national television and radio programs have done much to disarm deep-seated prejudice against Asians among Colombians (Creutzfeldt 2018). In public encounters he swerves between the nerdy technocrat and a youthful enthusiasm, and he knows the region well thanks to his previous postings to Bolivia, Costa Rica and Venezuela.

Lan had large shoes to fill after his predecessor had laid the groundwork for a stronger involvement of Chinese companies in a country traditionally much more oriented toward the United States than other South American countries. Although the Duque administration has stalled and prevaricated on the 2016 Peace Agreement, China has made significant inroads in mining and infrastructure projects, most notably when a Chinese consortium began building the capital’s first metro system in 2020 with an initial price tag of US\$5 billion, and maintains a strong trade surplus with Colombia, with annual exports over US\$10 billion. Building on his predecessor’s success in drawing ever more Chinese companies to the country, Ambassador Lan has been adept at reassuring the business community that commitment is strong and unaltered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.5. Wei Qiang 魏强 – The Tweeting Party Liaison¹⁹

The nations of Central America and the Caribbean constitute the last cluster of diplomatic allies with Taiwan, and after 2009 Beijing had kept a tacit truce with the island it considers a renegade province. But following an initiative by Panama’s president Juan Carlos Varela, China’s officers in Panama City began quietly laying the groundwork for a transition, which occurred in July 2017 to great fanfare and accompanied by the signing of 19 agreements.²⁰ The man chosen to head the first embassy of the People’s Republic

¹⁸ Two other representatives of this generation are Zhang Run 张润 who became the ambassador to the Dominican Republic in 2018 at the age of 46, and Liang Yu 梁宇, now in Peru, who was only 48 when he took up his first post as ambassador, in Bolivia in 2017.

¹⁹ Ambassador Wei tweets @weiasecas since November 2017, in fluent and often flowery Spanish.

²⁰ Being the highest-volume user of the Panama Canal, Beijing had long maintained an “Office” –in effect an unofficial embassy– at the top of a commercial building in the centre of Panama City. Given the historical ties of the United States with this small but strategically important

in this country is a seasoned Latin Americanist inside the Chinese diplomatic community: Wei Qiang, the director of IDCPC Section V, responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Ambassador Wei impersonates the blurring of the lines between these two institutions, having seen several postings to embassies in the region. His Spanish is flawless and he takes great pleasure in the puns and quips that define Latin American humor, but is equally happy to switch to the stilted language of polite academic exchange. He uses both styles with alacrity on the media platform Twitter: with over twenty-one thousand tweets and more than eighteen thousand followers, Wei is “Beijing’s most active social media user in Latin America” (Youkee 2020).

Panama’s importance in the changing tides of US-China relations goes well beyond the country itself and has far more to do with the strategic role of the Canal in global trade, seeing that an estimated 6% of global value in goods transit through here. The COVID-19 pandemic added further to the impact of the US-China trade war, leading to a contraction of Panama’s economy of almost 20%. Ambassador Wei has carried on his style of friendly engagement both online and in official dealings with Varela’s successor Laurentino Cortezo Cohen. He assiduously avoids engaging in the types of debates and controversies favored by some of his colleagues, and as such he is part of a worldwide trend among Chinese diplomats to come across as more accessible and relatable, and an example of the country’s embrace of public diplomacy (Song & Han 2017, 138).

8. Organizations

The two principal government entities responsible for China’s global strategy are the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Commerce (MofCom). Most ambassadors are employed by the MoFA, including those who made their career at the IDCPC or even the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, but there is occasional competition for top diplomatic posts from MofCom and other organizations.²¹ The intertwining of Party and State is the defining feature of China’s political system, and the IDCPC has evolved from the Party’s global outreach department into a politically well-connected arm of the MoFA (Li 2016, 57). Some observers see the revitalization of the Department as part of Xi Jinping’s efforts to re-centralize political power within the Party (Hackenesch & Bader 2020, 10).

Despite some infighting over who sets the tone at individual embassies, for China’s corporations and entrepreneurs, the most valuable information on foreign markets are invariably the annual reports researched and published online by the MofCom’s commercial attaché at every Chinese embassy. The 对外投资合作国别指南 [Country guides for foreign investment and cooperation] are detailed reports that can run to over 200 pages on occasion and which are updated annually. In contrast to other countries, however, there is no “revolving door” between Chinese corporations and the diplomatic

country that had liberated itself from partial US occupation as recently as 1999, the transition President Varela set in motion also carried symbolic weight.

²¹ Conversations with an anonymous source formerly employed at a Chinese embassy in Latin America, 2020.

service.²² Instead, it is not uncommon to find scholars from the Institute of Latin American Studies in Beijing taking up mid-level positions at embassies in the region, and several ambassadors have landed senior positions at leading international studies institutes after returning home. For instance, after leaving the embassy in Santiago de Chile in 2020, Xu Bu 徐步 became the director of the China Institute of International Studies; Chen Duqing 陈笃庆, after a fulfilling career at the head of several Chinese missions abroad, was in 2015 named the director of the Brazilian Studies Center of the Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Ambassador Yang Wanming is almost certain to take up a senior think tank position or, given his academic credentials, earn a university professorship after he properly retires from his post in Brasilia. Furthermore, all retired senior diplomats automatically become members of the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs (CPIFA). In this way, the insights won by China's diplomats are fed back into the ecosystem of China's international politics and composted for the better growth of forthcoming generations.

9. Conclusions

Stuart Harris perceptively notes that "China does not expect partnerships to eliminate conflicts, [but] it does expect that conflicts on individual issues will not prevent cooperation on the bigger economic, political or strategic issues" (2007: 8). China's strategic development of its diplomatic corps in Latin America suggests that it has nurtured diplomats with the character and abilities to grow and maintain such partnerships. Led by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Beijing government has created a professional foreign service corps that can keep pace with the role of one of the world's leading economies and look the leaders of its multinational business in the eye. By building a large and varied body of diplomats with regional expertise as well as global acumen, China is able to pursue its domestic and international goals and participate actively in global and local conversations. As suggested in the introduction, the evidence shows how China's diplomats, despite their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy and are working self-consciously to improve their cross-cultural communication and raise their country's ability to influence the global discourse on critical issues.

The paper points to a variety of Party and government entities involved in China's overseas operations, but also shows how important the MoFA's evolution is in proactive co-ordination with the political leadership at home and the priorities of state-owned enterprises spread across the globe. Wendy Leutert has explored lateral transfers of executives between state-owned companies and emphasizes how these may be critical to understanding China's politics and economics in the future (2018: 17). The same can be said of the need to gain better insights into the transfers of Chinese diplomats between countries, and even track their personal connections with corporate representatives. There is no evidence of close links between the MoFA and the United Front Work Department, as Chinese ambassadors today strive to be more accessible and transparent, whereas the United Front works indirectly and informally through multiple channels. While the Xi Jinping administration has worked to strengthen the Party within government by centralizing processes and tightening the hierarchies, it has also allowed ministries to lead with their strengths. The Latin American Department of the Ministry of

²² Several Latin American countries and even the United States have been known to send business leaders to represent their country abroad, at times risking putting short-term entrepreneurial interests ahead of national priorities.

Foreign Affairs is a remarkable example of such strengths and other major powers with interests in that region of the world could do worse than taking some pages out of the Chinese diplomatic playbook.

Importantly, the assertive tone of a small number of Chinese diplomats which has been dubbed “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” can be seen to be the exception to the rule and likely deemed counterproductive in Beijing’s strategy in Latin America. In answer to the question asked at the outset, it seems clear that the principal goal of Beijing’s envoys to the region has been to build goodwill through greater visibility and approachability, and to ensure a favorable environment within which China’s investment and commercial goals can grow. In spite of this, there is no question that Beijing’s diplomatic overtures in Latin America cause nervousness in Washington, where State Department officials regularly remind Congressional committees how severely US interests in the Hemisphere have been neglected and longstanding ties of friendship have worn thin or snapped asunder. Those who observe the dynamic closely are well aware that increasingly suave and savvy ambassadors from China effectively underpin China’s economic activities and help institutionalize China’s engagement in the region, as well as ensuring support in critical international fora such as the United Nations. Even if economic activities do not aim to directly challenge the US, Great Power competition is nonetheless at play here, too. China’s strategies and speeches feature cooperation plans in all spheres, covering trade, loans and investment, politics and security, infrastructure and energy, science, agriculture, industry and people-to-people exchanges. As of April 2022, twenty-one countries in the region have joined Xi Jinping’s signature Belt and Road Initiative: a success perhaps only on paper, but nonetheless a show of hands that contrasts with the poor display of regional cohesiveness at the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles in June 2022.

In the light of these shifting realities, it becomes evident that although China’s loans and investments in Latin America have slowed drastically since 2019 and the Pandemic has reduced travel affecting tourism, business and academic exchange, and in spite of a heightened sense of competition between the authoritarian regimes of Asia and the democratic regimes in the West, Beijing’s ambassadors have built a reputation of goodwill and accessibility that makes large swaths of the political and economic elite of the region feel at ease. It is time, therefore, that studies and strategies pertaining to this region pay as much attention to the oscillating economic figures as to the “softer” skills of bilateral relationship-building honed by diplomatic envoys and the institutions that support them.

Bibliography

- Artaza, Francisco. 2019. "Xu Bu: El golpe del dragón." *La Tercera* (7 September), www.latercera.com/la-tercera-domingo/noticia/xu-bu-golpe-del-dragon/814502/.
- Beck, Ana Luiza, Mayara T. Muller & Fernando Seabra. 2021. "The Controversy of Lateralisms: A Comparison between FTAs of China and the United States". *Colombia Internacional* 107, 29-49.
- Burns, William J. 2019. "The lost art of American diplomacy". *Foreign Affairs*, May/June edition, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-27/lost-art-american-diplomacy.
- CEPAL. 2021. "Cooperation between China and Latin America and the Caribbean is an Opportunity to Reduce Global Asymmetries and Support a Transformative Economic Recovery" (13 October), www.cepal.org/en/news/cooperation-between-china-and-latin-america-and-caribbean-opportunity-reduce-global-asymmetries.
- Chen, Dingding. 2015. "The transformation of Chinese diplomacy: What should the world pay attention to?" *The Diplomat* (22 December), <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-transformation-of-chinese-diplomacy-what-should-the-world-pay-attention-to/>.
- Chen, Zhimin. 2014. "中国的外交创新是否需要外交革命 [Does China's diplomatic renewal require a diplomatic revolution?]" *世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics]*, 12, 37-51.
- Connelly, Marisela & Romer Cornejo Bustamante. 1992. *China - América Latina: Génesis Y Desarrollo De Sus Relaciones*. México: Colegio de México.
- Creutzfeldt, Benjamin (ed.). 2012. *China en América Latina: Reflexiones sobre las relaciones transpacíficas*. Bogotá: Universidad Externado de Colombia.
- Creutzfeldt, Benjamin. 2018. "Diplomacia cultural china en Colombia, alcances y resistencias". In *La Política Cultural de China en América Latina*, edited by Romer Cornejo, 199-228. Mexico City: Colegio de Mexico.
- Custer, Samantha et al. 2018. *Ties That Bind: Quantifying China's Public Diplomacy and Its "Good Neighbor" Effect*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.
- Custer, Samantha et al. 2019. *Influencing the Narrative: How the Chinese Government Mobilizes Students and Media to Burnish Its Image*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.
- Doherty, Ben. 2019. "China leads world in number of diplomatic posts, leaving US in its wake". *Guardian* (27 November), www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/27/china-leads-world-in-number-of-diplomatic-posts-leaving-us-in-its-wake.

- Ellis, R. Evan. 2022. "China's Role in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues*. Washington, DC: CSIS Center for Strategic and International Studies (31 March).
- Feinberg, Richard E. 2022. "Biden in Latin America: A Modest Start". *Global Americans* (27 January), <https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/01/biden-in-latin-america-a-modest-start/>.
- Feng, Zhongping & Huang Jing. 2019. *China's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a changing world*. Madrid: ESPO European Strategic Partnerships Observatory.
- Fu, Ying. 2020. "在讲好中国故事中提升话语权 [Promoting the right to speak by telling good Chinese stories]". *Pengpai - The Paper* (2 April), https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6797941.
- Gitter, David & Leah Fang. 2016. "The Chinese Communist Party International Department: Overlooked yet ever present". *The Diplomat* (8 August) <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/the-chinese-communist-party-international-department-overlooked-yet-ever-present/>.
- "Global Diplomacy Index". 2020. *Lowy Institute*, <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/>.
- Hackenesch, Christine & Julia Bader. 2020. "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach". *International Studies Quarterly* 0 (2020), 1-11.
- Harris, Stuart. 2007. *Case studies in Chinese diplomacy*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Heilmann, Sebastian, Moritz Rudolf, Mikko Huotari & Johannes Buckow. 2014. "China's Shadow Foreign Policy: Parallel structures challenge the established international order". *China Monitor* 18 (28 October).
- Heine, Jorge. 2014. "From club to network diplomacy". In *The Oxford Handbook of modern diplomacy*, edited by Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine & Ramesh Thakur, 54-69. Oxford University Press.
- Huang Zhong. 2015. "新形势下中国对拉美国家的公共外交 [China's Public Diplomacy Towards Latin American Countries under New Conditions]." 拉丁美洲研究 [*Journal of Latin American Studies*] 37, no. 2: 60-66.
- Kastner, Scott L., Margaret M. Pearson & Chad Rector. 2018. *China's strategic multilateralism: Investing in global governance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Katzenstein, Peter J. (ed.). 2012. *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational processes beyond East and West*. London: Routledge.
- Leutert, Wendy. 2016. "The political mobility of China's central State-Owned Enterprise leaders". *The China Quarterly* 233 (March), 1-21.
- Li, Cheng. 2016. *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Liu, Xiaohong. 2001. *Chinese Ambassadors: The Rise of Diplomatic Professionalism since 1949*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

- Mallapaty, Smriti. 2021. "China's COVID vaccines have been crucial - now immunity is waning," *Nature* (14 October 14), www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02796-w.
- Martin, Peter. 2019. "Diplomatic outbursts mar Xi's plan to raise China on the world stage". *Bloomberg News* (6 March), www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-06/diplomatic-outbursts-mar-xi-s-plan-to-raise-china-on-world-stage.
- Martin, Peter. 2021. *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*. Oxford University Press.
- McDonell, Stephen. 2021. "Xi Jinping calls for more 'loveable' image for China in bid to make friends". *BBC online* (2 June), www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57327177.
- Myers, Margaret, Ricardo Barrios & Guo Cunhai. 2018. *Learning Latin America: China's strategy for Area Studies development*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2018.
- Myers, Margaret. 2020. *China's regional engagement goals in Latin America*. Washington, DC: Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy (7 May).
- Padilla, John & Sergio Guzmán. 2022 "As China eyes Colombia, the United States is AWOL." *Foreign Policy* (25 January).
- Pang, Zhongying. 2009. "Assessing the diplomatic power of China". In *Power and Sustainability of the Chinese State*, edited by Keun Lee, Joon-Han Kim & Wing Thyee Woo, 146-165. London: Routledge.
- Phillips, Nicola. 2010. "China and Latin America: Development challenges and geopolitical dilemmas". In *China, the Developing World, and the new global dynamic*, edited by Lowell Dittmer & George T. Yu, 177-201. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Ratliff, William. 1969. "Chinese Communist Cultural Diplomacy toward Latin America, 1949-1960." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49, no. 1 (1 February): 53-79.
- Ren, Xiao & Liu Ming. 2020. *Chinese perspectives on International Relations in the Xi Jinping era*. Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research (2 June).
- Shen, Simon & Jean-Marc F. Blanchard (eds.). 2010. *Multidimensional diplomacy of contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Song, Xiaoli & Han Zhaoying. 2017. "中国对拉美公共外交的演讲、活动与效果 [China's Public Diplomacy towards Latin America: Evolution, Activities and Results]". 拉丁美洲研究 [*Journal of Latin American Studies*] 39 (3), 123-39.
- Telias, Diego & Francisco Urdiñez. (2020). "China's Foreign Aid Drivers: Lessons from a Novel Dataset of the Mask Diplomacy in Latin America During the COVID-19 Pandemic". <https://estudiosasiaticos.uc.cl/humanidades-digitales/mask-diplomacy-v-1-0>.
- USCC (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission). 2021. *Annual Report to Congress*. Washington, DC: United States Congress (November), www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2021-annual-report-congress.
- Wang Yizhou. 2016. "实现全球战略，中国现在的外交投入够吗？ [To achieve its global strategy, is China's current diplomatic investment enough?]" 凤凰国际智库报告 [*Phoenix International Think Tank Report*] (12 January).

- Wang Yizhou & Li Xinda. 2017. “从外交官数量的历史变迁谈我国外交能力建设新课题 [On the construction of China's diplomatic ability in the light of the historical change of the number of diplomats]”. 人民日报 [*People's Daily*] (13 September).
- Wen Jiabao. 2012. 永远做相互信赖的好朋友 [*Trusted Friends Forever: Address by Premier Wen Jiabao at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean of the United Nations*]. Santiago de Chile: CEPAL (26 June).
- Wu Jing. 2017. 战狼II [*War Wolf 2*]. Beijing: China Film Group Corporation.
- Xiang Lanxin. 2020. “反思战狼文化，呼唤文明沟通 [Reflect on the Culture of the Wolf Warriors and Call for Clear Communication]”. *Sina.com* (30 April), https://k.sina.com.cn/article_2662090253_9eac460d01900mhhy.html.
- Xu Shicheng et al. (eds.). 2017. 拉美左翼和社会主义理论思潮研究 [*Research Trends on the Latin American Left and Socialist Theory*]. Beijing: Social Sciences Press.
- Yang Wanming. 2008. “Study of China's diplomatic policy towards Latin America (1990-2006)”, *Doctoral Dissertation*. Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- Youkee, Matt. 2020. “Chinese ambassadors in Latin America take to Twitter”. *Diálogo Chino* (29 May), <https://dialogochino.net/en/trade-investment/35646-chinese-ambassadors-in-latin-america-take-to-twitter/>.
- “Zhao in Latin America 1985: Seeing Is Believing.” *Beijing Review* 28, no. 47 (25 November 1985): 6-7. www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1985/PR1985-47S.pdf.
- Zheng Yongnian. 2004. 大国责任：转型中的中国国际战略 [*Responsibilities of a Great Power: China's International Strategy in Transformation*]. Singapore: Global Publishing.
- Zhu Zhiquan. 2020. “Interpreting China's 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy'.” *The Diplomat* (15 May), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

About the Author

A China scholar of German and British extraction, Creutzfeldt graduated with a BA in Chinese Studies from Durham University in England and earned his MA from SOAS, University of London, whereupon he joined Christie's as an auctioneer and specialist for Chinese porcelain and works of art. He has studied and worked extensively in China over the past two decades and has co-founded and managed multiple start-up companies. For over eight years, he was a university lecturer for East Asian Studies in Bogota, Colombia. He received his PhD in political studies in 2015, for research on China's foreign policy towards Latin America, under the supervision of Qin Yaqing (CFAU) and Matt Ferchen. After a postdoc position for China-Latin America-U.S. Affairs at Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, he continued in Washington, DC, as a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Currently, he is an affiliated researcher at the Centre for the Study of China and Pacific Asia at Universidad del Pacifico in Lima, Peru, and a lecturer at the Department for East Asian Studies, Georg August University Göttingen.