

An ‘Authoritarian Nexus’? China’s Alleged Special Relationship with Autocratic States in Latin America

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Abstract

China’s rise is often interpreted as a harbinger of a new era in world politics and raises the question if such a power transition may impact upon patterns of democratic rule across the globe. There is growing interest in whether China acts as an outside stabilizer for other authoritarian regimes. This paper contributes to the emerging literature on the international dimension of autocratic rule by focusing on Chinese Latin American policy. Using the method of structured focused comparisons, we want to assess whether China’s relations towards the Latin American autocracies Cuba and Venezuela differ from those with structurally similar, but democratic cooperation partners in the region, namely Costa Rica and Chile. The guiding question is whether we can detect such a pattern of specific bilateral relationships between China and other autocracies, leading to an ‘authoritarian nexus’ in Chinese foreign policy. *Keywords:* China, Latin America, authoritarianism.

Resumen: ¿Un ‘nexo autoritario’? Supuesta relación especial de China con Estados autocráticos de América Latina

El ascenso de China se suele interpretar como un presagio de una nueva era en la política mundial y plantea la cuestión de si dicha transición de poder podría repercutir en los patrones de la democracia en el mundo entero. La cuestión de si China actúa como estabilizador externo para otros regímenes autoritarios suscita cada vez más interés. Este artículo es una contribución a la bibliografía emergente sobre la dimensión internacional de los sistemas autocráticos enfocándose en la política chino-latinoamericana. Mediante el método de las comparaciones estructuradas y focalizadas, queremos evaluar si las relaciones de China con las autocracias latinoamericanas de Cuba y Venezuela difieren de las relaciones con otros aliados estructuralmente similares, pero democráticos en la región, como Costa Rica y Chile. La pregunta clave es si podemos detectar este patrón de relaciones bilaterales específicas

entre China y otras autocracias, un patrón que desemboque en un ‘nexo autoritario’ en la política exterior china. *Palabras clave*: China, Latinoamérica, autoritarismo.

China’s rise in world politics is often seen as a challenge to the contemporary global superpower (allegedly in decline), the United States, and consequently, as a harbinger of a new era in world politics (Ikenberry, 2008; Breslin, 2013). Furthermore, there is another idea which links such power transition thinking with rather specific assumptions regarding foreign policy and international cooperation of authoritarian regimes (Erdmann, Bank, Hoffmann & Richter, 2013; Mattes and Rodriguez, 2014; Tansey, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015). Authoritarian regimes are assumed to have special foreign policy motivations, ambitions as well as activities. In this regard, China is viewed as an actor which intentionally has sought to nurture specifically strong bonds with autocratic states around the globe (Bader & Kaestner, 2010; Bader, 2015, Burnell, 2010a, b). Some authors have indeed suggested that ‘authoritarian solidarity’ is an important ingredient in Chinese foreign policy (e.g. Kleine-Ahlbrandt & Small, 2008; Burnell, 2010b, 11; Kurlantzick, 2013, ch. 7-9). Other voices have at least implicitly hinted at a growing Chinese interest to boost its ties to authoritarian states in matters of energy security (Swaine, 2011, pp. 219-20). In contrast, Vanderhill excludes China *expressis verbis* in her recent study on such autocracy promotion, but without giving evidence why (Vanderhill, 2013, p. 6).

Only recently have some studies produced a theoretical argument as to why and under what circumstances non-democratic regional (and aspiring global) powers could be expected to support authoritarian backlashes within democratizing countries or to nurture entrenched autocratic regimes in their neighborhood (Bader, Graevingholt and Kaestner 2010; Schweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper 2012, Bader 2015). According to this logic, autocracies have strong incentives to favor similarly structured states at least in *nearby* states, mainly because of feared diffusion or spillover effects of democratization. What interests us is whether we can detect any such pattern of behaviour in general, respectively in non-neighbouring regions of the world, like Latin America. Since Latin America has been deemed of heightened strategic importance by China in recent years and is by now generally considered a field of considerable Chinese foreign policy activity (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010; Ellis, 2014), it provides a good testing ground for the aforementioned assumption. Hence, we want to elucidate whether Chinese activities throughout Latin America demonstrate China’s intention to nurture special relations with autocratic states around the globe. The central guiding question is: Can we identify patterns of a specific foreign policy vis-à-vis autocratic states on behalf of China, i.e. an ‘authoritarian nexus’? The idea of an ‘authoritarian nexus’ itself is linked to the concept of ‘special relationships’ in foreign policy in the following manner. Although the understanding of special relationships in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature is heavily tilted towards the analysis of the alleged Anglo-

American special relationship (Colman, 2004; Tate, 2012; see also the more encompassing view of Dumbrell & Schaefer, 2009), some general features of any special relationship can be distilled from there. What emerges from a survey of this literature is that a truly *special* relationship is characterized by:

- o unusually close institutional bonds, frequent consultation and concerted policies which are neither automatic nor self-creating but products of intentional agency and strategy (Colman, 2004, pp. 1, 3);
- o an unusual degree of intimacy and informality (Colman, 2004, p. 2; Dumbrell & Schaefer, 2009, p. 3), such as activities which exceed short-term, interest-driven and purely pragmatic exchange;
- o a cultural and sentiment-related base of the relations (Dumbrell & Schaefer, 2009, p. 2-3) which in turn may be the result of a consciously constructed and nurtured projection of cultural similarity (Dumbrell & Schaefer, 2009, p. 4) or cultural-ideological affinity (Tate, 2012, pp. 38-54);
- o a close alignment of interests already being or brought into accordance with each other, most often an alignment primarily conditioned by the interests of the more powerful side in the equation (Dumbrell & Schaefer 2009, p. 4); in this sense, a political and cultural-ideological superstructure may overarch and stabilize a relationship based on perceived and forged shared interests.

The primary focus of this paper is in elucidating whether we can meaningfully speak of a 'special relationship' when referring to the relations of China with selected autocratic states in Latin America. Consequently it is the question of specialness itself that is of paramount interest as well as the idea whether we, if at all, rather witness special relations *in the making*. Methodologically, we have chosen the technique of structured focused comparisons between different real types of relations in order to identify whether a relation is special vis-à-vis others or not (on the method itself see George, 1979; George & Bennett, 2004, pp. 67-72). Consequently, we are looking for a specific intensity or specific patterns of exchange between China and autocracies in the Western hemisphere as compared to China's relations with comparable, non-autocratic states in the region. Following the logic of paired comparisons (Tarrow, 2010), we compare each of the two obvious cases of relations to autocracies in the target region, namely Chinese-Cuban and Chinese-Venezuelan relations, to structurally similar cases (Chinese relations with Costa Rica and Chile, respectively).

Chinese foreign policy fragmentation and special relationships

In analysing whether Chinese activities throughout Latin America are *intentionally* seeking to nurture *especially* good relations with autocratic/authoritarian states, we define as a threshold for such a special relationship – an authoritarian nexus – as the following. First, we focus on internal features/state structures which allow a country to be categorized as 'autocratic'.¹

China definitely has become one of the most important autocratic states today. In Latin America, Cuba is not only without a doubt autocratic, but even a socialist autocracy, which makes Cuba the most likely case for special relations. China even recognizes Cuba as a ‘socialist brother and comrade’ (‘Chinese President Meets Cuban Foreign Minister’, 2013). The counterpart for Cuba is Costa Rica, structurally similar in size, population, and importance, but notably different in the crucial variable ‘regime type’. Costa Rica has been a stable democracy since 1949. Thus, if the logic of an authoritarian nexus holds, Costa Rica should constitute an unlikely case for a special relationship with China. As a second obvious case in the region, Venezuela can be identified at least as an electoral or competitive autocracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This makes Venezuela a weaker case for special relations, but still a likely one against the background of the idea of an authoritarian nexus. A suitable case for comparison with Venezuela is Chile, a structurally similar country with a resource-based economy, depending not on oil like Venezuela but on copper. Again, the notable difference is in the variable ‘regime type’: Chile has matured to a stable and successful democracy since re-democratization in 1989, which, in the logic of the alleged relation makes Chile an unlikely case, too.

A second, necessary qualification for an authoritarian nexus is the existence of specific bilateral foreign policy schemes which indicate a preference for specifically intense cooperation and collaboration with autocratic regimes. Here, we define four expectations tied to specific fields of action. If there is indeed an authoritarian nexus we would expect to find the following patterns in Chinese-Cuban and Chinese-Venezuelan relations (as compared to the cases of Chinese relations with democratic Costa Rica and Chile):

- o more and closer activities in the realm of (military) security, i.e. joint exercises and exchanges of personnel; significant cooperation in military R&D as well as intense arms trade eventually leading to an exclusive form of alliance;
- o specific patterns of economic cooperation, here measured by the intensity and importance assigned to economic exchange and the existence of preferential agreements;
- o an unusual degree of depth in the respective institutional relations, i.e. common institutional structures, possibly excluding others or being created for the purpose of bolstering specific bilateral relations;
- o a heightened importance assigned to soft power and public diplomacy as means to foster and nurture the cultural-ideological superstructure of the relations (embodied in high-level state visits and the establishment of Confucius Institutes).

The very idea of ‘special relationships’ between China and other states seems to suggest that China pursues its foreign policy as a unitary actor. Recent research on Chinese foreign policy hints to a growing ‘pluralization’ of Chinese foreign decision-making (Jakobson & Knox, 2010; Shambaugh, 2013; Downs,

2014). Several actors are involved in decision-making, the party, state bureaucracy, military and intelligence, regional and local governments, entrepreneurs and state-owned enterprises, which lead to what Jakobson and Knox call a 'fractured authority' (Jakobson & Knox, 2010). However, despite a growing number of actors involved, we assume the (still) formative overall foreign policy leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the CCP-controlled government. Chinese foreign policy is still to a considerable degree channelled and constrained by the policy choices and frameworks established through the CCP, most notably its Politburo Standing Committee. (Power et al., 2012, p. 114; Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 61ff.). Not surprisingly, even proponents of the 'pluralization thesis' such as Jakobson speak of an ambiguous yet *symbiotic* relationship (Jakobson, 2009, p. 415; emphasis inserted) between the government, the army, enterprises and other foreign policy actors. This notion entails that the Chinese party-state has reserved more than a modicum of policy coordination capabilities and is at the very least competent to channel the activities of Chinese actors abroad or to veto any actions deemed unsupportive of the overall government policy line. This is even true of foreign economic relations of China, arguably the field of activity where the 'pluralization thesis' has received the most support. First, the entire 'going out'-strategy of successive Chinese governments that has promoted investment and business activities abroad during the past two decades has been accompanied by a stream of official papers and guidelines for businesses outlining *where* to invest. Power et al. (2012, p. 101) remind us that these guidelines result from sustained and *coordinated* efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) as well as Chinese embassies and consulates around the globe. Secondly, as Downs remarks, the Chinese government commands several levers of control over Chinese enterprises (Downs, 2010, pp. 74-78). It still retains authority over appointments for top positions in large, state-owned enterprises; these party-appointed executives in turn are often willing to follow the Party's policy directives in their business decisions (Qiu, 2015, p. 8). Even formally 'private' global players, it needs to be stressed, usually exhibit ties to the CCP. A case in point is here Huawei, founded and still led by a former officer of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer and CCP member (Power et al., 2012, p. 108), which has a notoriously shrouded ownership structure only thinly veiling its close bonds to the Chinese party-state. Moreover, the Chinese government exerts some control on larger foreign investment decisions which must be approved by the CCP-dominated National Development and Reform Commission. It is also able to channel the investment behaviour of all types of enterprises through the provision of concessional credit. Finally, as Ellis has recently pointed out (Ellis, 2014, p. 10), Chinese companies facing hurdles in their operations abroad frequently turn to the Chinese government to support their cause or to provide overall guidance on how to appropriately respond to local problems. This, in sum, allows the Chinese government (with the CCP-controlled Politburo acting as the top coordinating entity) to shape

‘business decisions’ and to mould them according to its interests. Hence, we assert that the initial idea of a ‘special relationship’ between China and other autocracies, in our case in Latin America, is not fundamentally eroded by the recent pluralization of decision-making in Chinese foreign policy. There might be other Chinese actors conducting business or otherwise being active throughout Latin America, but on most accounts, and in particular within the fields we analyse – (military) security, economic cooperation, institutional and soft power/public diplomacy – recent research has not produced convincing arguments that would dispute the (still) strong leadership role of the Chinese party-state and the CCP-controlled government. Hence, for substantial as well as analytical reasons we see China in Latin America as a unitary actor.

Military activities

Despite their close rhetorical relationship, it does not appear that China treats Cuba as a special military partner. It has no confirmed physical military presence in Latin America, although some American security specialists suspect that the Chinese might have established at least one listening post in Cuba (Horta, 2008; Ellis, 2011). However, defence analysts such as Evan Ellis argue that China will refrain from taking overtly provocative military activities such as establishing bases in Latin America in order not to appear threatening to the United States (Ellis, 2011, p. 10). Military sales to Cuba are not in the official arms trade statistics for 2010 and 2011 (SIPRI, 2012), although occasionally it is reported that China traded an undisclosed amount of small and light weapons to Cuba, as well as to several other Latin American states, during the period of 2006-10 (Bromley, Duchâtel & Holtom, 2013). In addition, Cuba has been merely one of several countries which has participated in forums such the first China-Latin America High Level Defense Forum, held in China in November 2012, with six countries participating, including Colombia, Cuba, Bolivia and Uruguay (FMPRC, 2012). Thus, there is little evidence of a preference for military ties with Cuba. Nevertheless, in a broader sense, Cuba might be important for Chinese security policy due to the fact that the appearance of close relations towards the tiny island in the Western Hemisphere strengthens its bargaining power vis-à-vis the United States, in effect mirroring to some degree American ties to Taiwan (Lehoczki, 2012, p. 296). However, this neither implies substantial military cooperation nor does it indicate that regime type as such drives the interest in upholding the *impression* of close Chinese-Cuban relations.

China’s military relationship with Costa Rica represents China’s tendency to mix security cooperation with commercial interests. Costa Rica is the only country in the world with no army, leaving China without an institutional outlet to deepen military ties. However, China recently pledged to donate \$25 million to the reconstruction of the National Police Academy as part of a scheme to foster commercial ties (Arias, 2013). This blending of security and commercial

interests is indicative of China's actions throughout the region and shows no discrimination between autocratic and non-autocratic regimes.

China's military relationship with Venezuela looks at first to be the strongest in the region because of the higher sales of military equipment. But this is due less to Chinese strategic cooperation than to an arms embargo imposed in 2006 by the U.S. on Venezuela, which forced the Venezuelan military to diversify its arms acquisition. Venezuela, for decades a very good customer of U.S. military products, especially aircraft (Venezuela was one of the first customers of F-16 in the world), was consequently forced to resort to arms sellers like Russia, Belarus and China. Venezuela has recently become the most important customer for Chinese arms sales in the region; the country purchased about two dozen K-aircraft so far, discussing to buy twice that much, as well as a Chinese air surveillance system (Ellis, 2010; Marcella, 2012). However, apart from the very active arms trade, there are no exclusive military exchanges or military alliances between China and Venezuela which would indicate a special relationship.

Chile has maintained military relations with China since it recognized the PRC in 1970. China and Chile's navies have held exchanges with China's ships visiting Chile and Chile's training ship the *Esmeralda* has visited China several times ('China, Chile Pledge to Enhance Military Cooperation', 2011). During his visit to China in 2011, Chilean Defence Minister Allmand announced Chile's appreciation for China's role in global security ('China, Chile Pledge Closer Military Ties', 2011). Chile has also benefited from China's increased military exchanges throughout Latin America. In fact, it is remarkable that studies refer to the fact that it was students from non-autocratic countries (Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay) who went to the China's Defense Studies Institute, the Army Command College, the Navy Command School, and the Naval Research Institute (Marcella 2012). Thus, it appears that China favours good military relations with a democratic country like Chile over a special relationship with autocratic regimes.

For Latin America as a whole, China has increased its military exchanges with 18 Latin American countries, including traditional U.S. allies such as Colombia and Mexico as well as its own traditional ally Cuba, and Venezuela as a new ally (Ellis, 2011, p. 14; MODPRC, 2013). Quite similar patterns of partnering can be found with regard to joint exercises and military dialogues: there is hardly any favouritism towards either Venezuela or Cuba. The PLA also held joint exercises with Brazil and Peru (USDOD, 2011). Moreover, according to SIPRI arms sales statistics for 2010 and 2011, China also conducted arms sales to Argentina, Colombia and Peru (SIPRI, 2012). In total, military sales to Latin America comprised only approximately 9 per cent of China's total military weapons sales in 2010 and approximately 4 per cent in 2011.² To sum up, China's military activity in Latin America has been relatively limited, although relations have expanded in recent years. Moreover, it appears that China does not discriminate according to regime type while deepening these

ties. In particular, military cooperation with Cuba seems to be minimal. Although there are rumours about secret cooperation schemes and arms sales, due to a lack of data it is not possible to verify them at this juncture. Experts attribute this apparent restraint to the fact that China does not want to offend the U.S. openly in its own backyard (e.g. Ellis, 2011, p. 10). Increased arms sales to Venezuela resemble a strategy of the exploitation of commercial opportunities rather than a closing of the ranks among autocracies. There are no exclusive alliances or forms of cooperation with Cuba or Venezuela. Instead, Chinese cooperation in the realm of security includes Chile and even with Costa Rica, a country without an army, as well as a host of other democratic states in the Western Hemisphere. This pattern disputes the idea of a special authoritarian nexus in the realms of military and security cooperation.

Economic activities

Like its relationship with the rest of Latin America, China's economic relationship with Cuba has strengthened over the years, although the size of trade in no way compares with China's trade with partners like Brazil which reached \$84 billion in 2012 (European Commission, 2013a). Cuban-China bilateral trade reached nearly \$2 billion in 2012, making China the second largest single country trading partner for Cuba. In 2011, 13 per cent of Cuba's exports went to China, dominated by nickel and sugar (European Commission, 2013c; GTI 2013). Cuba is looking to increase economic cooperation with China and has become China's largest trading partner in the Caribbean. In 2011, the state-controlled China National Petroleum Corporation signed a \$4.5 billion deal to upgrade Cuba's Cienfuegos's refinery ('Cuba Seeks Closer Ties with Beijing', 2012). However, disappointing drilling results led to the departure of a Chinese-built rig from the region (Krauss & Crave, 2012). In sum, relations are quite asymmetrical and limited compared to other Latin American states, which is not surprising, keeping in mind the limited economic incentives Cuba offers. Cuba is, after all, a very poor country with limited resources.

In contrast to its weak economic ties with Cuba, China has been steadily increasing its relations with Costa Rica since 2007 when Costa Rica controversially switched recognition to the PRC away from Taiwan (Haro Navejas, 2013). Trade has taken off since a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries came into force in 2011, particularly in the amount of Chinese imports. By 2012 China was the second main source of imports for Costa Rica at 8 per cent and ranked seventh in Costa Rica's exports for the first half of 2013 (MOFCOM, 2013). Costa Rica maintains a large trade deficit with China due to the high tech nature of Chinese imports to Costa Rica, primarily cellular equipment, computers and microprocessors (COMEX, 2013a, b). Costa Rica's exports to China include processors, electrical equipment, orange juice pulp and copper scrap (COMEX, 2013c). During Xi Jinping's visit to Costa Rica in June 2013, agreements worth nearly \$2 billion were reached (Arias, 2013). The

Export-Import Bank of China, mandated mainly to hand out government concessional loans abroad, lent Costa Rica nearly \$400 million, \$296 million for the upgrading of the highway between San Jose and Puerto Limón, and \$101 million for public transportation vehicles (Cota, 2013). The biggest agreement was the \$1.3 billion project to modernize the oil factory in Limón, largely through a \$900 billion loan from the government-owned China Development Bank (Arias, 2013; Williams, 2013). Thus China continues to deepen its economic relationship with its only Central American partner.

In Venezuela, China has mainly focused on oil (see Giacalone & Briceño Ruiz, 2013; Ríos, 2013). Venezuela has reserves larger than Saudi Arabia and Chinese oil companies are heavily involved in its oil industry, mainly through joint ventures with Venezuela's state-owned oil company PdVSA. However, it must be remembered that China was already involved in the oil business in Venezuela as early as 1997, before the country turned autocratic under the rule of Hugo Chávez (Ellis, 2010; Ríos, 2013). Hence, its activities predate any seeming effort to close ranks with another autocracy, even though the rise to power of the Chavista movement might have further strengthened China's proclivity to secure its energy needs by engaging autocratic regimes. A further indicator of this symbiotic relationship which is driven by economic calculus rather than ideological predispositions is the series of loans provided to Venezuela recently. Again, although the closeness of regime type and mutual recognition as 'non-Western' actors might have bolstered this exchange, the very conditions of the loan repayment (repayment in oil deliveries at a non-concessional rate, in total worth more than \$40 billion, ('China Agrees on US\$ 40 Billion', 2012) make clear that economic interests have trumped any 'autocratic solidarity'.

However, it is not only oil which is interesting for China. Chavista economic policy has almost completely destroyed Venezuela's manufacturing base, which has created opportunities for Chinese companies and products. Companies which exhibit close relations to the Chinese party-state such as Haier, Huawei and ZTE have successfully entered the Venezuelan market. For example, Huawei and ZTE are in joint ventures with the Venezuelan government to produce cell phones. Haier has delivered more than 300,000 consumer appliances since 2010 which are sold in Venezuelan state-owned supermarkets. Furthermore, China Railway is building more than 1000 kilometres of railroad, and Huawei more than 2,000 kilometres of new fibre optic lines (on China in Venezuela, see Ellis, 2013). All these economic operations have finally made Venezuela one of the four Chinese 'comprehensive strategic partners' in Latin America in 2014, with more than 300 bilateral agreements and more than 80 major projects. Trade has risen significantly, from \$200 million in 1999 to \$10 billion in 2011 ('China-Venezuela Relations Keep Growing', 2011). Venezuela is the fourth most important investment country for Chinese FDI, after Brazil, Peru and Argentina, and the fourth most important trade partner in Latin America (ECLAC, 2011). Investments in Venezuela and joint ventures with mostly

state-controlled Venezuelan companies arguably resemble good economic opportunities for China. In turn, through its economic cooperation with China, the Venezuelan government is able to deliver some consumer goods and infrastructure to its demanding population; in this sense, Chinese-Venezuelan economic cooperation might also stabilize autocratic structures in Venezuela, but rather by default.

Similar patterns of economic transactions can also be identified with respect to Chinese activities in democratic Chile. Chile, the first Latin American country to sign a free trade agreement with China, is of heightened economic interest for China because of its mineral resources (Gachúz, 2012). Although Chile is a rather small country, and with about 17 million consumers far from being an important market, Chilean-Chinese trade grew from \$6.9 billion in 2005 to \$32.5 billion in 2012 (DIRECOM, 2014). Chile's main export product is copper, accounting for more than 50 per cent of its total exports. China consumes more than 40 per cent of the world copper production, while producing less than one-sixth of its own copper needs. China has hence become Chile's main trading partner, and Chile as the main supplier of copper (around 25 per cent of all Chinese copper imports) is of special importance to China. Consequently, Chinese copper hunger has resulted in a constant trade surplus for Chile, reaching almost \$5 billion in 2012. In order to secure copper, China invests strategically in the Chilean mining sector (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2012). In 2005, a joint venture worth \$2 billion guaranteed China access to Chilean copper for more than 15 years at far below market prices (Dosch & Goodman, 2012, p. 9). In 2010, China invested another \$2.3 billion in a joint venture with the state-owned Chilean mining company CODELCO and additionally approx. \$2 billion in iron ore mines. Again, regarding the main Chinese players involved, we find a pattern of Chinese activities in Chile which is largely comparable to that of Venezuela: either state-owned enterprises such as Minmetals are actively pursuing interests in line with the Chinese government's overall policy framework or formally private companies such as Hebei Wenfeng figure as investors (Ellis, 2014, pp. 18-19), with official backing of and tacit support through the Chinese government. The overall level of Chinese investment in Chile is considerable. Only recently, in 2013, China announced it would invest an additional \$1.1 billion in photovoltaics to reduce energy costs for copper production ('China Investing Heavily in Chile', 2013). These are huge sums for the comparably small country of Chile. More than that, the case of Chile – in particular when contrasted with a comparable case like Venezuela – is evidence to the fact that the logic of special relationships or an authoritarian nexus does not hold for Chinese foreign economic activities in Latin America.

Thus, in economic terms, China's relationship follows rational interest: with its abundant natural resources, Latin America fits perfectly in with China's goal of strengthening its comprehensive national strength (*zōnghé guóli*) in order to become a great power. China's 'go out' policy (*zōuchūqū zhànlüè*), promulgated by Jiang Zemin, supports this endeavour as it officially marshals

state support for Chinese firms to invest abroad to secure natural resources and know-how as well as to open new markets (Freeman, 2008; Power et al., 2012, pp. 100-10).

A case in point is Chinese long-term mining projects in the region. A recent study by Gonzalez-Vicente which explicitly considered the suggestion that 'market rules are not fundamental but secondary to political and geostrategic concerns' (and hence analyses a question that is similar to ours) has demonstrated that there are no specifically intense economic activities in autocratic regions, even if opportunities exist in principle (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2012). Chinese companies have so far rather avoided Venezuela despite its mineral wealth; the top Chinese mining projects in Latin America are all located in democratic countries, such as Peru, Chile and Ecuador (see Table 1).

Again, what can be inferred from this is that Chinese mining investment follows commercial incentives while regime type is no relevant explaining factor. Even in cases where political and geostrategic considerations (forging an authoritarian nexus through economic linkages) might overlap with economic incentives such as in the case of Venezuela's endowment with mineral resources, one cannot detect any specifically intense relations.

To highlight the strategic importance of Latin America in economic terms, China has named Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and only recently Venezuela as 'comprehensive strategic partners' as well as Chile and Argentina as 'strategic partners'. Although these designations remain deliberately vague concerning tangible implications, it seems safe to assume that they are intended to signal to both to the partnering countries within the respective bilateral contexts as well as on the diplomatic level to the outside world different degrees of importance attached to these two sets of relations by the Chinese government (cf. Zhongping & Jing 2014, p. 15). China has also established Free Trade Agreements with Chile (2006), Peru (2010) and Costa Rica (signed 2010, in effect since

Table 1: China: Trade in Latin America, 2011

Country	Trade (percentage share of total Chinese trade)
Latin America	6.7
Brazil	2.4
Mexico	1
Chile	0.9
Venezuela	0.5
Argentina	0.4
Panama	0.4
Peru	0.4
Colombia	0.2

Source: ECLAC, 2012.

2011) and has become one of the leading trade partners for Brazil and Chile (ECLAC, 2011, p. 19). These actions make clear that in terms of intensity and assigned importance, patterns of economic exchange between China and Latin America are by no means tilted towards autocratic states.

Institutional and soft power diplomacy

Institutional and soft power diplomacy represent further dimensions that China has highlighted in the region in order to protect its interests since Hu's promotion of soft power in 2007 (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). The following section analyses whether unusually deep institutional relations between China and Cuba/Venezuela have been forged during the last decade and whether these two autocratic countries are specifically targeted in terms of cultural-ideological activities by China.

Overall, China has increased its diplomatic presence in multilateral institutions of the region. In 2004, it received permanent observer status at the OAS, marking a clear indication of China's growing interest in the region. It is also an observer of UNECLAC and maintains 130 police as part of the UN peacekeeping forces in Haiti (MINUSTAH). China became a member of the Inter-American Development Bank in 2008, having invested \$350 million. It sits on the committee overseeing loans to highly impoverished countries, including countries like Haiti and Honduras which still recognize the Republic of China as the legitimate China (Ellis, 2011, p. 88). China has also been active in 'track two diplomacy', e.g. due to its participation in the *Forum of East Asia-Latin America Cooperation* and its initiatives aimed at establishing arenas like the China-Latin America Think Tank Forum. It was the first foreign country to congratulate the founding of CELAC (Presno, 2011).

In all these instances, China has sought cooperation and improved its organizational presence without positively discriminating in favour of autocracies. If anything, it seems as if it discriminates against ALBA. Despite several official invitations by Venezuela, China has apparently abstained from showing any commitment towards ALBA, the alliance of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, and some small Caribbean island states created in 2004 (Ríos, 2013). This organization, aimed at improving trade relations among member states with a decidedly anti-imperialist stance against the U.S. and offering Venezuelan oil for members at special rates, even appealed to Iran, Syria, and Russia as observing members. In this sense it arguably approximates being a club of (mostly) autocracies. While China has avoided ALBA, it immediately acquired observer status at the newly founded Pacific Alliance, a regional organization of Mexico, Chile, Peru and Colombia (with Costa Rica's recent signing to become a full member in 2014 as well), promoting free trade and investment (Alianza del Pacifico, 2014). Thus, China's institutional presence may not be due to any considerations of regime type but rather motivated by long-term interest in the region.

In terms of public diplomacy, a higher profile in the region helps China to win the recognition race with Taiwan as well as to support its increased economic activity in the region. In line with this strategy, Chinese leaders have expanded their ties with Latin America. Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have visited the region several times between 2001 and 2014 (see Table 2).

Analysing this travel diplomacy, we can see a slight bias in favour of Cuba. Cuba has been visited five times, a surprisingly high number of state visits considering the low importance in economic affairs, in contrast to four visits to Chile, four to Brazil and Mexico, and three to Venezuela. Interestingly, in the short time since its recognition of the PRC instead of Taiwan, Costa Rica has been visited two times. Diplomatic recognition remains a goal for China in Latin America, as 12 out of the 23 remaining countries that recognize Taiwan are located in Latin America and the Caribbean (Dosch & Goodman, 2012). The last switch was by Costa Rica in 2007, which along with other financial incentives, received \$83 million to build a football stadium (Will, 2012).

In terms of diplomatic recognition, Cuba really is in China's good books. Cuba was the first country in Latin America to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1960, a diplomatic move China has not forgotten until today (Zuo, 2010; Hearn, 2012). Up until that point, Latin American countries had followed U.S. policy in recognizing the ROC/Taiwan, further isolating the PRC at a time of the Sino-Soviet split. Although one can argue that in terms of travel diplomacy there is a slight favouritism towards Cuba in particular, it is necessary to bear in mind that counter examples for any authoritarian nexus are also at hand. In 2014, Xi Jinping visited Cuba and Venezuela, as well as Brazil and Argentina, but in 2013, Xi Jinping bypassed both Venezuela and Cuba prior to his visit to the United States, preferring to visit Costa Rica and Mexico (and Trinidad and Tobago).

Table 2: China, presidential visits to Latin America – countries included in comparison highlighted

Date	President	Country
2001	Jiang Zemin	Chile , Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela , Cuba
2002	Jiang Zemin	Mexico (APEC Summit)
2004	Hu Jintao	Chile , Brazil, Argentina, Cuba
2005	Hu Jintao	Mexico
2008	Hu Jintao	Peru, Costa Rica , Cuba
2010	Hu Jintao	Brazil, Venezuela , Chile
2011	Xi Jinping (Vice-President)	Cuba , Uruguay, Chile
2013	Xi Jinping	Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica , Mexico
2014	Xi Jinping	Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela , Cuba

Source: ECLAC, 2011, own compilation.

Table 3: Confucius Institutes in Latin America

Country	Number of Institutes	Country	Number of Institutes
Mexico	5	Peru	4
Brazil	3	Colombia	2
Chile	2	Argentina	2
Cuba	1	Costa Rica	1
Ecuador	1	Venezuela	0

Source: Hanban 2012, own compilation.

It is in this sense that the rhetoric of ‘socialist solidarity’ and the sometimes invoked slogan of Chinese-Cuban closeness as ‘socialist survivors’ (Lehoczki, 2012, p. 292) which, in turn, might be interpreted as conducive to an authoritarian nexus as defined below only marginally translates into tangible results. This becomes even more evident when further public diplomacy instruments and their use by China throughout Latin America are assessed. China is trying to build up its image through the establishment of language institutes, Spanish-speaking television, the sponsoring of student exchange programmes and its general image of a successful, rising developing country throughout Latin America. By 2011, China had established over 20 Confucius institutes in the region to promote the study of Chinese language and culture (Hanban, 2012). As seen in Table 3 below, it has established one Confucius Institute in Cuba, but one in Costa Rica as well, while there are two in Chile and none in Venezuela. The outstanding case here is Mexico (five Institutes) with the first one of these study centres established in Latin America in 2006. Hence, if we are to compare our cases (Cuba – Costa Rica, Venezuela –Chile), we certainly see that regime type does not explain the variance, while a mixture of economic and cultural/diaspora linkages, such as in the case of Mexico, may be of more predictive value. Consequently, our assumption so far regarding the creation of an authoritarian nexus through soft power instruments (that is producing cultural affinity as a means for stabilizing any special relationship) is not supported.

Conclusion: Chinese-Latin American relations and the absence of an ‘authoritarian nexus’

The paper set out to trace the specifics of Chinese foreign policy activities in Latin America, guided by the question whether there is a discernible authoritarian bias to Chinese activities in the region. A structured, focused comparison of Chinese foreign policy towards Latin American authoritarian regimes (Cuba and Venezuela) and towards comparable democratic countries (Costa Rica and Chile) was conducted in order to detect if there was any ‘authoritarian nexus’. This term was to designate patterns of favouritism towards autocratic states or

specific foreign policy schemes following the logic of a special relationship with autocratic states.

The results of our analysis, however, support the argument that China is *not* nurturing an 'authoritarian nexus' in Latin America. China's engagement in Latin America is due first, to Latin America's impressive abundance of resources and primary goods, and second, the Latin American market with a population of more than 600 million people, and third, the issue of diplomatic recognition (e.g. Leiteritz, 2012). Within this framework of interests, regime type does not play a pivotal role in finding cooperation partners. There is no evidence of China discriminating in favour of autocracies or deliberately working towards an offshore stabilization of autocracies in Latin America. Based on our analysis of dyads of structurally similar, comparable cases of autocracies (Cuba and Venezuela) and democracies (Costa Rica and Chile respectively), we conclude that there is no pattern of outright favouritism for autocracies or a sustained will to nurture autocratic regimes in the Western Hemisphere. Military cooperation, arms sales, patterns of economic exchange and public diplomacy efforts may be, to different degrees, important in Chinese relations with Cuba and Venezuela, but they are either comparable to or even dwarfed by the activities towards similarly structured democratic countries or the general level of activity within the whole region. Beyond that, in seeking allies for the promotion of China's vision of global governance (Zhu, 2010; Hearn, 2012; Leiteritz, 2012), Brazil, the regional democratic heavy-weight, is, as a partner within the BRICS-group, far more important than Cuba or Venezuela. Even with the most likely case for an 'authoritarian nexus', Cuba, we see no special relations. Despite the rhetoric of socialist brotherhood, the Chinese aim at economic benefits, as the Cubans clearly know: 'The Chinese are very clear about one thing: they're not going to be benefactors for Cuba like the Soviets were. I was once told in no uncertain terms by a Chinese diplomat: Our relations with Cuba have to be mutually beneficial or they will not work' (the former Cuban ambassador to China, Mauro García Triana, quoted in Hearn, 2009, p. 5). This exact sentiment was more recently expressed in a meeting in 2013 by an economist at the Ministry of Sugar.³ Judged by the results of our empirical analysis conducted through a structured focused comparison, we have to conclude that there is no special relationship of China with either Cuba or Venezuela.

Nevertheless, what the paper has to offer for the analysis of special relationships in general is an analytical device for uncovering special relationships in the making or evolving special relationships. The four expectations regarding patterns in foreign policy activities may provide a yardstick in order to assess whether it is plausible to speak of a *special* relationship instead of simply insinuating that such a relationship exists on the basis of alleged likeness. Formulating and testing such expectations concerning non-discursive practices and material implications also serves as a reminder that the rhetorical level is important but that the quality of special relationships should not solely be read off statements and speeches. A state might at times emphasize its 'special rela-

tionship' towards another state without much discernible specific action taken afterwards. Therefore, to assess whether there are indeed closer institutional bonds, patterns of intense security cooperation, preferential economic exchanges and a will to nurture a cultural-ideological superstructure might help to ground such often lofty rhetoric.

* * *

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Notes

1. According to all relevant democracy (or autocracy) indices, China is definitely non-democratic and hence to be rated 'autocratic'. China scores 6.5 at Freedom House ('not free'), Polity IV gives China -7 ('highly autocratic'), and in Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), China is placed in the category 'hard-line autocracies' (Freedom House, 2014a; Polity IV, 2014a; BTI, 2014a). Cuba is, according to all relevant democracy ratings, autocratic. Freedom House rates Cuba as 'not free' with a score of 6.5, Polity IV scores Cuba with -7 as 'autocracy', BTI rates Cuba as a 'hard-line autocracy' (Freedom House, 2014b, Polity IV, 2014b, BTI, 2014b). Venezuela is not an open autocracy, it is rated as 'partly free' with a score of 5.0 by Freedom House, rated as 'anocracy' by Polity IV, scoring -3. BTI defines it as a 'moderate autocracy' (Freedom House, 2014c, Polity IV, 2014c, BTI, 2014c). We include Venezuela in the group of autocracies following BTI and other scholars. All other Latin American countries are not autocratic according to the above mentioned ratings.
2. Authors' own calculations based on SIPRI statistics; see SIPRI 2013.
3. Personal interview in Havana, Cuba in March 2013.

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