

NEW GOVERNMENT IN CHILE: WHAT TO EXPECT IN ITS TIES WITH ASIA?

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Introduction: New Government in Chile

On March 11, 2022, a new government took office in Chile, setting an epochal change in Chilean politics. After 16 years of alternation between Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), current High Commissioner for Human Rights of the center left, and the former president, Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014 and 2018-2022) of the center right, a new generation of politicians took office. Gabriel Boric, 36 years old, who has been a student leader and later a deputy in the aforementioned governments, received the presidential band in the Congress of Valparaíso in the presence of several international leaders, including the King of Spain.

Boric, who defeated José Antonio Kast in the second round of elections in November 2021, takes office in a complex domestic situation because of the social protests that took place in October 2019 and the expectations developed by citizens regarding a change in the way of doing politics. The new government, an alliance called *Apruebo Dignidad*, integrated by the *Frente Amplio* and the Communist Party assumes with a diverse and fragmented congress and does not have majorities in the chambers, which would hinder some of the main reforms such as the tax reform.

The main leaders of the government are people close to Boric, some of whom are known from the student movements and with whom he has close ties of friendship and political complicity (Caro and Cáceres 2022b). These are Giorgio Jackson (former deputy and now Minister of the General Secretariat of the Presidency), Camila Vallejo (former deputy for the Communist Party who assumed the government's spokesperson) and Izkia Siches (Minister of the Interior, independent and key player in the second round of the campaign). Boric has nominated a cabinet with a majority of women (14 out of 24) and has incorporated independent's personalities and also from the center left (Social Convergence block) who led the country during Bachelet's governments. One of the appointments that generated most expectations was that of the Minister of Finance, due to the need to give a clear signal to the markets. Mario Marcel, a leftist but who proved to be faithful to the traditional economic consensus, calmed Chilean businessmen (Sajuria 2022).

President Boric takes office while in parallel a constitutional convention is drafting a new constitution after a broad citizen support in October 2020 appointed a convention to write a text to replace the constitution under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). This fact is historic because it will be the first time in Chile that a constitutional text is drafted in a body elected by the citizenry, with parity and with seats reserved for indigenous peoples. This assembly must present its proposal in July or, if an extension is requested, in the second half of the year. 60 days after the presentation of the new

constitutional text, a new plebiscite will be held, with a mandatory vote, to approve or reject the constitution.

Although they are on two different paths, the fate of the constituent convention will be crucial for the government, given the fact that Boric has been in favor of a new constitution from the very beginning. The new government will also have to take on various challenges of the country, from the inequality that unleashed the social outburst to different issues such as crime and drug trafficking, ethnic conflicts in the south and migratory flows in the north. In that context, for political scientist Juan Pablo Luna (2022), rather than reformist, the new government should be a transitional one that favors a new broad social agreement.

Turquoise and Human Rights-Focused Foreign Policy

The new foreign minister is Antonia Urrejola, who was president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2021 after serving on the commission since 2018. Urrejola has been connected to the Socialist Party and has been the right hand of José Miguel Insulza when he was secretary general of the Organization of American States. These antecedents set the human rights-focused profile that this administration seeks to give to the ministry.

It should be noted that one of the differences in terms of foreign policy during the internal campaign of the left was in Boric's criticism of the violation of human rights in Venezuela, as opposed to the position of Daniel Jadue of the Communist Party. Therefore, the appointment of Urrejola, who has been critical of the situation in Venezuela and Nicaragua (Jara 2022) seems to reaffirm a position in that sense and to show that the human rights issue will be important for the next administration. This is also part of showing a new left, democratic and respectful of human rights.

In his statements before assuming, Urrejola has emphasized a foreign policy with multilateralism and cooperation. However, the central concept that has been handled for the foreign policy is “turquoise”, which claims the fight against the climate crisis from a multidimensional view that includes not only the traditional components of the protection of the terrestrial environment but also the protection of marine ecosystems (Navarrete 2022). This turquoise, a mixture of the green of the physical territory and the blue of the ocean, is a concept developed in the book “New Voices of Foreign Policy” edited by prestigious young internationalists from Chile (Bywaters C., Sepúlveda, and Villar Gertner 2021).

Thus, it is not surprising that one of the main events of the first days of the new government's foreign policy was the signing of the presidential message to adhere to the Escazú Agreement, a Latin American and Caribbean environmental treaty whose purpose is to facilitate access to public information and promote citizen participation in environmental policies (the Agreement must now be approved in Congress). Chile, together with Costa Rica, was a promoter of this agreement in 2018 and had been part of the negotiation of this agreement. However, it had not adhered during the government of Piñera who argued that the agreement included ambiguous norms that may prevail over domestic legislation (Navarrete 2022). With this change it is clear that

the environment will be a relevant issue in the new Chilean foreign policy and will be a topic of cooperation with several countries.

International Economic Relations

Another issue that has been on the agenda regarding the foreign policy of the new government is trade agreements. Chile is one of the countries with more trade agreements signed (31), many of them with Asian countries (figure 1) and currently the discussion is on the ratification of the TPP-11. The current president was critical of this agreement and the nomination of José Miguel Ahumada as Subsecretary of International Economic Relations, who has a position of reevaluate the FTAs, seems to go in that direction. However, Urrejola has stated that although it is not a priority issue, the president is willing to discuss this ratification of TPP-11 after the constituent convention (Latorre 2022). Ultimately, we will have to wait until next year to see how the issue of the TPP or the new treaties will turn out. However, no major changes to agreements already signed are expected for the moment.

Figure 1. Milestones of Chile's economic insertion in Asia

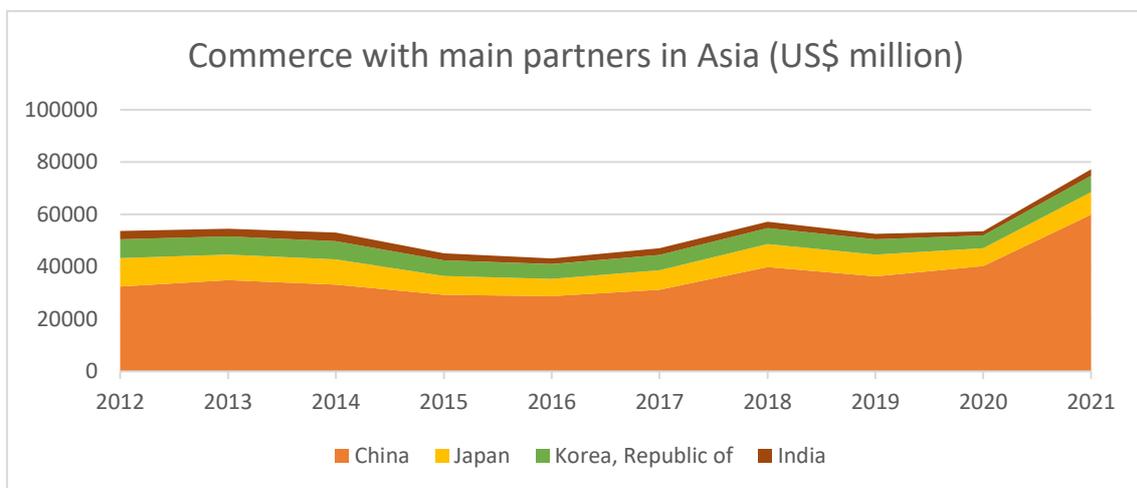
Free Trade Agreement with South Korea	2004
Chile's access to APEC	2004
Free Trade Agreement with China	2006
Economic Partnership Agreement (P4) with New Zealand, Brunei and Singapore	2006
Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan	2007
Preferential Trade Agreement with India	2007
Free Trade Agreement with Australia	2009
Free Trade Agreement with Malaysia	2012
Creation of Pacific Alliance with Colombia, Perú and México	2012
Free Trade Agreement with Hong Kong	2014
Free Trade Agreement with Vietnam	2014
Free Trade Agreement with Thailand	2015
Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with Indonesia	2019
Source: Subsecretaría de Relaciones Económicas Internacionales	

Ties with Asia

In his first mentions of foreign policy, Boric has emphasized that he not prefer meeting instances with a purely ideological point of view. However, according to Foreign Minister Urrejola, the Pacific Alliance, a platform of articulation and projection with emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region, is essential for the new president (Caro and Cáceres 2022a). This implies the possibility of giving a new impulse to this organization, which could be the entrance of Ecuador.

Chile has been a pioneer in Latin America in terms of its relations with the Asia Pacific, given that it has presented itself as a bridge country between both regions (Schulz and Rojas-De-Galarreta 2020). In addition, Chile's foreign policy towards the Pacific is part of the economic opening and the search for autonomy in terms of reducing dependence (Oyarzún Serrano 2018). This has implied a degree of progress in ties with East Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, China and ASEAN) that others in the region have not had.

Although there may be a slowdown in the search for new free trade agreements, mainly because it is not the Foreign Ministry's current priority, no major changes can be perceived in the ties with these countries with which Chile has already had a long history. For Chile, the Indo-Pacific countries are important at the commercial level. Trade with its four main partners reaches almost 80 billion dollars, with China standing out, representing around 30% of Chile's trade (figure 2).



Source: Trade Map

Future Expectations

Regarding the relationship with China, the fact that the new government places the issue of human rights as a priority could be disruptive in the ties. It is even worth remembering that in 2019 when a discrepancy was generated between the Chinese ambassador and representative Jaime Bellolio for a meeting of the latter with Joshua Wong, the then deputy Boric said that the Chinese ambassador could not pretend to guide the Chilean parliamentarians on who they can meet with or not (El Mostrador, 2019a).

However, this does not mean that ties will deteriorate, since Chile has an important history in its relationship with China, having been the first South American country to establish diplomatic relations (in 1970), supported its entry into the WTO and signed a free trade agreement in 2005. This allows Chile to have an important background with China and even mechanisms for dialogue on various issues. At the same time, the different governments, regardless of ideology, have maintained very good relations with China.

In recent years the relationship with China has been enhanced by the importance given by Chile to the Belt and Road Initiative, its incorporation to the AIIB and the close ties within the COVID framework, both in terms of donations and the arrival of vaccines. However, it must be considered how the U.S.-China competition may affect different

aspects such as Chinese investments, which have generated certain debates as for example the transpacific cable that involved a visit of the former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Santiago. Beyond this competition and the consequences that may arise, no major changes are to be expected.

As regards the relationship with the rest of the countries, also no major changes are expected. For example, with Japan, Chile celebrated in the last days of March the 125th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the presence of the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kiyoshi Odawara, who participated in the inauguration of the new president and generated wide repercussion for the gift of a Squirtle to Boric. In the meeting with the foreign minister, they highlighted the fact that the countries share values and principles such as democracy and the rule of law, something that Japan has been reiterating in the region and which implies differentiating itself from China. Regarding South Korea the foreign minister subsecretary expressed hope to deepen relations in the framework of the 60th anniversary of the ties between the countries.

Finally, considering the domestic aspects mentioned at the beginning and the constituent process, it could not be surprising that the government avoids critical foreign policy issues in the early stages, such as the ratification of the TPP-11 or disputes in the competition between the United States and China. Surely the government will focus on issues that have a current impact on the country such as the migratory crisis and on environmental issues that seeks to be a signature issue for this administration. In the latter area, opportunities for collaboration with Asian countries may arise.

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