

Public Opinion in Latin America Towards China: What Do We See Post-Pandemic?

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between China and Latin America have flourished over the last two decades, generating diverse lines of research. Mainly after the boom in trade focused on the export of commodities, the economic link has been one of the most analyzed aspects of these relations. However, academics have also studied the development of political and cultural ties, and even the positioning of Latin American countries in a context of hegemonic competition between China and the United States.

In an international context where competition between the US and China is growing and which is largely centered on the narratives proposed by one or the other, the study of public opinion towards China is becoming increasingly important. Since the Trump administration and the subsequent response from Chinese diplomats (in what has become known as the Wolf Warriors), the struggle to impose one narrative or the other is growing. How COVID has emerged, what the balloons involve, what the disappearance of certain personalities in China means, what is happening in the Xinjiang region and how the changes in Hong Kong are perceived are all aspects that are mediated by what is raised by different media outlets and reports.

In that sense, it is important to understand how these narratives have an impact on Latin American societies, which at the end of the day are the ones who are supposed to put thoughts on the table for policy-makers. Latin American public opinion towards China has not been studied as much yet, although there are several studies that have delved into this area. However, in recent years there has been a production of research that seek to understand how Latin Americans view this growing power.

This article puts China's image in the world into context and seeks to understand whether Latin America has the same tendency or whether there are differences with the image deterioration that exists in the developed world according to the latest Pew Research Center report. In this sense, we first delve into this ongoing process, and then understand to what extent there is a similarity or difference with Latin America. While more research is needed, existing studies so far show that in Latin America there are no such negative historical peaks towards China.

CHINA'S POST-PANDEMIC IMAGE

Different surveys analyses how people in different countries view China. The Pew Research Center's surveys are a reference in this regard. In 2020, a study in 14 countries

showed that negative views of China had grown in developed economies. In most of these countries there were unfavorable views of China, reaching peaks in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, South Korea, Spain and Canada, countries that have been polled on this issue for the last ten years (Pew Research Center 2020). For example, in Australia, 81% viewed China unfavorably, an increase of 24% compared to 2019. The same survey conducted in 2021 found that China's negative image persists despite good domestic performance with COVID-19 (Pew Research Center 2021). In that edition of the survey, the majority of respondents in 15 out of 17 countries view China negatively, with very high numbers in countries such as Japan (88%), Sweden (80%) and South Korea (77%), while a positive image predominates in Singapore, as well as in Greece.

In the latest version of the Pew Research Center (2022), negative views of China remained at historical peaks. What is new in this latest report is that the unfavorable views were related to concerns about China's human rights policies. In 19 of the countries surveyed, an average of 79% considered these policies to be a severe problem and 47% considered them to be a problem for their country even more important than China's military power, economic competition or its involvement in politics (Silver, Huang & Claucy 2022). Moreover, in most of these developed countries, respondents answered that human rights in China should be prioritized even if they harm economic relations, with exceptions such as Hungary, Israel, Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea.

Another survey that confirms this trend is the one on European public opinion towards China in the context of COVID-19 published by CEIAS (Turcsányi et al 2020). This survey in 13 European countries conducted at the end of 2020 reports more negative than positive images in 10 of the 13 countries, with differences between Western and Northern Europe, with negative views, and Eastern Europe with positive views. Sweden reports the most negative feelings towards China with 60% expressing very negative or negative feelings, 28% viewing China neutrally and 12% positively or very positively.

Other research by Summers et al. (2021) in the UK shows evidence of negative perceptions and worsening of China's image in the UK. Even in line with what is observed in the Pew Research Center, in terms of foreign policy priorities with China, the promotion of human rights and democracy is more critical than preventing geopolitical expansion or promoting trade. Surveys in Europe also show that trade with China is perceived as predominantly positive in most countries. Overall, Gries and Turcsányi (2021) argue that covering the origins of COVID-19 and a more aggressive policy in terms of foreign policy and human rights have led to a deterioration of China's image in Europe in 2020. A relevant aspect to highlight is the existence of differences within countries. The latest Pew Research Center survey found links between ideology and, for example, preference for promoting economic ties with China or human rights, with people on the left in several countries opting to promote human rights over economic ties (Silver, Huang & Claucy 2022).

Beyond the general trends shown by these public opinion polls, what is important to note is that these polls are concentrated in developed economies. In fact, China has officially criticized these surveys, which only analyze certain countries and therefore do

not represent the international community (Bloomberg News 2021). Surveys of public opinion towards China in the global south are not extensive, although they have proliferated in recent years.

The surveys available in other regions of the world differ from the above. According to the CEIAS survey, China is viewed more or less favorably in most of the countries surveyed in Africa (Angola, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tunisia), while in the Indo-Pacific region there are significant divisions between countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia with positive views, as opposed to South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, which were covered in the Pew Research Center surveys.

AND LATIN AMERICA, WHAT?

In Latin America there are several studies that have analyzed China's image (Aldrich and Lu 2015; Carreras 2017; Creutzfeldt 2017). Some of these studies observed a honeymoon in the valuation of China around the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, but also the fact that the valuation of the image has not been continuous, with a more skeptical view of China in recent years.

The research by Morgenstern and Bohigues (2021) is a reference when analyzing Latin Americans' level of support for China and the United States. These authors argue that unlike views of the United States, which are structured by ideology, attitudes towards China are unstructured. This means that they go beyond whether people respond that they are left-wing or right-wing, attracting support from the left for its anti-American stance and from the right for its influence on the economy. Moreover, they argue that Latin Americans judge China and the United States independently, feelings towards these countries are unrelated because different factors guide attitudes towards both powers.

However, the aforementioned research pre-dates the pandemic and does not capture this event or the growing competition between China and the US. As noted above, anti-China narratives have proliferated in the context of COVID-19, and this has also happened in the region. In response to various messages from different sectors of society (analysts, public figures and politicians), Chinese embassies, whether in Bolivia, Brazil or Peru, have responded to certain accusations received, positioning China as a responsible power in this context, either through donations or even the provision of vaccines that have arrived in large numbers in Latin America.

The study by Turcsányi et al. published in October 2022 analyses public opinion towards China in seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Panama. Broadly speaking and in relation to the United States, China is behind in how it is perceived in these countries, although this does not mean that it is not viewed favorably in several countries. In fact, they come to the same conclusion as Morgenstern and Bohigues that China and the US are not seen as a black and white dichotomy.

This CEIAS analysis shows that an important percentage of respondents to the feelings towards China question have a positive view of China, though lower than in Africa. For example, in Colombia, Chile and Brazil, positive views are around 40%, while in several African countries (Angola, Ghana and Nigeria) they are closer to 60%.

In terms of comparison with other countries, the CEIAS study shows that respondents have a more favorable opinion towards another Asian country such as Japan. In the seven Latin American countries surveyed, the percentage of favorable opinions towards Japan is higher than towards China. This aspect has also been studied by other academics in the region, with the same results. In the context of hegemonic competition with the United States, this study suggests that in these countries, if citizens have to choose between aligning themselves with China or the United States, there is a higher percentage that decides for the latter, and they even prefer the US development model.

If we look at perceptions on certain issues, the study shows that in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama, close to 80 per cent of those surveyed consider China to be economically important, with Argentina being the Latin American country where this aspect is least observed. Along these lines, in all the countries mentioned, trade with China is the most relevant aspect mentioned in the relationship.

Other surveys, such as the Latinobarómetro survey, also analyze the case of China in various countries in the region and have been used for academic work, given that they raise questions associated with leadership, comparison with other powers and economic influence. According to Carlos Luján (2022), a member of the analysis of the 2021 data, China's leadership in the region is perceived in terms of technological development, science and education, and its shared leadership with the United States in terms of the global economy, but not in military or normative-social issues.

With specific reference to countries, Luján (2022), using data from Latinobarómetro, states that the citizens of Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela consider that they have a better relationship with China than with the United States, something that does not seem to be the case in other countries such as Brazil and Colombia. Meanwhile, in terms of China's economic influence, in countries such as Uruguay, China is perceived to exert greater influence than the United States, something that also occurs in Bolivia and Venezuela.

In summary, the existing pre- and post-pandemic studies do not show a negative perception of China in Latin American public opinion, as is usually observed in the latest Pew Research Center reports on the developed economies of the North. On the contrary, there is a positive perception related to trade and the importance of maintaining a good relationship with this country (Maggiorelli et al 2023), which is a reference in economic and technological matters¹. Despite the difficulty of comparing data from different surveys with distinct questions, the picture in Latin America with respect to opinion towards China is not the same as in developed economies.

¹ <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20220329-rusia-china-america-latina-latinobarometro>

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