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# LATIN AMERICA: China image may face rising challenges

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## Abstract

Regional attitudes towards Chinese influence.

The Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Survey, published in July, is the latest evidence that many Latin Americans welcome China's increasing economic presence in their countries.

## Full Text

SUBJECT:Regional attitudes towards Chinese influence.

SIGNIFICANCE:The Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Survey, published in July, is the latest evidence that many Latin Americans welcome China's increasing economic presence in their countries.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

China's popularity in Latin America has not yet suffered the downturn recently seen on other continents.

Latin Americans generally still see the United States as their most important foreign actor, but China's influence is expected to rise.

The distance between Latin America and China implies that regional opinions are not deeply held and therefore

volatile.

Two recent surveys provide insights on how Latin Americans view China:

The Pew Research Center conducted its survey of 37,653 respondents in 39 countries on global attitudes toward China and the United States between March 2 and May 1, 2013.

The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) also recently published the findings from a 2012 study, with 41,000 interviews, focused on regional attitudes toward China.

Polls show that opinion regarding China in Latin America often resembles that found elsewhere, with many respondents seeing China as a rising great power whose increasing wealth and power is having, and will have, both positive and negative effects on their own wellbeing ( see INTERNATIONAL: Latin America wary of China dependence - May 17, 2012). They see the United States as the currently dominant but declining great power. The respondents value the economic, scientific and technological achievements of the Chinese people, but not the Chinese political system or popular culture.

However, there are less intense feelings regarding China than in many other regions, such as Europe or Asia. This low salience might change as China surpasses the EU to become Latin America's second-largest economic partner after the United States:

For example, China has become Brazil's leading trading partner, and more than half of the Brazilian respondents in the Pew survey dislike the way the Chinese do business (see BRAZIL/CHINA: Competition may boost efficiency - April 14, 2011).

Conversely, young people in many countries admire Chinese pop culture much more than their parents. In Brazil, the generational gap is around 16 percentage points.

Chinese influence.

The LAPOP survey found that 20% of the respondents view China as the most influential country in the region. In contrast, some 40% of the respondents believe the United States is most influential. However, in certain countries, particularly those belonging to the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA -- led by Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua), the gap in perceived influence between China and the United States was considerably less:

In ALBA countries, 26.5% saw the United States as more influential, to 22.1% for China.

In non-ALBA countries, 44.0% considered the United States to be more influential, to 19.9% for China.

Although Latin Americans generally perceive the United States as having more influence than China, most countries see China's influence more favourably. More than half of respondents have a positive perception of China's influence in their region, though Brazil's and Japan's influence is viewed slightly more positively than China's. Whereas 68% considered China's influence "positive" or "very positive", only 62% feel the same way towards the United States. In the ALBA countries, 67.6% considered China's influence positive, to 54.3% for the United States.

Respondents generally perceive their own country's relations with China to be positive or very positive (63.0%) rather than negative or very negative (12.5%). Their perceptions vary significantly, with Central American and Caribbean countries tending to be at the top of the list and Argentina and Mexico towards the bottom. Only 16% of Latin American respondents consider China a model for development; the majority believe that their own country's development model is the most suitable and do not believe that any foreign power offers a better model for them.

Trust.

In addition, the LAPOP study also examines the level of trust that citizens in each country have in both China and the United States. Again, the regional average indicates that Latin Americans have greater trust in the United States, although in ALBA countries there is a much larger degree of trust in China than elsewhere in the region. Southern Cone countries also tend to have more trust in China than in the United States, whereas Central American and Caribbean countries trust the United States far more. Those people who pay attention to news, approve of their own country's president's job performance or have a higher education level tend to report the highest levels of trust in China.

Latin Americans generally consider relations with China to be "growing closer", a view they shared with respect to the United States as well. This is not true regarding their relations with Russia, Iran or Israel. They see the United States as being the most influential country in the future, though to a lesser degree than those who believe it is the most influential country now. On the other hand, China's perceived influence in the future was seen as increasing.

Explaining the results.

It has only been in the last decade that China and Latin America developed strong economic ties, and it was not until around 2008 that Chinese companies began to establish a major presence in some Latin American countries. So far, their presence has coincided with benign economic conditions in Latin America, with the region doing surprising well during the recent global economic recession. The physical and historical distance between the two continents has meant that few sources of friction existed between them, unlike the case of the United States ( see LATIN AMERICA/CHINA: Economic initiatives on the rise - July 9, 2012; and see LATIN AMERICA/US: Past lessons are yet to be learned - October 30, 2006). Xi Jinping (then vice-president, now president) told overseas Chinese in Mexico in 2009 that, in contrast with the region's former colonial powers, "China exports neither revolution, nor hunger and poverty, and never inflicts pain on others".

Furthermore, most Latin Americans have little knowledge regarding China. Few even among the region's economic, political or intellectual elite know the Chinese language. This suggests their opinions are volatile. Indeed, many respondents in Central American countries appeared to conflate Taiwan and China.

The more targeted LAPOP survey found several anomalies. Respondents in both Brazil and Chile, China's main trading partners in the region, were often in the middle group of the data, as opposed to having strong positive or negative opinions about China. Argentines held generally negative views of China despite close economic ties ( see ARGENTINA: China trade sends warning signals - August 22, 2007).

CONCLUSION: China's popularity could fall as its interactions with Latin Americans increase -- or, conversely, rise, since younger respondents hold the more favourable views regarding China than older ones. A key variable is likely to be the nature of Chinese investment in extractive, resource-intensive industries. A negative track record here in environmental protection, labour standards and contract obligations could eventually produce more of the strong negative sentiments seen in Africa and South-east Asia.

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## Details

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