

REVIEW

Chris Alden and Álvaro Méndez, *China and Latin America: Development, Agency and Geopolitics*

Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2023, pp. 296

Barbara Stallings 

Brown University and Tsinghua University

(Received 3 September 2024; accepted 26 September 2024)

China and Latin America, by Chris Alden and Álvaro Méndez, is a major contribution to the burgeoning literature on the relationship between these two parts of the world. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has become the main trading partner of many Latin American countries and a major investor in them as well. It has also become the source of ideas about development models and a new partner in international relations.

There are several reasons why this book is important. First, it is the most comprehensive analysis of a topic that has been dealt with by many authors in the past decade. It begins with two historical chapters on how China and Latin America interacted in the past. Indeed, the authors claim that ‘the Chinese legacy in shaping Latin America is nearly as profound as that of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires’ (p. 33). The historical introduction is followed by an analysis of almost every country and sub-region in Latin America and the particularities of their historical, economic and political links with China. Finally, a concluding chapter places China–Latin American relations into the geopolitical context of the present day, concentrating especially on the United States–China–Latin America nexus. The book also includes a number of valuable appendices. Since it is written in a quite readable style, it should be of wide interest for the general public as well as academic specialists.

Second, the authors – who themselves have written extensively on various aspects of China and Latin America – have done an impressive job in finding lesser-known sources that enable them to provide great detail in the country/sub-regional chapters. Although sources in Chinese are not included, English-language works by Chinese authors are used. Moreover, Alden and Méndez supplement their written sources with nearly two dozen interviews in most of the countries they discuss. Mexico and Venezuela are significant exceptions, where they rely on published interviews by others.

Third, Alden and Méndez place their analysis in a useful tripartite framework, which consists of development, agency and geopolitics. The framework is laid out in the introduction and deployed in the conclusion to update the main topics addressed in the book. Two of the three elements – development and geopolitics –

are common ones in the literature. Less so, and thus of special importance, is the concept of agency. Indeed, a common idea is that agency on the part of Latin America is absent in the China–Latin American context and that these countries are simply responding to Chinese initiatives. Interestingly, this view is not as prevalent in studies of China and Southeast Asia or even sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, Alden and Méndez provide a particular service in showing how Latin American governments and private-sector actors have also been responsible for relationships between the two sides. An important source they could have used to buttress the notion of agency is ‘China Local Global’, a project by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which provides case studies of local agency in various regions, including Latin America.

It should be noted that although the book was published in 2023, the large majority of the analysis stops in 2019, i.e. before the Covid pandemic sharply reduced China’s role in the region. The exception is a short section in the final chapter on China’s providing Latin America with protective equipment and vaccines in the early Covid period when the region was neglected by other international actors. This neglect, especially by the United States, provided an opening for China to gain credit for helping Latin America rather than just seeking natural resources and markets. Nonetheless, the bulk of the Covid and post-Covid period are not discussed; the appendices also end in 2019. This is important since the quantity and quality of relations have changed dramatically in recent years, and it is not yet clear where the relationship is headed. This could be the subject of a follow-up book by these important authors.

Despite my admiration for the book, there are some issues where I would have liked to see changes and/or elaborations. First, with the exception of Brazil and Mexico, countries are analysed in groups, but the reasons for the groupings are not always clear. This is especially the case for the first group. Entitled ‘Riding the Tiger’, it includes Chile, Peru and Argentina. The authors admit that Chile and Peru are ‘very different countries’, but have ‘been at the forefront’ of China’s new relations with the region. Argentina, by contrast, has a much more checkered history with China. The best the authors do to justify the group is to say: ‘Unpacking the sources driving foreign and development policy in Santiago, Lima, and Buenos Aires ... offers insights into the relationship’ (p. 51). Likewise, while the grouping of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia is more comprehensible, it is associated with the ‘pink tide’ in Latin America. The pink tide – the emergence of a number of leftist governments – is far broader than these three countries.

A second issue is a forest–trees problem in the country chapters. A great amount of detail is offered, especially about economic transactions, but the structural consequences are often ignored. Two examples are illustrative. The authors say there was a splurge of Chinese investment in Peru in the 2010s, but where did this leave China in terms of the relative importance of Peru’s foreign investors? They say China was only 14th in the previous decade. Likewise, much information is provided on economic relations between China and Mexico, but Mexico’s huge trade deficit with China and its implications get short shrift.

A third issue is that, despite the comprehensiveness of the analysis, some important countries and topics are ignored or treated only in passing. Of the major Latin American countries, only Colombia is absent from the book. This

may be justified since only in the last few years has China begun to play an important role there. But the question of why Colombia was marginalised by China ('the dog that didn't bark') might cast light on reasons for closer relationships with Colombia's neighbours. A topic that is mentioned only in connection with Central America and the Caribbean is the use of Chinese labour (and contractors) rather than local sources. This has been tremendously contentious in some parts of the world. Was it relevant in Latin America? If not, why not?

Finally, there is a curious absence of expressed opinion in the book about whether Latin America's relationships with China are positive or negative – and why. Presumably, the authors think there are both positive and negative aspects, but it would have been useful for readers to know their views since they have done such a large amount of valuable work on the topic.