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SINO-RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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ANALYSIS

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Table of contents

Table of contents.....	3
Preface.....	4
Russian Interests in Central America.....	5
Russia–Central America Trade.....	6
Central American Political Elites’ Shift Towards the People’s Republic of China: From Words to Action.....	7
A Model for Diplomatic Relations with a Clientelist, Opaque Communist China.....	9
The People’s Republic of China as an Important Partner in Strengthening Autocratic Regimes in Central America.....	9
Disinformation Trends in Central America.....	10
Conclusion: Combatting Disinformation.....	12
References.....	14

Preface

In March and April 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was particularly enthusiastic in boasting about his good relations with Central America. Lavrov had also begun, through the chancellor of the Ortega-Murillo regime, pressuring for Russia to be granted observer status in the Central American Integration System (SICA in Spanish). Some months later, in August 2023, the parliament of the Central American Integration System (PARLACEN in Spanish), which includes six Central American countries, voted to revoke Taiwan's permanent observer status and admit China as an observer in its place.

These actions are part of a marked strategy by Russia and China to reinforce their presence in Central America. Although the triggers for this sudden urgency to expand ties with the region are reactions to different dynamics, this essay will focus on two aspects that are of overriding importance in the evolution of relations between these powers and the countries of Central America: i) the consolidation of autocratic regimes that increasingly oppose the United States, and ii) at the same time, the unprecedented waning of the historical hegemony of the United States, which has faced aggressive communication strategies of propaganda and disinformation, at whose core is an endeavor to create an impression of prosperity and development in the alliances between China, Russia and Central America.

The growing presence of these powers in Central America could not be possible without the acquiescence of political elites who, eager to advance and strengthen their authoritarian practices in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador, see in these relations an opportunity to circumvent the norms agreed upon by the international community in terms of democratic practices, accountability-oriented environments, and respect for civil and political rights.

Russian Interests in Central America

Russian foreign policy is based to some extent on what has been called the “near abroad” (Rouvinski, 2020); that is, the concept that there are zones of geographical proximity and political influence where a foreign power has the legitimacy to assert its interests. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia’s near abroad was made up of the former communist republics, while the near abroad of the United States was located in Latin America.

However, in Putin’s eyes, events such as the “color revolutions” of the past decade, in which citizens of a number of former Soviet countries mobilized to demand democracy and freedoms, were, an example of the influence the U.S. was trying to exert on the Russian near abroad. This was why the Russian president undertook a geopolitical counteroffensive to ramp up Russia’s outreach to Latin America, taking advantage of the anti-American discourse of its regional autocracies, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Subsequently, due to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia accelerated its efforts to woo the Central American region through its most radical historical anti-American partner, Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega Saavedra.

Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, and unlike Russia’s relations with Havana during the Soviet years, or trade relations with the leaders of the pink tide, this renewed closeness acquired a symbolic dimension (Chaguaceda & González, 2022). Through cultural, academic, and media influence, it was aimed essentially at painting a favorable image of Russia and replacing the values of the democratic ecosystem with values related to autocracy, not to mention, of course, cooperation in the military and security sphere.

The Ortega dictatorship, with its personalist and anti-Western rhetoric, made him the perfect surrogate for avenue autocratic cooperation in Central America. In fact, Ortega, along with Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, were the only Central American presidents to openly and unhesitatingly support the Russian “special operation” in Ukraine from the start while the rest of the region’s leaders maintained a non-committal position towards the invasion.

Russia’s relationship with Nicaragua in the Western Hemisphere is unique for this and other reasons. Although the Havana and Caracas regimes are already open allies of the Kremlin, ties with Managua will bring greater advantages for Putin. While Cuba and Venezuela demand strict economic cooperation from Russia – such as oil investment in the case of Venezuela – or renewed discussions over old unresolved issues, such as the case of the outstanding Soviet debt to Cuba, ties between Russia and Nicaragua involve more attainable terms in practice (Rouvinski, 2023).

Leaving aside an almost irrelevant economic cooperation, Russia offers Nicaragua aid in military and security issues,

while providing support in multilateral relations, given that the Ortega-Murillo regime is in a critical state of international isolation. In exchange, Putin gets the opportunity to establish a base for strategic operations virtually next door to the United States. Through a complex structure that brings together the embassy, Russian officials, friendly local authorities, and other public relations, Moscow is finding fertile ground in Managua for learning first-hand about the state of the U.S. near abroad, expanding its own narratives and destabilizing the democracies in the region (Rouvinski, 2023). And it achieves all this without investing a great deal of economic resources, as it would have had to do with other regional allies. In addition, Ortega can guarantee Russia proximity to allied populist leaders such as Mel Zelaya in Honduras, husband of President Xiomara Castro.

As will be seen below, a communication strategy is vital in this relationship, necessary both to legitimize Ortega’s decisions and to ease international pressure on the democratic and human rights crisis in Nicaragua. This information strategy is also employed in the rest of the region to promote the Kremlin’s anti-Western narratives, manipulate public opinion about the war in Ukraine, and project Russia as a leading political actor on the world stage. A similar dynamic is in play in multilateral forums where Russia and Nicaragua vote against those resolutions that lay bare the authoritarian nature of both regimes.

President Putin has been giving significant attention to Latin America for several years now. His narratives have found common ground with old political leaders of left-wing parties who sympathized with the defunct Soviet Union. These are leaders with a historical resentment towards the United States and who tend to blame the West for all Latin America’s ills. It is no coincidence that during the pandemic, when Russia and China spread the narrative that rich countries were hoarding COVID-19 vaccines, the Kremlin seized the opportunity to supply at least five Latin American countries – Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Venezuela – with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. This stimulated a renewed sense of solidarity with Russia that was later expressed in the form of silence over the invasion of Ukraine.

Table 1 shows how these governments have supported – sometimes intermittently – the Kremlin’s decisions in forums such as the UN and the OAS, categorically rejecting the criticism and sanctions related to the invasion of Ukraine, or opting to abstain, counter to the building of an international order based on respect for human rights.

	UN General Assembly Apr. 7, 2022 Suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council	Permanent Council of the OAS Apr. 21, 2022 Suspend Russia as a permanent observer	UN General Assembly Oct. 12, 2022 Illegality of Russian annexation of the territories of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine	UN General Assembly Nov. 14, 2022 Russian Federation called on to pay reparations for the war in Ukraine	UN General Assembly Dec. 15, 2022 Resolution on the human rights situation in the occupied territories of Crimea and Sevastopol	UN General Assembly Feb. 23, 2023 Adherence to the principles of the United Nations charter that would ensure peace in Ukraine
El Salvador	In favor	Abstained	Did not vote	In favor	Abstained	Abstained
Honduras	In favor	Abstained	Abstained	Abstained	Abstained	In favor
Nicaragua	Against	Absent	Against	Against	Against	Against

Table 1. Cooperation with Russia by Central American governments in multilateral forums. Source: Author, based on votes recorded in the UN and the OAS

Russia-Central America Trade

Apart from Russia’s considerable interest in receiving support – or at least international silence – from ossified Central American comrades such as Daniel Ortega and Mel Zelaya in their anti-Western rhetoric and their resistance to the United States, commercial relations between Russia and Central America are relatively insignificant.

According to the Secretariat of Central American Economic Integration (SIECA in Spanish), from 2018 up to March 2023, exports to Russia were a mere US\$350.12 million. Russian imports, on the other hand, totaled US\$2.714 billion. This leaves the Central American countries with a trade deficit of US\$2.26389 billion.

Figure 1 - Trade between Central America and Russia (2018 – March 2023)



Source: Author, with data from the SIECA (September 2023). *Does not include free zones/maquilas. Includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

This deficit is, to a large extent, due to the fact that Central American exports consist mainly of primary products such as fruits and vegetables, coffee, seeds, oilseeds, and sugar. This is precisely the same array of products these countries aspire to introduce into the complex Russian market. Russia’s major export to Central America is fertilizer, which, in fact, represents almost half of its exports to this region.

Tables 2 and 3 present a comparison of the ten main products traded between Central America and Russia in 2022.

Table 2 - Exports from Central America to Russia (millions of US\$)

Export	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	March 2023
Edible fruit and nuts; peel of citrus fruit or melons	38.24	26.92	40.06	40.37	23.65	5.96
Coffee, tea, maté and spices	20.87	22.27	30.61	19.53	18.02	5.12
Oil seeds and oleaginous fruits; miscellaneous grains, seeds and fruit; industrial plants	5.96	3.20	2.15	8.31	1.78	0.73
Preparations of vegetables, fruit, nuts or other parts of plants	0.47	0.64	1.30	3.14	0.88	-
Sugars and sugar confectionery	0.83	0.89	0.79	0.69	0.77	0.20
Beverages, spirits and vinegar	1.01	0.41	1.05	1.02	0.46	0.05
Plastics and articles thereof	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.25	-
Tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes	2.52	3.65	2.54	4.50	0.12	0.02
Cocoa and cocoa preparations	0.02	0.00	0.05	0.04	0.09	0.03
Articles of cast iron, iron or steel	0.02	0.02	0.11	0.18	0.08	-
Other	0.56	2.08	1.95	2.63	0.25	0.06
Total	70.49	60.07	80.63	80.43	46.34	12.16

Source: Author, with data from the SIECA (September 2023). *Does not include free zones/maquilas. Includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

Table 3 - Central American imports from Russia (millions of US\$)

Import	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	March 2023
Fertilizers	200.75	205.95	203.40	327.86	544.84	70.61
Cast iron, iron and steel	80.85	119.05	54.27	247.09	96.74	18.85
Pharmaceutical products	1.03	5.23	7.98	113.37	39.10	0.06
Products of the milling industry; malt; starches; inulin; wheat gluten	-	0.33	0.78	25.62	32.49	0.09
Paper and paperboard; articles of cellulose pulp, of paper or of paperboard	7.57	8.63	4.58	19.14	13.29	0.40
Copper and articles thereof	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.91	7.32	-
Inorganic chemicals; inorganic metal compounds	11.64	9.17	7.02	8.93	4.11	0.09
Aluminum and articles thereof	1.75	0.51	2.78	4.23	3.86	1.57
Mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances; mineral waxes	0.90	1.46	1.01	4.91	2.83	0.11
Organic chemicals	2.33	1.22	2.22	8.08	2.51	-
Other	43.93	38.47	37.72	39.49	10.71	1.26
Total	350.75	390.02	321.77	800.63	757.80	93.05

Source: Author, with data from the SIECA (September 2023). *Does not include free zones/maquilas. Includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

The Rise of China in Central America

For some time, China has kept its interests in Latin America limited to investments and trade, elements sufficient in themselves to exert a significant influence in the region, where it is positioned as the largest creditor by virtue of the 131 billion dollars in credit accumulated from 2008 to 2019 (Guzmán, 2023).

This sum could soar even further due to the slowdown of Latin American economies, which were severely impacted first by the coronavirus pandemic and then by the interruption to supply chains caused by the war in Ukraine. For this reason, it is plausible to think that the governments of the region will seek access to more Chinese financing to help them cope with the economic difficulties wrought by the international situation. In fact, Chinese promises of loans, donations, and investments free of Western conditions seem to have cast a spell over Central American leaders.

Central American Political Elites' Shift Towards the People's Republic of China: From Words to Action

Pro-Chinese narratives have been aggressively promoted throughout Central American media. In numerous articles and reports that generally follow Beijing sponsored trips to China, Central American journalists and political elites repeatedly assure the region that a relationship with the Asian giant will significantly enhance and boost trade relations with China. For example, on the occasion of a visit by 30 journalists to China in May 2023, an article in the Honduran newspaper La Tribuna stated that "China is ready to open its 137 billion-dollar checkbook to buy Honduran products" (La Tribuna, 2023). However, evidence from trade between China and Central America paints a different picture. In 2007, when Costa Rica made the decision to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of mainland China, the trade balance of the Central American country with the Asian giant was positive by about 100 million dollars.

In 2022, 11 years into a free trade agreement, Costa Rica had a trade deficit of nearly 3 billion dollars (2.835 billion dollars) with China. In 2021, while visiting Washington DC, Christian Guillermet, Costa Rican Deputy Minister for Multilateral Affairs during the Carlos Alvarado government, stated that "contrary to what we expected, our relationship with China has not been commercially successful" (Valladares, 2021). In 2022, El Salvador exports to China were only \$46.9 million, compared with \$1.6 billion to the United States. In fact, Central America's exports to China in 2022 exceeded \$1.7 billion, with a trade deficit of almost \$14 billion.

Table 4 - Commercial transactions between El Salvador and Central America with China and the United States (millions of US\$)

Country	Partner	Flow	2022
El Salvador	China	Export	46.9
		Import	2,710.44
		Trade Balance	-2,663.55
	United States	Export	1,677.36
		Import	5,009.66
		Trade Balance	-3,332.30
Central America	China	Export	1,775.55
		Import	15,212.24
		Trade Balance	-13,436.69
	United States	Export	14,969.98
		Import	33,719.84
		Trade Balance	-18,749.86

Source: Author, with data from the SIECA (September 2023). *Does not include free zones/maquilas. Includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama.

In El Salvador, Chinese diplomats, working with President Nayib Bukele and his closest political allies, have maintained a consistent pro-Chinese narrative through regular announcements of billions of US dollars in donations, non-refundable cooperation, and investments in infrastructure.

In May 2021, former Chinese Ambassador to El Salvador, Ou Jianhong, tweeted that the people of El Salvador were the "largest recipients of China's non-refundable aid" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in SV [@EmbajadaChinaSV], 2021a). In a patent message of support for President Nayib Bukele, accused of "autocratic decisions" by the United States, Jianhong declared that "China has never in the past nor will it in the future use foreign aid to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations, much less for its own benefit" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in SV [@EmbajadaChinaSV], 2021b).

Nicaragua and Honduras are the countries with which China has most recently initiated diplomatic relations. Chinese officials seem very comfortable with these countries, whose leadership expresses a notably populist and anti-American discourse. Since establishing diplomatic relations, dozens of agreements have been signed between China and these countries. However, the feasibility of these agreements is questionable and there has been no clear implementation plan.

In Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador, China is finding a new window of opportunity. It shares with these countries a critical discourse against perceived US hegemony, around which it aims to build a new order based on multipolarity, with Chinese president Xi Jinping assuming leadership. In this way, as we will review in detail below, China, like Russia, seeks to deploy an array of cultural, academic and, above all, communication exchanges by which to position its interests among the political and economic elites and consolidate their illiberal narratives.

All of this has been reflected in various bilateral agreements signed by Central American governments with Beijing, following the activation of diplomatic relations that, in addition to increasing China’s political influence in the region, reinforce the co-optation exercised by Xi Jinping’s government in the economic sphere.

For example, following the forging of relations between China and Honduras, the two countries have entered into negotiations toward a free trade agreement. During President Xiomara Castro’s visit to Beijing in June of this year, 17 agreements were signed on economic, commercial, financial, technological, communication, investment, and visa matters, among others (Madrid, 2023).

On July 4, 2023, the Honduran government announced the start of negotiations for its free trade agreement with China. Although the details and progress of these negotiations are not yet public, the initial statement spoke of a meeting between Honduras Secretary of State in the Office of Economic Development, Fredis Cerrato, and Chinese Minister of Commerce, Wang Wentao. According to the Honduran government, this treaty is expected to boost the country’s agricultural sector, diversify Honduran exports to the Chinese market, and facilitate the attraction of strategic investments (Organization of American States, 2023).

These agreements include one relating to cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as establishing a joint trade and investment committee. This committee has committed to begin work on plans for the construction of a railway line in Honduras linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at an estimated cost of 20 billion dollars (Reuters, 2023b). This pledge evokes memories of the failed Nicaragua Canal project, which was meant to be built at an estimated cost of 50 billion dollars by Chinese businessman Wang Jing in partnership with president Daniel Ortega

Perhaps more important has been Honduras’s formal request to join the New Development Bank (NDB) of the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – (Reuters, 2023a), an initiative led from Beijing to reconfigure the global financial system under the hallmark of multipolarity and de-dollarization. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that this formal request, made by President Xiomara Castro in a meeting held on June 10, with Dilma Rousseff, president of the NDB (Swissinfo, 2023), will be fulfilled in the foreseeable future.

The Chinese government has also been quite vocal with

promises of aid to El Salvador. During the first official meeting between Bukele and Xi in China, the parties announced delivery of \$500 million dollars in non-refundable public investment without conditions (Nayib Bukele [@nayibbukele], 2021). The Salvadoran president’s wording “without conditions” alluded to demands made by the United States and Europe that called for reestablishing an environment of respect for democratic institutions, accountability, and ceasing the persecution of independent journalism as a condition for aid and economic cooperation.

Chinese promises of economic support are precisely what fosters dangerous ties with the country, which follows a discretionary policy for issuing credit, in addition to not establishing clear rules and processes like those of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. It is common knowledge that China dismisses conditions as basic as the payment capacity of its debtors, which calls into question the viability and commitments that governments assume by accessing Chinese financing (Guzmán, 2023).

Table 5. Agreements between the governments of Honduras and China, 2023

TYPE	ASPECTS COVERED
Agreement	Mutual visa exemptions
Memorandum of understanding	Establishing public consultation mechanism
Accord	Cooperation between the University of Foreign Studies and the José Cecilio del Valle Diplomatic Academy
Protocol	Inspection, quarantine, and veterinary health requirements for aquaculture products
Protocol	Phytosanitary requirements for exporting unroasted coffee beans
Protocol	Phytosanitary requirements for exporting fresh banana
Memorandum of cooperation	Inspection and quarantine in food import and export
Memorandum of cooperation	Technical procedures for entry and exit of animal and plant products subject to quarantine
Memorandum of understanding	Cooperation within the framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road
Agreement	Cooperation in science, technology, and innovation
Memorandum	Establishment of the Joint Commission for Economic, Commercial, and Investment Cooperation
Memorandum	Agricultural cooperation
Memorandum	Between the Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the Secretary of State in the Office of Economic Development
Memorandum	Between the China Media Group and the National Telecommunications Commission of Honduras
Memorandum	Between the Xinhua Agency and the Honduran Ministry of Strategic Planning
Memorandum	Strengthening development cooperation and promoting implementation of the Global Development Initiative

Source: Author, based on the scheme proposed by Madrid (2023).

In China’s geopolitical strategy, Central America represents, in addition to an opportunity to expand Chinese political influence through economic coercion, the possibility of painting a more positive image of Beijing to the world.. Valencia’s assertion (2022) that the case of El Salvador “is an important component in expanding the global vision of the Asian nation as a beneficent and future power,” is therefore a statement that could well be extrapolated to the rest of the Central American region.

A Model for Diplomatic Relations with a Clientelist, Opaque Communist China

A particularly striking feature in Central American countries ruled by autocratic leaders is their management of relations with China. Bilateral agreements with the People’s Republic of China are usually handled through family networks, outside of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. It is also not uncommon for these countries, hoping to turn relations with China into a cozy niche of family and clientelist networks, to violate local accountability rules that determine how their countries may establish agreements or accords with other countries.

It is noteworthy that the key actors in these diplomatic relations are family members of these autocratic presidents. In Nicaragua, relations with China (and Russia) are overseen by Laureano Ortega, the son of president Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, who is also his vice president. In El Salvador, Karim Bukele, one of the president’s brothers, is in charge of directly supervising these relationships. In fact, all of President Bukele’s brothers are trusted advisors dispersed across practically all the institutions of the Salvadoran State.

In Honduras, the delegations that have traveled to China have systematically included two of President Xiomara Castro’s children, Hortencia Zelaya Castro, who is a representative in parliament, and Héctor Zelaya Castro, who holds the office of private secretary to the president. Hortencia Castro was even appointed by president Castro to oversee relations with the Chinese Communist Party.

In this framework of clientelist and opaque relations with China, Nicaragua and Honduras signed no less than 40 agreements between December 2021 and March 2023 on such issues as housing, transportation, trade, and telecommunications. The public knows little about the scope or terms of the agreements, several of which include confidentiality clauses. For example, in Honduras, the Honduran Telecommunications Company (Hondutel) and the Chinese company Huawei signed an agreement that includes a confidentiality clause that obliges Hondutel to administer this new relationship clandestinely .

A similar opacity characterizes the Central American infrastructure projects promised by China. According to the China–Central America Expediente Abierto Observer, of the nine projects underway in Costa Rica, Panama, El Salvador and Nicaragua, five are “donations,” while the terms and conditions of the loans for the other four are unknown. What is more, civil society and local communities have reported corruption and serious infrastructure defects in at least six of the nine projects.

Table 6. Infrastructure projects under execution with financing from China

Type of agreement	Country	Engagement Year	Title of the project	Amount (USD, nominal)
Loan	Costa Rica	2014	[China Co-Financing Fund] IDB administers 50 million USD loan from CHC to Government of Costa Rica for Infrastructure Transport Program (PIT)	USD 50,000,000.00
	Costa Rica	2013	China Eximbank provides \$296 million USD export buyer’s credit facility for the Route 32 Renovation Project	USD 296,000,000.00
	Costa Rica	2013	China Eximbank provides RMB 628 million government concessional loan for the Route 32 Renovation Project	USD 102,135,632.76
	Panama	2015	[China Co-Financing Fund] IDB administers 50 million USD loan from CHC to Government of Panama for Panama City and Bay Sanitation Program II	USD 50,000,000.00
Subtotal				USD 498,135,632.76
Donation	Costa Rica	2019	China co-finances construction and equipment of the building for the Center for the Collection and Administration of Heritage Collections, Headquarters “Jose Fabio Gongora”, of the National Museum of Costa Rica	USD 14,527,498.00
	El Salvador	2019	China sponsors project to purify water from Lake Ilopango in El Salvador	USD 40,000,000.00
	El Salvador	2019	China sponsors development of drinking water distribution system and sanitation system for Surf City beach circuit	USD 35,000,000.00
	El Salvador	2019	China sponsors construction of El Salvador’s national library	USD 54,000,000.00
	Nicaragua	2022	China sponsors 400-million-yuan social housing program in Nicaragua	USD 60,000,000.00
Subtotal				USD 203,527,498.00
Total				USD 701,663,130.76

Source: Author, with data from the Observatory on China in Central America of Expediente Abierto

The People’s Republic of China as an Important Partner in Strengthening Autocratic Regimes in Central America

Chinese presence in Central America should be a cause for concern not only because it will exacerbate abuses of power, corruption, and clientelistic networks but also because it will bring with it a marked increase in anti-Western rhetoric, through local elites and pro-government media, which will continue to shore up the benefits of the Chinese model and discredit the values of liberal democracies. The Chinese state Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network are already playing vital roles in this regard. Through a policy of numerous trips and scholarships to China for journalists, agreements and accords, and training on the ground, Chinese state media and the Communist Party are deploying practices and experiences of propaganda, disinformation, and espionage against independent journalists.

The evidence indicates that for China’s strategies to be thwarted, there needs to be accountability mechanisms and practices in partner countries. In countries with strong, independent institutions and where accountability, human rights, and an independent press prevail, a Chinese presence could be beneficial and may not threaten liberal ideals and institutions. However, in countries with weaker institutions, where the norm is for regimes to conceal public information, eschew accountability, and suppress public freedoms, the consequences will be quite dire: China will use these countries to increase its predatory presence, contribute to strengthening illiberal regimes, and strengthen these countries’ narrative of conflict against the United States and the West.

Disinformation Trends in Central America

The governments of China and Russia not only share an interest in promoting a narrative contrary to U.S. foreign policy, discrediting the values of liberal democracy and projecting themselves as leaders of the new world order, they also have specific disinformation interests in Central America premised on their own geostrategic agendas. Putin favors the construction of discourses that legitimize the “special military operation” in Ukraine, such as the supposed denazification of the Donbas region undertaken by Russian troops. This discourse is anchored on advancing the narrative of NATO’s encroachment on Moscow’s zone of influence, and the West’s supposed interest in prolonging the war and avoiding any peace agreement at all costs as behind the failure to stop the war in Ukraine.

The content of Chinese disinformation and propaganda in the region ranges from the effectiveness of its vaccines – CanSino and Sinopharm – during the COVID-19 pandemic, to the shortcomings of their counterparts developed in the West and Russia (Global Americans, 2021), to the health aid that Beijing provided to Central American nations such as Costa Rica and Panama during the covid-19 emergency¹ (Datt, 2023). One recurring topic – perhaps the favorite theme of the media and disinformation actors – is the advantages that economic cooperation with China brings for development in Central America, as well as Chinese support for certain controversial decisions made by illiberal governments in the region.

While Beijing and Moscow use different information warfare tools, they usually find synergies when repeating and expanding common narratives, or narratives favorable to one or the other of the parties. An example can be found in the coordinated efforts undertaken by their respective news outlets to discredit the last NATO summit in Lithuania, where Sino–Russian foreign policy was classified as a threat to Euro-Atlantic security. The preferred media for these campaigns are the radio, television, and news sites in Spanish, financed by global autocracies – Russian RT and Sputnik, as well as Chinese Xinhua and CGTN – which have consolidated their presence in Central America owing to various bilateral agreements on communications.

That being said, the Russian disinformation strategy is deployed in Central America almost exclusively through Nicaragua, the base of operations for an entire media network through which Moscow is expanding its influence in the region (Rouvinski, 2023). Platforms such as RT have penetrated several Central American nations through various

cable companies, who include them in their most popular bundles. The proliferation of cable companies that have free access to RT is a major vehicle for bringing Putinist rhetoric to the public, who are also bombarded by news agencies controlled by the government, and by some opinion leaders who are aligned with Moscow.

The launch of the Russian offensive and the consequent dissemination of its narratives throughout Central America has involved a series of communications agreements signed by Ortega and the Kremlin, since Managua is Putin’s gateway in the region. As shown in Table 7, there is a considerable amount of collaboration between the Nicaraguan Communication and Citizenship Council and various Russian news media, as well as exchanges between journalists from the two nations, which is an example of the propaganda training that they intend to inject into Central American broadcast journalism.

As a disinformation strategy, Russia has also used its influence to legitimize controversial election processes organized by autocratic regimes. For example, in November 2021, the general elections that once again carried Daniel Ortega to victory in Nicaragua were plagued by antidemocratic practices that included imprisoning opponents, banning parties outside Sandinism, and shutting down voting centers (Mendoza & Kitroeff, 2021).

In explicit opposition to the widespread opinion in the West regarding the illegitimate nature of these controversial elections, high-ranking Russian officials such as Sergey Lavrov condemned the U.S. government’s “pressure” to reject the elections, accusing it of promoting a new ‘color revolution’, this time in Managua. Lavrov expectedly endorsed the election results, saying that “the elections were held in an organized manner, in full compliance with Nicaraguan legislation in this regard, observing all the sanitary and epidemiological standards established due to the pandemic, and with a high voter turnout” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021).

As Rouvinski (2023) states, the opinions of Lavrov and the Russian electoral observers have been intentionally biased, concentrating only on the technical aspects of the process without acknowledging the absence of democratic principles during the course of the election campaign, such as competition based on electoral fairness, plurality, and transparency. This bias contributes not only to legitimizing the mock elections held by Russia’s autocratic allies – Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua – but also to discrediting the opinions of the election observer missions sent by democratic countries.

Another important element in the Russian disinformation network in Nicaragua is the proliferators mentioned above, among which are representatives of media aligned with Sandinism who use their voice to publicly promote pro-Kremlin narratives. For example, during a broadcast of the Sin Fronteras program, William Grigsby, director of Nicaragua’s Radio La Primerísima – which operates almost exclusively

¹ See, for example, the coverage in Chinese media of China’s donation of masks to Panama, as well as statements made by its ambassador to Panama, highlighting the “very close and very affectionate” ties between the two countries: http://spanish.xinhuanet.com/2020-07/04/c_139187803.htm
Costa Rica is a similar case; its official communications highlighted China’s “abundant support” during the pandemic: <https://www.presidencia.go.cr/comunicados/2020/04/la-republica-popular-china-brinda-amplio-apoyo-a-costa-rica-para-enfrentar-emergencia-por-el-covid-19/>

with state advertising – described the invasion of Ukraine as “a military operation to save the world from a nuclear catastrophe.”

He also falsely claimed that “Russia has not destroyed a single town, not a single hamlet, not a single civilian building [...] The images they are showing to illustrate the alleged military offensive or invasion of Russia, according to them [...] are those of the destruction in Donetsk and Luhansk, which they [Ukrainian troops] caused.” In an extreme case of misinformation during the same broadcast, Grigsby further claimed that “they put tomato sauce on them, seriously, they take a photo as if they are injured and then you see the same people somewhere else perfectly healthy,” without acknowledging that according to UN data, the Russian offensive has already claimed almost 25 thousand civilian lives (Filippov, 2023).

Table 7. Russian–Nicaraguan media cooperation.

DATE	TYPE OF AGREEMENT	PLACE	ACTORS	CONTENT
Sept. 5, 2022	Memorandum of cooperation between news agency and radio broadcaster Sputnik and the Communication and Citizenship Council of Nicaragua	Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia	-Vasily Pushkov, head of Sputnik’s international cooperation bureau -Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo, media coordinator of the Communication and Citizenship Council	-Sharing content in Spanish, which will be available on more than 20 Nicaraguan channels, reaching an audience of 6.6 million
Dec. 4, 2022	Memorandum of understanding for cooperation between RT and the Communication and Citizenship Council	Managua	-RT communication team in Spanish -Communication and Citizenship Council of Nicaragua -Sandinista media and Citizen Power media	-Content sharing -Support for coverage of the most important events and news in Russia and Nicaragua -Regular sharing of experiences
Dec. 9, 2022	Meeting to share professional experiences and training between RT journalists in Spanish and Citizen Power media	Managua	-Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo -Representatives of RT in Spanish -Representatives of Citizen Power media	-Share experiences and strengthen cooperation in issues of Russia–Nicaragua communications
May 25, 2023	Training for Nicaraguan media developed by the Sputnik News Agency, “Visual materials in the work of correspondents”	Virtual event	-Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo -Representatives of Sandinista media and Citizen Power media -Representatives of Sputnik’s international cooperation bureau	-Training for more than 150 journalists from Citizen Power
July 15, 2023	Professional exchange day between RT communicators in Spanish and Sandinista journalists	Managua	-Daniel Edmundo Ortega Murillo -Representatives of RT in Spanish	-Strengthening collaboration, exchanges, and cooperation between Russia and Nicaragua in the communications field

Source: Author, based on various sources.

The communication program coordinated in Central America from Beijing is able to take a more diversified approach,

thanks to China’s diplomatic ties with several countries in the region, providing it with multiple points of access. This gives China a way to address situations specific to each of these countries as well as mounting a general offensive. In fact, it can be claimed that Xi Jinping’s government proceeds in its misinformation efforts within Central America on three flanks: 1) digital activism by Chinese diplomats, 2) agreements between information platforms, and 3) journalist exchanges and training (Cook, 2023).

These specific operations can be seen, for example, in the case of Panama. The country is affected by information content in Mandarin more than any other Central American country, since it is home to the largest Chinese community in the region (Datt, 2023). This content focuses mainly on the dissemination of pro-Beijing narratives, omitting any coverage of issues that could be sensitive for Xi’s government, spreading through media such as *El Expreso* the largest-circulation Chinese-language newspaper in Central America, *Diario Chino*, and *Radio Chinavision*, all of which are related

to the influence-wielding activity of the Chinese Communist Party (Datt, 2023).

This is one of the reasons behind the China Index 2022’s

12 CONCLUSION: COMBATting DISINFORMATION

classification of Panama as the Central American country on which Beijing has the greatest impact. The China Index is an initiative of the civil society organization, Doublethink Lab, whose computational, social, and behavioral science research sheds light on the malignant effects of global autocracies in various regions of the world. Although the study only examines Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua in its analysis of Chinese influence, it is an important starting point for understanding the scheme referred to above in which Beijing's communication strategy essentially consists of three prongs – digital activism, expansion of dependent media, and journalist exchanges.

With regard to digital activism, there is a notable presence of Chinese diplomats stationed in Panama on Twitter. For instance, the Chinese ambassador to Panama, Wei Qiang, is the most active Chinese official on social media in Latin America, with nearly 18 thousand Twitter followers. While Wei does not assume a confrontational “wolf warrior” posture, during the pandemic he promoted the narratives about the U.S. adopted by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, related to alleged lies by the U.S. government about Covid-19 (Datt, 2023).

Although Beijing's embassies and ambassadors in Central America have not expressed an openly adversarial attitude towards their critics, they evidently repeat – to a greater or lesser extent – information opposed to the West, especially towards the United States. They, however, are more aggressive when it comes to defending positions taken by their Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, In September 2022, the official Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in El Salvador – @EmbajadaChinaSV – referred to the report on Xinjiang released by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which accused the Xi government of serious human rights violations. In the tweet, the Embassy, in addition to claiming, “Nearly 100 countries, including Muslim countries, have raised their voices [...] to support China's legitimate positions regarding issues related to Xinjiang,” called the report “illegal and lacking in any credibility [...]” and “entirely orchestrated and fabricated by the United States and certain Western forces [...]”.

Diplomats' activism on social networks is not the only method that Beijing has used to defend and expand its narratives in Central and South America. A recent report by the intelligence company Nisos tells of the proliferation of a mini-network of fake Twitter accounts that spread information related to China's news service, which of course operates with state resources. The target audience of this network are Paraguay, Chile and Costa Rica, the latter being countries with diplomatic ties with the Chinese government. The accounts are called @Hoy_Paraguay, @Hoy_Chile and @HoyCosta. Their rather small number of followers give them a fairly restricted reach, but these followers include Chinese diplomat Chen Ping and Uruguayan ambassador to Beijing Juan Fernando Lugris. These accounts are coordinated and all operate the same way, sharing information on entertainment, culture, and tourism in China, as well as about technological developments in that country. They all post

images related to this content from official news media such as Xinhua, but without including a link that would lead back to the sources (Nisos, 2023).

The Chinese disinformation strategy is complemented by media cooperation, which takes two main forms: agreements between news organizations and journalist exchange programs. These collaborations allow Central American countries with diplomatic ties to China to receive content from Chinese news agencies. This access, in turn, facilitates the entry of Chinese television stations into the region and empowers them to establish training programs for local broadcast journalists.

Conclusion: Combatting Disinformation

A recent report by the International Republican Institute (IRI) (2023) has shown how the Chinese party-state deploys its disinformation strategy in the Indo-Pacific zone, China's near abroad. This report proposes an outline of general counter-disinformation recommendations that could be adapted to the various regions currently being suffocated by Chinese influence through diplomacy, digital channels, and the media.

This would be particularly useful for the object of our study, Central America, where China has managed to put together a series of economic, political, and diplomatic networks to position itself as a potentially hegemonic nation, successfully interfering in a natural zone of U.S. influence, with a high probability of spreading to the rest of Latin America.

It is evident that China's ties with Central America differ considerably from those it has with the Indo-Pacific zone, due both to sociodemographic characteristics and the geographical locations of the two regions. Nevertheless, in both cases, we find ourselves facing the fact that this is fertile ground for Chinese disinformation, which is why the guidelines proposed in the ISI report should be taken up and adapted appropriately to the Central American experience.

Based on the framework laid out by the International Republican Institute (2023), we posit that the fight against disinformation from Beijing rests on four pillars: 1) constructing and strengthening democratic institutions in the region, 2) increasing knowledge about China and its global influence strategy, 3) assembling networks that disseminate this knowledge, and 4) supporting and reinforcing independent information media. There is no doubt that these observations are also relevant to the case of Russia.

These four pillars require that democracies supported by high levels of income become constructively involved with their political kindred countries with more fragile economies (IRI, 2023) through various cooperation mechanisms, among which investment and financing plans would be particularly effective. While there is no Central American country able to function as a democratic partner and model, the way Japan does for the Indo-Pacific region, the close geographical proximity of the United States represents an unbeatable opportunity to implement a strategy to counter authoritarian

forces in the region – internal and external – that could counteract the influx of Chinese and Russian disinformation.

This effort should be aimed at reinvigorating the partially existing liberal institutions present in most Central American countries; that include competitive elections as well as responsive and transparent institutions. To this end, instruments such as election observer missions and the creation of independent bodies analogous to the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala – facilitated by the UN – could be employed. However, at the same time, the pro-democratic enterprise must go beyond the political apparatus itself and also support civil society organizations, independent media, and think tanks.

As the IRI report suggests, the Group of Seven (G7) members should jointly invest in academic ambits and think tanks in the Global South, with the aim of creating China specialists who are dedicated to advising governments and able to inform public opinion from an impartial, critical perspective on the geostrategic objectives of the Asian giant. This should be a priority, as it is these channels of human capital that are often co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party and its agencies (IRI, 2023), and their research ends up favoring Beijing's global narratives. For an effort like this, the participation of institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy – NED – or the Stiftungs of German origin is necessary (IRI, 2023).

Combating dependence on China in the economic sphere should be of high priority to democratic forces involved in Central America, because this trend has influenced many actors to promote the spread of pro-Chinese narratives (IRI, 2023) which undermine democratic ideals and practices in the region. There is indeed an immense public relations network that operates through contracts and payments of various kinds, sometimes bordering on illegality, that allow and enable embassies, foundations, and companies aligned with the PCC to spread propaganda in foreign media of various kinds. (Cook, 2023). As we have seen, similar practices are not carried out only in the private sector. Governments that benefit from investments and loans granted from Beijing – Honduras and El Salvador, for example – inevitably tend to spread the Chinese disinformation strategy even farther.

Again, the G7 is obliged to counteract the influence of China in the region, and has several instruments that it can lean on in order to achieve this. Initiatives such as the Global Infrastructure and Investment Partnership, discussed at last year's meeting of the G7, must not only make good on their promises of health, energy, technology, and communications infrastructure in countries of the Global South, they must also consistently incorporate these under criteria that at the same time promote economic development and deepen democracy in Central America. For the same reason, it is regrettable that the investment agenda – supported by the Global Gateway project – at the most recent summit of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), was not finalized, having fallen far short of the attractive alternatives offered by the Belt and Road Initiative.

In the case of Russia and its advanced communications offensive, measures similar to these should be implemented as well. The decisions of Western governments to counteract disinformation about the war in Ukraine have been laudable. These have included funding independent journalists in Ukraine and strengthening the BBC's global services in order to generate a counterweight to Kremlin propaganda (OECD, 2022). However, analogous strategies are equally necessary in Central America. Such strategies would help shrink the reach of official Sino-Russian channels in the region, while making more broadcast facilities available to channels committed to democracy, such as CNN. Support and assistance to independent Central American journalism, increasingly under siege in regimes such as Nicaragua and El Salvador, is another vein to be explored by global democracies in the face of the wave of misinformation.

We have also seen that the Kremlin's strategy includes a plethora of cybertools, such as hacking and spoofing websites. The involvement of international organizations is necessary in order to counter these attacks. Again, the G7 could, through its Rapid Response Mechanism, take on this responsibility by cooperating with democratic governments in Central America on cybersecurity matters. The Rapid Response Mechanism is a coordinated technical assistance system for actions of this type, and counteracting disinformation falls within its remit (OECD, 2022).

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