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A Counter-Hegemonic Challenge in the Western Hemisphere? The Relations between China and CELAC (2008-2018)

¿Un desafío contra-hegemónico en el hemisferio occidental? Las relaciones entre China y CELAC (2008-2018)

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| **Abstract:** This article examines China's engagement from 2008 to 2018 with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). We ask whether China has utilized CELAC as a counter-hegemonic challenge to US dominance in the Western Hemisphere. To analyze this question, we delved deeper into the theoretical debates around rationalist and neo-Gramscian notions of hegemony and applied four types of China-promoted multilateral institutions to CELAC. We argue that China's engagement with CELAC functioned as an "institutional offshore balancing" strategy, advancing a largely pragmatic and non-confrontational to avoid a Kindleberger Trap.
Keywords: Position; China; CELAC; Hegemony; Western Hemisphere.

| **Resumen:** Este artículo examina los vínculos de China con la Comunidad de Estados de Latinoamérica y el Caribe (CELAC) entre 2008 y 2018. Nos planteamos si China utilizó

CELAC como desafío contrahegemónico contra la dominancia estadounidense en el Hemisferio Occidental. Para analizar esta cuestión, discutimos los debates teóricos alrededor de nociones racionalistas y neo-gramscianas de hegemonía y aplicamos cuatro conceptos de instituciones multilaterales apoyadas por China a CELAC. Argumentamos que el vínculo de China con CELAC funcionó como una estrategia de "equilibrio institucional a distancia", avanzando una posición contrahegemónica pero pragmática y no-confrontadora para evitar la "trampa Kindleberger".

Palabras clave: China; CELAC; Hegemonía; Hemisferio Occidental.

1. INTRODUCTION

"If China's engagement intensifies, so will US anxieties" (Pu and Myers 2022, 50).

Over the past two hundred years, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have maintained changing relations with the United States, including economic, trade and political cooperation, but also conflicts, US interventions, migration problems or drug trafficking. Despite these varying relations, the western hemisphere has developed a sophisticated system of institutionalized cooperation. Pan-Americanism, epitomized best in the Organization of American States (OAS), has been a decisive force, even though periodically contested by nationalisms, US unilateralism, or Pan-Latin American initiatives. Nevertheless, the inter-American system still seems to manifest US hegemony in the subcontinent as rationalists see it or the hegemony of Pan American ideals (neoliberal principles ("Washington Consensus"), democratic values and hemispheric security aligned with global US interests), as neo-Gramscian scholars would define it. However, LAC has always been eager to diversify external relations to diminish the strong influence of the US in the region and "post-hegemonic" institutions such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) challenged the Pan-American hegemony.

In recent years, the fabric of democratic societies appeared to crumble and western institutions or traditional alliances (transatlantic, transpacific) have been challenged by divisions and inequalities, populism and nationalistic tendencies, intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic and tensions over the Russian invasion in Ukraine. This has affected the supposed showdown between the US and China, potentially leading to a hegemonic transition. China further tries to establish new realities with its aggressive behavior in its neighborhood, development engagement in Africa or a number of initiatives on development, security and civilization as well as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build new global infrastructures (see Jenkins 2022). Bo Peng (2018, 48) argues that after the phases of rejection and hostility (1948-1971), acceptance and integration (1971-2008) and since 2008 a phase of leadership and contribution, in the past years, the PRC has turned into a proactive rule-shaper in global governance. In this scenario, developments in other world regions deserve attention: Did the Chi-

na-supported Latin American institution CELAC challenge the Pan-American hegemony in the western hemisphere?

In order to analyze this question, we will delve deeper into the theoretical debates and systematically review and analyze existing research. Due to language limitations, we focus on English- and Spanish-speaking literature. As a first step, we consider literature concerning hegemonic transition and neo-Gramscian theories with regard to the role of China. Here, we also outline four types of China-promoted multilateral institutions and apply them to CELAC. Secondly, we categorize literature and lastly, we examine how the theories can contribute to a better understanding of the Sino-LAC relationship. We focus on the time period between the first Chinese White Paper on LAC from 2008 and the CELAC-China meeting in 2018 when the Belt and Road Initiative also began including LAC but CELAC also began losing influence (and Brazil suspended its membership in 2020 under President Jair Bolsonaro). As a last step, we analyze the role of the China-CELAC relationship. We identify a pragmatic as well as symbolic challenge to US hegemony in the region as expressed in the inter-American system. Here we concentrate on the relationship between China and CELAC as the potential institution carrying a counter-hegemonic challenge to the US-led inter-American framework.

There have always been shifting tendencies in LAC to create alternative institutions to the US-led OAS. These considerations led to additional, parallel and rivalling organizations, alliances and pacts across the southern hemisphere. Diego Leiva Van de Maele (2017) makes out three phases of increased Sino-LAC rapprochement: 1) from 2001-2008: mostly driven by economic and trade interests; 2) 2008-2013 (aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis until Xi's coming into power): with a focus on soft power; and 3) 2013-2016 with an emphasis on political cooperation (CELAC). According to Shoujun (2016a, 1), China approached LAC when US dominance weakened due to other foreign policy priorities and the financial crisis of 2008/9, but also as a result of the lack of engagement in the hemisphere of the Bush jr. administration and President Obama's first term. In addition, China's need for natural resources was a perfect fit – at least for most South American economies. He further underlines "China in LAC and the United States in Asia Pacific are not isolated cases; thus, they shall not be dissociated. China's twirl to LAC is viewed as a reaction to Washington's pivot to Asia and vice versa" (Shoujun 2016a, 3). The role of the PRC for conflicting tendencies concerning inter-American cooperation in the western hemisphere seems significant. China's approach towards LAC seemed to follow its five principles of peaceful coexistence from the mid-1950s: mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, no aggression, no interference in domestic affairs, mutual benefit, equality and peaceful coexistence. These principles appear also attractive to LAC countries. In 1993, China and Brazil established the first bilateral strategic partnership, followed by Venezuela (2001), Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica and Ecuador (Bonilla Soria and Herrera-Vinelli 2020, 182-183).

In 2008, the PRC's White Paper on LAC described the relationship in more general terms: it emphasized among other aspects non-interference in domestic affairs, also

a traditional key element for LAC, the One China policy, cooperation and consultation in international affairs but also military cooperation. The Paper also highlighted the PRC's status as the "biggest developing country" and the importance of Sino-LAC relations for South-South cooperation in international affairs and finance institutions. It further underlined Beijing's relations to political parties and furthermore supported regional organizations in LAC (China's Policy Paper 2008).

China's 2016 White Paper on LAC outlined three major goals: 1) Promotion of a "multipolar world" in which key institutions and countries are not dominated by the United States; 2) recovery and unification of China (Tibet and Taiwan), 3) avoidance of an international coalition mobilized in opposition to China's "rise". Neither the White Paper from 2016 nor the initial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mentioned an inclusion of Latin America in the initiative. However, this changed in 2017 when China signed BRI-related Memoranda of Understanding with several LAC states. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2018), a turning point occurred in January 2018 with the China-CELAC Ministerial Forum in Santiago. While some authors (Gallagher 2016, 186; Small 2020) see more opportunities in Chinese engagement for LAC and optimistically advocate cooperation between LAC, the PRC and the US, others regard the inclusion of LAC into BRI more critical (Myers 2018). In terms of economic cooperation, China pursued a strategy of economic statecraft to integrate LAC states into BRI, progress bilateral and multilateral relations, institution building and free trade agreements. Lastly, China put pressure on several states to recognize the PRC as the legitimate China; states that comply in turn benefit, as states that still recognized Taiwan faced restricted access to the Chinese market (Liang 2019, 438-440, 446). However, Beijing acknowledged its own limitations by carefully circumventing US interests in the region. China strategically "targeted" few states in the LAC region that were dependent on China and vice versa to harmonize political and economic interests (Liang 2019, 445-446). Bahi argues that China's strategic investments in infrastructure, mining, and energy sectors, combined with Chinese diplomatic efforts, are providing significant leverage over several Latin American countries, thereby shifting the region's balance of power away from the US to China (Bahi 2021, 11-13).

Research on inter-American and Sino-LAC relations often revolves around questions on regional hegemony. Theories touching on this and hegemonic shifts in rationalist and neo-Gramscian views will help us to understand possible scenarios better.

2. THEORIES: HEGEMONY, POST-HEGEMONIC CHALLENGES AND CHINESE-LED MULTILATERALISM

2.1. Hegemony and hegemonic transition

Hegemony is a key notion in International Relations (IR). The British Empire and post-1945 US dominance are examples of international hegemons, while the Hundred

Years' War shows the absence of one (Worth 2009, 20). Hegemonic Stability Theory posits that a dominant hegemon brings stability and order. This traditional IR perspective focuses on states and great powers as hegemons.

For decades, IR scholars have debated the international order, particularly issues like polarity and the future of the liberal order. Some scholars argue the US-led world order will shift due to internal fragility and external threats, especially the rise of China challenging the US (Mearsheimer 2010; Pillsbury 2015). Others have pointed to Chinese soft power that will have a transformative effect on LAC (Ellis 2020a), dressed as "politics of harmony" (Hagström and Nordin 2020). Acknowledging China as a challenger to the US, Fukuyama and Yan doubt the PRC can project an ideological shift that would replace the liberal order. (Fukuyama 2012, 32; Yan 2019, 53, 139). Acharya suggests a "multiplex" world where the liberal order is one of many (Acharya 2017, 277), while Buzan (2018, 3-5) views China's rise as an internal challenge to the global system due to its partial integration and accumulation of power. Abbas highlights contrasting understandings of multilateralism from China and Russia, which could lead to demise of the US-led international liberal order (Abbas 2022, 53-54). Others point to internal threats as polarization, the decline of US leadership, populism, or even the inherited mechanisms of the US liberal world order (Acharya 2017; Magcamit 2017; Mearsheimer 2019).

Mearsheimer foresees a return to bi- or multi-polarity as two bounded orders, with a powerful China creating international institutions according to its own interests (Mearsheimer 2019, 46-47). In contrast, Ikenberry argues that the liberal order will persist, though transformed, with its leadership dependent on the liberal democracies. Despite the US's decline, the liberal order will survive because states have more to lose from its collapse, and there is no viable ideological alternative from China (Ikenberry 2018, 10-11, 17, 22-23, 43-44).

As China's ability to provide global public goods is doubtful, Nye (2017a) warns of a "Kindleberger Trap" where China, like the US before the Second World War, becomes a free-rider in the system. Nye (2017a; 2017b) further argues that China seeks to increase its influence within the current liberal order rather than disrupt it, potentially avoiding conflict by working within and relying on established institutions (Abbas 2022, 59, 62-64).

Allison's "Thucydides Trap" argues that the US-China rivalry mirrors the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), where rising powers provoke fear in established powers, often leading to war (Allison 2017). This popular view, however, faces criticism for oversimplifying the rivalry and ignoring deep economic interdependencies (Abbas 2022, 51-52 64-65; de Graaff *et al.*, 2020, 192-195). Abbas contends that although conflict is possible in East Asia due to US dissatisfaction, China will act responsibly on the global stage (Abbas 2022, 48-49, 61-62).

Coco argues that China might become a disruptive power, acting in its own interest and dissatisfied with the international order (Coco 2020, 10-12). This aligns with power transition theory, which suggests that dissatisfied powers are likely to initiate

conflict or reshape the order (Kim and Gates 2015; Kugler and Organski 2011). While war may not be certain, "power transition can be incremental as well as revolutionary" (Choi 2018, 65). Bezerra and Lin highlight China's efforts to challenge US hegemony through multilateralism and new institutions, presenting a soft balancing strategy (Bezerra and Lin 2023, 336, 341-343). While some power transition theorists see China as a revisionist power (Choi 2018, 71; He and Chan 2018, 327), others doubt this. China should be labelled as a status quo power since at the global level, China is satisfied (Yilmaz and Xiangyu 2019, 340), although, on the regional level China might be challenging Japan (Lee 2015, 268). Santa-Cruz (2020, 29) argues that regional hegemons rely on legitimacy and limit their neighbors' relations. In this context, the US may be losing its regional influence, especially as China becomes more involved in the Americas.

2.2. Neo-Gramscian hegemony and counter hegemony in Latin America

Antonio Gramsci introduced the concepts of hegemony, Caesarism (absence of a dominant hegemony), trasformismo, passive revolution and historic block. Gramsci defined hegemony in a neo-Marxist interpretation different from rationalists: Hegemony means the ability of a dominant class to attract consensual support from the subordinate classes by social and cultural practices. A counter hegemony of the subaltern classes can challenge this elite hegemony. In a simplified manner, Robert W. Cox applied Gramsci's notions of hegemony and counter hegemony to the field of international relations and world order (Cox 1983). While Marx had defined hegemony as a way of the bourgeoisie to maintain a capitalist system (by consent, also acceptable to the working class and the *petite bourgeoisie*), Gramsci used the concept to extend his definition of the state as a means to execute the dominant classes' interests. This reading of hegemony as gathering consent to the ruling classes' project can be related to the concept of soft power in international relations, meaning the appeal of a hegemonic system. Vadell (2022, 190-191) identifies "hybrid Chinese geopolitics" and argues that there is "an intrinsic ontological and reciprocal relation between the growing strengthening of Chinese economic and military capacities with the key three elements of Nye's soft power". Thus, Vadell holds that a Gramscian notion of hegemony, in a way combining hard and soft power, is better suited to explain China's role in LAC than Nye's more independent soft power. Santa-Cruz (2020, 32) argues that the US established a "regional order" in the Western hemisphere through "consent and coercion" (without explicitly referring to Gramsci).

Neo-Gramscian concepts may be useful for the analysis of Sino-LAC relations: For Cox (1981, 135), the historical context for hegemony is a combination of ideas, material abilities and institutions. Here, the ideas are soft power; cooperation in trade, investment and security are material conditions; and the CELAC-China forum the institution.

The notion post-hegemonic regionalism is of importance in this regard. Riggirozzi and Tussie (2012, 12) define the notion as follows:

> By post-hegemonic we mean regional structures characterized by hybrid practices as a result of a partial displacement of dominant factors of US-led neoliberal governance in the acknowledgment of other political forms of organization and economic management of regional (common) goods.

We argue that the PRC has used this management of regional common goods as an attempt to avoid the Kindleberger trap, which assumes that the likeliness of a severe (military) dispute between the United States and the People's Republic depends on China's success or failure to provide global common goods. However, China's role as a provider of common goods can be understood from Neo-Gramscianism as a tool to push dominance and subordination among states in the LAC region thus creating a counter hegemony to the US. China's ability to create effectively a counter hegemonic position for itself by providing not only global common goods but coupling it with "consent and coercion" for its economic and political ambitions in the LAC region is an important indicator connecting a rationalist approach and a neo-Gramscian analysis.

Nicholls (2020) suggests a differentiated view on hegemony, deriving from a more rationalist understanding of hegemony, distinguishing between ensconced and elevated hegemony. In an elevated hegemony, the hegemon is above the peripheral actors/states and interaction among the latter is limited. In an ensconced hegemony, however, the peripheral actors interact more with each other, which results in a "flatter" hegemony, i.e. the hegemon can more successfully be challenged due to increased coordination of the others (Nicholls 2020, 603). We can certainly see new forms of institutionalized cooperation in South America and LAC, which supports Nicholls's view of an ensconced hegemony in the Americas. While Nicholls applies the "ensconced hegemony" to see how South American institutions challenge US hegemony in the western hemisphere, he does not pay attention to the PRC's support for "post-hegemonic" institutions rivalling the inter-American system.

It can be argued that the PRC aims to manage regional common goods to sidestep the Kindleberger Trap. As the Kindleberger Trap suggests that China's ability to provide global common goods influences the likelihood of military conflict with the U.S. From a Neo-Gramscian perspective, China's role as a provider of global common goods facilitates a counter-hegemonic stance, blending consent and coercion to further its political ambitions in the LAC region is an important indicator connecting a rationalist approach and a neo-Gramscian analysis.

The new forms of institutionalized cooperation South America and LAC suggests a shift toward Nicholls's ensconced hegemony in the Americas. However, Nicholls overlooks China's role in supporting "post-hegemonic" institutions and its ambitions to rival U.S. hegemony through LAC institutions. Unlike most authors focusing on the

economic sphere and similar to Pu and Myers (2022, 41), we apply our IR approach and neo-Gramscianism rather within a strategic dimension.

2.3. Four types of Chinese-led multilateral institutions

To do this, we will utilize Stephen's categorization of Chinese-promoted institutions that combines policy-oriented and theory-driven studies to outline a surfacing research agenda on new Chinese multilateral institutions. Stephen (2020) argues that the sole creation of a new institution along an established one doesn't reveal the motives behind it – to find this out, we need to inquire the type of organization in comparison to the existing one. To address the complexity of Chinese-initiated institutions, Stephen categorizes Chinese-promoted alternative international organizations into four types: complementary, substitutive, divergent, or competitive concerning existing institutions. Moreover, Stephen analyzes Chinese-promoted institutions as a sort of "institutional balancing" (Stephen 2020, 8, 14-15, 4).

While most scholars regard Chinese-promoted multilateral institutions as a significant change in Beijing's foreign policy approach with at least potential consequences on the liberal international order, the research and policy communities disagree on these implications. Are these new institutions expression of China's support of multilateralism and the rule-based order or do they indicate the PRC's discontent with the existing institutions (Stephen 2020, 11)? Since researchers cannot agree on these questions and the scenario appears more complicated as these new institutions can play various roles, Stephen (2020, 16) suggests his typology. First of all, China promotes *complementary institutions* that mostly emulate existing ones within the same social purpose (technical standardisation by a European institution complemented by an Asian-Pacific one, f.e.). Secondly, *substitutive institutions* that compete with existing institutions, but still within the social purpose. As a third type, Stephen describes *divergent institutions* that do not directly compete with existing ones but pursue diverging goals and principles (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA)). As a fourth type, *competitive institutions* challenge both the governance roles and the social purpose of existing ones. Here, Stephen mentions that several scholars saw ALBA and UNASUR as some kind of post-capitalist, post-liberal form of regional integration (Stephen 2020, 16/17). Another example Stephen mentions is UNCTAD as a "Third World's" reaction to GATT and the Bretton Woods institutions. These "counter-hegemonic institutions" defy the social purpose and the political authority of existing ones (Stephen 2020, 17). Relationships between old and new institutions can change over time, as well as the nature of the new ones (from divergent to competitive or vice versa, changing social purpose etc.). For realists, it seems clear that China's rise will lead to its new multilateralism becoming "more rivalrous to existing institutions and pursue increasingly divergent social purposes (Stephen 2020, 18)."

We argue that Chinese support for the post-hegemonic CELAC constituted a form of "offshore institutional balancing" to avoid the Kindleberger Trap and support a counterhegemony in the region.

3. RESEARCH ON SINO-LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS

Recent research has focused on the period since 2000, particularly during the "boom" between 2003 and 2013, when South American economies exported raw materials on a large scale to growing China. Between 2000 and 2016, trade between Latin America and the PRC increased 26 times and foreign direct investments and development loans from China in LAC grew considerably (Hogenboom 2018, 179). Since 2013, this boom has ended and the Sino-Latin American relationship has shifted into various directions. Debates on a more strategic level centered around the question whether the PRC aspires to become the regional hegemon, replacing the United States. Equally interesting has been the discussion on a supposedly new resource dependency of the region from China, not too different from colonial relations with Europe or imperial relations with North America (see Bernal-Meza 2020, 4, 7; Wise and Chonn Ching 2018; Müller and Colloredo-Mansfeld 2018; Castañeda 2017; Emmerich and Reis 2016, 94). Wise and Chonn Ching (2018, 567) reject critical accounts of Chinese interference beyond business interests and also repudiate the critique concerning a new dependency. Similarly, Wise (2020) discards accusations of Chinese imperialism in the Americas.

Li Xing (2016) regards China as an upcoming hegemon and supposedly not as a challenge to the world system as such, as the PRC has benefited so much from it. He concludes that a Chinese-dominated world financial order is not a threat and rather "revitalizes" the system (Li Xing 2016, 13, 14) – but only in terms of capitalist logic, not politically. After debt crises and decades of US dominance in LAC, China's growing presence in the region offers alternatives for new strategic choices and more spaces for maneuver, which also finds expression in increasing military cooperation between the PRC and LAC (Li Xing 2016, 19, 20, see Ellis 2020b). Some criticize that the rhetoric of Sino-Latin American rapprochement is marked by "South-South" terminology, but in fact, it constitutes a "classic" asymmetrical North-South relationship in trade terms. Pu and Myers (2022, 44, 52) identify among Chinese elites the fear of the PRC's "strategic overstretching" also in the western hemisphere, and do not exclude US-Chinese cooperation in LAC. Nevertheless, the "strategic overstretching" is seen mostly in the economic realm, less so in the security area.

In all publications, the problematique of hegemony is present, either directly or indirectly (see Gachúz Maya and Urdinez 2022). Even though LAC governments seemed to embrace Chinese involvement, there have been fears that China would become a new imperialist power in the region (see Hogenboom 2018, 179, 188-189; Ellis 2017, 196-197). The "debt trap" narrative that is quite popular in other regions seems to be less convincing in LAC (Pu and Myers 2022, 51-52). Even though the

PRC's Third World solidarity narrative historically considered Africa and Asia more important than LAC due to geographical distance and less close cooperation, there was a shift from bilateral to additional multilateral relations, not least symbolized by the new China-CELAC dialogue mechanism (Shoujun 2016b, 16-17). Despite the strengthened ties between China and CELAC, the PRC still dealt mostly bilaterally with LAC countries (Bonilla Soria and Herrera-Vinelli 2020, 190). It seems that LAC was becoming important for China's rise in terms of resources and strategic ambitions as an ally to create a new world order not dominated by the US (Bernal-Meza and Ling 2020).

Research on Latin American integration (see Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014), a hegemonic shift from the US to China in LAC (Bernal-Meza 2020, 2), and specifically on post-hegemonic regionalism (see Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012; Legler 2013; Legler *et al*. 2020) focuses on the nature of CELAC (Simón and Álvarez 2014; Sánchez 2016, Kennedy and Beaton 2016, Emmerich and Reich 2016), UNASUR (Briceño-Ruiz and Ribeiro Hoffmann 2015) and ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). However, these studies mostly concentrate on questions about the lack of supranational ambitions (Pita Simón 2014) and the (projected) effectiveness and efficiency of these new institutions and why they do not follow the European supranational model (see Legler 2013, 343). Most studies also tackle the consequences for the region's relations with the US, the European Union and China (see Gallagher 2016; Mosquera and Morales Ruvalcaba 2018; Vadell 2018; Quevedo-Flores 2019; Crivelli and Lo Brutto 2020).

Legler *et al*. (2018, 246) are surprised that only few studies have analyzed Chinese attempts to build alternative regional governance structures in Latin America. According to these authors, various analysts suggest that the deepening relations with China carry with it positive effects for regional governance in LAC, pointing at three elements: 1) China challenges the US hegemony in the region; 2) China supports symbolically, rhetorically and ideologically the Latin American post-hegemonic regional governance; and 3) increasing economic and commercial connections between China and LAC support the national and regional autonomy in LAC (Legler *et al*. 2018, 249). Various authors argue that China's impact on regional governance in Latin America should be analyzed from the triangular perspective (LAC-USA-PRC). These scholars fall into two groups 1) those who see China's engagement as a threat to US interests in LAC and 2) those who see Chinese efforts as "benign". Here, the China-CELAC forum, comprising practically all states of the hemisphere without the US and Canada, potentially constitutes a challenge to inter-American institutions (Legler *et al*. 2018, 250). This forum constitutes a form of "hybrid interregionalism" as it opened a dialogue space for the entire region but also allowed China to deal with individual states bilaterally, which was deemed necessary in view of the diverging agendas of LAC countries. Nevertheless, China explicitly rejects that it is pursuing hegemony in LAC and there seems to be no proof for a hegemonic dispute between the PRC and the US in LAC (Rodríguez and Rüland

2022, 482-483, 252). For Beijing, relations with Washington is the top priority in global affairs, while LAC represents only a secondary priority. Seemingly, Chinese relations with LAC seem predominantly economic and commercial. Since 1993, the PRC has developed links with both, US-dominated inter-American multilateralism and Latin American regionalism (Legler *et al.* 2018, 253). Even though there is no direct hegemonic challenge in LAC, Legler *et al.* (2018, 258) conclude, China's increasing presence in the region and the involvement of LAC in the BRI can be seen as part of US-Chinese trade tensions and thus the emergence of a new bipolar world order that will affect regional autonomy as well. According to Ellis (2009, 286) the Western Hemisphere is no longer a "US sanctuary" in a potential conflict between the PRC and the United States. Legler *et al.* (2020, 28, 44) conclude that the PRC mostly operates pragmatically and promotes liberal and post-hegemonic institutions at the same time, while it does not automatically strengthen autonomous regional governance.

In addition to the rationalist arguments of increased trade, loans for infrastructure, and generally less hegemonic dominance by the US, there is a need for empathy among Latin Americans for China's influence in the subcontinent (see Ellis 2020a). Ariel C. Armony and Yu Xiao (2016, 38) emphasize that China needed to invent a "narrative of legitimacy" without the appearance of a "neocolonist project". The PRC may succeed with this soft power endeavor by building an alternative world order with new institutions around a new, non-western narrative based on the notion of "civilization" with which the Communist party highlights the concepts of diversity, equality and inclusion of different cultures. In its continuing identity crisis between being a "developing country" and a "superpower", this notion could provide the PRC a justification for its role as a "global power" (Armony and Yu Xiao 2016, 39-40, 42).

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINA AND CELAC

4.1. The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

Thirty-three countries established CELAC on 3 December 2011. The Community combined and replaced two previously existing regional fora: the Latin American and Caribbean Summit (CALC) and the Rio Group. CALC strived for socio-economic reforms and was highly critical of the neoliberal mantra epitomized in the so-called Washington Consensus. The Rio Group advocated a Latin America speaking with one voice. In 1986, it had merged the Contadora Group and its supporting group that both promoted Latin American solutions to regional conflicts (particularly in Central America) as reaction to the paralyzed inter-American institutions in the 1980s. It is debated if Mexico or Brazil (Segovia 2013, 100) or Venezuela initiated CELAC. Others conclude that CELAC constituted the result of five centuries of popular struggles in LAC (Tirado Sánchez 2016, 58-59). Segovia (2013, 97) regarded the institution as

a rival for the OAS. CELAC's principles comprised the respect for international law, the peaceful solution of conflicts, the prohibition of the use and threat of violence, the respect for self-determination, sovereignty, territorial identity, the non-intervention principle, and the promotion and protection of "all" human rights and democracy (Pita Simón 2014, 55). Ecuador initially proposed the establishment of a Latin American human rights system to rival the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS that enraged some LAC governments – this corresponds at least symbolically to the China-driven South-South Human Rights Forum, rivalling western human rights institutions (Stephen 2020, 2). CELAC's commitment to democracy appeared also more "succinct" than the OAS's Inter-American Democratic Charter from 2001 (Segovia 2013, 102). CELAC's Special Declaration on the Defense of Democracy and Constitutional Order from 3 December 2011 very generally stipulated the defense and maintenance of the democratic system. In case of a rupture of the constitutional order, the Inter-American Charter requires an immediate gathering of the OAS Permanent Council. In the case of CELAC, the three countries of the Troika (the pro-tempore presidency and its predecessor and successor) can convene an extraordinary meeting of foreign ministers, while it is not clear what will happen if the rupture takes place in one of the Troika countries. Even though CELAC did not represent a formal international organization as it lacked a permanent secretariat and organs independent of member states (Segovia 2013, 101-103), it formulated goals and arranged regular meetings (Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 56).

Together with UNASUR and ALBA, CELAC has been considered as an expression of the "third wave" (or even "fourth wave") of regionalism in Latin America. Encouraged by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America under Raúl Prébisch's leadership, "first wave" regional and sub-regional institutions in the 1960s and 1970s prioritized state developmentalism with import substitution strategies. The "second wave" of "new" or "open" regionalism embracing neoliberal logics took off in the nineties. "Third wave" institutions of the 2000s and 2010s were more skeptical of free-trade and neoliberal programs and concentrate on the state and sovereignty, unlike the partly supranational European integration model. These statist and trade-skeptical third wave institutions contrasted with neoliberal projects such as the Pacific Alliance (Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014, 298-299). There has been a debate on whether statist third wave regionalism really constituted a new phenomenon or stood in the tradition of state-led regional agreements with protectionist tendencies (Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014; Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 57; Crivelli and Lo Brutto 2020, 19). Kennedy and Beaton (2016, 53) accordingly hold that CELAC duplicated services offered by already existing institutions. Tirado Sánchez (2016, 60) concludes that CELAC represented in a way the continuation of "tiersmondiste" and anti-hegemonist traditions in the region as it embraced sovereignty and supporting a democratization (i.e. de-westernization) of international institutions (as China does). Likewise, Crivelli and Lo Brutto (2020, 19) argue that CELAC was part of a longer integration tradition and only appeared more visible because of the crisis of US "global hegemony" in the 21st century.

While second-wave organizations focused on trade, CELAC seemed to be different, as political concerns seemingly trumped economic and trade interests (see Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014, 301). UNASUR wanted to promote a South American identity; CELAC aimed at constructing a Latin American identity (see also Legler 2013, 336). ALBA, on the other hand, rather strived for the promotion of an identity of resistance (against neoliberalism) (Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014, 302). Also, Kennedy and Beaton (2016) argue that from a constructivist angle, CELAC's main aim and eventually only promising feature was the construction of a common LAC identity. Unlike most trade-driven regional associations, UNASUR and CELAC also comprised cooperation in defense and security matters (Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014, 302; Briceño-Ruiz and Ribeiro Hoffmann 2015, 49).

What made CELAC so interesting is that it included post-hegemonic institutions (UNASUR, ALBA), the neoliberal Pacific Alliance and the "open-regionalist" Andean Community (Briceño-Ruiz and Ribeiro Hoffmann 2015, 52). In accordance, Kennedy and Beaton (2016, 53) identify two blocs in CELAC. Tirado Sánchez (2016, 58) speaks of three integration axes in LAC: an "open regionalism axis" (Pacific Alliance), a revisionist one (Mercosur, UNASUR) and an anti-systemic axis (ALBA). In between these three, she situates CELAC. She further explains that the Pacific Alliance countries probably deemed their CELAC membership as useful as the institution promised to protect national sovereignty and possessed the potential to advance Latin American block interests – which strengthened their own negotiating capacity bilaterally and multilaterally (Tirado Sánchez 2016, 69). Furthermore, the Pacific Alliance members likely deemed it important to appear as if LAC agreed on speaking with one voice in order to downplay actual divisions. Similarly, Mexico and Brazil initially endorsed CELAC rhetorically, but in fact seemed to have other priorities. Their rather lukewarm support seemed symptomatic for this symbolic politics: While Brazil rather embraced the South American UNASUR (Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 65), Mexico used its CELAC membership to keep the ties to LAC and symbolically demonstrate its Northern neighbors that it also could play with anti-hegemonic cards. Vadell (2018, 18) holds that CELAC functioned as an "interlocutor" between "post-neoliberal", that is UNASUR and ALBA, and neoliberal projects (Pacific Alliance) and governments.

Hardly committing joint statements had an identity-creating function and furthermore contested "hegemonic structures, notably by calling into question the Washington Consensus, foreign intervention, and the existing makeup of international institutions" (Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 68). This is exactly, where the PRC came into play.

4.2. China and CELAC

In 2014, CELAC and China established a joint forum at a summit in Brasilia. The working structure of the CELAC-PRC forum revolved around ministerial meetings every three years. In one year, China held the temporary presidency, in another a LAC country. Moreover, the first ministerial reunion established eight sub forums (Vadell 2018, 20). The summit created "1+3+6", meaning one program, three engines (trade,

investments and cooperation), and six fundamental axes of collaboration (agriculture, science and technology, infrastructure, investments, knowledge and culture). At the first Ministerial Forum between China and CELAC in Beijing in January 2015, the "Declaration of Beijing" strengthened the constant rapprochement of China with CELAC through the establishment of an international dialogue space (Bonilla Soria and Herrera-Vinelli 2020, 189-190). In 2015, temporary CELAC president Rafael Correa outlined four shared goals: 1) strengthening multilateralism; 2) planning a "profound transformation and democratization of the United Nations"; 3) giving impulses to attenuate the climate crisis; 4) securing a sustainable peace. In the same year, President Xi announced 250 million Dollar investments in LAC in the next ten years (Vadell 2018, 20-21; Gallagher 2016, 171).

While research on China's alternative institution-building is growing, and abundant on Sino-Latin American relations, studies on the institutional level of China-CELAC relations are comparatively rare (Bonilla Soria and Herrera-Vinelli 2020; Mosquera and Morales Ruvalcaba 2018, 127-128). Vadell (2018, 10, 30) regarded the China-CELAC relationship as a potential starting point for the development of horizontal and diagonal cooperation forms and saw the Forum as a challenge to the entire vision of South-South relations. For Crivelli and Lo Brutto (2020, 17) the China-CELAC Forum was "transcending the entire idea of post-hegemonic regionalism". Kennedy and Beaton (2016, 73) deemed China's presence in LAC relevant for CELAC but considered the ideological element more important than the trade dimension. The so-called "Beijing Consensus" has been popular in LAC only because it offers a counter-concept to the detested Washington Consensus (Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 74). For Mosquera and Morales Ruvalcaba (2018, 128), the Forum China-CELAC was the most relevant institutional platform for Beijing to channel its relationships with LAC. While the initially enthusiastic relations between the European Union and CELAC had cooled off since 2015, CELAC-PRC relations witnessed more attention (Soriano 2019, 6; Vadell 2018, 17-18). The People's Republic learned the lessons from mistakes made in Washington and thus its vision resembled CELAC's mission (Kennedy and Beaton 2016, 74). This cohesion of viewpoints was a necessary fit for a politically quite diverse entity like CELAC. Ellis (2020a, 179) emphasizes that "…CELAC's lack of a permanent secretariat has made it ideal for the PRC to present its concepts for gifts to and projects with the region, in a fashion in which the region cannot effectively present a countering 'collective position' regarding what it wants from China."

CELAC had elements of all four types of Stephen's Chinese-promoted multilateral institutions, if compared with the inter-American system. Like other Latin or South American institutions, it is complementary representing a forum of dialogue for all countries, except the US and Canada. At the same time, it shows divergent features but no direct competition in terms of membership as long as the OAS still exists and LAC members don't leave it. However, CELAC is competing within the social framework that rhetorically cherishes democracy, human rights, the rule of law etc., but differs by the implicit exclusion of Anglophone North America, based on cultur-

al-political grounds. The latter may hint at that the aforementioned principles should be read differently in LAC compared to the US and Canada.

In general, CELAC appeared to be meandering between substitutive and competitive, as the social purposes of CELAC and the OAS seemed similar (substitutive). However, the interpretation of these may be bended similar to the PRC's alternative readings of notions such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, peace, multilateralism or good governance (see Oud and Drinhausen 2021). As Vadell (2022, 192) emphasizes: "China-CELAC is an example of 'forum diplomacy' with Chinese characteristics […] as a driver of the diffusion of practices, norms and ideas regarding new forms of institutional arrangement."

Therefore, CELAC and other "post-hegemonic" institutions in LAC appeared substitutive and divergent (within the same value-based framework) but were close to or at least seemed to have the potential to be competitive institutions for the LAC countries, offering them a different alternative to the inter-American system. In accordance, Stephen (2020, 17) emphasizes: "By challenging both the social purpose and the political authority of established institutions, these "counter-hegemonic" institutions conform more clearly to the competitive type, against which China's new multilateral institutions can be compared."

With regard to the geopolitical implications of China's involvement, the first China-CELAC forum in January 2015 in Beijing laid out general cooperation with consequences for world politics. While the PRC in the 1990s had focused mostly on economic aspects, the 2010s witnessed increasing geostrategic actions (South-South cooperation), "…with an emphasis on reshaping the unfair old world order". While Latin American governments seemed eager to diversify their foreign policy options away from US dominance, the PRC's influence in LAC promised to "…nurture a better relationship in the Asia-Pacific to offset the US geopolitical containments" (Shoujun 2016b, 24-26).

In terms of power distribution, Chinese-promoted institutions led to a competition with existing organizations for members, mandates, resources and legitimacy. In the end, China seemed to benefit most from this scenario as it increased its bargain power because LAC countries could threaten to leave existing (inter-American) institutions and thus put more pressure on (Beijing-friendly) reforms of these. In addition, the rise of new institutions within a field such as development offered more options for "service takers" and favoured them (for instance: creating more choices for loan-taking countries after NDB and AIIB were established) (Stephen 2020, 18).

Chinese-led multilateral institutions could purvey Beijing's narratives that normatively challenged existing global governance structures. Examples were the quite flexible and intangible notions of a "harmonious world", "a new type of Great Power relations", All under Heaven (Tianxia), the China Dream, the "community of shared destiny" or the Belt-and-Road Initiative. Despite the vagueness of these narratives, China has been installing such ideas as "foundational principles for the multilateral organizations it initiates" (Stephen 2020, 19-20). If we then regard Chinese-initiated

international institutions as vehicles to promote the PRC's interests and narratives to prepare the world for a hegemonic shift or at least a way to strengthen an anti-US counterhegemony, we can assess China's support for CELAC in Latin America and the Caribbean as a brick in this endeavour.

Bonilla Soria and Herrera-Vinelli (2020, 192) conclude that basically all the initiatives for the Chinese-LAC relationship were initiated in Beijing. The response from LAC was not reactive as conventional foreign policy analysis suggests: "Ante la agenda china, la CELAC básicamente no ha podido responder." This lack of reaction can be explained by 1) the non-existing representation of LAC, 2) the absence of joint decision-making in CELAC (impossible due to the fact that some LAC countries still recognize Taiwan), 3) the structural heterogeneity of the member states and 4) unstable subregional geostrategic scenarios.

4.3. A hegemonic challenge?

The PRC's dialogue with opposition groups may guarantee support for Chinese investments, firms on site or BRI-related projects also in the case of a government change—which traditionally has led to significant alterations in national political landscapes in LAC. From a neo-Gramscian view, it could also signify the support of counter hegemonies to the more US-oriented elites to maintain a "pragmatic" dialogue with other groups that are in opposition.

Another element of supporting a counter hegemony in LAC was to promote regional institutions or blocs that exclude North America. Rodríguez and Rüland (2022, 476, 478) describe PRC-LAC relations as "a cooperative strategy to counter US hegemony in its own 'backyard'". The PRC uses sino-LAC interregionalism "as a formally multilateral, yet chiefly nationalist quest to establish a cooperative counter-hegemonic strategy against the US beyond its traditional Asian perimeter of interests".

Applying Cox's approach, Crivelli and Lo Brutto (2020) argue that a "post-hegemonic" order depends on international social forces that establish another hegemony, a new international regulatory authority. Of all the big economic powers, only China has been sufficiently dynamic to aspire to global hegemony. However, if China is not capable to respond to its global plans i.e., provide economic benefits/global public goods, a Kindleberger Trap appears imminent. Bahi (2021, 1-3) also sees a forthcoming Kindleberger Trap, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic underscored a geopolitical shift where the US, as the dominant power, was unable to lead, and China, as the rising power, was unwilling to assume responsibility. This situation puts the liberal international order at risk.

Rodríguez and Rüland (2022, 479) argue that the PRC tried to take hold in LAC by actually delivering public goods to increase China's soft power, enabling accessibility to the region's raw materials, and by having an impact on values, world visions and politics in alignment with Beijing's view. These authors therefore argue

that the PRC indeed seemed to contribute public goods through the BRI to LAC and thus tried to avoid the Kindleberger Trap in the region: "Interregionalism under the auspices of CELAC offers China a suitable institutional platform to build up soft power through the provision of public goods" (Rodríguez and Rüland 2022, 485).

According to Cox's approach, we can regard most LAC countries as caught between a capitalist Pan-American hegemony cherished by the educated, pro-US/western and mostly neoliberal-minded elites and several competing hegemonies advocated by a variety of other groups ("civil society", leftist groups, indigenous communities, right-wing nationalists, protestant groups etc.). In this difficult scenario with no clear dominant class, Caesarism could flourish in the regional tradition of populist strongmen. The PRC could support counter hegemonies within several Latin American societies as it took part in the existing institutional structures but also challenged world order, and openly or covertly interfered in domestic affairs of third countries. In this regard, China promoted forms of counter hegemony within LAC but also sought for support of a global counter hegemony to challenge the existing world order as such.

It is true that China-CELAC cooperation could challenge the US hegemony in the region, while Beijing did not regard LAC as the most important world area to fight out a global struggle for supremacy with the United States. We may ask, however, if we witnessed a similar strategy at work in the western hemisphere like China's approach to international organizations and global governance: While China appeared to have become a "system maintainer" (see Kim 1999) with an active and often supportive role for global governance structures, it was also at times exploiting these and building parallel alternative structures (see Stephen 2020). Existing research, identifying China's institutional balancing in East Asia (Stephen 2020, 4), could be extended to a neo-realist reading of the PRC's support for CELAC: Thus, the Chinese support for post-hegemonic structures in LAC constituted a form of "institutional offshore balancing"—combining the neorealist assumption of offshore balancing (a great power backs a regional power in a remote world area to keep rivals in check) and Stephen's notion of China's institutional balancing. This is in line with Chen (2021, 6) who argues that the PRC has not yet challenged the US openly in LAC, but engages in "soft balancing" also by supporting alternative institution building in the region. Institutional offshore balancing could also avoid "strategic overstretching" in LAC (Pu and Myers 2022). Rhetorically, the PRC emphasized a "harmonious world" and referred to Confucian notions of a reinvention of a benevolent Sinitic world order (Tianxia). Despite these discourses, it seemed that China in fact has been a status quo power, attempting to avoid the "Kindleberger Trap" as it has benefitted substantially from the system in place and appeared not interested or ready to take on the responsibilities of a leading global power. This strategic dilemma and not least cultural and foreign-policy identity conundrum relates to what Fei-Ling (2015, 61) neatly summarized as Beijing's struggle between "Tianxia and Westphalia".

5. CONCLUSIONS

Did the China-supported Latin American institution CELAC challenge the Pan-American hegemony in the western hemisphere? For China, CELAC offered an interesting cooperation mechanism beyond the traditionally preferred bilateral approach. Since CELAC could be used as an institutional vehicle as complementary and substitutive organization, it also seemed to offer some potential of a divergent and even competitive institution, rivalling the US-led inter-American system. This potential to defy or even replace the US-led OAS appeared useful to promote a hemispheric counter hegemony at least until the CELAC lost influence in the region.

The PRC seemed to back up alternative structures that a) rival the US-led inter-American system, b) support intergovernmentalism and sovereignty, seemingly in line with Beijing's vision of a multipolar world, and c) institutionalize forms of counter-hegemony in LAC societies.

CELAC was composed of liberal democracies of the Pacific Alliance and countries that endorsed a post-hegemonic approach to regional integration. Thus, it combined a more pragmatic, US-friendly bloc and free market-critical and potentially or openly anti-American governments. In the end, CELAC therefore possessed complementary features to the inter-American system as well as diverging and even competitive tendencies. The diverging and competitive elements directed against US-led Pan American esconded hegemony in the hemisphere made CELAC such an interesting partner for the PRC to the extent that China even occasionally replaced its notorious bilateral approach with a multilateral one.

Rationalists regarded CELAC as not very promising due to institutional flaws, the intergovernmental inflexibility and inherent competing political outlooks. Nevertheless, the less fixed institutional framework and lack of rules-based political visions was seen as an advantage for China: Beijing could turn LAC against US hegemony and the OAS. In sum, Chinese-CELAC relations show that LAC has been eager to emancipate itself from the US as dominant power in the region and to construct its own post-hegemonic regionalism. Rather than positioning itself as new hegemon in a more rationalist interpretation, Beijing seemed to support various groups and forces as well as institutions such as CELAC. This was pragmatic and strategic at the same time. For China, its engagement with CELAC constituted to some extent a form of institutional offshore balancing. Supporting CELAC promised Beijing to avoid the Kindleberger Trap as it was not expected to deliver public goods directly.

Through economic, financial, geostrategic, political and military cooperation, the PRC promoted counter-hegemonies in LAC in a neo-Gramscian sense. However, where proper trade and investments were on offer, the PRC was not dogmatic and also played by the rules of the "Washington Consensus". So far, Chinese interests in LAC seemed not strategic for the entire subcontinent or the hemisphere, but rather varied.

Some fear that China's increasing influence could negatively affect LAC's regional "liberal order" (Pu and Myers 2022, 50). Notwithstanding the asymmetry of PRC-

LAC relations, maybe China is willing to take some constructive lessons from LAC, too, concerning democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights.

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