

# China–Latin America Alignment and Democratic Backsliding

## Gaining Traction for a Chinese-Led World Order

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### Abstract

In pursuit of its global ambitions, China has increasingly deepened relations particularly with countries in the Global South, leveraging political, economic, diplomatic, and military instruments of power. While these initiatives are well documented, the downstream domestic political effects of these relations remain unclear. In this article, we attempt to fill this gap both quantitatively through a study of the impact of UN General Assembly vote alignment with China on the static and dynamic states of democracy and qualitatively through case studies. In both studies, we consider the Latin American region for several reasons including its coveted natural resources, geographic location/proximity to the United States, and its relative neglect in studies of strategic competition. While we find no relationship between vote alignment with China and democracy in Latin American countries, research illustrates that more widespread engagement with China may provide Latin American countries or leaders with “top cover” to subvert democracy domestically.

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In the past several decades, China has translated its impressive economic growth into a broad spectrum of power, encompassing political, diplomatic, military, and other facets. As China’s power has grown, it has also sharpened its international ambitions, which pose challenges to the United States and run counter to the prevailing liberal international order. To support these ambitions, China has expanded its engagement and interactions with nations worldwide, notably in the Global South, where it claims to share a common narrative.

Notably, Chinese influence is increasingly felt across many nations in Latin America, a region historically regarded as firmly within the United States’ exclusive sphere of influence. Initially, China’s presence in the region primarily revolved around economic matters. However, intelligence sources have disclosed China’s

intentions to expand its military presence in the area, including plans for military and intelligence installations in Cuba and Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup>

The surge in Chinese engagement in Latin America coincides with a regional shift away from democracy toward authoritarianism. Leaders of Latin American dictatorships, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, have steadily consolidated power in the hands of individuals. Additionally, several countries in the region, even those with established or moderate levels of democracy, have faced setbacks in recent years. According to recent Latinobarómetro public opinion polls, there is a persistent decline in support for democracy in Latin America, leading *The Economist* to assert that the region has witnessed the most significant recession of democracy globally over the past two decades.<sup>2</sup>

While there is ample documentation of China's increased involvement and interactions with Latin American nations, the domestic political ramifications of these actions, which in turn could impact international relations and bolster China, remain inadequately understood. This article aims to address this knowledge gap within the context of China–Latin American relations and the erosion of democracy in Latin America. This is particularly pertinent due to the region's strategic significance, stemming from its valuable natural resources and its geographical proximity to the United States.

This article provides a general overview of China's overarching international ambitions, as outlined in its National Security Strategy. Subsequently, the article reviews two bodies of literature: one focusing on the causes of democratic backsliding and the other examining the domestic political consequences of international interactions. These sources inform the article's hypothesis that interactions and alliances with China, a powerful authoritarian global actor, may serve as a catalyst for domestic democratic regression. The article elaborates on this hypothesis and explores potential mechanisms in the third section.

Furthermore, the article introduces various preliminary research methods employed to assess the hypothesis and associated expectations. Specifically, the article's approach incorporates initial quantitative assessments, including extensive and updated data with meticulous time horizon coding, as well as two distinct case studies focusing on El Salvador and Brazil. The article's findings do not uncover

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Spetalnick and Dave Sherwood, "China to Build Spy Base in Cuba, WSJ Says; US and Cuba Cast Doubt on Report," *Reuters*, 9 June 2023, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/>; and Joel Gehrke, "China Seeks 'Naval Outpost' in Nicaragua to Threaten US, Taiwan Warns," *Washington Examiner*, 4 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Latin America Is under Authoritarian Threat," *The Economist*, 15 February 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

strong quantitative evidence suggesting that alignment with China, as gauged by voting records, negatively affects domestic democracy in Latin American countries. Instead, the article observes no discernible quantitative relationship.

Nonetheless, the article's qualitative case studies suggest that the relationship may possess more substance than our quantitative analysis implies. In particular, the case studies provide preliminary evidence that deepening relations with China, primarily in economic and diplomatic spheres, may empower certain Latin American countries governed by leaders with authoritarian tendencies to undermine democratic institutions. In the case of El Salvador, China's "noninterference" policy bolsters its increasingly authoritarian leader while eroding Western deterrence against democratic backsliding. Similarly, in Brazil, China's policy of foreign direct investment, operating under the guise of "noninterference," fuels authoritarian inclinations, including threats to popular sovereignty and the incitement of violent protests in response to election outcomes. In return, China gains closer political and military alignment in a region of immense geopolitical significance.

While further research is necessary to validate and refine this connection, this article's initial study underscores the importance of examining it more closely. Intriguingly, the article's quantitative assessments reveal that alignment with the United States, as measured by voting records, negatively impacts democracy. Numerous potential explanations exist for this relationship, including the possibility of a spurious correlation. Subsequent research should delve deeper into this matter while acknowledging potential policy implications that may arise.

### **China's Global Ambitions and the Role of Developing Regions**

China has long harbored ambitions to restore its power to the levels of its illustrious historical empires. Over centuries, from the Han Dynasty in 200 BCE to the Qing Dynasty in the nineteenth century, China received tribute from neighboring states, amassing vast wealth as the epicenter of East Asian trade. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, China's international standing suffered a severe blow during what it refers to as the "Century of Humiliation." This period was marked by debilitating conflicts, including the Opium Wars, the Chinese Civil War, and the Japanese occupation during World War II. After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) won the civil war and rose to power, it played Russia and the United States against each other for several decades as China went through several stages of development, including the Four Modernizations, the Great Leap Forward, and a series of international strategies carried on by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. The pivotal moment came in 1989 with the Tiananmen Square Massacre, which resulted in international condemnation and economic sanctions,

underscoring the vulnerability of the CCP's grip on power within a US-led liberal world order.

Over time, China recognized the necessity of pursuing industrialized super-power status, regional hegemony, and global influence in an anarchical world. The CCP has meticulously implemented this strategy under successive leaders, from Deng Xiaoping (1978–1991) to Hu Jintao (2002–2012) and finally to Xi Jinping (2012–present).<sup>3</sup>

In response to challenges such as peasant illiteracy, poverty, fledgling industries, and global competitiveness in the late twentieth century, Deng directed China to “Hide Its Capabilities and Bide Its Time”<sup>4</sup> while modernizing agriculture, industry, science, technology, and education.<sup>5</sup> Progress in these areas laid the foundation for China's rise to prominence, a trajectory inherited by Hu in 2002. Departing from Deng's cautious approach, Hu, inspired by the 2008 financial crisis and the perceived weakening of US hegemony,<sup>6</sup> championed a policy of “Actively Accomplishing Something,” which included the pursuit of regional influence.<sup>7</sup> Hu's efforts provided the groundwork for Xi's subsequent policy of “Moving Closer toward the World's Center Stage,” aimed at propelling China's global reach and influence.

Central to the CCP's pursuit of global influence is its relationship with the Global South. This relationship serves multiple purposes: sourcing raw materials from resource-rich regions and exporting processed materials to expand China's economy; shielding China and friendly autocratic states from Western sanctions; leveraging China's economic power to exert political pressure globally; and establishing an anti-US coalition to form a Chinese-led international system.

President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plays a pivotal role in these objectives. The BRI establishes economic ties with the Global South, secures overseas markets, and ensures access to vital natural resources for manufacturing.<sup>8</sup> The initiative grants China various advantages, including a labor force from China, substantial gains from debt repayment interest, exclusive resource rights, and political leverage. Additionally, it counters US influence by inundating developing

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<sup>3</sup> Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Bridging the Gap (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> “Four Modernizations,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11 August 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Rush Doshi, “Hu's to Blame for China's Foreign Assertiveness?,” *Brookings*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

<sup>7</sup> Doshi, *The Long Game*.

<sup>8</sup> Christoph Nedopil, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” *Green Finance & Development Center*, 2023, <https://greenfdc.org/>.

markets with competitively priced Chinese exports, including technology and communication infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> However, China's global presence extends beyond economic realms.

China actively engages in South-to-South partnerships to diplomatically insulate itself from external coercion and augment its relative power by countering the United States' network of allies.<sup>10</sup> While the US employs its financial systems to isolate dissenting states from global trade, China embraces diverse multilateral efforts that endorse the principle of noninterference, such as BRICS, an association comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.<sup>11</sup> For instance, throughout the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West has condemned Moscow and imposed sanctions on Russia, while the BRICS network maintained engagement with Russia, aligning with the principle of noninterference and nurturing friendly relations.<sup>12</sup>

In response to the Great Recession, China has actively established its own financial systems to counter those of the United States. These initiatives bolster China's economic autonomy, safeguard against external sanctions, and advance political goals, including the principle of noninterference.<sup>13</sup> The CCP offers generous investments to countries and leaders willing to overlook their involvement in human rights violations and pledge to maintain positive bilateral relations with China.<sup>14</sup> While these investments may seem beneficial to recipient countries and leaders, in practice, they often serve the CCP by undermining democracy, ensnaring recipient countries in debt (referred to as *debt-trap diplomacy*), and subjecting them to exploitative relationships with China.

While we possess a reasonable understanding of how China engages with the Global South to bolster its global influence, we have limited knowledge regarding

<sup>9</sup> Jason Douglas, "China's Drop in Exports Signals Deepening Slowdown in Global Trade," *Wall Street Journal*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>; and John P. Barker, Soo-Mi Rhee, and Dana Or, "A Mere Two Years After Adding Huawei to Entity List, BIS Announces First Enforcement Case," *Arnold & Porter*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.arnoldporter.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Pedro Allende, "What Do the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank's Recent Forays Outside of Asia Mean?," *CSIS*, 28 October 2022, <https://www.csis.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> "The History and Limits of America's Favourite New Economic Weapon," *The Economist*, 8 February, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "BRICS Faces a Reckoning," *Foreign Policy* (blog), June 22, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Darya Korsunskaya and Alexander Marrow, "Russia Raises 2023 GDP Growth Forecast, Longer-Term Outlook Worsens," *Reuters*, 14 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas des Garets Geddes, "Countering Western Sanctions: Building a CES Network by Ye Yan," *Sinification*, 25 May 2023, <https://www.sinification.com/>.

<sup>14</sup> Sophie Wintgens, "China's Growing Footprint in Latin America," *fDi Intelligence*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/>.

whether and how these efforts, along with related interactions and alignments, influence domestic politics, particularly a commitment to democracy. Nonetheless, insights can be drawn from two strands of political science literature: one examining the causes of democratic backsliding and the other exploring the effects of international alignments. These insights offer valuable perspectives on what we might anticipate in this complex interplay.

## **Democratic Backsliding and International Alliances: What We Know**

### ***Democratic Backsliding and Its Causes***

Democratic backsliding has become a growing concern globally, capturing the attention of scholars. Much of the research on this subject has been devoted to conceptually dissecting it and examining the various forms it can assume, both in theory and practice. While terminologies may vary, many scholars align with Nancy Bermeo's comprehensive definition of *democratic backsliding* as the "state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy."<sup>15</sup> They have identified instances of this phenomenon in countries spanning from Venezuela to Turkey to Hungary.

However, despite the widespread recognition and concern surrounding democratic backsliding, scholars have made comparatively limited headway in explaining its underlying causes. David Waldner and Ellen Lust's annual review takes strides in this direction by outlining several theories believed to underlie backsliding. These encompass agency-based theories, theories related to political culture, arguments concerning political institutions, theories rooted in political economy, and theories pertaining to social structure and political coalitions.<sup>16</sup> Waldner and Lust also acknowledge the significance of international factors, positing that international interventions, nation-building through occupation, interactions with the liberal-democratic West (with a focus on leverage and linkage), regional diffusion, participation in international organizations, electoral monitoring, and foreign aid all possess the potential to influence democracy, particularly in the direction of deepening democratic values.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 5–19.

<sup>16</sup> David Waldner and Ellen Lust, "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (18 January 2018): 93–113, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>17</sup> Waldner and Lust, "Unwelcome Change."



While they do not extensively explore whether and how the converse of these factors might impact democratic backsliding, it remains plausible that they, among others, could indeed have such effects. For instance, rather than contemplating the influence of the liberal, democratic West's utilization of leverage and linkage to promote democracy in competitive-authoritarian regimes, it is conceivable to investigate a study centered on illiberal, undemocratic China's use of leverage and linkage to propagate authoritarianism, thereby contributing to democratic backsliding.<sup>18</sup> This article aims to delve into precisely this aspect. However, before delving into the specifics, we must consider potential insights from the international relations literature to further enrich our understanding and expectations regarding this topic.

### *International Alliances and Their Effects*

While the field of international relations traditionally focuses on interactions between states, it has recently embraced the recognition of significant cross-level interactions. It acknowledges that domestic political phenomena possess the potential to shape international interactions. Notably, foreign policy analysis (FPA) exemplifies a “domestic turn” within international relations theory.<sup>19</sup> This literature, among its various contributions, acknowledges that domestic factors, including the type of political regime and the political ideology of the chief executive, play a role in shaping international alliance formation and the nature of those alliances.<sup>20</sup>

However, there is a limited body of literature that explores the influence of international factors on domestic politics. Some exceptions to this include Camber Warren's observation that “states that form international alliances with democratic partners are more likely to develop domestic democratic institutions.”<sup>21</sup> Warren found evidence that authoritarian countries allying with democratic nations began to adopt democratic characteristics,<sup>22</sup> and Ronald Rogowski argued that trade has

<sup>18</sup> Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Linkage versus Leverage. Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change,” *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 4 (July 2006): 379–400.

<sup>19</sup> Juliet Kaarbo, “A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory,” *International Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2015): 189–216.

<sup>20</sup> Mushahid Hussain, “Alliances in International Politics,” *Strategic Studies* 2, no. 3 (1979): 51–63; and Aaron Rapport and Brian Rathbun, “Parties to an Alliance: Ideology and the Domestic Politics of International Institutionalization,” *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 2 (1 March 2021): 279–93, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>21</sup> T Camber Warren, “Modeling the Coevolution of International and Domestic Institutions: Alliances, Democracy, and the Complex Path to Peace,” *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 3 (May 2016): 424–41.

<sup>22</sup> Warren, “Modeling the Coevolution of International and Domestic Institutions.”

an impact on domestic politics.<sup>23</sup> While these sources do not primarily investigate how foreign politics directly shape domestic politics, they suggest a relationship that this article seeks to expand upon—specifically, the notion that international interactions can influence domestic political outcomes. In the following sections, we delve into this possibility and present a theory outlining the potential ways in which international interactions and alliances can permeate and impact domestic political developments.

### **A Theory of International Interactions, Strategic Competition, and Democratic Backsliding**

As previously discussed in the literature, the democratic West employs leverage and linkage in its dealings with authoritarian states to encourage democratic transitions and consolidation. This article proposes that there are compelling reasons to consider that engagements with the authoritarian CCP could create opportunities for democratic backsliding.

Before China's ascension to global prominence, the Global South heavily relied on the international community championed by the United States for foreign assistance in a broad sense, often accompanied by political conditions. However, in the contemporary multipolar world, there are multiple viable sources of assistance, meaning that countries in the Global South now have alternative options. Consequently, if nations in the Global South find themselves dissatisfied with the aid or the conditions attached to it from the United States and its partners, they possess alternatives with different terms. This environment of “choice” may nurture conditions conducive to democratic backsliding.

Ultimately, as China continues to engage with countries in the Global South to advance its global ambitions, and as the United States endeavors to maintain its status as the preferred partner, there is a growing likelihood of assistance being offered without conditions. This may provide authoritarian leaders in the Global South with the cover needed to undermine democracy and solidify authoritarian rule.

### **Why Latin America?**

It is imperative for research to consider Latin America as an emerging arena of strategic competition between the United States and China for several compelling reasons. Firstly, Latin America holds invaluable natural resources and burgeoning markets crucial for powering the growth of global superpowers. In the early to

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<sup>23</sup> Ronald Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions: How Trade Affects Domestic Political Alignments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).



mid-2000s, Latin America played a pivotal role in fueling rapid economic growth across emerging markets, notably China, thanks to its abundant commodities such as oil, minerals, metals, and agricultural products. Today, Latin America once again takes center stage in global economic importance due to its critical role in the transition to renewable energy. Countries like Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia, forming “the lithium triangle,” possess over 60 percent of the world’s lithium reserves, a mineral essential for battery production. Brazil alone holds 17 percent of global nickel reserves, while Peru and Chile are the world’s primary copper suppliers.<sup>24</sup> Latin America’s significant state ownership of mineral deposits empowers regional governments to make political calculations and assess geopolitical alignments when granting access to these vital resources. For instance, in January 2023, Bolivia granted exclusive lithium mining rights to the world’s largest reserves to Chinese battery corporation CATL, choosing them over US and Russian competitors.<sup>25</sup> This decision follows years of democratic backsliding in Bolivia and a 2019 election that the Organization of American States deemed “impossible to validate” due to “intentional manipulation and serious irregularities.”<sup>26</sup> The leverage that Latin American countries possess in determining which nations can access these critical minerals will play a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of great-power competition.

Secondly, Latin America’s proximity to the United States has prompted Chinese interest in establishing a physical military presence in the region, potentially contributing to kinetic conflicts. Relations between the United States and Latin American nations, particularly authoritarian states like Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, are increasingly strained. Recent intelligence has revealed plans for collaboration between China and Cuba, an enduring authoritarian stronghold, to create a joint military training facility, complementing the four joint eavesdropping stations already operating on the island. Additionally, secret negotiations have transpired between China and Nicaragua’s authoritarian President Daniel Ortega to construct a deep-water port off Nicaragua’s coast capable of serving as a naval outpost.<sup>27</sup> The existence and plans for additional Chinese military bases in the

<sup>24</sup> Christina Lu and Rocio Fabbro, “China’s Latin American Gold Rush Is All About Clean Energy,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), 27 February 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Ramos, “Bolivia Taps Chinese Battery Giant CATL to Help Develop Lithium Riches,” *Reuters*, 20 January 2023, sec. Technology, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Final Report of the Audit of the Elections in Bolivia: Intentional Manipulation and Serious Irregularities Made It Impossible to Validate the Results,” Organization of American States, 4 December 2019, <https://www.oas.org/>.

<sup>27</sup> Warren P. Strobel et al., “Beijing Plans a New Training Facility in Cuba, Raising Prospect of Chinese Troops on America’s Doorstep,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 June 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/>; and Nora Gámez Torres and Jacqueline Charles, “Pentagon’s Leaked Docs Show Russia and China’s Reach in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Miami Herald*, 28 April 2023, <https://www.miamiherald.com/>.

Western Hemisphere not only directly challenge the United States' traditional sphere of influence but also threaten its national security, stemming from the vast oceanic buffers that historically separated it from rivals. The presence of a near-peer adversary's military within a hundred miles of the US coastline would represent the most significant escalation in strategic competition since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Furthermore, it is crucial to consider that Chinese control over Latin America's critical logistical chokepoints, vital for both commercial and wartime operations, could disrupt the United States' home front and military capabilities. Latin America serves as a pivotal global economic and military corridor that connects North and South America, as well as the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans through the Panama Canal and the Strait of Magellan. The Panama Canal, in particular, is indispensable to global trade, with more than USD 270-billion worth of goods traversing it annually, serving more than 140 maritime routes to over 80 countries.<sup>28</sup> Although the United States ranks as the canal's largest user, Panama governs the waterway and leases ports to the highest bidder. The rapid expansion of Chinese economic investments in the region creates conditions for a political regime less aligned with U.S. interests, thereby granting greater authority to China. A Hong Kong-based subsidiary already manages two major ports on the Canal's Pacific and Atlantic outlets.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the proliferation of Chinese-controlled ports in the region could be leveraged to severely impede US freedom of navigation and hinder military efforts to reposition naval forces to the Pacific during wartime.

Thirdly, the prevailing trend of democratic backsliding in Latin America could disrupt a delicate geopolitical balance and further bolster China's assertiveness. As previously alluded to in the discussion of BRICs, Latin American countries that are experiencing democratic erosion have increasingly embraced principles of noninterference and nonalignment in support of China's global aspirations to expand diplomatic partnerships and economic ties. In essence, as the region deepens its relations with China, neutrality increasingly aligns with complicity in international law violations and attacks on democratic institutions. The implications of these shifts, coupled with growing regional diplomatic realignments from Taiwan to China, could have far-reaching consequences, including the potential for a Chinese invasion of democratic Taiwan.<sup>30</sup> In essence, there appears to be a

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<sup>28</sup> "Panama Canal Traffic Along Principal Trade Routes" (Canal de Panamá, 2022), <https://pancanal.com/>.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel F. Runde and Amy Doring, "Key Decision Point Coming for the Panama Canal," *CSIS*, 21 May 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Associated Press, "Honduras Establishes Ties with China after Break from Taiwan," *NPR*, 27 March 2023, sec. Latin America, <https://www.npr.org/>.

circular, reinforcing, and self-sustaining relationship between democratic backsliding in Latin America and both Chinese empowerment and anti-liberal tendencies on the international stage. In the subsequent sections, we elucidate our unique contribution to our understanding of this relationship, specifically delving into how Latin American alignment with China translates into domestic democratic changes.

## Research Design

To gain a deeper understanding of how international alliances or “closeness” influence democracy and democratic backsliding within Latin America, this article employs a combination of quantitative assessments and case studies. In its quantitative analysis, this article draws upon data from two key sources: the United Nations (UN) General Assembly Voting Data and the Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) dataset.<sup>31</sup> This approach marks a departure from conventional methods, as the article focuses on noneconomic-oriented international alignments, which are increasingly significant in today’s geopolitical landscape.

To calculate annual proportions of UN General Assembly “voting alignment” between each Latin American country and both China and the United States, we utilized David Robinson and Nicholas Grogue-Compagnoni’s ‘unvotes’ R package. Additionally, we supplemented this data with original coding for the most recent three years (2020–2022).<sup>32</sup> Our analysis covers the time span from 1971 to 2022, aligning with the UN General Assembly’s recognition of the People’s Republic of China and the renunciation of Taiwan in October 1971. To determine voting alignment, we considered UN votes to be “aligned” when: (1) both countries voted “yes,” (2) both countries voted “no,” or (3) both countries “abstained.” This annual proportion of UN General Assembly “voting alignment” serves as our primary explanatory variable, which we also find inherently insightful for our purposes.

From the VDEM dataset, we utilized two established democracy indices: Michael Coppedge and companions’ electoral democracy index and liberal democracy index. These indices enable us to construct measures of democratic backsliding by capturing changes in index scores over 1-year and 5-year periods. Specifically, the article calculates electoral democratic backsliding by subtracting the electoral democracy index values at time  $t-1$  and time  $t-5$  from the electoral democracy index value at time  $t$ . Similarly, we compute liberal-democratic backsliding by subtracting the liberal democracy index values at time  $t-1$  and time  $t-5$  from the liberal democracy

<sup>31</sup> David Robinson and Nicholas Grogue-Compagnoni, “Unvotes: United Nations General Assembly Voting Data,” 9 March 2021, <https://cran.r-project.org/>; and Michael Coppedge et al., “V-Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v11,” *Varieties of Democracy Project*, 2021, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson and Grogue-Compagnoni, “Unvotes.”

index value at time  $t$ . These measures constitute our primary dependent variable. In addition to informing our primary dependent variable, VDEM provides researchers with several control variables that have the potential to confound our primary relationship of interest. These control variables encompass measures of electoral and liberal democracy (in static form), education, population size, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, petroleum production per capita, urbanization, and life expectancy. Given their potential to introduce bias into this article's primary relationship, the authors include these controls in their assessments of the impact of international alliances or "closeness" on democracy and democratic backsliding in Latin America.

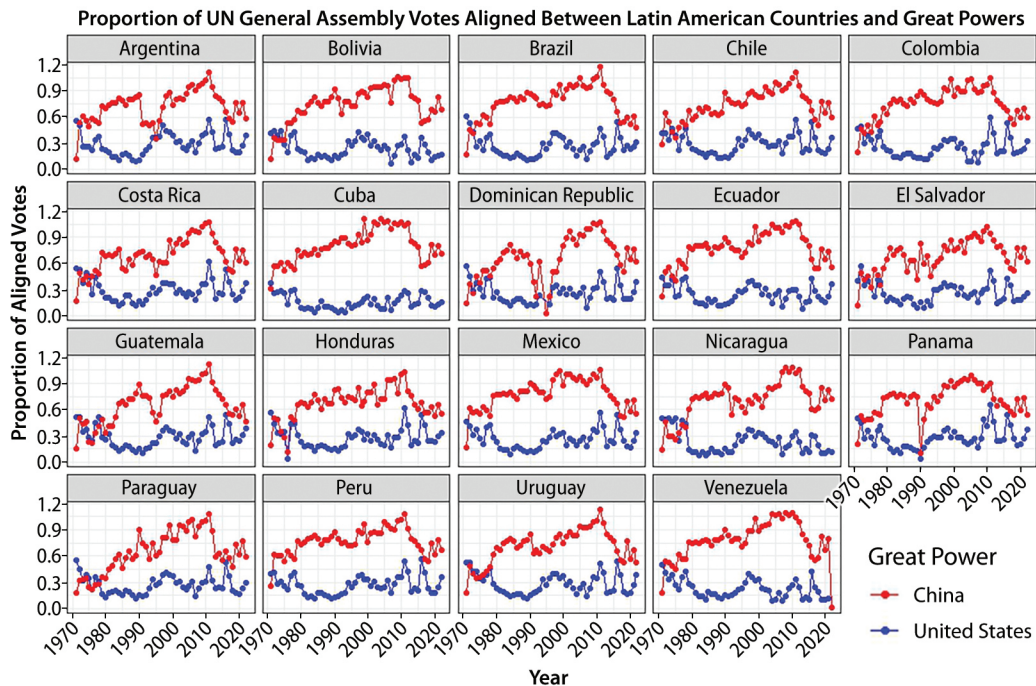
To evaluate this article's primary relationship of interest, the authors employ both basic descriptive analyses and regression models. Initially, the researchers utilize data visualization tools to provide descriptive insights into our primary independent and dependent variables. Subsequently, the authors conduct regression analyses to investigate the potential relationship between these variables. As mentioned earlier, we regress measures of UN voting alignment between Latin American countries and China and the United States (considered separately) on both electoral and liberal-democratic backsliding. Notably, we incorporate lagged values of our primary independent variables to address potential endogeneity concerns, which arise from the possibility that democratic status or backsliding may influence voting alignment in the opposite direction of our hypothesis. While we that endogeneity concerns may persist, we have taken appropriate precautions to mitigate biased estimates. Additionally, our regression models account for various factors that could bias estimates. These models enable us to assess the impact of international alliances or closeness on democratic backsliding.

Acknowledging the limitations of our quantitative analyses and recognizing the value of qualitative insights, we supplement this work with two brief case studies that illustrate the unique dynamics of China's relationships with specific Latin American countries: El Salvador and Brazil. These case studies provide valuable insights into the primary relationship of interest across countries with differing levels of closeness to China and varying democratic characteristics.

## **Quantitative Results**

Figure 1 depicts the UN General Assembly "voting alignment" between each Latin American country and both the United States and China over time, serving as our primary independent variable. Two particularly noteworthy observations emerge from this illustration. Firstly, throughout the observed period, Latin American countries consistently exhibit a greater degree of alignment in their UN General Assembly voting patterns with China than with the United States.

Secondly, the alignment of Latin American UN votes with China appears to exhibit an upward trend over time. Interestingly, these heightened levels of voting alignment and the upward trends in alignment precede the commencement of the significant economic relations between Latin America and China in the twenty-first century. Conversely, while Latin American UN voting alignment with the United States displays fluctuations over time, it generally maintains a relatively stable pattern.



**Figure 1. Proportion of UN General Assembly votes aligned between Latin American countries and great powers**

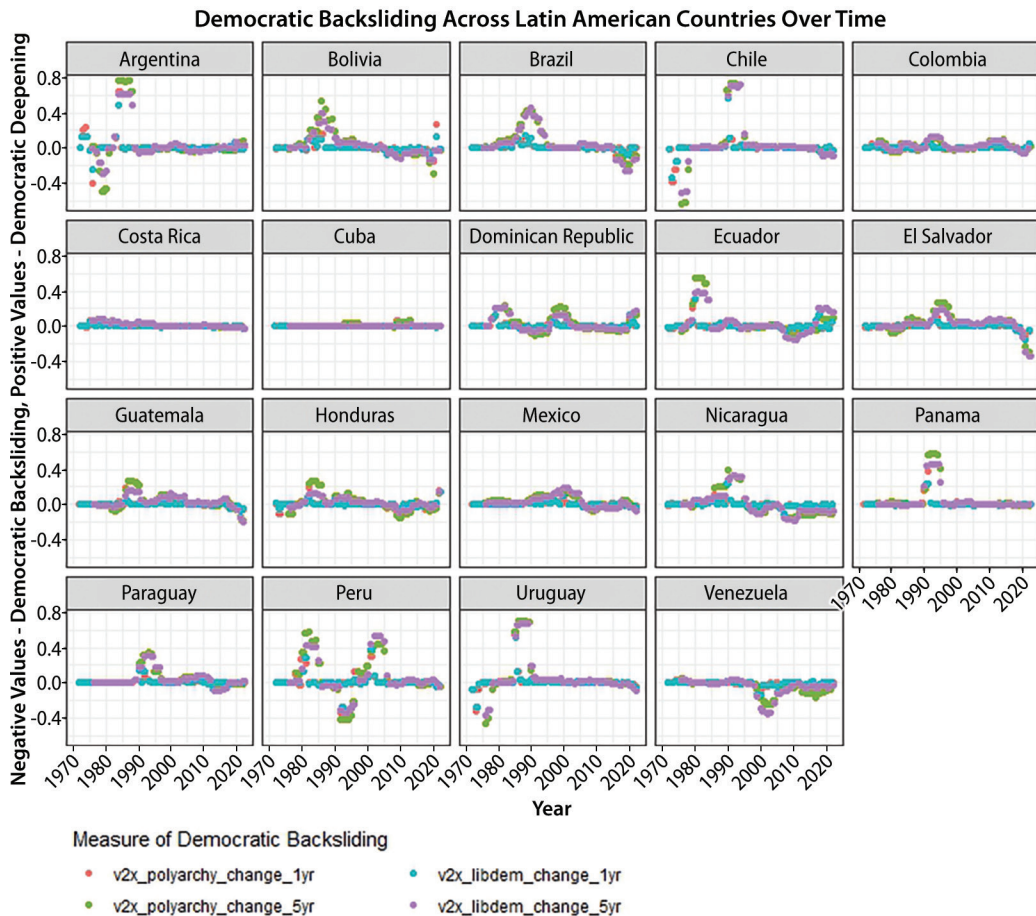
Figure 2 shifts the focus to the dependent variable, presenting two measures of political regime change between adjacent years and two measures of political regime change across five-year periods. These calculations are based on both current and lagged values of VDEM's electoral democracy and liberal democracy indices, as previously described. In this representation, a value of zero signifies the absence of political regime change, negative values denote democratic backsliding, and positive values indicate democratic deepening.

The data reveal that the majority of countries exhibit political regime change values that hover near zero, indicating infrequent short-term political shifts in either a positive or negative direction. While some nations have witnessed minimal political regime change over time, a significant portion of Latin American



countries has experienced abrupt political transformations. As mentioned earlier, the mid-twentieth century saw most Latin American political regime change recorded as negative in terms of measurement values, indicating a shift toward authoritarianism. In contrast, during the late twentieth century, political regime change trended positively in terms of measurement values, reflecting a movement towards democracy.

The dynamics of political regime change in the twenty-first century remains relatively static, but instances of change that have occurred tend to be negative in terms of measurement values, suggesting a regression away from democracy.



**Figure 2. Democracy across Latin American countries over time**



Figures 1 and 2 play a pivotal role in elucidating two key aspects: the trends in UN General Assembly voting alignment among Latin American countries, China, and the United States (primarily serving as a reference point), and the dynamics of democracy within Latin America, both in its static and evolving forms. However, these figures offer limited assistance in advancing the article's comprehension of the potential interplay between these two factors. To delve deeper into this relationship, the authors have employed regression analyses.

Tables 1 and 2 present partial output from a series of regression models meticulously designed to gauge the impact of lagged indicators of UN General Assembly voting alignment between Latin American countries and China (Table 1) and the United States (Table 2).

**Table 1. UN General Assembly voting alignment with China and democracy/democratic backsliding in Latin America**

	Elec	Elec	Elec Change (1yr)	Elec Change (5yr)	Lib	Lib	Lib Change (1yr)	Lib Change (5yr)
A1. votes China, 1-yr Lag	0.04		-0.00		0.03		0.03	
	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
A1. Votes China, 5-yr Lag		0.06 *		-0.07		0.04		0.02
		(0.02)		(0.06)		(0.02)		(0.05)
N	539	465	539	465	539	465	539	465
R2	0.94	0.94	0.02	0.18	0.95	0.95	0.04	0.10
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.								

**Table 2. UN General Assembly voting alignment with China and the United States and democracy/democratic backsliding in Latin America**

	Elec	Elec2	Elec Change (1yr)	Elec Change (5yr)	Lib	Lib2	Lib Change (1yr)	Lib Change (5yr)
A1. votes China, 1-yr Lag	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
	(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)	
A1. Votes China, 5-yr Lag		0.00		-0.02		0.00		-0.02
		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.00)		(0.01)
A1. votes US, 1-yr Lag	-0.01 **		-0.01 **		-0.01 ***		-0.01 **	
	(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)	
A1. votes US, 5-yr Lag		-0.01		-0.03 **		-0.01		-0.03 *
		(0.00)		(0.01)		(0.00)		(0.01)
N	538	464	538	464	538	464	538	464
R2	0.94	0.94	0.06	0.11	0.95	0.95	0.06	0.11
All continuous predictors are main-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05								

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that, for the most part, recent levels of UN General Assembly voting alignment with China do not exhibit significant associations with either political regime type or democratic backsliding, irrespective of the VDEM measures employed. An exception to this overarching observation is found in Model 2, which suggests that UN General Assembly voting alignment with China five years prior is linked to an increase in subsequent levels of electoral democracy in Latin American countries.

The models presented in Table 2 mirror those in Table 1, with the additional inclusion of explanatory variables related to UN General Assembly voting alignment with the United States. Table 2 affirms the primary conclusions drawn from Table 1 regarding the largely nonsignificant impact of UN General Assembly voting alignment with China on democracy and democratic backsliding in Latin America. However, the data also reveal that UN General Assembly voting alignment with the United States one year prior is associated with a decrease in subsequent levels of both electoral and liberal democracy in Latin American countries. Interestingly, this alignment's impact is not observed when examining a five-year lag. In terms of democratic backsliding, the results are more consistent. UN Gen-

eral Assembly voting alignment with the United States, both one year and five years prior, increases Latin American countries' tendencies toward democratic backsliding, as measured by both electoral and liberal democracy indices.

While a comprehensive exploration of the underlying factors behind this unexpected outcome falls outside the scope of this article, we later highlight some potential limitations of our research and suggest avenues for future investigation. For now, we transition to two qualitative case studies that offer further insights into the article's primary research focus.

## Case Studies

### *El Salvador*

El Salvador, under President Nayib Bukele, presents one of the most concerning recent cases of democratic backsliding in Latin America. China's substantial economic investments in El Salvador underpin a departure from democratic principles and human rights violations.

President Bukele's election in 2019 marked the beginning of an unprecedented consolidation of executive power and systematic violations of human rights, characterized by attacks on the independence of the military, legislature, and the judiciary. In February 2020, lacking the majority control needed to pass funding for his Territorial Control Plan, Bukele entered the legislative chamber with armed forces personnel, surrounded by thousands of supporters, and issued an ultimatum to the National Assembly. Following legislative control obtained in the 2021 election, the Bukele-controlled Assembly replaced the Attorney General and all five members of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice.<sup>33</sup> In sum, the use of intimidation within the legislative branch and the appointment of loyalists within the justice branch resulted in a decline in democratic and human rights safeguards in El Salvador. The *de facto* permanent state of emergency against gang violence, ongoing since 2022, has enabled the arbitrary and inhumane detention of thousands, suspending various constitutional rights, including the presumption of innocence and the right to a defense.<sup>34</sup> According to Zaira Navas, the legal director of Cristosal, an El Salvadoran human rights organization, there is sufficient evidence to try El Salvador for crimes against humanity in the Inter-

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<sup>33</sup> "US Concerned over Removal of Top Salvadorean Judges," *BBC News*, 3 May 2021, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

<sup>34</sup> Natalie Kitroeff and Daniele Volpe, "El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But at What Cost?," *New York Times*, 9 April 2023, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

national Criminal Court due to “systematic torture” against alleged gang members detained under El Salvador’s state of exception. This includes the deaths of at least 160 people in prison, accompanied by widespread cases of beatings, malnutrition, and overcrowding.<sup>35</sup>

While the United States strongly criticized the Bukele administration’s deviation from international law and democratic principles, its pressure is significantly blunted by China’s expansion of foreign direct investment in El Salvador. For instance, in response to US Vice President Kamala Harris’ public criticism of the National Assembly’s vote to remove constitutional court judges, President Bukele responded by stating, “with all due respect: We’re cleaning our house . . . and that is none of your business.”<sup>36</sup> This response echoes China’s traditional appeal of “noninterference” in internal affairs and demonstrates the direct influence that Beijing’s investments have in El Salvador. As previously discussed, the flexibility resulting from the current great-power competition between the U.S. and China allows certain states that do not wish to maintain the democratic conditions attached to aid from the United States to turn to China instead. Therefore, in 2018, El Salvador received USD 150 million in initial investments from China to switch its diplomatic alignment from democratic Taipei to authoritarian Beijing.<sup>37</sup> China’s spending spree in El Salvador, coinciding with President Bukele’s domestic dismantling of democratic institutions, included a Confucius Institute at the University of El Salvador, water treatment plants in Ilopango and La Libertad, construction of a large national library, a sports stadium, and partial funding for President Bukele’s USD 200-million “Surf City” project.<sup>38</sup> These high-profile public projects serve to elevate Bukele’s populist persona, following the CCP’s authoritarian model. China’s economic investment in El Salvador enhances President Bukele’s cult of personality while simultaneously reducing the threat of U.S. sanctions. Consequently, despite a “pause in relations” with Washington, President Bukele enjoys widespread public approval, generally exceeding 80 percent.<sup>39</sup> In June 2023, Bukele announced his bid for re-election, in violation of a constitutional presidential term limit. If he wins, he

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<sup>35</sup> Julia Gavarrete, “There Is Enough Evidence for El Salvador to Be Tried for Crimes against Humanity,” *El Faro*, 7 June 2023, <https://elfaro.net/>.

<sup>36</sup> “US Concerned over Removal of Top Salvadorean Judges,” *BBC News*, 3 May 2021, sec. Latin America & Caribbean, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson Renteria et al., “China Pledges \$150 Million Aid to El Salvador as Relationship Deepens,” *Reuters*, 8 November 2018, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>38</sup> R. Evan Ellis, “China and El Salvador: An Update,” *CSIS*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

<sup>39</sup> “El Salvador’s President Is Running for Reelection, Though Critics Say the Constitution Prohibits Him,” *AP News*, 26 June 2023, <https://apnews.com/>.

will be the first president in El Salvador since 1944 to be re-elected and serve multiple terms.

## **Brazil**

Brazil, one of the most powerful democracies in the Southern Hemisphere and South America, faces potential challenges to its democratic progress due to regional conflicts and international pressures from the People's Republic of China, highlighting the risk of democratic backsliding.<sup>40</sup> China's influence underscores the fragility of Brazil's democracy, evident in Brazil's interest in China-led regional blocs aimed at challenging the existing liberal international systems and domestic political turmoil following the election of Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva.<sup>41</sup>

Lula seeks to expand Brazil's global influence, viewing the nation as a hegemon within South America. His vision was apparent during his first two presidential terms from 2003 to 2010 when he played a key role in establishing the BRICS geopolitical bloc (comprising Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as a counter to the prevailing liberal international world banking systems. This historical context sheds light on Lula's contemporary priorities for Brazil. Notably, Lula recently offered to mediate a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine, facing criticism for his perceived naïveté on the international stage. In contrast to his predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, who delayed meeting with Chinese Premier Xi Jinping until six months after his inauguration in June 2019, Lula engaged in a bilateral summit with Xi in April 2023. This signals a deepening of ties between Brazil and China, emphasizing Brazil's receptivity to direct engagement with China and its pursuit of a "nonaligned and noninterventionist" global stance.<sup>42</sup>

The deepening Sino-Brazilian relations, particularly within BRICS, provide Brazilian politicians with cover to undermine democracy domestically. While BRICS initially focused on economics, it has evolved into a geopolitical bloc with the aim of reshaping the prevailing liberal international world order. Leaders within BRICS, including Lula, have criticized Western-led financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for linking financial investments to democratic commitments.<sup>43</sup> However, this stance isolates Brazil

<sup>40</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Gross domestic product (GDP) in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021, by country (in billion U.S. dollars)," *Statista*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.statista.com/>.

<sup>41</sup> Vanessa Barbara, "Opinion | My Country Is Reaching Out to People the West Can't Stand," *New York Times*, 2 May 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

<sup>42</sup> "Brazil's Foreign Policy Is Hyperactive, Ambitious and Naive," *The Economist*, 10 April 2023, <https://www.economist.com/>.

<sup>43</sup> Kalinga Seneviratne, "BRICS Nations Lead Push for Freedom from Western Financial System," *South China Morning Post*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

from democratically aligned nations and shields its leaders, including Lula, from international accountability mechanisms designed to prevent corruption and interference in democratic institutions. Historical precedent, such as the 2005 “Mensalão” corruption scandal, illustrates the vulnerability of Brazilian democracy without robust international safeguards.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, threats to democracy in Brazil are likely to persist and even proliferate in the absence of such protections.

The root cause of this democratic instability lies in the deepening bilateral relationship between Brazil and China, both diplomatically and economically. This growing entanglement coincides with significant upheaval in Brazil’s democracy, including Operation Car Wash in 2013, the election of President Bolsonaro and a wave of conservative/right-wing leaders in 2016, an assassination attempt on Bolsonaro in 2018, the shift back to the left with Lula’s election in 2022, and the storming of Brasília on 8 January 2023.<sup>45</sup> Collectively, China’s increasing influence in Brazil through economic and diplomatic interactions undermines Brazil’s democratic stability and provides political cover to anti-liberal politicians, solidifying the country’s alignment with a Chinese-led world order.

## Conclusion

In 2023, China’s emergence as a global power is undeniable. While we are gaining a clearer understanding of China’s overarching international objectives and the various tools it employs to achieve them, there remains limited insight into how interactions or alignments with China impact domestic politics, specifically in terms of political regimes. This article seeks to offer an initial assessment to address this knowledge gap. Our quantitative analysis indicates that alignment with China, particularly in the form of UN votes, does not appear to lead to domestic democratic backsliding. However, our case studies provide a more nuanced perspective on the potential relationship between alignment with China and democratic backsliding, suggesting that other forms of alignment—primarily economic and diplomatic—are more plausible factors contributing to the observed democratic decline in twenty-first-century Latin America.

Future research should delve into these possibilities, exploring questions such as: Does economic alignment with China erode democracy in Latin American nations? Does diplomatic alignment with China undermine democracy in Latin American nations? While our case studies offer preliminary indications that the

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<sup>44</sup> PGR BRASILEIRO, “Mensalão’ foi o ‘mais escandaloso caso de corrupção no Brasil,’” *Notícias ao Minuto*, 19 May 2013, <https://www.noticiasaoiminuto.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Attack on Democratic Institutions in Brazil: Statement by Human Rights Watch,” *Human Rights Watch* (blog), 8 January 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/>.



answer to both questions may be affirmative, further investigation is necessary for confirmation. Additionally, future research should assess our interpretation that it is not necessarily strategic competition-driven concessions that foster democratic backsliding, but rather that aligning with China on the international stage provides cover for leaders in the Global South to subvert democracy.

Beyond its academic significance, unraveling these questions holds critical insights essential for preserving democracy and the liberal world order in an era marked by strategic competition. ♣

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