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Article

US Hegemony in Latin America: Think Tanks and the Formation of Consensus about the Chinese Presence

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Abstract

In recent years, U.S. government agencies have defined the Chinese presence in Latin America as a challenge, which has organized foreign policy towards the region. Departing from a neo-Gramscian approach, this paper investigates the bibliographical production of U.S. think tanks and seeks to understand the construction of consensus about the Chinese presence in Latin America. The methodology is based on content analysis and we identified two main narratives: in the first, the Chinese presence is presented as a threat to U.S. regional hegemony; in the second, the Chinese adaptation to liberal precepts is sought. There are therefore nuances in how the Chinese power is perceived, although the discourses remain restricted to the promotion of capitalism and neoliberalism under U.S. leadership.

Keywords: Hegemony; think tanks; U.S. foreign policy; Latin America.

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Introduction

Particularly at the end of the Barack Obama administration (2009-2017), U.S. leaders[1] intensified discussions and voiced objections towards the Chinese presence in Latin America. Nowadays, this challenge is articulated as one of the central axes of U.S. foreign policy for the region. As Milani (2022) points out about the agenda of one of the main U.S. bureaucracies in Latin America - the Southcom[2] - the challenge expressed by China has

[1] We consider "US leaders" to be the economic, political and military groups that directly and indirectly participate in government decision-making. This concept, developed by Ianni (1988), will be revisited.

[2] The Southcom is one of 11 unified Combatant Commands in the Department of Defense. Its area of operation encompasses 31 countries and 16 territories in Latin America, from southern Mexico and adjacent waters to Central America, South America, and the Caribbean (Vidal and Wietchikoski 2022).

become an agenda around which the military institution builds notions of regional threat, adding it to traditionally perceived transnational challenges, such as transnational organized crime and terrorism (Milani 2021; 2022).

Although the topic of U.S. perception on China's regional presence is the subject of prolific academic literature (Long 2021; Paz 2012; Campos and Prevost 2019; Guida 2018) and recurrent debate among U.S. leaders, there are still very few works that analyze in more depth the U.S. actors – besides the presidencies and the military – that are part of the discussion on the Chinese regional inroads. This issue is pivotal to U.S. action in Latin America, since limiting the presence of extra-regional actors is one of the main continuities of the world power's foreign policy, dating back to the Monroe Doctrine (Brands and Berg 2021).

Thus, aiming to go beyond the discussion on the presidents and military postures, and to deepen the understanding on other relevant actors, this article analyzes the bibliographic production of U.S. think tanks, based on a Gramscian and neo-Gramscian approach, with the aim of evaluating the efforts of U.S. leaders to consolidate a national and transnational consensus on Chinese actions in Latin America. Anchored in a position of dominance, we understand these institutions as instruments for the maintenance and propagation of organized projects that function to transform the ideologies of dominant groups into universal ones, both inside and outside the US.

For the analysis, we selected documents produced between 2017 and 2022 by four think tanks– The Inter-American Dialogue (The Dialogue); Council of the Americas (AS/COA); Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and Woodrow Wilson Center (Wilson Center). The choice sought to include organizations that are part of the ruling classes and have written on the subject. Still, on the subject of structure, we have divided this paper into three parts in addition to this introduction. First, we briefly present the notions of state and hegemony from a Gramscian and neo-Gramscian perspective and discuss U.S. hegemony in Latin America. Then, this research aims to present think tanks from a Gramscian theoretical perspective, with which we identify the social role of these organizations in shaping the consensus of U.S. leaders in domestic and transnational terms. Finally, this paper presents the methodology and content analysis of the four selected think tanks.

In general, we can identify two main narratives: in the first, the Chinese presence is portrayed as a threat to U.S. regional hegemony; in the second, Chinese adaptation to liberal precepts is sought. There are, therefore, nuances, although the discourses remain restricted to the promotion of capitalism and neoliberalism under U.S. leadership[3]. We note that as in the past (Ianni 1988; Schoultz 2000), the ultimate goal of these definitions, now with China as the focus, is to legitimize U.S. hegemonic action in Latin America. Manifested around the principles and values of the

[3] It is relevant to stress that we do not claim that China is a threat to the United States or Latin American countries. On the contrary, its regional presence is mainly economic; it provides relevant investment opportunities for Latin America and it acts cautiously. We do analyze how US think tanks participate in the construction of a narrative that describes China as a threat. This narrative constitutes a strategy of US hegemony and consensus building.

"liberal international order" constructed by the USA at the end of the Second World War, these ideas, when taken up by the state, become fundamental in self-justifying the maintenance of the economic, political, and military interests of the northern power over the entire region.

State, ruling class, leaders, and the exercise of U.S. hegemony in Latin America

We see the state based on an expanded notion, in which its direction and manifested interests are the actions of a ruling class on the rest of society, whose hegemony is developed by the "combination of force and consensus, which are balanced in a varied way, without force greatly supplanting consensus, but, on the contrary, trying to make force appear to be supported by the consensus of the majority" (Gramsci 2001, 96). This exercise of domination, according to Gramsci, is expressed "by the so-called organs of public opinion - newspapers and associations - which are therefore artificially multiplied in certain situations" (Gramsci 2001, 96). In international politics, centers of power exercise domination based on the expansion of a domestic hegemony that is sustained by the ruling classes, the economic and social institutions, culture, and technology that become "patterns of emulation overseas" (Cox 1983, 171).

In this sense, those who set the national course are not only those directly involved in government, but also representatives of the ruling classes and bureaucratic elites, who are highly transnationalized and manage to make their preferences prevail. The hegemonic worldviews shared and reproduced by these dominant sectors are disseminated to other subordinate social groups at national and international levels through specific apparatuses, such as think tanks. In a similar train of thought, Ianni (1988, 20) proposes differentiating between leaders and governments,

> [...] By leaders, we also mean the economic, political, and military groups - sometimes together, sometimes separately - that directly or indirectly participate in government decisions, whether in domestic or foreign policy. Leaders can distinguish themselves from, overlap with or oppose the people, or more specifically, the wage-earning classes.

When it comes to the US, Latin America has historically been the first area of international expansion for the U.S. ruling class and a region that plays a key role in its internal and global hegemony. Considered a zone of influence, from the beginning of the 19th century the U.S. intervened in Latin American countries according to the economic and domestic security interests of the U.S. ruling class (Schoultz 1987, 2000; Ianni 1988; Moura 1990; Furtado 1975).

Since the end of the Second World War, the legitimizing narrative of U.S. hegemony has been based on the rhetorical defense of an international order based on liberal values in the political and economic spheres, as well as the promotion of multilateralism and the construction of the Soviet Union as a threat. Especially since the end of the Cold War, the notion of promoting democracy has gained prominence as a way of legitimizing the actions of the US, which in its

name intervenes in crises and transitions of power in peripheral countries (Robinson 1996). The promotion of democracy is also connected to the expansion of globalization and transnational capital. Furthermore, issues such as combating corruption and promoting better governance practices have been exported by the United States in processes that both shape and justify its hegemony.

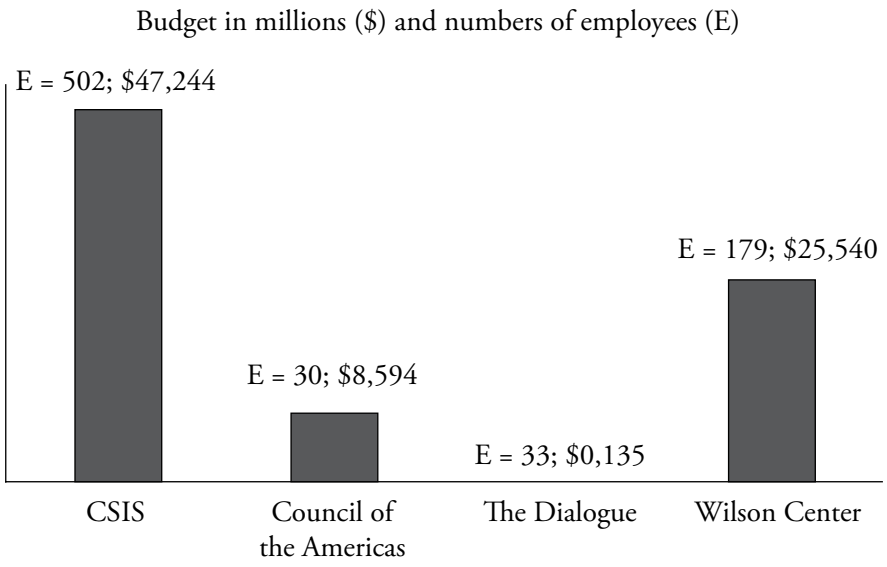
This hegemony is also reproduced by an agenda of problems and challenges, which despite their specificities, are subordinated to the global strategies of power and are posed as "shared regional" problems or threats (Ianni 1988; Moura 1990). For example, during the Cold War, they referred to both internal issues - related to challenges to capitalism, also called "political instability" - and external issues, arising from the influence of other major powers. In the 1990s, the U.S. presence was legitimized through the fight against transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, and immigration. In the 2000s, despite ambiguous results, identifying challenges progressed through the inclusion of terrorism, which, adapted to the region, came to be referred to as "narcoterrorism" in U.S. discourse (Avilés 2018; Rodrigues 2012; Villa 2014). Identifying China as a threat adds a new dimension to U.S. foreign policy and hegemonic consensus building – as it has mostly pointed out transnational threats since the end of the Cold War.

These threat perceptions and policy recommendations based on liberal values (Parmar 2018; Robinson 1996) tend to institutionalize themselves in the U.S.'s relationship with Latin America through bilateral ties, the extensive inter-elites networks, or the set of multilateral institutions and specialized bureaucracies created by U.S. authorities. Thus, these liberal ideas are presented and diffused through "cooperation" or "technical assistance" agreements, multilateral organizations (such as the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Development Bank), and the bureaucracies operating in the region (such as Southcom, United States Agency for International Development and the military "schools") (Ianni 1988; Vidal and Wietchikoski 2022; Penido et al. 2023). As we will see below, think tanks are also part of this process of legitimizing hegemony, both by participating in the construction of narratives and their dissemination.

Think tanks and the hegemonic practice of U.S. leaders

Formally, think tanks are registered as non-profit public interest organizations that fall under section 501 (c) 3 of the U.S. tax code, along with religious and scientific institutions, and thus they repeatedly claim to be non-partisan and politically independent. Presenting themselves as institutions for policy-oriented research, opinion mobilization and "technical" advisors to politicians, the most prominent and socially prestigious think tanks have large management, administrative and intellectual production teams, as well as volunteers. Their annual budgets are in the millions, stemming from donations (mainly from large corporations/businesses, foundations and, to a lesser extent, donations from individuals) and the U.S. government (Wietchikoski 2018). To gauge the size and financial resources of these organizations, we present in Figure 1 data from the think tanks analyzed in this paper[4].

Figure 1 - The structural profile of *think tanks*



Source: Prepared by the author based on 990 Forms (data from 2017 to 2020[4]).

Despite their self-professed autonomy from market interests, business, the state, and politics, think tanks are not disconnected from their social structure. In this paper, we understand these organizations as institutions created by and for the U.S. ruling class in order to form a consensus (domestic and transnational) about its political and economic interests, as well as to legitimize the coercive action of U.S. leaders in Latin America.

Taking Gramsci (1971; 2001) as a reference, we identify that, in order to maintain its hegemonic position, the U.S. ruling class develops a set of functions of domination and direction over the rest of society using a combination of force and consensus. In this context, each group directly involved in hegemonic production relations creates for itself one or more layers of intellectuals that provide them with homogeneity and awareness of their own role, not only in the political field but also in the social and economic fields.

These organic intellectuals (named so by Gramsci as they have a vital connection with the class that gave rise to them) seek, through their practical life, to secure a social consensus of domination and direction over the rest of society (Gramsci 2001). Therefore, there are no completely autonomous intellectuals in relation to the social structure, as claimed by the vast majority of think tanks.

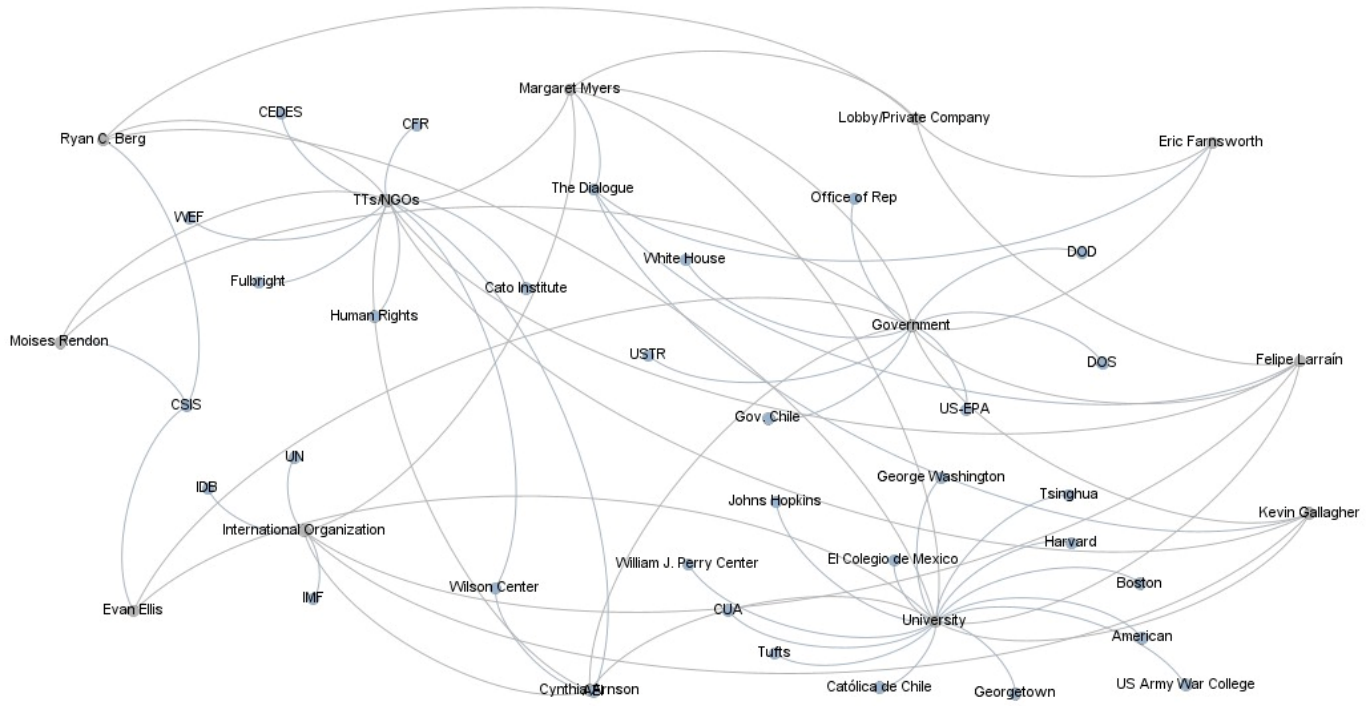
By making use of "private apparatuses of hegemony", this consensus formation promoted by organic intellectuals involves the naturalization of knowledge and values from the world of the ruling class in order to propagate its ideology, i.e. the universalization of the particular interests of a class. Thus, the ruling class exercises its power and domination over other classes through persuasion and indirect domination (Gramsci 2001).

[4] The financial information of these organizations is difficult to identify and there is little transparency in the disclosure and presentation by the think tanks themselves. In this context, we chose to point to the most recent available data, which ranged from 2017 to 2020, depending on the organization.

In the case of think tanks, the same class that finances them is the one that maintains the intellectual activities of these organizations. The organic intellectuals in think tanks come from a hybrid social structure that at the same time crosses, connects, and overlaps the worlds of the academic, political, business, and journalistic elite (Medvetz 2006), which develops through the phenomenon characteristic of these organizations and which has become known as the "revolving door". Thus, the social actors who produce the content of think tanks have multiple professions, build their careers and take, for example, high-ranking positions in the White House, the State and Defense Departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, law firms, lobbying and consulting organizations or banks with international reach (Parmar 2004; Abelson 2006; Stone and Denham 2004; Wietchikoski 2018). We therefore consider the social universe of think tanks to belong to what Ianni (1988) called leader groups.

In order to exemplify this argument and better understand the social universe from which this production emerges, we present in Figure 2 a summary of professional positions held by influential authors in the analyzed think tanks with Social Network Analysis, used mainly by a specific neo-Gramscian literature (Carroll 2010; Van Apeldoorn and De Graaff 2015). We identify the most recurrent authors on the presence of China in Latin America in the period analyzed and some of the prominent positions in their professional careers.

Figure 2 - Main authors and their professional profile



Source: elaborated by the authors[5]

[5] The data was obtained from the documents selected for this work, information provided by think tanks and the authors' profiles on LinkedIn. Gephi software was used for the conduction of the analysis.

It is therefore clear that the main think tanks are organizations founded and maintained by the U.S. ruling class itself (with financial support from the government) using the expertise of their staff as a principle of legitimacy, which is affirmed in their professional experiences. Moving through privileged spaces and making use of intellectual argument, these organizations seek to create and maintain consensus on specific political/ideological and economic projects both domestically and transnationally. In this context, think tanks function as spaces/actions aimed at "the internalization and naturalization of knowledge and values that are based on their interests in the form of 'national interests'" (Vidal and Brum 2020, 110).

Other critical analyses of think tanks also use this perspective (Medvetz 2006, Parmar 2004). For example, Indjeert Parmar (2004) points out how the first think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution (1924), the Council on Foreign Relations (1921), and the Carnegie Endowment International for Peace (1910), were created and financed on the initiative of wealthy magnates at the beginning of the 20th century. Amid the intense process of industrialization and disputes between different political projects for American society, they created centers aiming to influence U.S. foreign policy and foster a new place for the country in the world, based on liberal internationalism, anti-communism and Anglo-US cooperation (Parmar 2004).

This consensus-building intended by U.S. think tanks is also exercised at the regional level. Intending to implement certain ideas among Latin America's most important actors and decision-making spaces, think tanks seek to establish a wide network of interpersonal and institutional contacts with the region's leading politicians, bureaucrats, economists, academics, and journalists (Wietchikoski 2018).

It is in this context, for instance, that the activities of the Council of the Americas (AS/COA) are conducted. With more than half a million hits on its website, the think tank stated in its 2017 report that

> During 2017, the Council held high-level programs across the United States and Latin America to foster dialogue on regional issues. (…) the Council continued working to fulfill its mission of explaining the major shifts in social and economic policy in the region and strengthening hemispheric ties through both public forums and private meetings. In 2017, our programming covered a wide range of themes, including the renegotiation of the 24-year-old North American free trade agreement, the rise of anti-corruption and better governance in the region, and the political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela (Council of the Americas Inc 2017, 4).

Focused exclusively on economic and political influence in Latin America, the same report describes the scope of its activities,

> we hosted public and private programs with the heads of state of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru (…). COA continued to

> offer an unparalleled platform for public and private exchanges where top government officials, business leaders, and investors discussed some of the most pressing issues facing the region (…). Prominent speakers at the series' gatherings included presidents, ministers, governors, secretaries, ambassadors, senior representatives from multilateral organizations, CEOs, and leading entrepreneurs and innovators. Among the top officials featured at our Latin American cities conferences were Chile's then-president Michelle Bachelet, Brazil's president Michel Temer, Canada's minister of foreign affairs Chrystia Freeland, Mexico's secretary of foreign affairs Luis Videgaray, and Argentina's chief of the cabinet of the ministers Marcos Pena (Council of the Americas Inc 2017, 4).

Therefore, it is possible to establish think tanks as a significant private apparatus aimed at the hegemonic exercise of the American ruling class over the region. In their actions of domination and the resulting structural dependence of Latin American countries, U.S. authorities seek, through think tanks, to turn their private interests into regional interests shared by other ruling elites.

Think tanks' views on the Chinese presence and U.S. hegemony

Before presenting the think tanks' views on the Chinese presence in Latin America, it is necessary to make brief methodological notes. We analyzed texts published or disseminated on the websites of four think tanks: The Inter-American Dialogue (The Dialogue); Americas Society/Council of the Americas (AS/COA); Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Woodrow Wilson Center (Wilson Center) between 2017 and 2022. We sought to incorporate representative institutions whose ideas have repercussions in other fields, such as the media and the U.S. Congress, and that have produced relevant literature on the subject of China-Latin America relations[6].

The choice included two think tanks focused on Foreign Policy issues in general, which also have specific programs for Latin America, and two others focused exclusively on the region. In the cases of The Dialogue, Wilson Center and AS/COA, there is significant interaction with researchers and political-intellectual leaders from Latin America, who publish in blogs, working documents, and journals and, in the case of The Dialogue, are part of the research team. The material selected includes documents produced by think tanks or their researchers and made available on the institutions' websites. Thus, we analyzed reports, written testimonies sent to Congress, blog posts, books, written interviews, as well as material published by the *Americas Quarterly* magazine, maintained by the *Council of the Americas*.

The texts were selected from the think tanks' websites. The Wilson Center has a specific collection on *US & China in Latin America*, from which we selected the documents incorporated

[6] In this scenario, think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Council of Foreign Relations were also initially considered for analysis, although, after initial prospecting, we realized none of them had significant production on the subject in the period covered by this research.

into the analysis. In the case of CSIS, the search was carried out using a search tool, including the keyword "China" and filtering the search for documents produced by the *Americas Program*. The Dialogue also has a dedicated page for *Asia & Latin America*, and the material on China was catalogued from this page. In the case of AS/COA, the research focused on testimonies to Congresses and the *Americas Quartely* magazine, maintained by the think tank, from which the articles in the "China" section were analyzed[7].

A total of 177 documents were selected, 69 from CSIS, 53 from The Dialogue, 34 from AS/COA, and 21 from the Wilson Center. For the analysis, we used the Content Analysis technique developed by Bardin (2004). After a preliminary reading of the documents and taking as our central question "how are relations between China and Latin America characterized and connected to the preservation of U.S. hegemony?", we identified two main categories: i) China as a threat to the U.S.; ii) possibilities of Chinese liberal adaptation. These were divided into four subcategories: i) geopolitics, threat and influence, ii) politics and relations with regimes with which Washington rivals, iii) economy and trade, iv) impacts on Latin America.

These broad categories correspond to two visions of the Chinese presence in Latin America, which, albeit different, are not contradictory, since the objective of maintaining U.S. hegemony is present in both of them. In the first case, intellectuals characterize China as a threat, its presence is seen as a security issue, implying the need for U.S. leaders to seek to contain or even eliminate Chinese regional influence. In the second narrative, the authors acknowledge that Chinese investments bring benefits to Latin America but also highlight challenges. They argue that China needs to "improve" and "adapt" its regional engagement to align it more closely with the norms of the liberal international order. In other words, in the first case, hegemony is preserved by eliminating the competitor, in the second, hegemony is maintained through co-optation.

View 1: China as a threat to Latin America

The interpretation of the Chinese presence in Latin America through geopolitical lenses prevails in CSIS documents, and it is identified, to a lesser degree and/or with greater nuances, in the documents of the other think tanks. It is a vision that expresses the maintenance of U.S. regional dominance based on the definition of China as a regional threat. It also connects with the views present in other governmental spheres, being similar to the vision established by the National Security declaratory documents published by the White House and the Department of Defense (U.S. Department of Defense 2022; The White House 2022).

A summary of these narratives is described in the following excerpts:

> China is actively building its relations with emerging markets including Latin America and the Caribbean based on sharp power [...] Sharp power is the use of

[7] The selected documents were catalogued by year, author and title in the following table: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1E7KK5_iEanwP8D5dZyxD6mDCr67-fPpPgfTO2VnzTUA/edit?usp=sharing.

> state resources intentionally and proactively to manipulate behavior and actions in foreign states by distorting the domestic political environment and degrading independent institutions. [...] Beijing boasts a suite of state-led activities designed to bend hearts and minds toward the Chinese Communist Party worldview on core interests such as Taiwan, Tibet, internal human rights issues, and the South China Sea, among others (Farnsworth 2019).
>
> The primary threat to U.S. interests in Latin America comes from China because Beijing is the most significant global challenge for U.S. statecraft and its presence in the Western Hemisphere is multifaceted and widespread (Brands and Berg 2021, 8).

In this narrative, China is described as a geopolitical "threat", "power", or "challenge" that competes - or rivals - the U.S. for "geopolitical supremacy" (Braun 2020). Thus, the Chinese presence would bring "the dynamics of the great power competition into regional and international politics" (Runde et al. 2021). Intellectuals show concern regarding political influence and speculate that China co-opts elites and seeks to foment national division (Berg 2022), as well as supposedly influences domestic policies (Aragão and Berg 2021). Relations between China and the U.S. are described as a zero-sum game, since the country could threaten the "interests", "dominance" (MacDonald 2018), or "hegemony" (MacDonald 2019) of the USA.

Economic engagement is seen as a source of influence, with potential security implications (Berg 2021; Runde et al. 2021b). For example, there is concern that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will create [...] "imperatives for engagement by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese state in Latin America" (Ellis 2020, 2). The BRI is also seen as "as a principal platform for projecting economic power and improving its geopolitical position" (Berg 2021, 3). The idea that Chinese loans and investments are predatory also appears. Chinese financing is described by Ryan Berg (2021, 3) as "another powerful economic tool of its engagement with LAC [...]". There is also concern that the loans could be a source of political influence, as China could be "taking advantage of high debt burdens owed by small island nations in the Caribbean" (Berg 2021, 3). This position contributes to the idea that China may be building a debt trap for the region.

Pundits also argued that China, or Chinese investment, has guaranteed support for anti-American regimes. Ellis (2020), for example, sees connections between left-wing governments and China, which would be mutually supportive. The main emphasis, however, is on the case of Venezuela, which is one of the most commented themes in this narrative (Berg 2021; Rendon and Fernandez 2020; Ellis 2017). Although these authors do not exclude the interpretation of a pragmatic stance on the part of China, which is more economic than military, at least in comparison to Russia, they identify Chinese interests in maintaining an anti-U.S. government. Redon (2017, 1), for example, argues:

> When looking at resolving the Venezuelan crisis, we must consider China's economic and geopolitical interests [...]. Though China might have a strategic interest in continuing to support an anti-U.S. government in the region, it would also benefit from a transition in Venezuela if a new government brings economic stability, the rule of law, and a respect for previous treaties and bilateral loans. (Rendon 2017, 1)

Despite the emphasis on geopolitical issues and Chinese influence, this narrative recognizes that trade and investment are the central elements of the China-Latin America relationship, and the country is described as "the top trading partner for many countries" (Berg 2022, 5). However, the consequences of Chinese investment tend to be seen as negative, arguing "the short-term benefits often lead to long-term dependency" (Rendon and Baumunk 2018). The narrative is based on the diagnosis that China is looking to open up markets in the region and that state-owned enterprises aim to consolidate their presence in strategic economic sectors. However, in general, no benefits have been identified for Latin America as a result of its economic relations with China. In the words of Evan Ellis, there is a "[...] contrast between the PRC, where decisions are made and to which profits flow, and Latin America, as a worksite and source of raw materials in the service of China" [...] (Ellis 2018, 8).

Conversely, several challenges are presented. Proponents refer to dependency, predatory investments, and few concrete results from investments, since China supposedly imposes the employment of Chinese workers and Chinese companies, and investments would serve as a gateway to political influence. Among other challenges arising from the Chinese presence in the region, there is also concern about illegal and unregulated fishing, which would represent a "continuing series of violations of Latin America's sovereign waters" (Ellis 2020). There is also speculation about the potential espionage of Chinese companies operating in the field of information and communication technologies, which would be "another weapon of Chinese influence in Latin America" (Brands and Berg 2021).

This is, therefore, a narrative that clearly dialogues with the U.S. project of preserving its regional hegemony, since U.S. presence is presented as beneficial, but relations with China are seen as a source of costs and losses. No benefits are recognized for Latin America, and the economic relations are securitized. The narrative also suggests that threats to hegemony in different fields are connected, such as governments that resist American hegemony and seek to expand relations with other powers. Hence, China is not just presented as a threat to hegemony, but to the Americas as a whole, and the resulting policy aims to contain its influence.

View 2: The possibility of Chinese adaptation

The second view is more nuanced when it comes to geopolitical competition, as it emphasizes economic relations and describes China's actions as "cautious" (Myers and Gallagher 2019). Chinese political interests in allocating investments and costs or losses to Latin America are recognized,

but they ponder that this occurs with investments "of any major power" (Barrios and Creutzfeldt 2018). The idea that the challenges arising from the relationship with China are similar to the challenges in relations with other great powers appears with some frequency, as do comparisons between Chinese and U.S. actions (Barrios and Creutzfeldt 2018; Myers 2018). Therefore, the relationship between influence and investments is less securitized.

In this view, it is understood that increased economic relations can bring advantages to China, but there is no perception of comprehensive use of potential influence for political purposes. An exception relates to the Taiwan issue, where Chinese actions to encourage countries to switch diplomatic recognition are perceived. This topic even seems to be a point of consensus among intellectuals affiliated with think tanks in the U.S. Conversely, the Belt and Road Initiative - which tends to be securitized in the view of China as a geopolitical challenge - is seen as an initiative that doesn't bring many changes to the Asian country's pattern of action. As Barrios points out, "many of these projects (and to some extent the BRI itself) are just old wine in new bottles" (Barrios 2018).

Furthermore, Chinese loans in the region are not seen as a source of Chinese power. The Inter-American Dialogue reports point out that during the pandemic, when Latin America was experiencing a situation of economic fragility, China renegotiated its debts, refraining from adopting an aggressive stance (Myers and Ray 2021; 2022). A Wilson Center report argues that China - and not Venezuela - has been caught in a debt trap (Kaplan and Penfold 2019). In the case of Venezuela, the country is described as a fragile and problematic economy (Myers and Gallagher 2017), but terms like "anti-American regime" are not included. Nevertheless, the intellectuals of these think tanks share the view of the need for regime change in Venezuela.

In regards to Venezuela, they recognize China's caution and pragmatism, with the Asian power not granting new loans to the Maduro government during the period of political crisis when the U.S. was seeking regime change (Myers and Ray 2021). One point that stands out, however, is the consensus among think tanks in naming Venezuela as a problem, understanding that regime transition would be the best course of action. In this sense, there is a narrative consistent with maintaining U.S. hegemony.

On the other hand, in general, there prevails the argument that ideological issues do not condition China-Latin America relations, as pointed out by Margaret Myers

> At the onset of enhanced relations in the mid-1990s, Chinese companies and banks necessarily focused their attention on those LAC countries with an ideological affinity toward China, that were in considerable need of Chinese finance, or where ties were facilitated by China's allies in the region. [...] But over the past two decades, Chinese entities have demonstrated an ability to engage with most every country in LAC, by employing different strategies in different setting (Myers 2021a, 2).

From this perspective, there is recognition that the implications of China's actions for the U.S. are not necessarily negative. Barrios and Creutzfeldt (2018), for instance, argue that the U.S.

is still the most important partner for Latin America, however "in an era of American disinterest in the region, China's growing presence seems all the more timely" (Barrios and Creutzfeldt 2018).

The main dimension emphasized refers to economic relations between China and Latin America. In this narrative, relations with China are also seen as significant for the region's economic well-being, as well as a source of capital (Myers and Gallagher 2020; 2018). Investments are not only seen as a function of Chinese interests or strategic competition with the U.S., but there is also recognition of the benefits for Latin America. Such investments are perceived as intended to be "as useful to China as it is beneficial to its trading partners" (Barrios and Creutzfeldt 2018). At the same time, there is concern that Chinese action could aggravate environmental problems, generate socio-political conflicts, or contribute to corruption. As Myers points out, "China's track record is mixed […]. There is considerable variation in […] commitment to quality and sustainability […] [and] varying commitment to consultation with local communities and other stakeholders, and to avoiding corrupt activities" (Myers 2021b).

Kaplan and Penfold (2019) understand that the financing model offered by China is different from the Western model, as there is no imposition of conditionalities - in other words, an economic policy model. Consequently, "China's policy banks thus based their overseas lending to Venezuela on a non-Western interpretation of sovereign risk", which eventually failed, since a "high cost for its creditor learning curve" was paid (Kaplan and Penfold 2019, 8). In the same vein, there is the notion that in terms of environmental protection, Chinese investments could be improved. In general, there is the expectation that Chinese capital will, over time, become more similar to Western capital.

The lack of conditionality in loans is also often highlighted as a "flaw" when compared to investments by Western actors. There is also the idea that, although China does not prefer to engage with actors that distance themselves from the neoliberal consensus, the existence of easy access to investments has made it possible to adopt heterodox economic policies.

> While China extolled the merits of nonintervention and ideological flexibility in its commercial dealings, its lack of conditionality implicitly gave creditor consent to Chávez's nationalization spree that would have been far more challenging under the stewardship of Western multilateral creditors. (Kaplan and Penfold 2019, 19).

Therefore, in this narrative, there is an intention to accept the Chinese role in Latin American capitalism, even seeking to encourage China to turn its actions more in line with Western norms. In this way, even if there is acceptance of China, this takes place within the boundaries of U.S.-led capitalism, and there is an expectation that Chinese actions will become more Western-like, leading to suggestions of policies aimed at shaping Chinese engagement in the region. Acceptance of China's role in Latin America takes place within a framework of preserving U.S. hegemony and the rules and norms that legitimize it. A synthesis of both visions on China is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Summaries of the narratives on China

	Narrative 1	Narrative 2
Geopolitics, threat and influence	China is described as an economic, commercial, and strategic power, with geopolitical implications. Some of the adjectives used are challenge, rival, competitor and threat, and economic partner.	China is described as a crucial source of finance and capital, an economic and financial partner for LA. It is thought of as a great power that behaves like one.
Relations with regimes rivaled by Washington	Relations between China and Venezuela are highlighted by this narrative and there was speculation that China would support a regime transition, but there was also a perception of Chinese interests in maintaining an anti-US government.	A topic of more limited attention, it is argued that China engages with governments of all political stripes. There is recognition of the Venezuelan government as problematic and a perception that China would be pragmatic in its relations with the country.
Economy and trade	Chinese economic engagement is seen as a source of influence. There are concerns about security implications, including espionage, access to land, and political influence, as well as economic exploitation and increased dependency.	The theme most emphasized by this narrative. Economy and trade are seen as the primary drivers of China-Latin America relations. The Chinese financing model is seen as different and riskier than the Western one.
Benefits to Latin America	In general, there are no perceived benefits for Latin America from its engagement with China.	There are perceived benefits for the region, since China would be a source of capital. There are also perceived costs, especially related to environmental issues and socio-political conflicts.

Conclusion

The analysis of the think tanks' documents showed that, as in the past, there are two main ways the U.S. seeks to reproduce its hegemony on the American continent: the construction of threats - in this case by identifying China as an enemy; and the rhetorical promotion of liberal values - currently by encouraging Chinese investments to become more similar to Western ones. In this second case, China is identified as a disconnected actor that must conform to the norms and values established and disseminated under U.S. leadership. This is an attempt at co-optation, while the first narrative is aimed at containment or confrontation. The "regional threat" is more salient in CSIS documents and less so in the Inter-American Dialogue's and the Wilson Center's. In the case of AS/COA, there is an important diversity of views, but the think tank's vice-president's – Eric Farnsworth – is clearly militaristic.

Also noticeable, especially among those who seek to construct the narrative of China as a threatening actor, is an attempt to connect issues at the regional and international levels. The

case of Venezuela stands out, where the regime was already confronted by the US, and Chinese presence is now seen as supporting it. Thus, the view of China as a threat is added to a series of other factors internal to the countries of the region historically seen as problematic by the US, such as corruption, anti-democratic tendencies, organized crime, among other issues. More research is needed to advance on understanding how the narrative connections between transnational and state threats are constructed.

Although two different strategies for dealing with the Chinese regional presence are identified, based on a Gramscian and neo-Gramscian approach, we perceive an effort to form a consensus on the limits and problems of Chinese action in Latin America. Chinese investments are generally presented as inferior to Western ones, either because they are interpreted as a source of power and influence for an extra-regional actor, or because of the identification of problems related to socio-environmental conflicts, supposedly absent in American and European investments.

The two strategies proposed by the think tanks correspond to ideas in circulation in that country, however, it is worth highlighting the social origin of these visions. These are notions proposed by the dominant social classes and disseminated in spaces where decision-makers circulate widely, both in the private and public spheres. It is noteworthy that the Inter-American Dialogue, which has significant interaction with Latin American and Chinese leaders, is one of the think tanks with a more lenient view of the Chinese presence in the region.

Finally, there is an overlap between the ideas advocated by the selected institutes and official documents published by the U.S. government, in which, however, the view of China as a regional threat prevails. Therefore, it seems to us that - at present - the first view has found greater acceptance among U.S. policymakers. This points to the possible growth of challenges for Latin America since the moment when Washington will pressure the countries of the region to limit their relations with the China does not seem far off. It is important to highlight that the perception of China as a threat does not correspond to an objective reality, but to a U.S. strategy of regional presence and consensus building.

We believe that this work also encourages new lines of research aimed at analyzing how U.S. leaders think about the exercise of their hegemony in Latin America today. Although not our original aim and beyond our scope, based on observations made throughout our analyses, Latin America is usually treated as a passive region without ideas on the proposed theme. However, more research is needed to corroborate this impression. In this sense, we highlight the importance of future studies that aim to analyze how Latin America is perceived by think tanks in this context of disputes.

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