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Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics

Pandemic Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean

by

Li Xing, Javier Vadell, and Florencia Rubiolo

Empirical analysis of China's health diplomacy toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that even though the region remains peripheral among China's foreign priorities its health diplomacy functions as a diffusion tool for increasing its soft power in the region, particularly against the background of the evolving China–United States rivalry. The source and development of Chinese soft power in the Global South should be understood as the diffusion effect of the combination and interdependence of its material hard power and its ideational soft power.

Un análisis empírico de la diplomacia sanitaria de China hacia América Latina y el Caribe en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19 sugiere que, aunque la región sigue ocupando un lugar periférico entre las prioridades exteriores de China, su diplomacia sanitaria funciona como una herramienta de difusión para aumentar su poder blando en la región, particularmente en el contexto de la rivalidad entre China y Estados Unidos. La fuente y el desarrollo del poder blando chino en el Sur Global deben entenderse como el efecto disperso de la combinación e interdependencia de su poder duro material y su poder blando ideacional.

Keywords: *Soft power, Diffusion, Health diplomacy, Pandemic, China–Latin America and Caribbean relations*

The worldwide discussion of China's global rise is centered on the broad impact of its material hard power. Beijing's policies in finance, currency, investment, trade, security, environmental issues, resources, food security, raw materials, and prices are increasingly connected with the life and well-being of millions of people outside of China's borders. As a result, China is increasingly seen as indispensable in the way that the United States has historically been. It has generated incremental growth in the global economy that has made its success significant for the welfare of other countries.

Underlining the impact of China's global rise is its economic expansion to the Global South, mainly Africa and Latin America, historically Western colonies and within the Western sphere of influence. China's investment and outsourcing are bringing about tangible socioeconomic and sociopolitical

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transformations in these two continents and raising the question whether the relationships involved constitute a South-South partnership or a North-South relationship.

Will China be a destructive or a constructive world power? A status-quo or a revisionist one? A force for continuity or a force for change? One of the pillars of the world order is a commitment to liberal values and a liberal agenda. This order has traditionally been associated with what might be termed value politics (Flockhart and Li, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that the rise of China is viewed as a challenge not only in terms of material competition (hard power) but also in terms of value politics (soft power and normative power) (Hanania, 2020; Ellis et al., 2022).

The objective of this article is to analyze China's health diplomacy toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from a soft-power perspective. It suggests that, although the region remains peripheral among Chinese foreign priorities, Beijing's health diplomacy functions as a tool for improving its image and exhibiting its soft power, particularly in the new era of growing China–United States rivalry. The article consists of four sections. The first presents our conceptual propositions for understanding the sources and means of soft power and the causal relationship between hard and soft power. These propositions pave the way for the second section, which explains why Chinese pandemic diplomacy represents the dissemination of soft power in the region. The third section addresses the development of soft-power initiatives and institutionalization processes in China's approach to Latin America and the Caribbean. In the last section the emphasis is on the health dimension of Chinese soft power, focused on China's role in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the conclusion we synthesize the theoretical and empirical parts of the analysis and propose some areas for further research.

CONCEPTS AND ANALYTICAL PROPOSITIONS

Theories of international relations, be they realist, liberalist, constructivist, or Marxist, attempt to show how power variables lead to certain outcomes. Power is an elusive concept, and there is no consensus among international-relations scholars regarding its nature and role. In many ways, the United States invented the concept of soft power and pioneered its use and measurement (McClory, 2015). In discussing hard power and soft power we are drawn into a U.S.- or West-centric discourse context. Terms such as "power," "order," "institution," "structure," "norm," and "value" have arisen from Western historical contexts and political and theoretical discourses. The concept of soft power was introduced by Nye (1990a; 1990b; 2004; 2005; 2010; 2011) against the background of the coming dissolution of the USSR and the end of the bipolar hard-power competition. The U.S. triumph in the Cold War was believed to be convincing evidence of American soft power. Since then, the world order has entered an age of soft power, and the perceived superiority of soft power as a concept and a foreign policy guideline has been widely accepted in international relations and politics.

Although there is growing interest in studying China's soft power from both internal and external perspectives, there is a tendency to analyze and judge it in relation to its compliance with normative standards in line with Nye's notions. According to some critics it often becomes a material entity that can be measured (see McClory, 2015). It is argued that soft power, like identity and security, is a social construction (Callahan, 2015). Others suggest that soft power in Chinese politics is simply a reactive/defensive foreign policy strategy aimed at reducing the global "China threat" environment and enhancing regime legitimacy (Edney, 2015). In applying Nye's concept to China's international relations strategies and foreign policy, we need to ask three questions: (1) Are the *forms* of soft power a product of sources such as culture, sociopolitical values, and foreign policy, or are they a byproduct, reflection, or extended consequence of hard power? (2) Are the *causal mechanisms* through which soft power can bring about desirable outcomes in international relations shaped more by shared values, norms, and ideologies or by "structural power" (Strange, 1988: 3)? (3) Is soft power a *dependent* or an *independent* variable?

Despite the richness of Nye's concept, it fails to specify the tools and mechanisms by which soft power influences international relations and politics (Rothman, 2011). Huntington (1996: 92) has pointed to the material success and hard-power achievements that are the preconditions for soft power to play its role:

What, however, makes culture and ideology attractive? They become attractive when they are seen as rooted in material success and influence. Soft power is power only when it rests on a foundation of hard power. Increases in hard economic and military power produce enhanced self-confidence, arrogance, and belief in the superiority of one's own culture or soft power compared to those of other peoples and greatly increase its attractiveness to other peoples. Decreases in economic and military power lead to self-doubt, crises of identity, and efforts to find in other cultures the keys to economic, military, and political success.

Huntington argues that cultural and ideological attraction depends first and foremost on material success, and this assertion is vividly reflected in the ongoing China–United States rivalry—a competition between an existing power struggling to maintain its hard power and global influence and a rising power striving to catch up and to translate its economic success into the power of attraction and emulation.

The following propositions are important for studying Chinese soft-power development in terms of its global rise in general and Beijing's pandemic diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean in particular. First, the *forms* of Chinese soft power are not a product of given sources such as Chinese culture, Chinese sociopolitical values, and foreign policy. Rather, they are a byproduct, a reflection, or an extended consequence of Chinese material and hard power. Second, the *causal mechanisms* through which Chinese soft power is to be understood are brought about and shaped by China's hard power, which paves the way for the diffusion that leads to soft-power advancement, rather than the other way around. Third, Chinese soft power is a *dependent* variable, playing a proxy role in the country's efforts to become a globally attractive and persuasive power.

Although Chinese hard power does not automatically translate into soft power, Chinese soft-power increase is the diffusion effect of that hard power. Fourth, the *expansion* of Chinese soft power in the Global South, including Asia, Latin America, and Africa, is driven by the diffusion of the benefit it receives from China's hard power. This diffusion is manifested in the internalization of external policy norms and the ideational impact of China's values, culture, and governance model brought about by Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (Vangeli, 2018; 2022) and its pandemic diplomacy.

To summarize, China's four-decade economic success in delivering economic growth and prosperity while maintaining sociopolitical stability has normative consequences for the thinking and positioning of international actors, who are inclined to adopt a cooperative or even an emulative relationship with China. The growing interdependence and interconnectivity between China and the Global South will increase the ideational influence of the "Chinese model" and socialize various actors into the "Chinese way of doing things," integrating them into institutionalized structures and China-led international development cooperation. Norm diffusion becomes the source of the attraction of China's soft power, influencing the policies and attitudes of other states and shaping perceptions, cognition, and preferences among international actors.

METHODOLOGY: SOFT POWER AND HEALTH DIPLOMACY

Health appears in the international relations literature as an understudied dimension of soft power, but in the pandemic scenario this dimension has become central to diplomacy, particularly for great and emerging powers (Fazal, 2020). As a dimension of soft power, Youde (2008) suggests, it can allow a country to demonstrate its moral authority, provide a concrete demonstration of certain political values, and even "make a country's culture more attractive if the care reflects upon the provider's country in some way." In the case of China, health has not been neglected as a dimension of diplomacy, but it has played a smaller role than trade, finance, and culture. The focus has traditionally been on bilateral health cooperation, particularly directed to African developing countries. China's first overseas health program consisted of a medical team sent to Algeria in March 1963 (Brautigam, 2011). With its growing role in the international arena and more active participation in multilateral institutions, Beijing has also started to show a growing willingness to participate in multilateral health institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Although it has avoided collaboration with surveillance systems and information sharing (Youde, 2018), through the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the WHO in January 2017 Xi Jinping committed the country to building the Health Silk Road, an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur, 2020). In fact, according to some analysts, the Health Silk Road got stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic, opening a new area of cooperation for the Belt and Road Initiative (Cao, 2020; Calabrese, 2022; Huang, 2022).

Chinese health diplomacy is an important soft-power tool that is reinforced in the pandemic context. The motivations are diverse but mostly summarized in the need to improve its international image, particularly after the strong criticism for its initial handling of the outbreak in Wuhan (Fazal, 2020; Lee, 2021). The focus on developing nations also connects with the Chinese foreign policy narrative of South-South cooperation, but besides this altruistic goal the government regards health diplomacy as one more way to ensure support and gain access to necessary resources (Youde, 2010) and other domestic and foreign policy goals, including security, economic growth, and business interests (Brautigam, 2011).

Although Latin America and the Caribbean are not the main destination of China's economic aid, credit for infrastructure development, or foreign direct investment, the region did become a major recipient of health soft-power efforts from Beijing. As we have seen, health diplomacy as a mechanism of soft power should be regarded as a byproduct or reflection of Chinese hard power. In this context, it must be highlighted that besides China's global material power—particularly in the economic sphere—the country has also become a crucial extraregional economic power for every Latin American and Caribbean state. As Telias and Urdinez (2021) suggest, the economic relationship has been a central driver of Chinese health cooperation in the region. One example is Venezuela, the main recipient of Chinese health aid “given China's prior investment in that country and the extent of Venezuela's humanitarian emergency” (Sanborn, 2020: 3). A second example is Brazil. The two countries have a long-standing strategic partnership, both are part of the BRICS, and Brazil has been Beijing's top trade partner in Latin America and the Caribbean since 2009, with a total bilateral trade of US\$163 billion in 2021 (ITC, 2022). From China's point of view, underpinning the evolving economic relations with its major economic partners in Latin America and the Caribbean is a main driver of health cooperation (Niu, 2020) as a tool for improving its image through soft-power mechanisms, building a “China–CELAC [Community of Latin American and Caribbean States] community of health” (Wang Yi, 2021).

Another major driver of China's relatively quick response to Latin America's needs in the context of the health crisis was political. Beijing's dependence on the region for natural resources has been well studied (Liang, 2019; Rubiolo, 2020). The need to secure continued access to natural resources in one of the main natural-resources-exporting regions was a major motivation for its timely and effective response. A second political motivation was Beijing's effort to increase the appreciation of Chinese values and culture (Telias and Urdinez, 2021) in the region, building on its consolidated economic power there. A third political motivation was the competition between the United States and China for influence in the region. Several writers argue that China's mask and vaccine diplomacy was mediated by political considerations regarding U.S.-China tensions (Telias and Urdinez, 2021). In this same vein, Malacalza and Fagaburu (2022: 19), examining vaccine diplomacy in Latin America, stress that the geopolitical strategies behind the vaccine transactions of China and the United States show that “the bid for access and political and economic influence is on the rise” in the region.

The response to China's answers to the region's urgencies was immediately positive and strengthened Beijing's favorable image in Latin America and the Caribbean, but the cultural and ideological gap is still wide. The countries of the region have different views on China. Although it is considered a successful development model, it also entails risks and challenges for which the region has not established any common definition or strategy (Bernal-Meza, 2021),

Regarding the responses to the pandemic, China's aid efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean were unprecedented, but, as Bernal-Meza (2021) points out, it must also be recognized that China was unable to process critical information about the scale of the epidemic in a timely fashion, thus weakening the WHO's capacity to act. Also, there is still a lack of transparency (or information) about China's humanitarian spending, including COVID-19 health cooperation figures, which represents a limitation to analysis and makes it difficult for recipient countries to be informed about conditions, dimensions, and quality of donations (Kurtzer, 2020)

CHINA-LATIN AMERICA/CARIBBEAN RELATIONS: FROM ECONOMIC POWER TO INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND SOFT-POWER INITIATIVES

For developing countries, China's hard-power achievements as an alternative economic development model seem to be the major source of attraction. Latin America and the Caribbean countries are a case in point, given their growing need for funding sources other than traditional investors and donors for developing infrastructure and their governments' readings of the opportunities that Chinese investments and loans represent in this regard (Creutzfeldt, 2016; Gallagher and Myers, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated trends toward hegemonic interdependence such as the United States-China "trade war" and the sharp disputes over technology. The United States' traditional sphere of influence, Latin America and the Caribbean, acquired increasing economic and financial commitments with China and became a theater of competition for influence in which soft power was an essential tool. There would, however, be no possibility of promoting the diffusion of ideas via soft power without China's economic power. Its hard-power achievements as an alternative commodity purchaser or alternative lender-of-last-resort and a supplier of public goods in pandemic times (China-SCPRC, 2021) are inseparable from its soft-power appeal.

The promotion and enhancement of Chinese soft power is, as Vadell (2022) states, "an outcome of Chinese hard power based on its economic strength and material capabilities understood as a 'totality-relationality.'" In geographical terms, "the diffusion of norms and practices represents the projection of Chinese power via an institutional network as part of a 'hybrid Confucian geopolitics'" that proposes to overcome the zero-sum game of conventional geopolitics to establish a world system based on the principle of a community of shared future for mankind.

Economically, by the beginning of the twenty-first century China was becoming a regular consumer and buyer of primary goods, mainly from

Latin America and the Caribbean and Africa, strengthening commercial and financial ties in an unprecedented way. As Vadell (2019: 117) has pointed out, “strong bonds established over time between Latin America and the Caribbean and the PRC evolved from trade cooperation to strategic partnerships and more complex action plans that involve investment and financial cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, energy, manufacturing, infrastructure, technological and scientific innovation, and information.” China has become the major player regarding significant infrastructure projects in the region (Dussel Peters, 2019) and the main lender via policy banks—the China Development Bank and China Eximbank—despite a decline in 2019 (Myers and Gallagher, 2020).

Regarding foreign direct investment, China is becoming an outstanding partner for most countries in the region. The amount of its investment remains behind that of their traditional partners, particularly the United States and Spain. Exact investment figures are elusive because of the difficulty of distinguishing the country of origin of the investment from third countries. China “does not appear as a significant source of FDI in the official statistics, despite having had a growing presence as an investor in the region over the last decade” (ECLAC, 2020). Several sources stress China’s growing presence as an investor in Latin America and the Caribbean, accounting for an increasing proportion of foreign direct investment, mergers and acquisitions, and project announcements since 2010 (ECLAC, 2020; Dussel Peters, 2019; Chonn Ching, 2021). According to Ding et al. (2021), “the stock of Chinese investment in Latin America and the Caribbean as a share of China’s total overseas investment stock, after remaining stable for most of the early 2000s, increased from 12 percent in 2014 to a peak of 21.4 percent in 2017.” These figures, they stress, include the Latin American and Caribbean countries considered offshore financial centers.

Trade is the cornerstone of China’s economic power in Latin America and the Caribbean. China has become Latin America and the Caribbean’s second-largest trading partner, driven by an interindustrial-based exchange. The countries of the region export raw materials and low-value-added agricultural manufactures in response to China’s growing demand for natural resources and imported industrial goods. In 2020 China’s total trade with Latin America amounted to US\$291 billion. Brazil, Mexico, and Chile were its main trade partners in the region. Total bilateral trade reached US\$100 billion for Brazil and US\$40 billion for Chile. In both cases China was the country’s main trade partner worldwide. For Argentina, Mexico, and Ecuador, although China’s participation has notably increased in recent years, it remains the second.

Institutionally, the more important step was the creation of the China-CELAC Forum on January 8 and 9, 2015, in Beijing. This event was the first move in the institutional framework of cooperation, trade, and investment between China and the Latin American and Caribbean countries. At the forum’s second meeting, held on January 21 and 22, 2018, in Santiago de Chile, China’s minister of foreign affairs, Wang Yi, formally invited the 33 countries to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (Wang Yi, 2018; Vadell, 2022). The forum is consolidating a pattern of political and economic relations with developing countries known as the “South-South relationship” or

“South-South cooperation” (Vadell, Lo Bruto, and Leite, 2020). Its triennial meetings are shaping the institutionalization of relations between China and the Global South that address issues of cooperation and economic aid, investment, trade stimulation, and loan possibilities.

Some scholars, among them Jakóbowski (2018) and Alden and Alves (2016), have described the Chinese movements in the Global South as a “diplomacy of forums.” This tactic can be considered as an innovative way of exercising soft power and norm diffusion. From the beginning of the 2000s, China has developed a worldwide network of dialogues and institutions with developing countries as a regional platform for facilitating bilateral agreements (Vadell, 2022; Wang Hongying, 2014). The China–CELAC Forum spreads and nurtures its relational soft power in a holistic and dynamic concentric circle (Vadell, 2022). In addition to its ministerial meetings every three years, the forum contemplates eight subforums funded from the beginning. Despite the economic crisis and the pandemic, the scenario of rapprochement between China and Latin America and the Caribbean could not have been more propitious. The third meeting took place, virtually, on December 3, 2021, and the health agenda played a fundamental role in the discussion (MOFA, 2021). In addition, as a result of close health and vaccine cooperation,¹ special emphasis was placed on more intense cooperation with regard to poverty reduction in a postpandemic economic recovery, in particular infrastructure construction and digital technology (Hu, 2022).

In this context, the forum has agreed to establish a special program for infrastructure loans. As mentioned above, Chinese investments in Latin America and the Caribbean have increased in the past decade, mostly concentrated in the extractive industries, energy, and infrastructure, with increased participation in the transport sector and renewable energies. According to diverse sources, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Peru are the region’s main investment destinations (Ding et al., 2021; Liang, 2019). The shift in Chinese investment from extractive industries to a more diversified basket including renewable energies, manufactures, technology, and transportation has outstanding potential for complementarity with Latin American and Caribbean infrastructure needs. From China’s perspective, this shift responds to a global reorientation of foreign investment driven by its need to relocate capital away from sectors with surplus capacity domestically (Ding et al., 2021).

Although the region was not originally part of the Belt and Road Initiative, during the China–CELAC Forum meeting in January 2018 the representatives agreed that “the Latin American and Caribbean countries are part of the natural extension of the Maritime Silk Route and are indispensable participants in the international cooperation on the Belt and Road” (Wang Xianmin, 2018). In November 2017, Panama became the first Latin American country to sign the initiative’s memorandum of understanding. The following 19 countries followed: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Peru, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Koop, 2019). In February 2022, Argentina became the twentieth country in the region to sign the memorandum of understanding. It is important to underline that participation in the initiative is embodied in a bilateral agreement and its potential benefits are calculated on a country-to-country rather than a regional basis.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the enhancement of bilateral relations within the region, particularly in terms of health cooperation, is viewed as a concrete alternative for countries dealing with an uncertain economic scenario. Perhaps the paradigmatic case of vaccine cooperation between China and Latin America and the Caribbean was with Cuba, when the two countries announced the joint patent for a pan-corona vaccine on June 7, 2022 (Flounders, 2022).

The main holistic dimension of Chinese South-South cooperation in Latin America and the Caribbean is trade, investment, and loans. The Belt and Road Initiative, with its appealing narrative, adaptability, and flexibility, is becoming more attractive for pursuing the region's economic stability. This is a direct effect of Chinese economic hard-power success.

CHINESE PANDEMIC DIPLOMACY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: FROM ECONOMIC COOPERATION TO MASK DIPLOMACY AND THE EXTENSION OF THE HEALTH SILK ROAD

China's health diplomacy and its use as a soft-power tool for improving Beijing's image and strengthening links with the Global South are not a new trend. Its active health diplomacy toward Africa began in the 1960s and has benefited its reputation in several countries in the continent. Some analysts, such as Youde (2018), argue that Beijing is willing to collaborate and abide by at least some international society norms and goals while maintaining its own traditions and values. Chinese efforts in Africa articulate and nurture the international health goals portrayed by international organizations and nongovernmental organizations by connecting the deployment of its medical teams with international goals (Youde, 2018). China's increasing investment in health care on the African continent since the pandemic has strengthened the Health Silk Road (Bartlett, 2022). Vadell, Lo Brutto, and Leite (2020) and Domínguez Martín (2018) interpret China's cooperation with the Global South since the 1960s as a new alternative to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that is acquiring more relevance because of Beijing's hard-power attributes. The strengthening of this new regime goes hand in hand with its global economic expansion. Most recently, during the *Ebola* crisis in 2012–2014, China launched an unprecedented response to the epidemic in West Africa that became its largest-ever health emergency relief effort overseas (Tang et al., 2017).

The Latin American/Caribbean experience is significant for the study of Chinese soft power because, first, as Malacalza and Fagaburu (2022: 13) show, while China and the United States concentrate more than half of the global technological capacity for COVID-19 vaccine production, it is China that became the leading exporter of COVID-19 vaccines to the low- and middle-income countries, and, according to Knoell (2021), in June 2021 Latin America and the Caribbean countries were the largest recipients of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines per capita in the world. Finally, the Health Silk Road and other forms of creative cooperation during the pandemic were "part of President Xi Jinping's trademark BRI [Belt and Road Initiative], which has evolved from originally focusing on building infrastructure in developing countries to

including a wide range of other sectors from technology to space to security to medicine" (Bartlett, 2022; see also Lancaster, Rubin, and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China's main tool of soft power has been its health cooperation in what was labeled first "mask diplomacy" and then "vaccine cooperation" (Mardell, 2020). This diplomacy consists of policy cooperation and aid to certain countries dramatically affected by COVID-19, which reached Latin America and the Caribbean countries in March 2020 with a robust roll-out. This aid had two main dimensions, one discursive, symbolic, and cultural and the other material (donations of medical equipment, software, specialists, etc.) and took place both bilaterally and via CELAC.

At the bilateral level, China's action was immediate. Building on the experience gained in deploying donations in Southeast Asia and some European countries, it managed to mobilize resources to assist the countries of the region ahead of any other international power. Between February and June 2020 alone, China provided over US\$128 million in medical-related donations to 33 countries. In July it announced a US\$1 billion loan for vaccine access (Guevara, 2021). Three main destinations (Venezuela, Brazil, and Chile) accounted for 61.4 percent of China's total donations (Wilson Center, 2022). Measured in US\$ per capita, the greatest impact of such donations was in the Caribbean countries and Venezuela. The fact that Venezuela was the largest recipient of aid from China is not surprising given the humanitarian emergency that the country was experiencing after the economic crisis of 2015 (Pantoulas and McCoy, 2022).

In addition to government assistance, the following private and state-owned Chinese companies have made donations in Latin America: Huawei, BGI, China Three Gorges Corporation, NBF, CHCEC, Alifante, Tencent, CNPC, GAC Group, DiDi, ZTE, CATIC, Alibaba, COSCO, CCCC Dredging Group, Dahua Technology, Microport, Fosun, COFCO International, Trip.com Group, WanHuida, Nu Group, Yutong, China Communications Construction, ICBC, Bank of China, TikTok, and Envision Energy, ICBC (Alizila, 2020; Garrison, 2020, Lancaster, Rubin, and Rapp-Hooper, 2020).

International decentralized cooperation by Chinese non-central-government actors was more active with certain countries in Latin America. Sister (twin)-city linkages are one of many examples of China's expansive subnational diplomacy in the region. Large cities in China have shipped equipment to Chinese embassies or governments in the region for distribution. For example, the city of Chongqing in central China delivered 1,000 protective suits, 1,000 surgical suits, and 5,400 N95 masks to Ecuador in early April, according to China's embassy there. Suzhou donated 20,000 masks and 200 hazmat suits to Panama's government later that same month, and the city of Nanjing donated 30,000 masks to Colombia (Myers and Barrios, 2022).

According to official figures, the main recipients of donations from Chinese regional and municipal governments to Latin America were Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. In the Argentine case, donations came from Hangzhou, Shanghai, Chongqing, Nanchang, and Guangzhou. For example, the city of Hangzhou gave Argentina 196,000 masks, 20,000 pairs of disposable gloves, 5,000 disposable protective suits for medical use, 2,500 COVID-reactive test kits, 2,000 pairs of protective glasses, 550 digital thermometers, and 3 infrared digital thermometers in March 2020 (*Telam*, 2020). Shanghai donated to the city

of Rosario 3,000 N95 masks, 300 Jijua protective suits, and 20,000 surgical masks (*La Capital*, 2020). The city of Chongqing provided the city of Córdoba with 1,600 disposable masks, 1,520 surgical masks, and 1,200 disposable protectors (CBA24N, 2022). Shanghai and Chongqing are sister cities with Rosario and Córdoba, respectively.

Brazil has received donations from the following Chinese cities and regions: Shanghai, Shangxi, Shenzhen, Jiangmen, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, Qingdao, Guiyang, Sichuan, Guangzhou, Dongguan/Fujian, Jiangsu, Gansu, Henan, and Hebei. The city of São Paulo received donations of masks directly from the municipal government of Shanghai, its sister city since 1988 (Leikang, 2020).

Uruguay was also a top destination for decentralized cooperation from China. It has multiple sister-city agreements, among them Paysandu with the city of Guangxi, Lavalleja with Sichuan, La Paloma with Zhoushan, the province of Rocha with its counterpart Hainan, Florida with the city of Kainfeng, Montevideo with Guangxi, Qingdao, and Guangzhou, Salto with Foshan, Rivera with Guizhou, and Trinidad with Weifang (PRC Embassy in Uruguay, 2020b). The regions and cities that donated medical equipment to their counterparts in Uruguay during the pandemic were Chengdu, Chongqing, Qingdao, Guangzhou, Guangxi, Jiangxi, Hainan, Sichuan, Shanxi, and Qingdao (PRC Embassy in Uruguay, 2020b).

Although CELAC is not very strong in a fragmented regional scenario,² it entered into a dialogue with Chinese health specialists in which Mexico, as president pro tempore of CELAC, had a prominent role. In January, under Mexican leadership, the agency stimulated a consensus to follow up on coronavirus outbreaks around the world, and in March, through the Mexican foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard, called a virtual ministerial meeting of Latin American health ministers and the Chinese National Health Commission, through its vice president, Zeng Yixin, in which 30 ministers participated along with representatives of the Pan American Health Organization, the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean, the Caribbean Community, and the Latin American and Caribbean Economic System.

China's aid experiences in the past two years have been flexible, multidimensional, and multilevel, involving a range of diverse actors. The cooperation took place between governments, between subnational units and between them and national governments, and between large Chinese companies and national/subnational governments. Washington, concerned about China's growing presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, responded (although to a lesser degree) by donating medical supplies to some countries in the region. In terms of vaccines, the United States has been more assertive, becoming the main donor by February 2022 with a total of 53 million doses (Harrison, Horwitz, and Zissis, 2022). Nevertheless, as Lancaster, Rubin, and Rapp-Hooper (2020) have pointed out, it has not done itself any favors with its pandemic response, and its relative absence from early global health leadership has left China plenty of room to maneuver.

There is an evolving transition in the global order in which the balance of power is shifting toward China. China's aid to Latin America and the Caribbean in the pandemic context is yet another indicator of this gradual transition and a clear sign of Beijing's willingness to become a recognized global power.

FINAL REMARKS

The debate on the rise of China is entering a new stage, and so is the discussion on China's soft power. Beijing is struggling to increase and nurture its soft-power capabilities to create an image of a benevolent global superpower. It is increasingly acknowledged that its engagement with other regions is generating distinct socialization dynamics in the international system and that it is gradually taking the role of a norm maker. Two central conclusions can be drawn from this article. First, the source of Chinese soft power cannot be conceptualized merely in terms of popular culture, mass media, and political values. Emphasis should be placed on the interdependence of material (hard) power and ideational (soft) power. The emergence of China's soft power is shaped less by the deliberate state-led promotion of its cultural image, nation branding, and public diplomacy than by its economic success and the normative expansion of its global role.

In the Latin America and the Caribbean case, as analyzed above, the pandemic context can be seen as a golden opportunity to transform the orientation of its international relations from a trade- and finance-centered one to a wider and more diversified spectrum. Chinese health diplomacy underpins China's positive role in the region and is contributing to a gradual change in the country's image. Given the centrality of vaccines as a tool for mitigating the impact of the disease, China's diplomatic efforts toward the region are nurturing its role as a public goods provider (China-SCPRC, 2021) and strengthening a more diversified perception of the benefits of its presence.

More than ever, in the pandemic context Chinese soft power may have less to do with the attraction of the Chinese political system and cultural values than with China as a metaphor: learning how to do it and doing it your own way. Chinese mask and vaccine diplomacy may represent a relaunching and projection of the Health Silk Road as an important component of the Belt and Road Initiative and as an active deployment of Chinese soft power. This regional health diplomacy, in the context of China–United States rivalry, is shaping a new geopolitics of health in the region (and in the world) in a postpandemic era.

NOTES

1. "In June 2022, China was the first and largest vaccine supplier to many LAC countries, and has carried out joint research, development and production cooperation with many countries in the region on COVID-19 vaccines, drugs and medical equipment" (Hu, 2022).

2. Brazil suspended its participation in CELAC in January 2020, but the new government led by Lula has renewed Brazil's participation.

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