



Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas, Políticas y Relaciones Internacionales

Tema:

Análisis bibliométrico de la producción académica sobre el Foro China-CELAC y sus implicaciones en las relaciones sino-latinoamericanas (2015-2024)

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Resumen

Desde su creación en 2015, el Foro China-CELAC (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños) ha facilitado la creación de un canal de diálogo sobre diferentes áreas de interés, desempeñando un papel transformador en la configuración de las relaciones multilaterales y la dinámica interna de China y América Latina. Sin embargo, a pesar de su relevancia en el fortalecimiento de los mecanismos de cooperación sino-latinoamericanos en términos prácticos, actualmente existe una importante brecha académica. La literatura es limitada a la hora de abordar de manera exhaustiva la importancia y el impacto del Foro en el desarrollo de las relaciones entre estas dos regiones. Por esta razón, se propone realizar un estudio bibliométrico que aborde el papel transformador del Foro China-CELAC. A partir de una búsqueda bibliográfica en la base de datos Scopus, se utiliza un enfoque mixto para determinar las relaciones entre los autores citados, las palabras clave y, posteriormente, la evolución temporal de los estudios y los principales ejes temáticos. El análisis muestra un debate académico polarizado y limitado entre las implicaciones geopolíticas y económicas del Foro y la rivalidad entre China y Estados Unidos y sus tensiones comerciales, lo que permite visualizar oportunidades de investigación para profundizar en los estudios de casos nacionales y las evaluaciones de la “diplomacia de los foros”.

Palabras clave: *Foro China-CELAC, Análisis bibliométrico, Cooperación chino-latinoamericana, Diplomacia de foros, Multilateralismo.*

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Dedicatoria

A mis profesores Diego Ortiz y Santiago Ullauri, quienes se establecieron como mentores a lo largo de mi carrera, impulsándome a aventurarme en nuevas áreas y proyectos que han marcado profundamente mi trayectoria, y cuya guía y compromiso dejaron una huella imborrable en mi formación académica.

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Bibliometric Analysis of the China-CELAC Forum: Relevance, Challenges and Prospects for Research

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Abstract

Since its creation in 2015, the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum, has facilitated the creation of a channel for dialogue on different areas of interest, playing a transformative role in shaping multilateral relations and the internal dynamics of China and Latin America. However, despite its relevance in strengthening Sino-Latin American cooperation mechanisms in practical terms, there is currently a significant academic gap. The literature is limited in comprehensively addressing the importance and impact of the Forum in the development of relations between these two regions. For this reason, it is proposed to conduct a bibliometric study that addresses the transformative role of the China-CELAC Forum. Drawing from a bibliographic search in the Scopus database, a mixed approach is used to determine the relationships between cited authors, keywords and, subsequently, the temporal evolution of the studies and main thematic axes. The analysis shows a polarized and limited academic debate between the geopolitical-economic implications of the Forum and the China-US

rivalry and their trade tensions, allowing the visualization of research opportunities for the deepening of national case studies and evaluations of “forum diplomacy”.

Key words: *China-CELAC forum, Bibliometric analysis, Sino-Latin American cooperation, Forum diplomacy, Multilateralism.*

Resumen

Desde su creación en 2015, el Foro China-CELAC (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños) ha facilitado la creación de un canal de diálogo sobre diferentes áreas de interés, desempeñando un papel transformador en la configuración de las relaciones multilaterales y la dinámica interna de China y América Latina. Sin embargo, a pesar de su relevancia en el fortalecimiento de los mecanismos de cooperación sino-latinoamericanos en términos prácticos, actualmente existe una importante brecha académica. La literatura es limitada a la hora de abordar de manera exhaustiva la importancia y el impacto del Foro en el desarrollo de las relaciones entre estas dos regiones. Por esta razón, se propone realizar un estudio bibliométrico que aborde el papel transformador del Foro China-CELAC. A partir de una búsqueda bibliográfica en la base de datos Scopus, se utiliza un enfoque mixto para determinar las relaciones entre los autores citados, las palabras clave y, posteriormente, la evolución temporal de los estudios y los principales ejes temáticos. El análisis muestra un debate académico polarizado y limitado entre las implicaciones geopolíticas y económicas del Foro y la rivalidad entre China y Estados Unidos y sus tensiones comerciales, lo que permite visualizar oportunidades de

investigación para profundizar en los estudios de casos nacionales y las evaluaciones de la “diplomacia de los foros”.

Palabras Clave: *Foro China-CELAC, Análisis bibliométrico, Cooperación chino-latinoamericana, Diplomacia de foros, Multilateralismo.*

Introduction

In recent decades, China has positioned itself as a crucial player on the global stage, forging strategic alliances that currently exert major influence on the foreign policy of many of the member states. Specifically, in Latin America, through initiatives such as the China-CELAC Forum or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian giant has established itself as a strong strategic partner that has enabled countries in the region to explore various avenues of development. In particular, the China-CELAC Forum (hereafter, the Forum), formally established in 2015, has facilitated the creation of a channel for dialogue on different areas of interest to the actors involved, shaping their multilateral relations and the internal dynamics of these two regions. However, contrary to the enormous implications that the Forum and the Sino-Latin American cooperation sub-processes have had, there is a scarce approach to the topic in the academic literature and few referential documents. This represents an obstacle for academic research in order to understand the current and even future cooperation processes that are being documented academically, thus establishing the gap that gives rise to the central question of this study: What is the academic output generated by the China-CELAC Forum since its creation?

The limited literature can be broadly grouped into two principal lines of thought. The first one characterizes the Forum as an effective South-South cooperation platform. It fosters long-term development between China and Latin America through the expansion of trade links, infrastructure financing, and the diversification of the region's diplomacy beyond the traditionally dominant actors (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018). Notably, some authors have highlighted the importance of this Forum in strengthening South-South cooperation and have even argued for a new type of regionalism (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018). On the other hand, a second line of thought portrays the cooperation mechanism as a means of economic dependence. It entails the risks of economic imbalances and a possible erosion of regional autonomy in the long term (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

In this context, there is a significant problem in the existing literature analyzing comprehensively the Forum because, due to the limitations arising from an overemphasis on economic aspects in existing studies, other dimensions such as political-diplomatic, sociocultural, and environmental aspects continue to be neglected. Therefore, given the significance of this mechanism for the continent, it is extremely important to apply a broad and structural perspective that transcends thematic fragmentation solely into macroeconomic or geopolitical axes and incorporates sociocultural and environmental dimensions throughout the decade of the Forum.

Therefore, to address this gap, this study proposes conducting a bibliometric analysis to systematically map the scientific discourse surrounding the China-CELAC Forum. To that end, we relied on the Scopus database and identified 12 documents (eight in English and four in Spanish) published between 2015 and 2024 on this topic. Also, this

study applies a mixed-method bibliometric approach that combines quantitative co-citation and co-occurrence analysis with qualitative thematic coding that seeks to systematically identify the main thematic axes developed around the Forum, and reveal gaps not yet explored in previous studies. Thereby paving the way for the establishment of thematic dimensions such as political, economic, geopolitical, social, and environmental, which are defined and addressed throughout the systematic analysis.

Some preliminary results reveal a highly polarized academic debate between the geopolitical-economic implications of the Forum and the China-US rivalry and their trade tensions. A connection between theories such as “soft power,” “multilateralism,” and “regionalism” and the actual regional dynamics is also established through the keyword co-occurrence analysis, further pointing to “China” as the central bridge between concepts. Subsequent qualitative thematic coding generated five thematic dimensions: economic-commercial, geopolitical-strategic, political-diplomatic, social-cultural, and environmental-sustainable both for English and Spanish texts. This process underscored a prioritization of the economic and strategic axes, while the environmental and socio-cultural topics remain underexplored. These findings highlight critical gaps for a comprehensive understanding of the Forum and contribute to the formation of a solid basis for the design of new areas of study on Sino-Latin American relations.

That way, this manuscript provides an empirically-derived framework of areas of research to systematically analyze the China-CELAC Forum in the future, moving the studies beyond economic dichotomies to examine comprehensively the structure and discourse of this mechanism, and even others. Furthermore, as a result of the limited scholarly, by mapping the current literature around the Forum this study proposes specific

lines of research for an incipient field of study, laying a conceptual and empirical basis for future studies and highlighting the most necessary thematic gaps to be addressed.

The subsequent analysis is structured into six sections. The second section outlines the background of the China-CELAC Forum, current lines of thought, and their limitations, providing context for the analysis that follows. The third section details the research design and methodology. The fourth section presents the results organized around five thematic dimensions and integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence. The fifth section provides a cross-dimensional discussion that synthesizes the previous findings, identifying thematic priorities, tensions, and research gaps in the academic production. Finally, the sixth section discusses the conclusions based on a systematic and exhaustive examination of existing academic production on the China-CELAC Forum.

Literature Review

The following section is divided into three parts to provide the necessary contextual and analytical basis for the study. First, section 2.1 summarizes the background of the China-CELAC Forum, providing a broad overview of the Forum's beginnings and institutionalization, ministerial meetings, and subsequent action plans, as well as its concrete impacts in various areas. Section 2.2 outlines the dominant academic lines of thought in the current literature, providing an understanding of how the cooperation mechanism and its relevance in the region are interpreted. Finally, section 2.3 identifies the analytical limitations that arise from these lines of thought, which allows the design of the research to be framed, addressing them and motivating the empirical strategy developed in the following section.

China's Influence in Latin America: Background to the Forum

This section provides a brief background on the Forum's origins and its relevance within China's multilateral strategy in the region, setting the stage for a more detailed exploration from the beginning of relations, ministerial forums and action plans, links with the BRI and concrete impacts in infrastructure and economy. In this way, by contextualizing the cooperation between the two actors and the China-CELAC Forum, we seek to lay the groundwork for the following sections, which examine the dominant interpretations in the literature (2.2) and the limitations that motivate the research design (2.3).

Beginnings & Institutionalization

Sino-Latin American relations began in the 1990s, when China began to work on multilateral processes because of its entry into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. Specifically, in the region these processes began to consolidate in 1993, when China established a strategic partnership with Brazil, which Herrera-Vinelli described as “the deepening of political, economic, social and cultural relations” (2022, p. 108).

Subsequently, after its admission to the WTO and the implementation of the Go Global Strategy in 2001, China accelerated the processes of horizontal and “diagonal” international cooperation, with an exponential increase in exports and imports by 26 times between 2000 and 2020 (Zhang and Lacerda, 2021), and the signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between China and countries in the region (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022). This international consolidation has allowed China to position itself as a key partner in the infrastructure and strategic sectors of the region, including energy, mining, and transportation (García, 2021; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018).

Another milestone in China's relationships with Latin America was its involvement with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The CELAC, created in 2011, with the aim of becoming a space to address integration and economic cooperation issues in the region, initiated its cooperation with China in 2012 through a series of visits by high-level ministers to Latin American countries (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022). This was the basis for the establishment of the China-CELAC Forum in the Declaration of the CELAC Summit held in Havana in January 2014 and subsequently, the first ministerial meeting in 2015 (Vadell, 2018).

Ministerial Forums & Action Plans

The Forum's ministerial meetings (2015, 2018, 2021) established a cooperative mechanism through multi-year action plans and sectoral sub-forums. The First China-CELAC Ministerial Forum, which took place in January 2015 in Beijing, transformed the continent into an area focused on peace, security, investment, infrastructure, resources, education, and environmental protection through the Cooperation Plan 2015-2019 (Vadell, 2018). Simultaneously, the Beijing Declaration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015) was established, which “sought to articulate greater dialogue and understanding with various LAC countries” (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022, p. 112). This is how the Summit became an unprecedented opportunity for Latin America to improve its industrial competitiveness in various fields and protect the environment (Gallagher, 2016).

In addition, this first rapprochement resulted in forums for integration in infrastructure such as the 1st China-LAC Infrastructure Cooperation Forum in 2016, conducting in-depth discussions on how to promote mutually beneficial cooperation in

infrastructure (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a). Similarly, the First China-CELAC Forum on Scientific and Technological Innovation was held in the same year, announcing a number of scientific collaboration programs between China, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as a Young Scientists Exchange Program (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016b).

The Second China-CELAC Ministerial Forum was held in 2018, and through the 1+3+6 plan, it sought to deepen the South-South cooperation between China, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The 1+3+6 plan proposed by China is composed of the following: a Development Priority Plan for the region; three strategic areas of interest: investment, financial cooperation, and trade; and six strategic areas: energy, infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, innovation in science and technology, and information systems (Vadell, 2018). Finally, the Third China-CELAC Ministerial Forum was held online in 2021, which adopted the Action Plan 2022-2024 with the objective of promoting trade and investment, joint projects in science and technology, cooperation in sustainable infrastructure, environmental protection, cultural exchange programs, scholarships, and public health (Xinhua, 2021).

The subsequent action plans of the respective ministerial forums are the perfect example that illustrates the Forum's impact within the region through common interests. Therefore, the China-CELAC Forum constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for Latin America to achieve the most significant steps in cooperation between both parties to achieve common goals, with renewed focus on economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental axes (Xinhua, 2021).

Sino-Latin American Cooperation Impacts at The Regional Level

In principle, these frameworks translated into concrete projects and policy linkages across the region through official documents such as the first 2008 White Paper for Latin America¹, an official document of the Chinese government communicating its policies in different areas, issued to strengthen cooperation in political, economic, and security terms. Following this 2008 policy document, China deepened ties through projects such as Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric in Ecuador through a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China in 2010 (AidData, 2010). Similarly, in 2011, a free trade agreement between China and Costa Rica came into force, liberalizing more than 90% of trade in goods (MOFCOM, 2011).

Subsequently, the second and final 2016 White Paper for Latin America and the Caribbean² was issued with the aim of improving coordination in multilateral spaces through agreements such as the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that were achieved with several countries in the region, such as Chile, Peru and Costa Rica (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022). Also, there were further references to the Belt and Road cooperation which paved the way for the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Chile and the BRI in 2018 (Belt and Road Portal, 2018; China-CELAC Forum, 2018). Another relevant example is COSCO's Chancay megaport (Peru), which went from being a partnership in 2019 to being financed and inaugurated in 2024 with a loan of almost \$1 billion from Chinese banks (Thome, 2024).

With the crisis caused by COVID-19 in 2020, the Ministerial Forum mechanism covered axes of cooperation regarding COVID-19 to support public health projects, Chinese

¹ The full text of the 2008 White Paper is available at: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-11/06/content_7179488_2.htm.

² The full text of the 2016 White Paper is available at: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/11/24/content_281475499069158.htm.

transnational trade and investment, and the coordination of global governance (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022). At the same time, the joint construction of the BRI project was promoted, “the bridge that links China with its main partners and strategic allies of the 21st century through a diverse agenda based on connectivity, infrastructure and trade” (Herrera-Vinelli, 2022, p. 116).

In this way, over the course of a decade, the Forum has established itself as a key dialogue platform between two regions, where, through a flexible diplomatic architecture, non-binding commitments and action plans are formulated and submitted to each participating actor for implementation. In particular, this flexible approach represents a critical element in the field of study to understand how the Forum achieves efficacy through a non-rigid, cooperative model based on consensus. This logic is consistent with studies on “forum diplomacy,” conceptualized as the practice of states and non-state actors participating in negotiations, cooperation, or political debates within institutionalized spaces that allow collaborative responses to complex transnational problems (Haegeman et al., 2015; Melchor, 2020).

Comparative evidence from leadership forums shows how these spaces structure cooperation and produce programmatic outcomes through declarations, action plans, and follow-up mechanisms (Kirton, 2016). The China–CELAC Forum exemplifies these dynamics, embodying innovative cooperation and multilateralism practices distinct from hard power approaches and conventional diplomatic consensus-building. Consequently, this overview clarifies the mechanism's contribution to South-South cooperation and points to the importance of systematic studies on its implications, a gap in Forum studies that is addressed in sections 2.2 and 2.3.

Dominant Strands in the Literature on the China-CELAC Forum

As detailed in the methodology section, a systematic search for academic literature around the Forum in different databases such as Latindex, Dialnet, SciELO, and Scopus yielded a limited corpus of 14 documents which, through a language filter to ensure analytical rigor, resulted in a final body of 12 key publications for further analysis. This corpus reveals how, to date, few authors have written about the China-CELAC Forum, as well as its main implications both on the continent and at the international level, including Javier Alberto Vadell (2018), Kevin P. Gallagher (2016), Eduardo Tzili-Apango (2018), and Lorena Herrera-Vinelli (2021), among others in the final selection.

In particular, after a systematic analysis of this corpus, as detailed in the third section, reveals a debate structured around two principal lines of thought. Specifically, the aforementioned works address the positioning of China as an important economic actor in Latin America, challenging the traditional hegemony of the United States (Gallagher, 2016). This has further developed China's multifaceted diplomatic strategy in the region that, through the China-CELAC Forum and the BRI, has expanded its influence, becoming an important trading partner, especially for Brazil, Chile, and Peru (Preciado Coronado, 2020; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018). Collectively, new development financial institutions, such as the BRICS New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Chinese investment in sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure, have also been embraced (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018).

At the same time, concerns have been raised about potential issues around Chinese investment and financing as the main driver of economic growth in the region, leading to

dependence on commodity exports to China and the “Commodity Consensus.” This describes a new economic and political-ideological order on the continent (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018) and concerns about premature deindustrialization, unfair competition, and environmental impact (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018). In the face of these problems, the development of strategies that can take full advantage of the opportunities of Sino-Latin American relations, which can mitigate their impact on regional autonomous governance and on the sovereignty of Latin American states, is promoted. This is achieved by strengthening national institutions, economic diversification, and environmental and social protection (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018).

Taken together, these contributions on the China-CELAC Forum reflect two principal lines of thought. The first approaches the Forum as an effective South-South cooperation platform serving as a pathway for long-term development through trade expansion, infrastructure investment, and multilateralism, thereby opening new diplomatic channels. Under this view, the Forum advances development through pragmatic cooperation mechanisms (Gallagher, 2016; Vadell, 2018; Legler et al., 2018; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022; Preciado Coronado, 2020). The second line of thought places special emphasis on the long-term imbalances in regional autonomy, dependence on commodity exports and the significant asymmetries this Forum may generate, potentially transforming it into a mechanism of economic dependence (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018).

However, despite the relevance of this Forum in strengthening South-South cooperation as a new type of regionalism (Vadell, 2018), current studies and lines of research present a notable challenge when it comes to comprehensively addressing the impact and importance of the China-CELAC Forum in the political, economic, social, and environmental

spheres of Latin America. These limitations reveal a conceptual and empirical gap in how academia frames the Forum in various areas, resulting in a thematic limitation and fragmentation of the academic approach. This is addressed in the next subsection which specifies why these strands are insufficient and how the research design responds to them.

China-CELAC Forum and the Lack of Theoretical Studies

As can be seen in the first section of the literature review, the China-CELAC Forum and its subsequent action plans illustrate the most significant steps in cooperation between both parties to achieve not only economic initiatives, but environmental, social, political, and geopolitical axes. However, the principal lines of thought mentioned above show a limited analytical framework when addressing different areas of interest within the Forum.

Specifically, due to an overemphasis on economic aspects, the political-diplomatic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions remain substantially underestimated, resulting in a thematic limitation that prevents a multidimensional assessment. Similarly, the literature on this subject remains dichotomized, which prevents comprehensive assessment of the Forum's true global impact across all domains over time, including persistent gaps and emerging agendas. Consequently, while these lines of thought capture important aspects of the mechanism, they face significant limitations.

This generates both conceptual and empirical voids that prevent a deep and systematic understanding of the Forum's implications across multiple potential dimensions. Therefore, given the identified research gap, the purpose of this study is to map the Forum's academic footprint by conducting a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. This will provide an empirically-derived framework of areas of research to systematically analyze the China-

CELAC Forum and propose specific lines of research for an incipient field of study, laying a conceptual and empirical basis for future studies.

To achieve this, the objective is pursued through a mixed-method that integrates a quantitative co-citation and co-occurrence analysis with qualitative thematic coding that seeks to identify the thematic axes and gaps not yet explored in current research. As outlined in subsequent sections, the research strategy is linked to the limitations identified, ensuring academically relevant results based on specific theoretical and empirical voids.

Method

This study employs a mixed bibliometric-qualitative design to directly address the limitations identified in the lines of thought defined above. Specifically, the research strategy is operationalized through five steps, detailed in the Table 1, to systematically map the academic discourse around the China-CELAC Forum. It starts with a quantitative analysis of co-citations and keyword co-occurrence to map the academic structure around the field, followed by qualitative thematic coding to identify underlying narratives and research gaps. Together, this integrated analysis results in a comprehensive assessment of the academic discourse of the Forum across different languages and time periods.

Bibliometrics is a field of study first formally defined by Pritchard (1969). Nevertheless, numerous scholars have proposed diverse conceptualizations and interpretations of bibliometrics and their scopes, allowing the assessment of scientific production in terms of quantity, quality, and impact across several topics, journals, authors, and countries (Salinas-Ríos and García-López, 2022). Accordingly, through an analysis of metadata extracted from scholarly research databases, bibliometric analysis provides a

comprehensive perspective on the current advancements in any given field of study (Osareh, 1996). More specifically, and applied to this study, this metadata commonly includes publication titles, citations, and keywords that can be used to generate a wide range of analyses and visual representations to elucidate the research landscape, as will be done with the quantitative analysis software VOSviewer (version 1.6.20).

Furthermore, bibliometric analyses can complement meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of a given research area (Zupic and Čater, 2015). In that sense and having outlined the quantitative insights provided by bibliometric analysis, it is crucial to complement these findings with a qualitative approach for a deeper understanding of the underlying themes and narratives (Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza, 2006).

Specifically, the qualitative phase relied on the interpretive coding of textual data using an original analytical framework of five dimensions, assisted by the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1.32924). This framework was developed by the systematization of key cooperation areas from the Forum's strategy and subsequent official documents, as established in the literature review, ensuring a comprehensive and structured analysis process of the Forum's axes (economic-commercial, political-diplomatic, geopolitical-strategic, sociocultural, and environmental-sustainable). This original framework was subsequently implemented in a word frequency analysis within the same software, providing additional ways to refine the reading of thematic emphases.

In this way, a bibliometric analysis was conducted to examine the academic output on the China-CELAC Forum and to uncover the thematic axes and knowledge gaps that

emerge from it. Accordingly, to address this, the variable under analysis is defined as “academic output”, operationalized through six steps using a mixed-methods approach: the corpus characterization and filtering, the co-citation patterns among cited authors, the keyword co-occurrence analysis, the thematic dimension coding through qualitative analysis, the word frequency, and the temporal evolution analysis, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Research Steps and Analytical Techniques

Research Step	Data Source	Technique
1. Corpus characterization and filtering	Scopus metadata	Descriptive count and language filtering
2. Co-citation analysis	Scopus database (cited references)	VOSviewer - Co-citation network analysis (threshold: 3 citations; full counting)
3. Keyword co-occurrence analysis	Scopus database (keywords)	VOSviewer - Keyword network analysis (threshold: 2 co-occurrences)
4. Thematic dimension coding	Full texts (EN/ES) in ATLAS.ti	ATLAS.ti - Intentional AI-assisted coding
5. Word frequency analysis	Full texts in ATLAS.ti	ATLAS.ti - Frequency analysis (threshold 60 EN / 40 ES)
6. Temporal evolution analysis	Publication metadata + coding results	Manual comparative analysis by time segment

Note. Own elaboration.

Corpus Characterization and Filtering

As a first step, in order to construct the document corpus, the search strategy utilized preliminary exploratory mapping in regional and international repositories such as Latindex, Dialnet, SciELO, and Scopus, using the search terms “China CELAC Forum” and its Spanish equivalent “Foro China CELAC,” for the title, abstract, and keyword sections. Consequently, these preliminary searches revealed a serious lack of research, with studies either minimally addressing the Forum or yielding no relevant results at all.

However, the results derived from the Scopus database proved to be the most substantial and focused on the theme of the China-CELAC Forum, yielding 14 documents that matched the search parameters. Furthermore, given Scopus' standing as a leading international multidisciplinary database, it is ideal for the main corpus of bibliometric analysis.

This initial characterization exhibited a heterogeneous language distribution, with eight documents in English, four in Spanish, one in Russian, and one in Portuguese. Despite the relevance of these contributions to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, the absence of additional research in Russian and Portuguese, coupled with the research team's lack of certified linguistic competence in those languages, precluded a systematic and rigorous translation of this literature. This practical limitation, combined with the recognition that the English- and Spanish-speaking world accounts for a large part of the available and relevant academic output on the China-CELAC Forum, led to the application of a second language filter that retains only studies in English and Spanish, resulting in a final corpus of 12 documents published between 2015 and 2024, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

List of publications in the Scopus database under the topic “China-CELAC Forum”.

Year	Authors’ full names	Title	Language
2015	Shixue Jiang	<i>China’s New Leadership and the New Development of China-Latin America Relations</i>	English
2019	Yuanbo Li and Xufeng Zhu	<i>The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America and the Caribbean</i>	English
2020	Gretchen Small	<i>Latin America and the Caribbean Bring the Western Hemisphere into the Belt and Road</i>	English
2022	Javier Vadell	<i>China’s Bilateral and Minilateral Relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean: the Case of China-CELAC Forum</i>	English
2022	Dan Banik and Benedicte Bull	<i>Multilateralism to the Rescue? Beijing’s Support for Multilateral Institutions during the COVID-19 Crisis</i>	English
2023	Pedro Paulo dos Santos, Yichao Li and José Alves	<i>The New Face of Multilateralism: The Case of “Chinese” Forums</i>	English
2023	Pedro Paulo dos Santos	<i>The Role of Forum Macao in the People’s Republic of China Foreign Policy</i>	English
2024	Nathalie Aminian and Cuauhtémoc Calderón Villarreal	<i>China-Mexico Economic Relationship in the Context of China’s Penetration in Latin America</i>	English
2018	Anna A. Lavut	<i>La iniciativa china “La Franja y La Ruta” y los países de América Latina y el Caribe</i>	Spanish
2020	Jaime Antonio Preciado Coronado	<i>Geopolítica de la planeación del desarrollo: el Consejo Suramericano de Infraestructura y Planeamiento (COSIPLAN-UNASUR) en el Foro CELAC-China</i>	Spanish
2021	Gabriel García	<i>América Latina y el Caribe en el siglo asiático: un análisis comparativo de las relaciones de Japón y</i>	Spanish

Year	Authors' full names	Title	Language
		<i>China con sus socios latinoamericanos desde la perspectiva del derecho internacional económico</i>	
2024	Eliane Megumi Akemi Terui Villegas and Juan González García	<i>El Foro China-CELAC en la disputa por la hegemonía económica global entre Estados Unidos y China, en América Latina y el Caribe</i>	Spanish

Note. Own elaboration.

This filtering enables an efficient comparative analysis of the selected languages regarding how thematic dimensions are addressed over time and how they evolve progressively through the integration of new topics in the global sphere, which are essential for the development of a comprehensive study. As a result of this process, the construction of the final corpus (12 documents) constitutes the first step of this study and works as the basis for all subsequent analyses. For the remaining five steps, these would be structured based on this corpus, specifically through two software tools: VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) to map the relationships between the authors cited and the keywords at the abstract level and ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1.32924) for in-depth qualitative analysis of the content of the texts.

Co-citation and Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

As the second and third step, the co-citation and keyword co-occurrence analyses were used to systematically map the academic structure around the China-CELAC Forum, providing methodological rigor in quantifiable terms even within a limited corpus. In particular, the software VOSviewer was implemented to generate a wide range of quantitative analyses and visual representations to elucidate the research landscape and identify the thematic concentration in the present corpus.

First, a co-citation analysis was conducted to facilitate the identification of groups of authors who are frequently co-cited within the bibliographies of the corpus, thereby revealing the academic basis and schools of thought that shape the Forum research within the scholarly discourse around the Forum. This was followed by the keyword co-occurrence analysis, which mapped the thematic structure by identifying those terms that commonly appear in tandem within the 12 texts on the China-CELAC Forum, thereby revealing thematic priorities within the primary documents.

For both analyses, the unit of analysis within the software was defined as all authors and keywords cited applying a full counting method. This approach allowed a minimum threshold to be established for each instance, enabling a complete and integrated visualization and a comprehensive understanding of actual literature attention.

Thematic dimension coding

Based on the quantitative mapping, a subsequent qualitative analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, which involved an intentional AI-assisted coding based on the original analytical framework of five dimensions to analyze the principal thematic focuses in the academic literature around the China-CELAC Forum. This framework was implemented by importing the filtered corpus of 12 texts extracted from Scopus written in English and Spanish and generating two parallel structures segmented by language to ensure consistency. The first focused on eight documents in English and the other on four documents in Spanish, applying identical categorization frameworks in five axes:

- Economic-trade dimension and *dimensión económica-comercial*.

- Environmental and sustainable dimension and *dimensión medioambiental y sostenible*.
- Geopolitical and strategic dimension and *dimensión geopolítica y estratégica*.
- Political-diplomatic dimension and *dimensión política-diplomática*.
- Social and cultural dimension and *dimensión social y cultural*.

This parallel coding approach enabled a comparative assessment of how, and to what extent, each document addressed the thematic dimensions, facilitating the visualization of the main differences between the topics of interest around the Forum and the evolution of these topics over the years. Additionally, by unifying quantitative and qualitative analyses around the same category axis, it is possible to cover political and geopolitical issues, economic cooperation, sustainable development, and socio-cultural exchanges in a more comprehensive and exhaustive manner, ensuring holistic comprehension of the Forum's critical contributions and challenges.

This process was implemented with the descriptive definitions in Table 3, serving as a conceptual basis to scan the texts for semantic patterns and terms related to the principal content of the respective dimension. After the initial codes were generated, they were manually reviewed to ensure precision and contextual accuracy, forming a validation cycle ran separately for English and Spanish document groups, maintaining linguistic integrity and enabling an effective comparative analysis.

Table 3*Thematic Codes*

Code / Dimension	Description
Economic–commercial	Trade relations, investment flows, financing, infrastructure, and the “commodity consensus.”
Political–diplomatic	Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, South–South cooperation, CELAC’s role, and Chinese foreign policy strategies.
Geopolitical–strategic	Power asymmetries, regional autonomy, China–US rivalry, and strategic positioning in Latin America.
Social–cultural	Academic exchange, cultural diplomacy, educational programs, and societal perceptions of China–LAC cooperation.
Environmental–sustainable	Ecological impacts, sustainable development, green finance, and environmental protection initiatives.

Note. Own elaboration.

Word Frequency and Temporal Evolution Analysis

In parallel, a word frequency analysis was performed within each structure, excluding stop words (e.g., articles and connectors) and under a threshold of 60 mentions for English documents and 40 in Spanish due to the numerical difference in texts in each language and the greater number of irrelevant terms derived from the English case compared to those in Spanish, also obtaining a more accurate visualization of the key concepts and their treatment

in the literature. In this way, through integrating bibliometric methods with qualitative coding and word frequency analysis, this study provides a comprehensive examination of how the China-CELAC Forum has been researched and discussed in academic publications.

Finally, to determine how the academic discussion evolved over the years, the final corpus was divided into three periods (2015-2018, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024) based on the Forum's key ministerial meetings, which, as documented in section 2.1, serve as a critical point that redefines institutional priorities and drives the progressive inclusion of new areas of interest when addressing the China-CELAC Forum and its agenda. Using both the coding data and the bibliometric outputs, a manual comparative analysis was carried out, allowing the identification of emerging axes and highlighting the diversification of the literature over the decade.

In this way, through the integration of bibliometric and qualitative analyses, this study presents a comprehensive framework for elucidating the academic discourse surrounding the China-CELAC Forum. Bibliometric analysis elucidates co-citation and co-occurrence patterns, offering a macro-level perspective on the evolution of the field, while, in conjunction with the qualitative phase, it is complemented by examining the underlying thematic axes and conceptual nuances of the literature. Together, this mixed-method approach enables a more nuanced understanding of trends, gaps, and future trajectories in research related to the China-CELAC Forum, thereby expanding the thematic coverage and integrating limited evidence.

Analysis of Results

In this section, the findings derived from the mixed bibliometric-qualitative analysis of the 12 publications around the China-CELAC Forum are presented systematically to address the research question. The results are organized in order to first reveal the academic basis and thematic relations through the quantitative co-citation and co-occurrence keyword analysis. Subsequently, qualitative methods are implemented to provide an integral examination of the content and areas of emphasis across the corpus, which leads to a thematic dimension coding, word frequency and temporal evolution analysis. Finally, the results are synthesized into a section of main trends and critical gaps through a cross-dimensional discussion, providing a comprehensive mapping of the scholarly discourse around the Forum.

Co-citation Network of Authors

As a first step, the analysis software VOSviewer 1.6.20 was used to carry out the first co-citation analysis, whose main objective was to identify which authors are most frequently co-cited within the bibliographies of the 12 texts collected from the Scopus database on the topic of the China-CELAC Forum, allowing to visualize the academic basis within the corpus and generating a landscape of the principal networks of those.

Once the analysis unit of cited authors was established and the complete count method was used to define a minimum threshold of three citations per author, 397 co-cited authors were obtained, of which only nine met the established criteria. This yielded a complete co-citation network as presented in the final interpretation of the software results in figure 1, in which the nodes represent cited authors with a size proportional to their citation frequency and links that reflect these co-citation relationships within the analyzed research.

Among the most notable characteristics, the distribution in two groupings or also called “clusters” is observed, each represented by a different color, which stands for shared theoretical approaches within the scholarly discourse, enabling immediate visual identification of thematic clusters. As result, the analysis demonstrates a polarization of the academic debate, clearly differentiated through a single significant Vadell-Tzili link. In this same line, the clusters present a notable disparity, where the first cluster comprises seven authors with a high density of internal connections and the second consists of only two, reinforcing this thematic fragmentation even more.

Figure 1

Complete network of co-citations.



Note. Scopus metadata in VOSviewer.

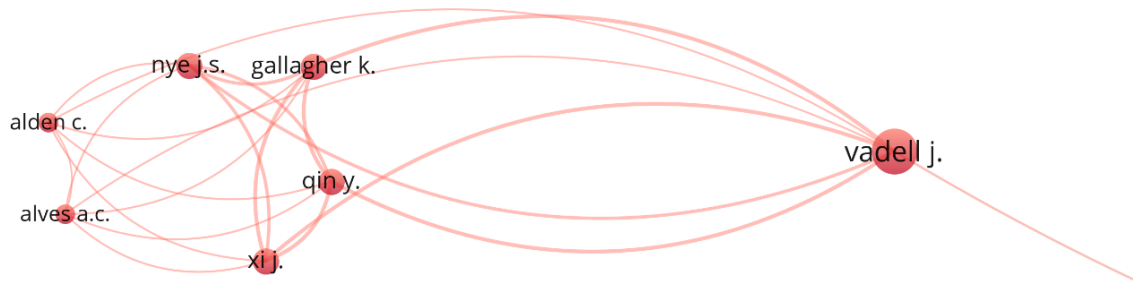
Within the first cluster, as visualized in figure 2, authors such as Alden, Alves, Gallagher, Nye, Qin, Vadell, and Xi appear, who represent a significant number of citations

together, with citation counts ranging from 3 to 7. Based on the predominant themes in their cited works, this cluster concentrates a high percentage of the theoretical debate on the geopolitical and economic implications of the China-CELAC Forum and related themes, particularly financial dependence (Gallagher, 2016) and the examination of geopolitical positioning (Vadell, 2022). Also, this cluster exhibits a common focus on theoretical foundations such as soft power framework (Keohane and Nye, 1998; Qin, 2018) and strategic foundations (Xi, 2017) of Chinese expansion, covering, in large part, common themes around the structuring of this flexible diplomatic model and the mechanisms under which it is established.

Such is the case of Alden and Alves (2017), who, through the framework of forum diplomacy, analyze these Forum platforms as rule-establishment mechanisms at the regional level. Similarly, Gallagher (2016) and Vadell (2022) analyze the Chinese multilateral model in practice, and its role as a key tool within the continent as a financing mechanism for state development, highlighting at the same time about risks of long-term economic dependence.

Figure 2

First cluster



Note. Scopus metadata in VOSviewer.

The second cluster, as observed in figure 3, displays a reduced group given its smaller total number of links, but is notably cohesive, in which authors such as González and Tzili-Apango appear, the latter being connected to the first group through Vadell. However, despite their size, these authors present a relative weight of seven citations, covering themes around the economic rivalry between China and the United States, as well as practical implications in the region (González et al., 2023; Tzili-Apango & Legler, 2020). More specifically, the high connection between these two nodes demonstrates a specialized focus on the themes of hegemony, economic dependence, and trade disputes, quite distinct from the theoretical focus addressed in the first cluster.

Both authors explore the Chinese multilateral mechanism in the region, positioning it for economic and geopolitical positioning against the United States, highlighting increased

trade linkages with southern states and the consequences of these processes within the productive chains of the countries, generating bilateral tensions. Additionally, the authors within this cluster also address challenges concerning the export of raw materials in Latin America, its perpetuation, and the economic and political dependence of this process (González et al., 2023; Tzili-Apango & Legler, 2020).

Figure 3

Second cluster



Note. Scopus metadata in VOSviewer.

Therefore, the co-citation analysis shows a polarized academic field around the China-CELAC Forum, being structured into two heterogeneous clusters with a minimal interconnection where a dominant cluster demonstrates a consolidated scholarly focus on geopolitical and economic implications through established theoretical frameworks. In the case of the second cluster, it reveals a specialized focus on themes that are quite distinct from the

theoretical focus addressed in the first one, such as hegemony, economic dependence, and trade disputes. As a result, this quantitative mapping provides an academical basis for understanding the current thematic focus within the literature, which will be complemented in the subsequent subsection through a keyword co-occurrence analysis to examine the thematic emphases present in the primary texts themselves.

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

Subsequently, a co-occurrence analysis was conducted to identify the keywords that could appear together in the selected documents. This was done by establishing all keywords as the unit of analysis utilizing the complete count method, followed by setting a minimum co-occurrence threshold of two, which resulted in a total of 62 keywords, of which only seven satisfied the defined parameters, as displayed in figure 4.

We observe that, in the establishment of the nodes and clusters, the keyword co-occurrence analysis also employs a color-coding visualization to distinguish thematic clusters, indicating groups of semantically related terms. Concretely, the keyword “China” positions itself as the one with the highest density, even acting as a bridge node between the generated groupings and serving particularly to unite the conceptual discussions between concepts and real dynamics. In the same line, this central node presents high-frequency links both with elements of theory and with those referring to the regional platform, which reinforces an approach and understanding of the studied mechanism centered on the Asian giant, its perspective and strategies, and not so much in the dynamics of its Latin American counterpart, this both theoretically and practically.

In the case of the two main groupings or “clusters,” in the first one feature conceptual and strategic terms of the discourse on China, such as “Belt and Road Initiative” (3 occurrences), “China” (7 occurrences), “multilateralism” (3 occurrences) and “soft power” (2 occurrences), demonstrating the interest of the authors in emphasizing areas of study related to the dynamics of soft power, the diverse initiatives of China in Latin America and the importance of multilateral strategies within the framework of cooperation within the China-CELAC Forum.

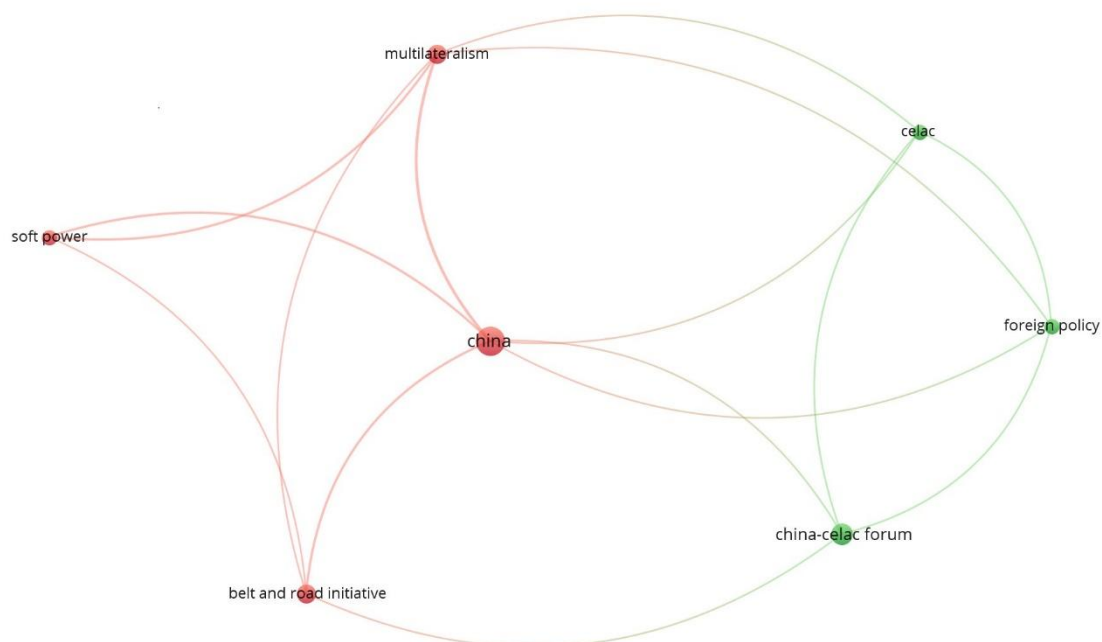
Concretely, this first cluster constitutes a framework of understanding of multilateral platforms, legitimized through soft power and more flexible multilateral models, as is the case of the BRI, whose perception does not fall on that of a traditionally established project, but rather on that of a multilateral initiative reinforced in narratives of cooperation and mutual benefit among its participants. Soft power is also an element of critical relevance in contextualizing this theme, as it serves as the primary theoretical foundation among scholars establishing the discursive basis of the mechanisms implemented by China through cultural and political attraction.

In the second cluster, we find terms such as: “CELAC” (2 occurrences), “China-CELAC Forum” (4 occurrences) and “foreign policy” (2 occurrences), highlighting a perspective focused on specific issues related to the foreign policy of the involved countries and the role of CELAC as a platform of regional integration regarding relations with China. Despite forming a smaller cluster, these elements mark an important thematic block for understanding the incorporation of Latin American dynamics within existing studies around the Forum.

As such, the term “CELAC” demonstrates the inclusion of the region as a capable actor within the mechanism, positioned as independent, with influential decision-making capacity, which reinforces the multilateral ideal of the Forum and its role as a channel of dialogue and cooperation. Similarly, the term “foreign policy” also places a relevant interpretation of Chinese foreign policy, since through this lens the priorities and practices that Beijing implements in the continent are questioned, and implementation methods. Together, these elements, alongside “China-CELAC Forum”, construct a narrative around strategic components addressed in current research that has reframed the cooperation narrative behind the Forum, along with discourse coherence and actual implementation.

Figure 4

Complete network of co-occurrences.



Note. Scopus metadata in VOSviewer.

In summary, the keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals a dominant China-centric discourse with two differentiated thematic orientations focused on Chinese strategic framework and soft power mechanisms, and a second one that places a relevant interpretation of Chinese foreign policy priorities and practices that Beijing implements in the continent. This second quantitative mapping visualizes how scholarly attention is predominantly centered on China 's initiatives, while the Latin America perspectives receive less emphasis. Based on these results, the following subsection applies a qualitative thematic coding using the original analytical framework of five dimensions to analyze the principal thematic focuses in the academic literature around the China-CELAC Forum, thereby deepen the understanding of the conceptual priorities in the actual scholarly discourse.

Thematic Dimension Coding

These first results from the VOSviewer software clearly demonstrate the diverse relationships among the works found on the China-CELAC Forum, providing a preliminary mapping of the predominant current of studies on this cooperation process. Based on these initial analyses, further coding was conducted using ATLAS.ti 25.0.1.32924 software to delve deeper into the already identified study areas in a more qualitative manner.

As a first qualitative step, an intentional AI-assisted coding was made using ATLAS.ti, based on the original analytical framework of five dimensions and generating two parallel structures segmented by language. Once the coding process was carried out, the distribution of the analysis among the English documents assigned 552 subcodes to the economic-commercial dimension; 520 to the geopolitical and strategic dimension; 387 to the political-diplomatic dimension; 251 to the social and cultural dimension; and 220 to the

environmental and sustainable dimension. Thus, with a total of 1,930 subcodes implemented, a clear dominant focus on the economic-commercial and geopolitical aspects is visualized, with comparatively less attention to an environmental and socio-cultural approach within current studies.

On the other hand, for the four Spanish texts the economic-commercial dimension recorded 377; the political-diplomatic dimension 350; the geopolitical and strategic dimension 322; the social and cultural dimension 207; and the environmental and sustainable dimension 155, yielding a total of 1,411 subcodes implemented. In this case, the analysis in Spanish presents a joint emphasis on economic and diplomatic dimensions and a more balanced attention to social and environmental dimensions than in the case of English studies, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Distribution of Qualitative Subcodes by Thematic Dimension and Language

Thematic Dimension	English Documents	Spanish Documents
Economic-Commercial	552	377
Geopolitical-Strategic	520	322
Political-Diplomatic	387	350
Social-Cultural	251	207
Environmental-Sustainable	220	155

Thematic Dimension	English Documents	Spanish Documents
Total	1,930	1,411

Note. Own elaboration.

Comparative Interpretation of Thematic Dimensions

Together, a first scenario is revealed in which English and Spanish research prioritize trade flows, infrastructure financing processes, credits, and business models associated with the Forum and the BRI. Within this approach, there is also a critical discourse about the asymmetry of the proposed financial mechanisms with risks spanning from sovereign over-indebtedness to structural dependence on Beijing, perpetuating problems historically present on the continent. Such was the case of Gallagher (2016) and Vadell (2022) previously mentioned, who identify China as a pivotal actor in the process of recommodification of Latin American exports.

In the case of the geopolitical and strategic dimension, English-language studies mostly address the China-CELAC Forum as a soft power tool to exert Chinese influence on the continent against the United States, allowing the Asian giant to be capable of exerting great geopolitical pressure in favor of Beijing's interests in the region. In the case of Spanish literature, there is a greater focus on the analysis of traditional powers' reactions to China's positioning in the region and its short, medium, and long-term implications, generating discussions about the establishment of new projects in Latin America and, above all, the purpose behind these.

In English texts, the political-diplomatic dimension pays special attention to institutional mechanisms, their functioning, and structuring through the Forum, with particular interest in the 'no conditionality' of its processes, aiming to recognize soft power dynamics that seek to position themselves as limitations or place national interests over Latin America. For example, Alden and Alves (2017) detail China's insistence on norms such as non-conditionality, equality, and mutual benefit, characterizing Chinese forum diplomacy as capable of shaping cooperation rules without imposing preconditions or policies. On the other hand, Spanish literature focuses on addressing official discourses and the results of ministerial meetings, as in the case of official documents generated after each Forum, the Action Plan, and the Ministerial Declaration, characterized mainly by a logic of respect for sovereignty and mutual collaboration, which highlight the dynamics of equality and equity for all participating actors.

Finally, regarding the least explored dimensions in both languages, the socio-cultural and environmental are posed as critical thematic axes within studies concerning the China-CELAC Forum, since, despite being areas of increasing global emphasis in recent years, there still exists a great lack of research that holistically integrates implications and advancements according to the Forum's evolution. Compared to Spanish texts, English specimens show greater interest in cultural cooperation and sustainability, along with a fuller approach to projects related to renewable and conservation energies. However, these are presented less systematically than other dimensions, demonstrating the critical need for study.

Thus, after the analysis, concepts and keywords linked to each dimension were observed, whose subcodes indicate the most and least frequent thematic axes addressed in the documents. Such is the case of the dominance of the economic-commercial dimension in

both languages through the high mention of investments, infrastructures, and bilateral trade, as well as the strategic relevance of the competition between China and the United States and its implications in the region in the geopolitical and strategic dimension.

This has given rise to a significantly refined conceptual understanding of the research area of the China-CELAC Forum that allows the identification of both the connections between dimensions and the relevance of concepts in each thematic axis. This has also allowed to demonstrate current deficiencies and critical gaps in the research area through an integrative approach that opens the way to new research that addresses these voids and facilitates recognition of causes, phenomena, and implications of utmost importance around the China-CELAC Forum.

Word Frequency Analysis by Language

Complementarily, with the purpose of guaranteeing the pertinence of the present study, a word frequency analysis was conducted to identify the precise terminology and scholarly emphasis within each linguistic corpus. This analysis beyond the coding framework illustrates empirical evidence of thematic dominance in the academic discussion, generating a language-specific landscape that facilitates the understanding of the corpus before tracking their temporal evolution. For this, using ATLAS.ti software, an exclusion criterion was established focused on eliminating common terms, such as articles, connectors, and words without conceptual relevance in both Spanish and English, to thus be able to recognize the real frequency of terms involving essential themes in the documents.

On this basis, it is remarkable to visualize how the comparison of term frequency shows a clear difference between the English and Spanish documents. In the case of the

Thus, through word frequency analysis conducted in both languages, the existence of a thematic base pertinent to the previously established coding process was observed, in which English texts mention aspects related to sustainable development and global policies involving diverse actors at the international scale. Spanish texts show greater interest in economic, infrastructure, and investment dynamics, which is in line with the previously conducted coding analysis in which both English and Spanish research place special emphasis on trade flows, infrastructure financing processes, credits, and business models associated with the Forum and the BRI.

Generally, throughout the analysis, a contrast of research approaches and interests is observed between Anglophone and Hispanophone authors, including some themes depending on the region, giving rise to new possible research areas in relation to the study of the China-CELAC Forum. Similarly, thematic intersections between the two languages are glimpsed, as in references to the BRI, expressed through terms like “silk”, “BRI”, “belt” and “road”, and their proximity to terms like “economic”, “infrastructure” and “cooperation”, given debates on development, trade, and investment present in the documents, demonstrating both a multisectoral approach to Chinese initiatives in Latin America and their development in the Forum's research scope, as well as correct pertinence to the prior coding process.

Another relevant feature to consider is the pattern of sustainability and development, as the English texts show greater interest in and connection with terms such as “development” and “sustainable”, the latter being less common in general, demonstrating the growing importance of the environmental and sustainable dimension. Meanwhile, the Spanish texts do not present the term “sustainable”, but others such as “infraestructura”, “desarrollo” and

“inversiones”, suggesting contextual associations between environmental issues and the planning of major infrastructure initiatives.

Similarly, geopolitical terms show parallel approaches to the China-CELAC Forum, as in English texts, words like “policy”, “foreign”, “power”, “strategic”, and “Africa” indicating scholarly focus on global competition patterns and the type of Chinese strategies in diverse regions. In the case of the Spanish texts, by means of terms such as “EUA”, “Asia”, “chino” and “mundial”, demonstrates an approach to Latin America's position vis-à-vis China and how this works against historically established dynamics such as that of the United States. This evidences China's broader geopolitical strategy that challenges major powers, such as the United States, Japan, and India, through the BRI, intensifying global geopolitical competition (Wang, 2023). Thus, having established the predominant terms patterns, the research proceeds to trace the temporal evolution of these thematic dimensions across key periods of the Forum, examining how these thematic priorities have progressed.

Temporal Evolution of Research Focus

The 12 analyzed documents, spanning from 2015 to 2024, denote thematic evolution that over the years progressively leans towards integrating new thematic axes to consider when addressing the China-CELAC Forum and its agenda, even surpassing linguistic barriers due to shared global attention generated around new problems that affect indiscriminately, such as climate change.

In order to determine how the academic discussion evolved over the years, the final corpus was divided into three periods (2015-2018, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024) based on key ministerial meetings of the Forum, which constitute a critical point that redefines institutional

priorities and drives the progressive inclusion of new areas of interest. As a result, Table 5 synthesizes the dominant thematic focuses for each period, subsequently providing the specific evidence that substantiates these trends.

Table 5

Evolution of Dominant Thematic Dimensions by Period

Period	Main Focus	Emerging - Secondary Theme
Period 1 (2015-2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political-diplomatic foundation • Geopolitical positioning vs. U.S. • Initial economic agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South-South cooperation • Infrastructure projects
Period 2 (2019-2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental/social concerns emerge • Development geopolitics • U.S.–China rivalry continues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance risks • Societal responses
Period 3 (2022-2024)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forum institutionalization • Economic cooperation • Operational principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural cooperation • Environmental gaps persist

Note. Own elaboration.

Period 1 (2015-2018)

Beginning in 2015, academic production emphasized political-diplomatic aspects during the First Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, highlighting the inaugural presidential visits of Xi Jinping to Latin America under the concept of non-interference in

other states' affairs, the use of public diplomacy, and the pursuit of multilateral cooperation within its roadmap. Similarly, there is significant economic focus through the implementation of the “1+3+6” plan for 2015-2019 and financing lines established within these initial diplomatic channels between actors. The geopolitical vision behind the Forum is also raised, as given the great predominance of the U.S., the Forum positions itself as a key strategic response toward a more multipolar global focus. Finally, regarding social or environmental aspects, these themes are marginally addressed, as they did not represent enormous relevance within the axes of interest that the Forum at the time elucidated to build with Latin America (Shixue, 2015).

For subsequent years, more specifically 2017 and 2018, academic literature establishes enormous interest in regional countries and their inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it would be at the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum in Santiago (2018) that the formal invitation to Latin American countries to join this initiative would be established. Consequently, this tilted the main focus of interest around BRI objectives and new trade routes with Latin American States following significant flows of Chinese investments in infrastructure and transportation areas (Lavut, 2018).

This brought challenges about conditionalities in recipient countries of these funds, as well as the positioning of the Asian giant on the continent at the expense of the United States. Collectively, this period represented the forum-related study themes, political, economic, and strategic dynamics through which China established itself in Latin America against a U.S. government opting for more protectionist policies. Regarding social or environmental axes, a marginal focus is again presented, where within the literature of this

analyzed period, the social theme is only briefly mentioned, without any exploration of its implications (Lavut, 2018).

Period 2 (2019-2021)

For the period between 2019 and 2021, in addition to observing an increase in research around the Forum, previously unconsidered axes begin to be addressed, such as environmental and social themes, thus witnessing an evolution in the areas where the mechanism gains relevance. Environmentally, for example, addressed economic re-primarization, neo-extractivism, and their negative environmental impacts, highlighting sustainability concerns about environmental sustainability and the need to implement megaprojects considering their environmental impact (Preciado Coronado, 2020). Along the same lines, the geopolitics of development and its implications for planning projects are highlighted, where their execution depends on population acceptance or resistance (Preciado Coronado, 2020).

Similarly, this period and its literature also cover political, economic, and strategic axes, addressing China's growing influence as a global power, its geopolitical positioning relative to the U.S., and the strong structuring of multilateral mechanisms in the region, enabling projects such as developing a transcontinental railway as part of the BRI. The U.S. confrontational approach is also discussed regarding the use of these processes as tools favoring Chinese national interests, undermining governance, and state autonomy (Small, 2020).

Period 3 (2022-2024)

Regarding the 2022-2024 period, research on the Forum becomes more pronounced, presenting more studies in this line; however, this increase does not equate to continuing a trend focused on lagging thematic axes, such as social-environmental dimensions. Conversely, in response to China's significant influence in Latin America, studies have primarily addressed political, economic, and strategic themes, as in Vadell (2022), whose article focuses on Chinese power projection through Beijing's multilateral soft power relations. On the other hand, authors like dos Santos (2023) positioned forum mechanisms as key facilitators of bilateral economic cooperation, providing a diversified approach to economy, trade, and culture.

It is also notable how within this period, strategically, the China-CELAC Forum is discussed more examined on its structure and implementation foundations than in previous years, considered a key element for consolidating China's regional presence (Terui Villegas y González García, 2024) and, simultaneously, an essential multilateral platform promoting dialogue and equality operationalizing principles of non-conditionality, mutual benefits, and non-interference (dos Santos, 2023). Particularly, this latter approach is also highly mentioned in the current period, showing perhaps not subsequent evolution in assimilating environmental themes but strategic and social ones, where the Forum acts and is analyzed through structuring dialogue channels and addressing regional issues multilaterally.

In this way, documents from 2015 to 2018 primarily addressed the economic-commercial aspects of the Forum and their implications within a scenario of Chinese positioning against the United States, focusing on promoting free trade and boosting

economic integration. Regarding subsequent texts, we observe that as summit diplomacy consolidated as the main cooperation mechanism between China and Latin America, the spectrum of themes around the mechanism's regional articulation began to broaden the thematic scope, starting with the inclusion of thematic axes for the pragmatic fulfillment of new global demands that the Forum must address. Among these, we note the incorporation of social, cultural, and environmental spheres in research, representing a highly relevant step toward comprehensively understanding the importance and impact of the China-CELAC Forum in political, economic, and social spheres.

Cross-Dimensional Discussion

Drawing from the previous results and different thematic dimensions, the following arguments were determined to address the main resulting trends holistically and transversally in the analyses, functioning as a synthesized section from previous steps that identifies thematic priorities, tensions, and research gaps in the academic production on the China-CELAC Forum. The specific evidence that substantiates these trends is provided through the following dimensions:

Political-Diplomatic Dimension

Through the analysis, the political-diplomatic dimension reveals central aspects in the scholarly discourse around multilateralism processes. Since its creation in 2015, literature on the China-CELAC Forum has paid special attention to sustained summit diplomacy based on resulting documentation, such as the Beijing Declaration (2015) inaugurating ministerial dialogue and the Santiago Declaration (2018) formalizing Beijing's invitation to Latin American states to join the BRI. Collectively, operations through non-binding documents

and principles of respect, equality, and non-conditionality have gained focus in recent years, after a decade of the mechanism.

Furthermore, this dimension largely encompasses China's short- and long-term regional objectives, transversally addressing the vision of increasing trade and investments through diverse projects enhancing regional connectivity. Simultaneously, China is presented as a defender of multilateralism and South-South cooperation, and as a strategic actor using multilateral means to counter U.S. global unilateralism.

However, throughout the analysis, difficulties in platform articulation and its objectives across the continent, particularly within individual national contexts, are observed. Likewise, the dimension extensively addresses the positioning of Chinese interests in the region, posing a critical challenge to state autonomy, driving reassessment of Beijing's multilateral mechanisms and their purpose within operational areas.

Economic-Trade Dimension

In the economic and development field, the 2015 “1+3+6” framework guides the main approaches to cooperation in trade, investment, and financing, with six sectoral priorities. In parallel, Chinese development banks are identified as the primary actors in the infrastructure, energy, and transportation financing processes, while concessional loans and cooperation funds also function as significant mechanisms in this dimension. Concretely, the literature addresses the description and analysis of megaprojects such as bioceanic railways and industrial parks employing Chinese contractors and local labor, about which logistical problems, oil supply clauses, and doubts about cost transparency are discussed.

Nevertheless, regarding economic projects resulting from the Forum, critical perspectives emerge about long-term implications, as large loan initiatives to the region raise concerns about dependency dynamics that may arise from these. The described risks range from over-indebtedness to dependency towards Beijing, which generates a discussion about China's proposals in favor of its positioning as the next hegemon over Latin American countries.

Geopolitical and Strategic Dimension

The studies address this dimension through a shifting global power dynamic and regional autonomy. Within geopolitical and strategic aspects, Chinese multilateral mechanisms are analyzed as part of a transition process towards a multipolar order vis-à-vis the United States, which raises more specialized studies on global economic realignment, cross-cutting themes of the line of study.

Furthermore, the China-CELAC Forum is framed as an autonomous horizontal platform that allows Latin America to articulate itself outside US tutelage, which positions these multilateral processes in the region as an opportunity to leave behind highly hierarchical mechanisms. Simultaneously, within the analyzed literature, a high approach to Chinese expansion and its establishment on the international scene as a power is observed, which against the United States poses a risk to the maintenance of its geopolitical positioning on a global scale.

Social and Cultural Dimension

In the Social and cultural dimension, as demonstrated in the chronological analysis, research related to the Forum showed brief analytical mentions around social and cultural

themes, failing to explore implications through soft power methods within Latin American states.

Despite this, within the most recent studies, the Chinese mechanism is characterized as an essential multilateral platform for the promotion of dialogue and equality grounded in norms of non-conditionality, mutual benefits, and non-interference in internal affairs. This places a discussion more inclined to understand the Forum through a critical analysis lens in which its horizontal structure signals an evolution from traditional and binding diplomatic processes to more flexible and effective forms.

Environmental and Sustainable Dimension

Finally, in the same line as the social dimension, the approach to environmental issues was strongly marginalized to superficial mentions until the period after 2018, when it began gaining recognition as a significant axis of important implications within the discussion around the Forum.

Notably, the emerging literature presents topics of criticism of neo-extractivism and calls for rigorous impact studies, paving the way for the importance of the environmental approach within the structuring and implementation of projects arising around the Forum. Despite not being positioned consistently, its proposal within the research will establish a comprehensive framework with which distinct aspects of the mechanism will be analyzed.

As a result, a greater diversity of positions was shown in the economic-commercial dimension, which encompasses both the expansion of trade links and infrastructure financing as opportunities of great relevance for the region and its development. This is the case of new development financial institutions, such as the New Development Bank of the BRICS, and

Chinese investment in sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018). Others point out the possibility of economic dependence that entails the risk of long-term economic imbalances with dependence on the export of raw materials to China and the “Commodities Consensus”, which describes a new economic and political-ideological order on the continent (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

Regarding geopolitical and strategic aspects, the China-CELAC Forum is seen as a means of diversifying alliances, expanding influence, and becoming an important trading partner, especially in Brazil, Chile, and Peru (Preciado Coronado, 2020; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018). However, on the other hand, it is argued that the competition between China and the United States in the region may erode regional autonomy and reproduce patterns of dependence (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

Conclusions

Since its inception, the China-CELAC Forum has established itself as a structured dialogue platform that has significantly strengthened China's presence in Latin America, consolidating it as a strategic trade and investment partner. This increasing influence challenged the quasi-hegemonic position previously held by other global powers in the region. To systematically examine this phenomenon, this study conducted a mixed bibliometric-qualitative analysis to address the research question: What is the academic output generated by the China-CELAC Forum since its creation?

The analysis thereby reveals a significant gap in the literature concerning the Forum's political-diplomatic, socio-cultural, and environmental implications, particularly

when compared to other regional organizations and trade alliances. From this perspective, the scarcity of academic research has hindered the development of a comprehensive assessment of the Forum's broader implications. Despite its strategic relevance, this lack of scholarly attention has made it difficult to construct a well-rounded perspective not only regarding the Forum's impact but, more importantly, in understanding the challenges and limitations that shape the current dynamics between China and Latin America. To address this gap, this study applied a mixed-method bibliometric approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Through this approach, the analysis highlights that, despite the Forum's great relevance in various areas of interest in the study of Sino-Latin American relations, its academic research on it remains severely limited, leaving open questions about its regional consequences, benefits, and risks, as well as its impact on the international arena and its implications as a flexible regional forum that contrasts with historically established traditional diplomatic formats in interstate relations.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize language-based limitations in the analysis of China-CELAC relations. As observed, English-language studies tend to focus on topics related to sustainability, multilateralism, and comparative studies with other Chinese-led forums. Conversely, Spanish-language research emphasizes development cooperation in infrastructure, investment flows, and geopolitical ramifications of China's growing role in the region.

Similarly, the evolution of academic interest in the China-CELAC Forum between 2015 and 2024 reveals two distinct lines of thought in which, during the first five years,

research focused mainly on economic integration, trade flows, and FTAs, with limited attention to bilateral investment expansion and regional trade agreements. However, later periods transitioned toward sustainability concerns, emphasizing long-term sociocultural and environmental dimensions of China's influence in Latin America.

As a result, although studies on the China-CELAC Forum have mainly focused on economic cooperation, the Forum itself has expanded beyond trade and investment, extending into dimensions of global and regional relevance, including social, cultural, environmental, and sustainability issues. Notably, environment and sustainability have emerged as key areas of interest given their global significance, for that reason, the Forum's engagement with these themes, and their transversality within other dimensions allow a contextualization of China's environmental vision and Latin America's efforts to adapt these dynamics.

In parallel, this evolution and its continental implications reflect China's strategic use of soft power as a key instrument for strengthening its influence in Latin America. The emergence of this Forum underscores a strategic shift in China's foreign policy towards regional multilateralism, moving beyond bilateral engagements to a more institutionalized and flexible framework for cooperation. Moreover, the Forum has provided an integrated and adaptable approach to the exchange dynamics between actors. Within the framework of the "forum diplomacy", this flexibility has allowed China to successfully adapt to global dynamics, developing a more assertive and proactive diplomatic strategy.

This strategic repositioning is further evidenced over the last decade, where China has not only consolidated strong multilateral processes with significant projections but has

also become the primary economic partner of several countries in the region, such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru. This undoubtedly establishes a focus of interest on the configuration of Sino-Latin American trade and to the Forum's mechanisms that have intervened in the current scenario, enabling, through this approach, projections of this relationship in the future via the China-CELAC Forum.

However, despite China's consolidation as a key partner in trade and investment, significant challenges remain in strengthening cooperation between both actors, including the articulation of objectives within States. Among the most pressing problems, the socioeconomic stratification of Latin American societies positions itself within the focus of interest. This particular challenge directly impedes multilateral effectiveness of mechanisms like the China-CELAC Forum, as formulating a unified and coherent regional agenda capable of balancing the asymmetric relationship between China and Latin America becomes a factor that depends on navigating volatile national contexts.

Consequently, the study presents a crucial opportunity to expand research on the Forum's long-term implications within different fields of study, such as social, cultural, environmental, and sustainable development, whose relevance lies in the current international context of recent problems that require a joint response rather than an individual one. Along the same lines, understanding the logic behind its functioning and application in contrast to other regional mechanisms within multilateral governance frameworks, as is the case with China in other regional cooperation processes in Asia and Africa, becomes another relevant area of study. Furthermore, it is necessary to continue addressing new thematic axes around the Forum to achieve more detailed assessments of

Chinese investments in strategic sectors, particularly within the framework of “forum diplomacy”, as a tool to elucidate China's multilateral approach to global governance.

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