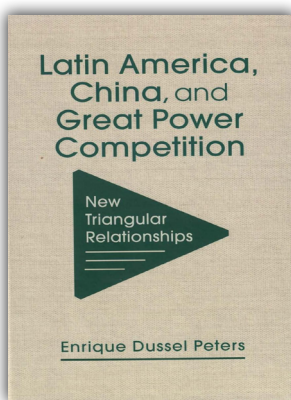


Review

Latin America, China, and Great Power Competition: New Triangular Relationships by Enrique Dussel Peters

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Latin America, China, and Great Power Competition: New Triangular Relationships represents a substantive contribution to understanding the evolving dynamics between Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), China, and the United States in an era of intensifying global competition. Drawing from decades of specialized research through the Center for Chinese-Mexican Studies (Cechimex) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico

(UNAM), Enrique Dussel Peters presents a sophisticated analytical framework that challenges conventional bilateral approaches to understanding LAC-China relations. This review examines the book's core arguments across its six chapters, comparing them with contemporary scholarship and analyzing their implications for regional policy.

Chapter 1, titled "Why Understanding LAC-China Relations Is Imperative", establishes the book's central thesis that LAC-China relations serve as a crucial lens for understanding fundamental shifts in global power dynamics. Dussel Peters argues that neither the United States nor LAC has adequately integrated China's socioeconomic rise into their strategic thinking. The author's conceptual framework is of "new triangular relationships," which

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explicitly includes the United States as an indispensable third vertex in analyzing LAC-China dynamics rather than treating them as purely bilateral relations, given that the United States remains the economic, political, and military hegemon in the region, while China has become deeply embedded in LAC's trade, financing, investment, infrastructure, and cultural exchanges. The quantitative scope of this engagement is striking: Chinese employment generation in LAC reached 8.1 million jobs (nearly 15% of total employment generation from 1995-2021), while China's trade share with LAC increased from 1.73% in 2000 to 17.07% in 2022, making it the region's second-largest trading partner.

Chapter 2, titled "The «China Question» for LAC", addresses that very "China Question" for the region, situating current challenges within the historical context of neoliberal reforms and the Washington Consensus that dominated post-1980s policymaking. Dussel Peters juxtaposes LAC's struggles with inequality and structural limitations against China's unique development path, characterized by rapid GDP growth, technological upgrading, and significant public sector presence in industry, finance, and infrastructure. The chapter's critique of analytical inadequacy resonates with broader scholarly concerns. Like Oliver Stuenkel (2022)'s assessment in the *China Questions 2*, Dussel Peters argues that traditional frameworks—dependency theory, neoliberalism, debt trap narratives—prove insufficient for grasping current realities.

Chapter 3, titled "China's Goals for Engagement with LAC", delves into China's strategic objectives in LAC, revealing a carefully calibrated approach that balances resource security, market development, and geopolitical influence while remaining sensitive to US concerns. China's goals encompass several dimensions. Firstly, securing stable access to oil, minerals (copper, iron ore, lithium), and agricultural commodities (soybeans) remains paramount, serving both as inputs for China's development and hedges against supply volatility. Secondly, Chinese engagement has evolved beyond resource extraction toward promoting market development, industrial cooperation, value-added clusters, and technology transfer, though often within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. Thirdly, Chinese investments in infrastructure (energy, transport, communications) serve dual purposes as commercial opportunities and tools for consolidating strategic leverage through deeper interdependence. This analysis aligns with Kim and Dong's (2025) observations about China's evolving strategy, moving from resource-seeking to more sophisticated forms of engagement. Both works emphasize

the “creditor learning curve” that has led to more cautious lending practices and greater attention to debt sustainability concerns.

Chapter 4, titled “The US Response: New Triangular Relations”, documents the fundamental transformation in US-China relations since December 2017, when the US National Security Strategy formally acknowledged that “great power competition had returned”. This represented a dramatic departure from decades of constructive engagement based on the assumption that economic integration would lead to China’s political liberalization. Dussel Peters identifies key elements of this shift. Firstly, the first Trump administration’s abandonment of four decades of strategic engagement, continued under Biden’s “invest, align, compete” strategy. Secondly, the Biden administration’s approach of subordinating all international economic relations to national security interests, requiring allies to “align” against China or risk exclusion from US partnerships. Lastly not the least, the security shoring strategy creates pressure for LAC countries to make binary choices between superpowers, potentially reducing their strategic autonomy and development opportunities.

This analysis converges with contemporary scholarship on US-China competition. As documented in recent studies of US policy toward the Andean region, Washington has intensified efforts to counter Chinese influence through initiatives like the “Clean Network” program and conditioned financing through institutions like the Development Finance Corporation, illustrated by Vidarte and Quichua (2024). However, as Dussel Peters notes, these efforts often prove counterproductive, potentially pushing LAC countries toward deeper Chinese engagement. The triangular framework proves particularly valuable in understanding current dynamics. Unlike Cold War bipolarity, these triangular relationships create both opportunities and constraints for third parties like LAC, as they must manage relationships with both superpowers on specific issues rather than choosing exclusive alignment.

Chapter 5, titled “China on the Ground in LAC: The Nuts and Bolts”, provides detailed empirical analysis of China’s presence across five dimensions: trade, financing, investments, infrastructure projects, and employment generation. This granular examination reveals both the depth of Chinese engagement and persistent challenges stemming from what Dussel Peters terms “mutual ignorance”—the lack of understanding between Latin American actors and Chinese firms regarding each other’s regulations, business cultures, and political environments. The chapter’s findings align with other literature in highlighting the ambiguous developmental impact of Chinese

engagement. While Chinese investments generate employment and export opportunities, concerns persist about long-term effects on local development and industrialization. The dominance of Chinese state-owned enterprises introduces additional complexity, as business failures or controversies frequently translate into diplomatic strains between entire countries. These observations resonate with Kaplan's (2021) analysis of Chinese development finance, particularly regarding the evolution of Chinese approaches and the challenges of managing state-to-state relationships. However, where Kaplan emphasizes commercial and developmental logics, Dussel Peters highlights the security competition dimension and its impact on local-level dynamics.

Chapter 6, titled "The Challenges Ahead", synthesizes the analysis to outline critical challenges facing LAC in dealing with new triangular relationships. The chapter warns against the growing pressure for "forced alignment" under the Biden administration's security shoring strategy, which subordinates trade and investment to national security considerations. Dussel Peters advocates for pragmatic triangular management through enhanced institutional development, which would strengthen research capabilities, academic institutions, and policy frameworks specifically designed for managing triangular relationships; through issue-specific rather than comprehensive alignment, which would develop capabilities to manage relationships with both powers simultaneously while avoiding zero-sum thinking; and through sustained research and academic exchange, which would build understanding of triangular dynamics through enhanced research and monitoring capabilities. This approach aligns with recent calls for "active non-alignment" as articulated by Fortin et al. (2023), emphasizing the need to maintain strategic autonomy while engaging pragmatically with both superpowers. As documented in analyses of Andean region dynamics, LAC countries increasingly face pressure to "choose a side," but geographic proximity to the US combined with economic dependence on China creates structural incentives for triangular balancing rather than exclusive alignment.

The book's analytical framework proves prescient given recent developments. The opening of Peru's Chinese-operated Chancay Port in 2024 exemplifies the triangular tensions Dussel Peters describes: the \$3.5 billion infrastructure project creates benefits for Peru-China trade while raising US security concerns about potential military use. Similarly, Ecuador's experience with US Development Finance Corporation loans conditioned on excluding Chinese telecommunications companies demonstrates how triangular pres-

tures manifest in practice. The evolving trade dynamics support the book's central arguments. China-LAC trade increased by 2,600% from 2000-2020, compared to 50% growth for US-LAC trade, while recent US strategic responses include enhanced engagement through initiatives like the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity.

Dussel Peters's work demonstrates both convergences and divergences with recent scholarship. The analysis aligns closely with Kim and Dong's (2025) emphasis on China's strategic evolution and debt sustainability concerns. Both works highlight the challenges of political swings in LAC countries, where electoral cycles can dramatically alter bilateral relationships regardless of economic interdependence. However, Dussel Peters places greater emphasis on US-driven competitive dynamics than much of the existing literature. While authors like Pu and Myers (2022) focus on Chinese elite debates about potential "strategic overstretching," Dussel Peters argues that US competitive pressure primarily creates the triangular structure that LAC countries must cope with. The book's institutional focus also distinguishes it from purely economic analyses. Unlike trade-focused studies, Dussel Peters emphasizes the critical need for specialized institutions capable of managing complex triangular relationships—a gap that currently constrains effective policy responses across all three vertices of the triangle.

The book's policy implications extend beyond LAC to other regions engaged with China. The triangular framework offers insights for understanding how great power competition reshapes regional relationships in an era of multipolarity. Key recommendations include institutional investment with significant resources dedicated to building specialized expertise in triangular relationship management; regional coordination by enhanced cooperation among LAC countries to avoid being played off against each other; and transparent engagement within clear frameworks for evaluating costs and benefits of engagement with both superpowers.

While comprehensive, the book could benefit from deeper engagement with security dimensions of triangular relationships, particularly regarding dual-use infrastructure and military cooperation. Additionally, the analysis focuses primarily on state-level dynamics, with less attention to sub-state actors and civil society organizations that increasingly influence these relationships. Future research might explore how the triangular framework applies to other regions, comparative institutional responses to great power competition, and the role of middle powers in managing triangular relationships.

In short, *Latin America, China, and Great Power Competition* represents a significant contribution to understanding contemporary international relations in an era of great power competition. The book's triangular analytical framework provides essential tools for moving beyond binary thinking about LAC's engagement with China and the United States. By documenting the depth and complexity of Chinese engagement while acknowledging persistent US influence, Dussel Peters offers a contextualized understanding of the strategic choices facing LAC countries. The book's emphasis on institutional development and pragmatic policy approaches offers a constructive alternative to zero-sum competitive dynamics, though implementation remains challenging given the intensifying nature of US-China rivalry. As recent events demonstrate—from the Chancay port opening to evolving US security policies under the second Trump administration—the triangular framework proves essential for understanding LAC's strategic position in an era of great power competition.

The work's greatest strength lies in its integration of empirical depth with conceptual innovation. By grounding the triangular framework in detailed analysis of trade, financing, investment, infrastructure, and employment data, Dussel Peters demonstrates that successful management of great power competition requires sophisticated understanding of complex, multifaceted relationships rather than simplistic alignment choices. For scholars, policymakers, and practitioners engaged with LAC-China relations, this book provides indispensable analytical tools for understanding current dynamics and anticipating future challenges. As great power competition intensifies, the triangular perspective will likely become increasingly relevant not only for LAC but for all regions navigating the complex terrain between Washington and Beijing.

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