
The US-China rivalry and Latin American geopolitics: from narrative to data

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Theme

The predominant narrative suggests that Latin America, or rather the countries of Latin America, since there is no regional coordination in their geopolitical stance, seek to maintain a certain equidistance or neutrality to avoid aligning themselves with one of the two global powers and being dragged down by this rivalry. However, do the data support this narrative of Latin American geopolitics?

Summary

The geopolitical stance of Latin American countries with respect to the two dominant global powers, [the US and China](#), is not one of neutrality, but nor does it respond to a desire to avoid aligning with one of the two global powers to maintain a balance.

As reflected in the votes on the Resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, the geopolitical stance of the countries of Latin America –with the notorious exception of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela– aligns with different blocs on different issues. In terms of Values (Human Rights, and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity) they do so with the US and the EU, in terms of Economic Interests (Trade and Development, and Economic Sanctions) they do so with China and their emerging peers. Furthermore, this geopolitical stance is independent of the political leanings of whatever the government in power.

Analysis¹

Although the US is the dominant power, both in military terms (to whose resources in this domain must be added the density of its security alliances) and economic and technological power (it is still the largest economy on the planet, it is at the forefront of frontier technologies and the dollar is the global currency with no competitors in sight), China has increasingly become a formidable competitor in the three dimensions. Moreover, both are at a significant distance from other competitors in global power distribution. The EU has an economic dimension comparable to that of the US and China but is neither a military nor technological power of similar magnitude. Russia has a military power comparable to that of the US and China (even greater than China's if

¹ This is an adaptation of a paper [originally published in Spanish](#) on 6 February 2024.

nuclear weapons are considered) but is neither an economic nor technological power of similar magnitude.

The US-China rivalry differs from the Cold War in at least two dimensions. First, because the strategic competition, rivalry or confrontation, as we prefer to call it, between the US and China is limited to the economic and technological spheres, but is not yet as evident in the ideological and military spheres, as was the case with the USSR, when the global powers confronted each other militarily in different parts of the world through their domestic proxies in an ideological struggle.²

Secondly, although the USSR equalled and, [according to some indicators, even surpassed the US in military power](#), its economic power never matched that of China in relation to the US. In contrast to China, interdependence (measured through trade and investment flows between the dominant powers) was practically non-existent during the Cold War. With the exception of trade with the Warsaw Pact countries (the countries in its sphere of influence), the USSR had hardly any economic ties with today's so-called emerging economies. In contrast, China is today the most important trading partner for more than [100 emerging countries](#), particularly in Latin America, including Brazil and Argentina. And despite recent setbacks, more than [150 emerging countries](#) are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

1. Values and interests

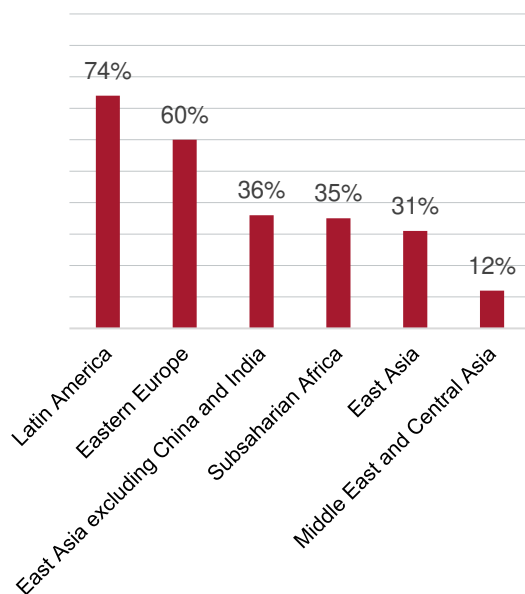
We are in a world with two global powers combining military, economic and technological might, with no rivals in sight. And as was the case during the Cold War, both represent antagonistic forms of organisation of society in terms of fundamental values: democracy, freedom, the rule of law and the respect for human rights.

In this global geopolitical context, democratic, developed and emerging countries alike, including most of Latin America, face a dilemma regarding their geopolitical stance: how to balance interests and values in a context in which authoritarian governments, especially China, are gaining economic and technological influence and military power. The dilemma is particularly complex for Latin America, the emerging region most aligned with Western values (see Figure 1), but whose economic interests, in many cases, are strongly conditioned by trade and/or financial and/or investment ties with China.

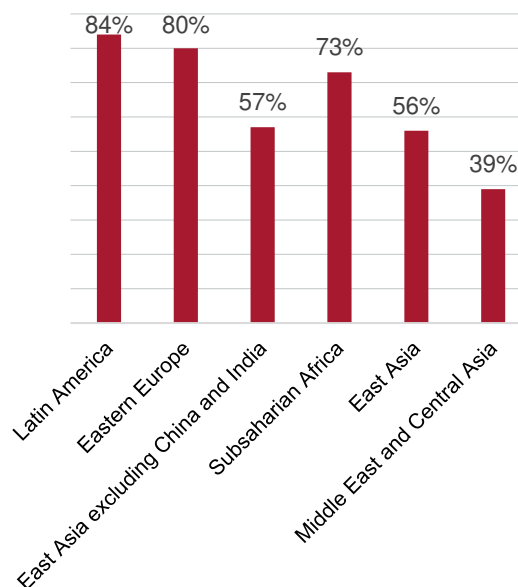
² This does not mean, of course, that we are unaware of the [underlying tensions in relation to Taiwan](#).

Figures 1a & 1b. Democracy and Human Rights in emerging regions

a. Prevalence of democratic regimes (% of countries, 2021)



b. Respect for Human Rights in emerging regions (% of countries, 2021)



Source: *Why does Latin America Matter?*, Elcano Royal Institute.

2. The geopolitics of Latin America: the narrative

The predominant narrative suggests that Latin America, or rather the countries of Latin America since there is no regional coordination in the geopolitical stance, try to maintain a certain balance or neutrality to avoid aligning themselves with one of the two global powers and being dragged down by this rivalry.

However, do the data support this account of Latin American geopolitics?

3. The geopolitics of Latin America: the sample

To answer this question, we consider as an indicator of the geopolitical stance of Latin American countries their votes in the Resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly according to the following criteria:

- Those voted between 2001 and 2023.
- Those where the Western bloc (the US and the EU) voted jointly and in an opposing position with respect to China.³
- Those representing Values (Human Rights, and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity) and those representing Economic Interests (Trade and Development, and Economic Sanctions).

³ We consider the EU voted with the US when more than 80% of EU countries did so.

With these criteria we obtain a total of 31 Resolutions classified as follows:

- Human Rights: 11.
- Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity: 4.
- Trade and Development: 12.
- Economic Sanctions: 4.

For the purposes of analysis, we consider that Resolutions on Human Rights and on Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity fall into the category of Values. Those concerning trade and development and economic sanctions fall into the Economic Interests category.

4. The geopolitics of Latin America: what the data say

If the hypothesis of neutrality or geopolitical balance were an accurate description of reality, we would expect that most Latin American countries would abstain from voting on resolutions in the UN General Assembly that, by sample construction, place the US and the Western bloc in the opposite corner of China.

As an alternative to the hypothesis of neutrality or balance narrative, it could be that Latin American countries:

- Align themselves in most of the Resolutions with one of the two global powers.
- Pursue their own national interest by aligning themselves with different blocs on different issues.

These are the results obtained for the total of 31 Resolutions considered in the sample:

- EU countries vote overwhelmingly with the US (this by sample construction) both for the total number of resolutions (91% of EU countries vote with the US for the average of 31 resolutions) and for the two subcategories of Values (100%) and Economic Interests (82%) (see Figure 2).
- Developed countries vote overwhelmingly with the US and the EU for the total number of resolutions considered (88%). The same is true for the subcategories of Values (100%) and Economic Interests (75.5%) (see Figure 2).
- Russia aligns with China in the total number of resolutions considered (96.9%). It also does so in the two subcategories of Values (100%) and Economic Interests (92.8%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of countries aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Total (simple average)	% US	% China
EU	91	9
Developed Economies	87.8	12.2
Russia	3.1	96.9
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Total (Values)	% US	% China
EU	100	0
Developed Economies	100	0
Russia	0	100
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Total (Economic Interests)	% US	% China
EU	82	18
Developed Economies	75.5	24.5
Russia	6.2	93.8

Notes: the Resolutions included in Values refer to Human Rights, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; the Resolutions included in Economic Interests refer to Trade and Development and Economic Sanctions; abstentions were considered as votes in favour of the US for the EU and Developed Economies, and as votes in favour of China in the case of Russia, since the rationale for abstaining is similar to that used by the US or China when justifying a vote in favour or against a Resolution. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- The democratic countries of Latin America (excluding Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, the three authoritarian governments in the region) are mostly aligned with the Western bloc when it comes to resolutions on Values: Human Rights and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. On average, 86.3% of democratic countries voted with the US and the EU in resolutions on Human Rights (2% with China) and 61% in those referring to Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity (14% with China) (see Figure 3).
- Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela aligned with China and Russia in most of the resolutions on Values and never do so with the US and the EU (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of countries aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Values	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	79.5	5	15.5
Cuba	0	84.6	15.4
Nicaragua	0	90	10
Venezuela	0	80	20
Human Rights	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	86.3	2	11.7
Cuba	0	84.6	15.4
Nicaragua	0	90	10
Venezuela	0	80	20
Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	61	14	25
Cuba	0	84.6	15.4
Nicaragua	0	90	10
Venezuela	0	80	20

Notes: Resolutions on Values refer to Human Rights, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; Democratic Latin America excludes Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- Democratic Latin America's alignment with the Western bloc and with the rest of the developed countries according to shared values, is similar among left/centre-left and right/centre-right governments in the region. The percentage of left/centre-left and right/centre-right governments aligned with the Western bloc in the resolutions on Values is 74% and 84%, respectively. Only 10% and 4%, respectively, do so with China (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of governments aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Values	% US	% China	% Average
Left/Centre-left	74	10	16
Right/Centre-right	84	4	12
Centre	88	0	12

Notes: Resolutions on Values refer to Human Rights, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- The voting patterns of Brazil and Mexico, the two major countries in the region, do not differ substantially from those observed for Democratic Latin America as a whole. In terms of Values, 60% and 80% of the resolutions are aligned with the US and the Western bloc, respectively. In no case did they do so with China (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of Resolutions in which Mexico and Brazil align with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Values	% US	% China	% Average
Mexico	80	0	20
Brazil	60	0	40

Notes: Resolutions on Values refer to Human Rights, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- Latin America is the most western of the emerging regions, with the sole exception of Emerging Europe, whose countries are all EU aspirants. In terms of Values, 79.5% of Latin American countries align themselves with the Western bloc, to a much greater extent than the rest of the emerging regions: Middle East and North Africa (37%), Sub-Saharan Africa (25%), Former Soviet Republics (24.5%) and Emerging Asia (19%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of countries aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Values	% US	% China	% Average
Emerging Europe	95.5	1	3.5
Democratic Latin America	79.5	5	15.5
Middle East and North Africa	37	31	32
Sub-Saharan Africa	25	23.5	51.5
Former Soviet Republics	24.5	69	6.5
Emerging Asia	19	43	38

Notes: Resolutions on Values refer to Human Rights, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; Latin America excludes Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- Most Democratic Latin American countries are aligned with China on resolutions related to Economic Interests: Trade and Development and Economic Sanctions. 95,5% of Latin American countries vote with China in the resolutions related to Trade and Development and 97% in those related to Economic Sanctions (see Figure 7).
- Even Paraguay and Guatemala, the only two democratic countries considered in the sample that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, vote with the US

and the Western bloc on Values and with China and its emerging peers on Economic Interests.

- Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, the three authoritarian governments in the region, align themselves with China and Russia on most resolutions concerning Economic Interests and never do so with the US (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of countries aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted Between 2001 and 2023)

Economic Interests	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	5.5	92	2.5
Cuba	0	93.7	6.3
Nicaragua	0	93.3	6.7
Venezuela	0	92.3	7.7
Trade and Development	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	7.3	90.5	2.2
Cuba	0	91.7	8.3
Nicaragua	0	91.7	8.3
Venezuela	0	90	10
Economic Sanctions	% US	% China	% Average
Democratic Latin America	0	97	3
Cuba	0	100	0
Nicaragua	0	100	0
Venezuela	0	100	0

Notes: the Resolutions included in Economic Interests refer to Trade and Development, as well as Economic Sanctions; Democratic Latin America excludes Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- The majority alignment with China and the rest of the emerging regions in terms of Economic Interests does not differ between left/centre-left and right/centre-right governments. The percentage of left/centre-left and right/centre-right governments aligned with China on Economic Interests is 93.3% and 91%, respectively (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of governments aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Economic Interests	% US	% China	% Average
Left/Centre-left	5.2	93.2	1.5
Right/Centre-right	5	91	4
Centre	13	87	0

Note: the Resolutions included in Economic Interests refer to Trade and Development, as well as Economic Sanctions. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- The voting pattern of Brazil and Mexico, the two major countries in Latin America, does not differ substantially from that observed for Democratic Latin America. In terms of Economic Interests, they are aligned in 86.7% and 81.3% of the votes with China and the rest of the emerging economies (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of Resolutions in which Mexico and Brazil align with the Votes of the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Economic Interests	% US	% China	% Average
Mexico	6.2	81.3	12.5
Brazil	6.7	86.7	6.7

Note: the Resolutions included in Economic Interests refer to Trade and Development, as well as Economic Sanctions. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

- In terms of Economic Interests, all emerging regions are mostly aligned with China: Latin America (92% of countries), Emerging Asia (95%), Middle East and North Africa (93%), Sub-Saharan Africa (94.2%) and the Former Soviet Republics (93.8%). The only exception is Emerging Europe, which tends to align with China in only 28.2% of cases (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Voting in UN General Assembly Resolutions (% of countries aligned with the US and China, average of Resolutions voted between 2001 and 2023)

Economic Interests	% US	% China	% Average
Emerging Europe	33.5	28.2	38.2
Former Soviet Republics	6.2	93.8	0
Sub-Saharan Africa	5.8	94.2	0
Democratic Latin America	5.5	92	2.5
Emerging Asia	4	95	1
Middle East and North Africa	0	93	7

Notes: the Resolutions included in Economic Interests refer to Trade and Development, as well as Economic Sanctions; Latin America excludes Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. Source: the authors based on United Nations data.

Conclusions

Using a sample of 31 resolutions representing Values (Human Rights, and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity) and Economic Interests (Trade and Development, and Economic Sanctions) voted in the UN General Assembly between 2001 and 2023, and in which the US (and the EU) voted on the opposite side to China (and Russia), Latin America's geopolitical stance displays the following characteristics:

- (1) The democratic countries of Latin America align themselves with one bloc or the other according to their national interests. Their geopolitical stance does not respond to the desire to avoid aligning themselves with one of the two global powers and thus maintain a certain neutrality or balance. The data reveal that the democratic countries of Latin America align themselves mostly with the US, the EU, the rest of the developed countries and Emerging Europe (in the latter case all of them aspiring to join the EU), when it comes to resolutions referring to Values (Human Rights, and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity); and they align themselves mostly with China and their emerging peers when it comes to resolutions referring to Economic Interests (Trade and Development, and Economic Sanctions).
- (2) The geopolitical stance of Brazil and Mexico, the two major countries in Latin America, does not differ substantially from that observed for the rest of the democratic countries in the region. In terms of Values they align with the US and the Western bloc (to a greater extent Mexico than Brazil) and in terms of Economic Interests they align with China and the rest of the emerging economies (despite the fact that Mexico's trade ties are stronger with the US and Brazil's with China).
- (3) Paraguay and Guatemala, despite being the only two democratic countries considered in the sample that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, exhibit the same voting pattern as the rest of the democratic countries in the

region: they align with the US and the Western bloc on Values and with China and its emerging peers on Economic Interests.

- (4) Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, the three authoritarian governments in the region, are in all cases aligned with China and Russia, both in resolutions on Values and those related to Economic Interests.
- (5) The geopolitical stance of democratic countries in Latin America cuts across governments of different ideologies. The voting pattern in UN General Assembly Resolutions tends to be very similar regardless of whether the governments are left/centre-left or right/centre-right, both on issues of Values and Economic Interests. In other words, political polarisation does not seem to contaminate the geopolitical stance of the countries in the region.
- (6) Latin America is by far (except for Emerging Europe) the most western of the emerging regions in terms of Values (Human Rights, and Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity).

In short, the geopolitical stance of Latin American countries with respect to the two great centres of global power, the US and China, is not one of neutrality, nor does it respond to the desire to avoid aligning themselves with one of the two powers in order to maintain a balance. As reflected in the votes of the countries of the region in the Resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, the geopolitical stance of the countries of Latin America –with the notorious exception of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela– pursues national interest by aligning with the different blocs on different issues, and they do so independently of the political sign of the government of the day.

A recent example clearly illustrates this pattern of Latin American geopolitics: the war in Ukraine. In the resolutions condemning the violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, most democratic Latin American countries aligned themselves with the US and the Western bloc in condemning the invasion and only a minority did so with China and Russia. However, following what has been the historical tradition of its voting in UN Resolutions, Latin America did not support economic sanctions against Russia.

This pattern of Latin America geopolitics has relevant practical implications. If the West intends to mitigate China's growing influence in Latin America in trade, finance and investment, it must offer an attractive menu of opportunities in these areas of strategic interest for the region, as the EU is doing with the launching of the Global Gateway, the modernisation of its association agreements with Chile and Mexico, and the political decision to move forward to conclude the EU-Mercosur agreement.

If China aspires to bring Latin America into line with its international political stance, it will be difficult to find an echo in a region with strong roots in democratic values and the respect for human rights.

Appendix I. Sample of countries and regions

Countries	EU	Emerging Europe
US	Germany	Turkey
China	France	Serbia
Russia	Italy	Ukraine
	Spain	Bosnia and Herzegovina
	Belgium	Albania
	The Netherlands	North Macedonia
	Poland	
	Sweden	
Sub Saharan Africa	Middle East and North Africa	Latin America
Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Argentina
South Africa	Iran	Bolivia
Kenya	United Arab Emirates	Brazil
Ethiopia	Egypt	Chile
Angola	Iraq	Colombia
Ghana	Qatar	Costa Rica
Tanzania	Argelia	Cuba
Côte d'Ivoire	Kuwait	Dominican Republic
DR Congo	Morocco	Ecuador
Cameroon		El Salvador
Uganda		Guatemala
Senegal		Honduras
		Mexico
		Nicaragua
		Panama
		Paraguay
		Peru
		Uruguay
		Venezuela

Developed Economies	Former Soviet Republics	Emerging Asia
Japan	Kazakhstan	India
UK	Belarus	Indonesia
Canada	Uzbekistan	Thailand
Australia		Philippines
Republic of Korea		Malaysia
Israel		Bangladesh
Switzerland		Vietnam
Norway		

Notes: the countries from the EU, Developed Economies, Emerging Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, Former Soviet Republics, and Emerging Europe included in the sample account for more than 80% of the GDP of the corresponding bloc.

Appendix II. List of Resolutions

Human Rights

- [Resolution A/RES/56/174 - 2001](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/57/232 - 2002](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/61/175 - 2006](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/63/245 - 2008](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/64/175 - 2009](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/69/188 - 2014](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/73/264 - 2018](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/75/238 - 2020](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/ES-11/3 - 2022](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/77/228 - 2022](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/77/230 - 2022](#)

Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

- [Resolution A/RES/68/262 - 2014](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/72/190 - 2017](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/ES-11/1 - 2022](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/ES-11/5 - 2022](#)

Trade and Development

- [Resolution A/RES/62/161 - 2007](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/63/178 - 2008](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/64/98 - 2009](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/65/142 - 2010](#)
- [Resolution A/RES/67/219 - 2012](#)

- Resolution A/RES/67/202 - 2012
- Resolution A/RES/69/207 - 2014
- Resolution A/RES/72/203 - 2017
- Resolution A/RES/73/336 - 2019
- Resolution A/RES/75/232 - 2020
- Resolution A/RES/77/174 - 2022
- Resolution A/RES/77/338 - 2023

Economic Sanctions

- Resolution A/RES/57/5 - 2002
- Resolution A/RES/62/183 - 2007
- Resolution A/RES/76/191 - 2021
- Resolution A/RES/77/214 - 2022