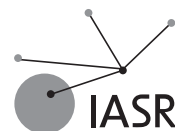




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Article

Beyond the Neocolonial Label: Reassessing China’s Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean

Qi Zhang* 

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Joaquín Beltrán Antolín 

Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

China’s rise as a key economic partner to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has generated intense debate over whether its regional engagement constitutes neocolonialism, a debate that has reached analytical impasse. This article advances beyond the neocolonial label by applying a structured four-dimensional assessment, economic, cultural, technological, and political, against explicitly operationalized neocolonial criteria. Although China’s engagement produces identifiable asymmetries across all four dimensions, none satisfies the three constitutive conditions required for a neocolonial characterization as defined here. The article introduces the concept of “negotiated asymmetric interdependence” to describe what neither the neocolonial framework nor the official “win-win” narrative captures: a configuration in which structural power differentials are real and consequential, yet LAC states retain meaningful, if bounded, agency over the terms of engagement. It differentiates this concept from complex interdependence, asymmetric interdependence, dependency with agency, South–South cooperation, and post-hegemonic accounts of regional order, and grounds it in evidence spanning the high-exposure cases most favorable to the neocolonial thesis, within-case analyses of Ecuador’s oil-backed borrowing and the Las Bambas conflict, and the region’s largest economies, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico.

Keywords

China–LAC relations, Neocolonialism, South-South cooperation, Negotiated asymmetric interdependence, Dependency theory, Soft Power

Corresponding author:

* Email: qi.zhang3@autonoma.cat

Introduction

The term neocolonialism originated in the mid-twentieth century to describe how Western states, no longer governing former colonies directly, continued to shape their internal affairs and foreign policy through economic, cultural, and political means (Degli Esposti, 2024; Nkrumah, 1966).

China's deepening involvement in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), through infrastructure, trade, investment, and technological and cultural exchange, has drawn extensive scholarly and policy attention. Although China frames its activities as mutual benefit and shared development, the scale of its engagement has prompted reconsideration of the relationship (Giraud, 2020; Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2021; Rodríguez & Bazán Seminario, 2024), and many critics label it neocolonialism (Nyiawung et al., 2024; Treacy, 2022).

The literature remains divided between two incomplete positions. One applies the neocolonial label largely on China's economic scale, without specifying the mechanisms or criteria that distinguish neocolonial extraction from asymmetric but negotiated exchange (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2021; Treacy, 2022). The other rejects the label by foregrounding China's South–South discourse and LAC's formal sovereignty, without accounting for the structural constraints under which LAC states choose (Sidaway & Woon, 2017). A third, intermediate position acknowledges asymmetry while rejecting the label (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010; Myers & Ray, 2022) but does not specify the criteria by which the threshold is or is not crossed, leaving the verdict ungrounded. This gap is what the article addresses.

What distinguishes this study is not its conclusion, since the inadequacy of binary characterizations is widely acknowledged, but its method. The article argues that the neocolonial framework, though productive as a diagnostic lens, ultimately mischaracterizes the relationship; it tests this by disaggregating neocolonialism into four operationalizable dimensions, economic exploitation, cultural assimilation, technological control, and political manipulation, and assessing China's conduct in each against criteria derived from the conceptual literature. Single-dimension studies of trade dependency (Giraud, 2020), lending conditionality (Gelpert et al., 2023), or digital infrastructure (Malena, 2021) capture partial dynamics but cannot judge whether asymmetries across domains combine into an integrated pattern of control; that cross-domain assessment is the contribution.

Four questions organize the analysis. First, does China's trade and investment conduct reproduce the resource-extraction and dependency-deepening mechanisms neocolonial theory treats as economically constitutive? Second, do its cultural initiatives exhibit the coercive or displacement-oriented dynamics that distinguish neocolonial cultural penetration from ordinary soft power? Third, does its technological infrastructure generate irreversible dependency and foreclose indigenous capacity? Fourth, does economic leverage translate into demonstrable constraints on LAC states' foreign-policy autonomy or domestic governance?

Case selection follows a two-track design. The first applies a most-likely logic (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 120–123), examining where the thesis is strongest: Ecuador and Venezuela, the most heavily resource-collateralized borrowers; Argentina, the largest recipient of renminbi swap support; and Las Bambas in Peru, the most prominent socio-environmental conflict involving Chinese capital. If the three conditions are not jointly met where Chinese leverage is greatest, their absence elsewhere follows with greater confidence, so the design is conservative toward the negative finding. Because high-exposure debtors underrepresent the modal form of engagement, trade and investment, the second track adds the three largest economies, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, as least-likely contrast cases: none carries significant Chinese policy-bank debt, yet each shows deep engagement (Brazil, Chile) or deep asymmetry without engagement (Mexico), separating the effects of engagement from those of debt.

The evidence base is secondary literature, contract- and loan-level datasets (Gelpern et al., 2023; Myers & Ray, 2024), trade statistics, and policy documents; conclusions concern the documented record, not unobserved motives. Each dimensional section specifies the mechanism at issue, weighs consistent and inconsistent evidence, and reaches an explicit verdict, weighting disconfirming cases more heavily than confirming ones (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 75–76). The next section traces the concept's history and mechanisms; the four dimensional sections follow; two cases, Ecuador's oil-backed borrowing and the Las Bambas conflict, then receive extended within-case treatment before the conclusion.

Definition, Historical Context, and Contemporary Mechanisms of Neocolonialism

Neocolonialism refers to the continued control developed countries exert over formally independent developing nations through economic, political, cultural, and technological means (Uzoigwe, 2019). Kwame Nkrumah introduced the concept in the 1960s to describe the external control African countries faced after independence: unlike direct colonialism, it operates without formal governance, offering power without accountability and exploitation without redress (Nkrumah, 1966). As the concept moved from liberation politics into development theory, its precision eroded, a drift this article's operationalization addresses (Degli Esposti, 2024). Developed states often justify intervention with altruistic rhetoric while deepening local poverty and dependence (Adem & Babagana, 2023, p. 1364; Langan, 2018, p. 2; Nkrumah, 1966).

The primary economic mechanism is conditional dependence: through financial institutions and bilateral creditors, dominant states impose structural adjustments serving their own interests, while elite capture channels investment to ruling classes rather than populations (Langan, 2018, pp. 2–4; Nkrumah, 1966). Cultural neocolonialism works through the diffusion of dominant values via education, media, and consumer culture, displacing local production (Nwosu, 2023), and political ideals such as democracy and human rights are at times deployed instrumentally (Aketema & Ladzekpo, 2021).

In the digital age, control of technology and data is a further form: monopolization of operating systems, cloud computing, and submarine cables creates dependencies that constrain autonomous development (Mann & Daly, 2019; Thatcher et al., 2016), and restrictive technology-transfer conditions limit local capacity (Kwet, 2019). Politically, neocolonialism operates through compliant governments, conditioned aid, and multilateral institutions as instruments of influence, with assistance carrying donor-aligned conditions that constrain recipient autonomy (Gegout, 2019; Langan, 2018, pp. 4–5; Nkrumah, 1966, pp. ix–xv).

Although neocolonialism originally described Western influence over Africa, its application to China–LAC relations requires justification. Three features prompt scholars to reach for it: the scale of resource-oriented trade and investment (Jenkins & de Freitas Barbosa, 2012); the asymmetric structure of financial agreements, including the collateralization and confidentiality documented by Gelpern et al. (2023); and the concentration of Chinese firms in critical infrastructure (Afonso et al., 2021). These resemble the mechanisms Nkrumah (1966) defined and Langan (2018) elaborated, yet applying a framework built for postcolonial Africa to two Global South actors, one invoking South–South cooperation, introduces tensions it does not resolve. The question is not whether China resembles a Western colonial power, but whether the constitutive mechanisms of control and dependency are empirically present; the lens is productive because it forces specification of how asymmetry is or is not converted into domination (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2021, p. 221).

China's deployment of South–South discourse, partnership, mutual benefit, co-development, draws on a tradition foregrounding horizontal solidarity among formerly colonized states (Mawdsley, 2012, pp. 3–8). Whether this framing describes China's practice or obscures asymmetries that the tradition itself treats as problematic is among the questions this article addresses.

Before assessing China's conduct, the evaluative threshold must be specified. Drawing on Nkrumah (1966, pp. ix–xv), Langan (2018, pp. 2–5), and Gonzalez-Vicente and Montoute (2021, p. 221), the article treats neocolonial practice as requiring three conditions simultaneously: first, structural asymmetry that systematically disadvantages the subordinate party; second, an active mechanism through which the dominant actor maintains or deepens it; and third, foreclosure of exit, such that autonomous development or policy choice is materially constrained. Asymmetry

Table 1. Evaluative framework: Neocolonial conditions and indicators by analytical dimension

Dimension	C1: Structural Asymmetry	C2: Active Control Mechanism	C3: Foreclosure of Exit / Resistance	Principal Evidence Base
Economic	Indicators: export composition skewed toward primary commodities relative to other trading partners; creditor concentration; repayment collateralized against future commodity exports.	Indicators: documented strategy of deepening asymmetry, including counter-cyclical lending surges into borrower distress, contractual capture of policy discretion, and refusal to renegotiate.	Indicators: absence of alternative financing or trading partners; inability to renegotiate, restructure, or exit agreements without prohibitive cost.	Gelpern et al. (2023); ECLAC (2021); Myers & Ray (2024); Horn et al. (2021)
Cultural	Indicators: scale of state-backed cultural and media infrastructure relative to host-country and third-country cultural flows.	Indicators: coercive or displacement-oriented promotion, including content conditions imposed on host institutions and marginalization of local cultural production.	Indicators: host institutions unable to decline, renegotiate, or terminate programs; local cultural production foreclosed.	Bohigues & Morgenstern (2021); Nisley (2022); Duarte et al. (2022); Kim (2021)
Technological	Indicators: concentration of critical digital infrastructure in Chinese vendors; indigenous technical-capacity deficit.	Indicators: demonstrated extraction of data or rents, suppression of local capability, or standards lock-in imposed against host preference.	Indicators: irreversibility of dependence; no feasible vendor diversification; technology transfer and training withheld.	Malena (2021); Salazar-Xirinachs (2020); Taylor (2019); Feldstein (2019)
Political	Indicators: economic leverage available for political conversion, including debt exposure, trade dependence, and collateralized obligations.	Indicators: documented conditionality linking economic benefits to policy alignment; intervention in domestic political processes.	Indicators: host states unable to sustain divergent foreign-policy positions or diversified external alignments.	Horn et al. (2021); Kaplan & Penfold (2019); Yang & Lee (2020); Afonso et al. (2021)

Note: C1 = structural asymmetry; C2 = active control mechanism; C3 = foreclosure of exit. The table specifies criteria and indicators only, with no assessments; all three conditions must hold jointly for a neocolonial characterization. Findings are consolidated in Table 2, country variation in Table A3.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

alone is insufficient; dependence that is voluntarily entered, renegotiable, and not weaponized falls below the threshold. Table 1 states the criteria and indicators; it contains no assessments, which are developed in the four empirical sections and consolidated in Table 2.

The conjunctive threshold is deliberately more demanding than several established usages, and the choice requires defense. In the dependency tradition, dos Santos (1970, p. 231) defines dependence structurally, without any intentional mechanism; world-systems analysis treats peripheral position as itself constitutive of exploitation (Wallerstein, 2004); and Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power locates colonial relations in durable hierarchies of knowledge, race, and labor. Under any of these, findings reported below, the primary-commodity composition of LAC's China trade and the fiscal constraints of resource-backed lending, would already establish a neocolonial relationship, and the verdict would differ accordingly.

Three considerations justify the stricter threshold. First, conceptual discrimination: if structural asymmetry alone sufficed, the concept would apply equally to LAC's relations with the United States, the European Union, and the multilateral lenders, dissolving its capacity to distinguish China's engagement, the stretching Sartori (1970) warned against and Degli Esposti (2024) documents. Second, fidelity to Nkrumah (1966, pp. ix–xv), whose account specifies the instruments, conditioned assistance, client elites, monetary control, through which external direction operates. Third, falsifiability: a purely structural definition is unfalsifiable in any commodity-exporting region, whereas the three-condition test specifies the confirming evidence. Each conjunct also eliminates a distinct false positive, so the conditions are jointly necessary by the category's definition. The neo-imperialism literature is accommodated rather than adopted: Harvey's (2003) accumulation by dispossession enters as evidence under the first two conditions, and Table A3's country scoring reports each case by conditions met, giving a graded reading, as in Venezuela's two-of-three result.

The threshold is thus a division of labor among concepts, not a verdict in disguise. Asymmetry without control mechanisms is captured here by the vocabulary of dependency and asymmetric interdependence, whose applicability the analysis affirms. Readers holding a structuralist definition may read the negative finding as the narrower claim that the documented asymmetries are not shown to be actively engineered or escape-proof; the dispute is over what to call the asymmetry, not whether it exists. The dependency reading of the same evidence (Stallings, 2020) is treated in the conclusion as the most serious rival interpretation.

The Economic Dimension: Does China's Conduct Deepen Trade and Debt Dependency?

The economic cases examined here, China's resource-trade structure, state-bank lending in Ecuador and Venezuela, and the mining operations assessed by Irwin and Gallagher (2013), represent the three sub-mechanisms through which economic neocolonialism is theorized to operate: trade dependency, debt-conditioned sovereignty constraints, and labor and environmental exploitation. Critics emphasize China's resource extraction in mining, energy, and agriculture, arguing it causes environmental damage while channeling profits from local communities (Nolte, 2013), and that projects rely disproportionately on Chinese contractors and imported labor (Brautigam & Gallagher, 2014).

China's share of LAC exports rose from under 1% in 2000 to approximately 9% by 2020, while LAC's exports to China shifted toward primary commodities: by 2019, over 70% were raw materials, against 42% of LAC's exports to the rest of the world (ECLAC, 2021, p. 18; Gallagher & Myers, 2021; SELA, 2024 see also). This compositional divergence is the quantitative

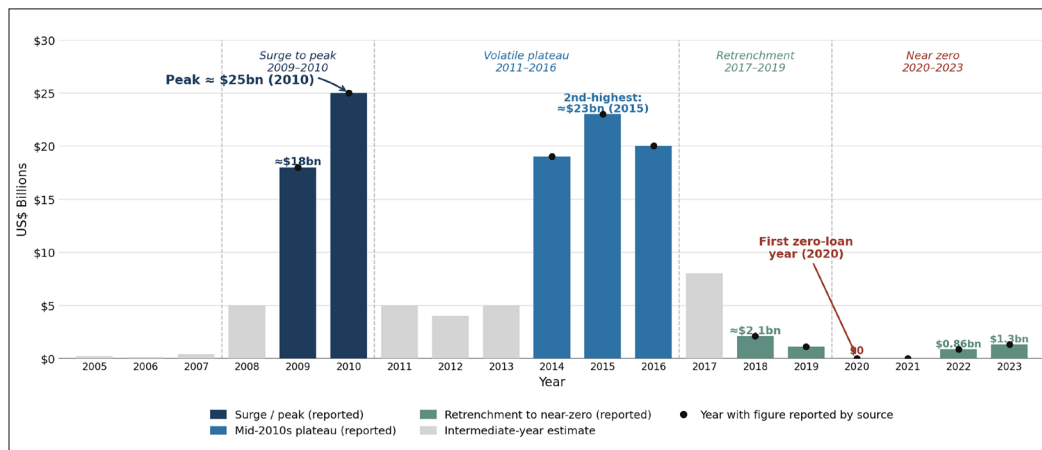


Figure 1. Chinese policy bank lending to LAC, 2005-2023 (Annual commitments)

Note: Bars show annual China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank commitments from the Chinese Loans to Latin America and the Caribbean (CLLAC) Database, 2024 update (Myers & Ray, 2024), whose verification process revised several earlier-year figures downward, lowering the 2010 peak to roughly \$25 bn. Filled circles mark years with a figure reported in the source or its annual reports (2009–2010, 2014–2016, 2018–2023); the remaining years (2005–2008, 2011–2013, 2017), shown without circles, are interpolated estimates. Among the reported years, the 2020 (\$0, the first zero-loan year since 2005), 2022 (\$0.86 bn), and 2023 (\$1.3 bn) values are exact, while the earlier reported figures incorporate the 2024 revisions; all are consistent with a cumulative total of roughly \$138 bn (2005–2023). The mid-2010s plateau, post-2015 retrenchment, and 2020 zero-loan year bear directly on the dependency debate (see text).

Source: Inter-American Dialogue China-Latin America Finance Database (Gallagher & Myers, 2012; Inter-American Dialogue, 2016), as updated in the Chinese Loans to Latin America and the Caribbean (CLLAC) Database, 2024 update (Myers & Ray, 2024). CDB = China Development Bank; Ex-Im = Export-Import Bank of China. Sovereign loan commitments only; commercial lending and FDI excluded.

expression of the structural asymmetry the critique identifies.

Chinese lending to developing countries became a major force in development finance in the twenty-first century (Casanova & Remolona, 2018). Dependency operates primarily through resource-backed collateralization: when repayment is secured against future commodity exports rather than general revenue, borrowers forfeit discretion over export allocation regardless of any formal political conditions (Gelpern et al., 2023, pp. 362–364). China is now one of the world's largest official creditors (Horn et al., 2021).

In LAC, the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China hold the largest portfolios, with marked temporal and sectoral variation. Annual policy-bank lending peaked at roughly \$25 billion in 2010, with a secondary peak in 2015, then fell sharply to zero by 2020 (Myers & Ray, 2024), as Figure 1 shows.

By sector, energy accounted for roughly 60% of cumulative lending in 2005–2022 and infrastructure about 20%, with social-sector lending marginal (Myers & Ray, 2024, p. 7); Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador absorbed over 70% during the peak years, so aggregates mask concentrated exposure (Horn et al., 2021). The higher the exposure and collateralization, the stronger the dependency case; for most LAC states, whose exposure is negligible, it barely applies. Critics argue these arrangements hinder autonomous development and risk new dependencies (Carvalho, 2019; Gonzalez, 2010, p. 71), yet the post-2015 retrenchment itself challenges the strong thesis: a power seeking irreversible lock-in would deepen engagement,

not withdraw it. The retrenchment reflects Chinese banks' risk reassessment after losses on Venezuelan and Ecuadorian loans (Myers & Ray, 2024, pp. 9–10), indicating commercial logic rather than dependency engineering.

LAC's turn toward China reflected its own strategic agency: the region sought to diversify beyond dependence on the United States and Europe, leveraging primary-commodity advantage to access Chinese capital and markets (Mora, 1999; Prebisch, 1950). Ocampo (2013, pp. 14–17) cautions that diversifying partners without diversifying export composition risks reproducing center-periphery dynamics with a new center. The agency argument also requires qualification: choice under severely limited alternatives, as when Ecuador turned to China after its 2008 default closed Western markets, is structurally constrained (Gelpern et al., 2023, pp. 362–364; Horn et al., 2021); and that governments choose engagement does not establish equitable domestic distribution, since rents captured by elites make the relevant unit the population, not the state (Langan, 2018, pp. 4–5).

Compared with foreign mining firms of similar scale, Chinese firms show broadly similar rates of labor and environmental violations, reflecting industry-wide regulatory deficiencies rather than ownership-specific pathologies (Irwin & Gallagher, 2013). The most-cited counterexample, Las Bambas in Peru, is examined in the within-case section; its governance failures are real but neither systematic nor specifically neocolonial.

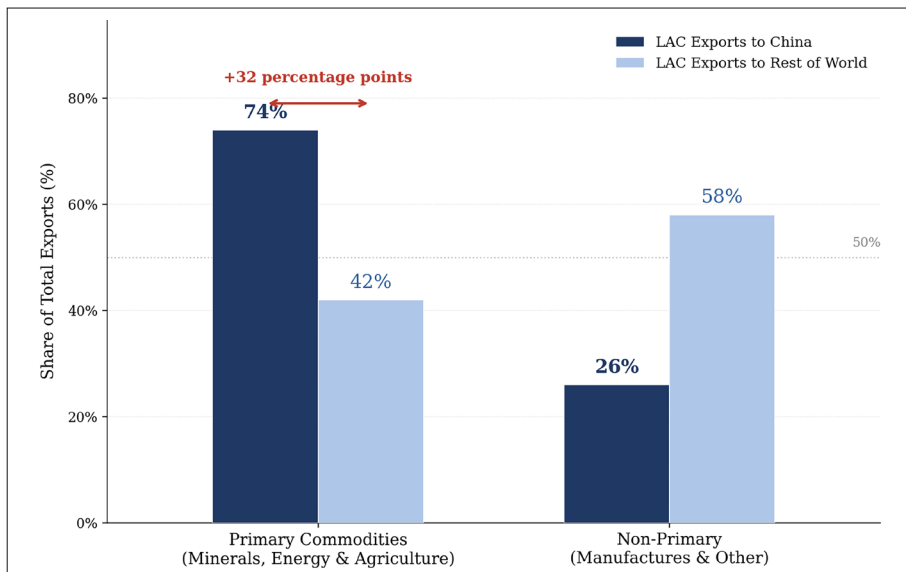


Figure 2. LAC export composition: To China versus rest of world (Primary versus non-primary, approximately 2019 to 2021)

Note: Confirmed aggregate totals only. “Primary commodities” combines minerals, energy, and agricultural products; sub-category breakdowns are not shown. The 32-point differential (74% versus 42%) bears on Condition 1 (structural asymmetry), assessed against Table 1 and consolidated in Table 2. LAC-wide aggregate; South America accounts for about 93% of LAC exports to China, and country-level variation is substantial.

Source: UN Comtrade (2021), as reported in SELA (2024) and Gallagher and Myers (2021); for the structural characterization of exports to China, see ECLAC (2021, p. 18). Over 70% of LAC exports to China are primary commodities (74% used here), versus about 42% of exports to the world. pp = percentage points.

The structural conditions shaping China–LAC economic interaction, primary-commodity dependence, elite capture of rents, and limited institutional capacity, predate China’s presence by decades and are documented in ECLAC’s structuralist tradition (Ocampo, 2013, pp. 14–17; Prebisch, 1950). Acknowledging them is necessary not to exculpate China but to avoid misattributing structural outcomes to Chinese agency: the question is whether China actively deepens inequality through the mechanisms the critique identifies. Figure 2 shows the compositional divergence.

As of 2020, Chinese loans to LAC totaled an estimated \$138 billion, significant absolutely but modest against the region’s external debt, dominated by the IMF, World Bank, and private bond markets (Singh, 2021). Country variation matters: in Ecuador, oil-for-loan agreements tied future petroleum revenue to debt service, constraining fiscal flexibility during the 2015–2016 downturn (Gelpert et al., 2023, pp. 362–364; Horn et al., 2021); Venezuela’s PDVSA-collateralized borrowing deepened commodity dependence (Kaplan & Penfold, 2019). Neither establishes a systematic debt-trap strategy, both governments accepted these terms under limited alternatives, but both show that the significance of Chinese lending cannot be read from aggregate shares.

Argentina presents a different configuration. Since 2009 the People’s Bank of China has extended a currency swap line that Buenos Aires has drawn on repeatedly (Gabel, 2018, pp. 201–204), enabling it to manage IMF negotiations with greater liquidity, a countervailing resource against Western conditionality rather than an added dependency. Yet the swap’s availability has been contingent on diplomatic positions consistent with Chinese preferences, so autonomy expands through reduced dependence on one actor while narrowing through increased dependence on another, a dynamic the binary framework cannot accommodate.

The three largest economies, incorporated as contrast cases, show configurations debt-centered evidence misses. Brazil, China’s largest regional trading partner for over fifteen years, runs a relationship organized through trade and investment rather than policy-bank credit: bilateral trade surpassed US\$180 billion in 2024, China takes over 70% of Brazil’s soybean and iron-ore exports, and Brazil runs a substantial surplus (Xinhua, 2024). Compositional asymmetry persists, primary products for manufactures, the deindustrializing pattern Jenkins and de Freitas Barbosa (2012) identify, but Brazil declined formal BRI accession in November 2024, opting for negotiated synergies that preserve latitude with Beijing and Washington (China-Global South Project, 2024): the largest recipient of Chinese trade and capital set the terms itself.

Chile, the first Latin American country to bring a free trade agreement with China into force (2006), depends on the Chinese market for most of its copper and has seen Chinese firms acquire sensitive assets, Tianqi Lithium’s 24% stake in SQM (2018) and State Grid’s acquisitions of Chilquinta (2020) and CGE (2021), together serving over half of electricity-distribution customers (Dialogue Earth, 2020). These prompted congressional scrutiny yet proceeded under a nationality-neutral framework: deep, voluntarily contracted exposure, contested through domestic institutions rather than foreclosed by external leverage.

Mexico near-inverts the template. Its trade with China is large and asymmetric, with a bilateral deficit exceeding US\$100 billion annually, the obverse of the South American pattern; yet policy-bank lending is negligible, Mexico has not joined the BRI, and Chinese investment remains modest beside US and other G7 sources (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2025). Mexico announced tariffs of up to 50% on Chinese vehicles in 2025 amid North American trade review, contrary to Chinese preferences and drawing no dependency-channel retaliation (Mexico News Daily, 2025).

Across the three cases the pattern is consistent: asymmetry varies independently of control. Where finance exposure is highest (Ecuador, Venezuela) the constraint is fiscal rather than directed; where engagement is deepest (Brazil, Chile) the terms remain host-determined; where

asymmetry is sharpest (Mexico) policy autonomy is least constrained. Outcomes are governed by host-country structure and institutional capacity rather than a uniform Chinese strategy (Stallings, 2020; Wise, 2020).

On conditionality, Chinese loans concentrate in energy and infrastructure (Ray & Myers, 2023). The comparison is more nuanced than either side allows: IMF programs have historically attached macroeconomic conditions with governance implications (Woods, 2006, pp. 64–68), while Chinese contracts carry their own restrictive clauses, cross-default, confidentiality, stabilization, that limit discretion differently (Gelpern et al., 2023, pp. 370–374). The difference is in mechanism, not magnitude, and the contract-level evidence does not support attributing a debt-trap strategy to China alone (Singh, 2021).

Taken together, the evidence supports neither pole. LAC's concentration in primary commodities is well documented, long predates China, and has been reinforced rather than created by Chinese demand (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Giraud, 2020; Prebisch, 1950). Fiscal constraints are real, Gelpern et al. (2023) document collateralization and cross-default clauses, and elite capture is documented (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2021; Langan, 2018, pp. 4–5). Yet none is unique to China: deindustrialization reflects global production restructuring (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010), and systematic debt-trap engineering is unsupported by contract-level evidence (Singh, 2021). What the evidence supports is asymmetric interdependence: China benefits disproportionately from the prevailing structure (Menezes & Bragatti, 2020) while LAC governments exercise bounded but genuine agency in selecting and renegotiating terms (Ray & Myers, 2023).

On the three-condition threshold, the economic evidence satisfies the first, structural asymmetry in trade composition and fiscal leverage, but not the second or third: no systematic strategy of asymmetry-deepening is documented, and LAC governments retain capacity to renegotiate, as Ecuador's 2020 restructuring illustrates (Ray & Myers, 2023). Asymmetry is documented; engineered, escape-proof dependence is not.

The Cultural Dimension: Does China's Conduct Coercively Displace Local Cultural Production?

This section examines Confucius Institutes (CI) and state media, the two channels most consistently cited as vehicles of Chinese cultural influence in LAC (Duarte et al., 2022; Hartig, 2015a), and uses bilateral exchange programs to test the directionality claim.

Discursive power invites engagement with postcolonial theory, specifically Said's (1978, pp. 3–9) premise that asymmetric knowledge production and representation constitute dominance independent of material coercion. The empirical question is whether China's media and educational infrastructure constitute LAC as an object of Chinese development discourse, or whether LAC retains the counter-discursive capacity to resist such framing.

Some read China's cultural initiatives as neocolonial: cultural exchange as diplomacy serving Chinese interests, from CI to media and platforms (Duarte et al., 2022; Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 61–81), with the institutes advancing strategic interests and a cumulative cultural hegemony subtly eroding local autonomy (Hartig, 2015a, 2015b; Nisley, 2022, p. 33).

But the soft-power framework is not itself a neocolonial argument: Nye's (2004, pp. 5–11) formulation is explicitly non-coercive, and equating soft-power projection with cultural neocolonialism requires the contested premise that persuasion at scale becomes structurally coercive (Tomlinson, 1991, pp. 92–96).

That CI serve soft-power objectives is not disputed; the question is whether projection meets

the conditions for cultural control. CI promotion advances China's image (Nye, 2008; Wang, 2008) but also facilitates genuine exchange (Huang & Xiang, 2019), and the proposed pathway from language instruction to favorable opinion to compliant policy remains unsubstantiated: Huang and Xiang (2019) find CI presence correlates with positive attitudes but trace no measurable policy outcomes.

LAC engagement with Chinese culture is far more limited than with Korean and Japanese exports. K-pop and K-dramas command a substantial regional following, driven by South Korean cultural diplomacy in Chile, Argentina, and Mexico (Kim, 2021); China's presence centers on traditional culture and language education (Bohigues & Morgenstern, 2021).

China has not coerced cultural adoption. CI teach voluntarily, and exchange is two-directional: LAC countries have established cultural centers in China and scholarships flow both ways (Global Times, 2023; Nisley, 2022, p. 32). This coexists with documented concerns, several LAC universities have closed or declined to renew CI agreements over academic-freedom and transparency issues (Nisley, 2022, p. 35), but does not establish systematic coercion.

Media presence requires the same disaggregation. Chinese state media have expanded Spanish- and Portuguese-language operations, Xinhua bureaus and content-sharing agreements, CGTN-Español and China Daily supplements, and journalist training (Duarte et al., 2022), which critics term sharp power (Walker, 2018). It again falls short of displacement: content-sharing arrangements are contractual and terminable, and uptake of Chinese state content remains marginal (Bohigues & Morgenstern, 2021). The popularity of TikTok and, in Brazil, Kwai reflects commercial adoption rather than state programming, and platform-governance concerns belong to the technological dimension.

The cultural evidence supports neither characterization fully. Hartig (2015a, 2015b) and Kurlantzick (2007) document strategic communication functions, and Huang and Xiang (2019) confirm CI correlate with more favorable perceptions. What it does not support is the inference from instrumental intent to assimilative effect: LAC attitudes remain ambivalent and economically motivated (Bohigues & Morgenstern, 2021), Korean and North American flows command far greater engagement (Kim, 2021), and exchange is two-directional (Duarte et al., 2022). Tomlinson (1991, pp. 68–101) defines cultural imperialism's mechanism as the systematic marginalization of local production, not the projection of external content. Against the threshold, the first condition is only partially met, a state-coordinated cultural and media presence constitutes a real but bounded asymmetry whose footprint remains well below entrenched United States and South Korean flows (Bohigues & Morgenstern, 2021; Kim, 2021); and the evidence meets neither the second condition, no coercive displacement is documented, nor the third: local production is not foreclosed and exit costs remain low.

The Technological Dimension: Does China's Conduct Foreclose Indigenous Technical Capacity?

Critics argue China's high-tech investment, while bringing capital and connectivity, risks deepening technological dependency: Telecommunications and smart-city projects involve adoption of Chinese standards, raising concerns about supply-chain reliance and reduced local innovation (Afonso et al., 2021; Malena, 2021). Huawei and ZTE's 5G expansion has sharpened concerns over data security (Malena, 2021, p. 3), as has China's advocacy of state-led internet governance (Nanni, 2024).

The primary constraints on LAC technological development are internal. Though graduate numbers have risen, only about one in seven LAC graduates majors in engineering and

technology, against six in ten in the social sciences, unlike China, South Korea, and Singapore, where most concentrate in IT and engineering (UNESCO, cited in Salazar-Xirinachs, 2020, pp. 44–45). This skills deficit partly explains the limited competitive resistance Chinese providers have met, reinforcing the structural dependency the critique identifies.

Chinese firms have nonetheless contributed substantively to LAC's digital infrastructure. Huawei and ZTE entered in the early 2000s, building telecommunications networks, university training centers, and Mexico's largest public Wi-Fi network (Malena, 2021, p. 8); Alibaba has localized logistics and payments; and Huawei, Alibaba, and Xiaomi have created employment through production and R&D bases. The Digital Silk Road (2015) and China-LAC Year of Science and Technology (2021) institutionalized these partnerships. Friction exists, however: Huawei's role in Ecuador's ECU-911 surveillance system shows technology transfer requires scrutiny of governance conditions, not only connectivity (Feldstein, 2019, p. 23).

Country-level infrastructure decisions since 2020 are the most direct test of whether technological asymmetry forecloses host-state choice, and the record is one of host-determined outcomes. Brazil's 2021 5G auction, the region's largest, imposed no vendor exclusion on commercial networks despite US lobbying, reserving only a stricter government network; Huawei remains a principal supplier (Universidad de Navarra, 2021). Chile routed the first trans-Pacific submarine cable to Sydney with Google, setting aside the Shanghai options of a Huawei-supported study (Datacenter Dynamics, 2024), while hosting Huawei's first South American cloud data center. Vendor concentration has not produced uniform alignment.

Two cases illustrate the governance risks concentrated provision can pose where host institutions are weak or willing. ZTE's role in Venezuela's carnet de la patria identity system extended a Chinese social-control technology to a government that used it for politically conditioned benefit allocation (Berwick, 2018), and Argentina's fifty-year concession of the Espacio Lejano deep-space station to a PLA-linked agency, with limited Argentine oversight, remains the most cited case of opaque concession (Londoño, 2018). Both are client-driven, host governments sought or accepted the terms, inverting the directionality the neocolonial mechanism requires and underscoring that the absence of neocolonial control does not entail the absence of harm.

Assessing the dimension means separating what the evidence establishes from what is merely possible. Chinese firms, mainly Huawei and ZTE, occupy a structurally significant position, and Malena (2021) and Afonso et al. (2021) document the dependency risks. What remains unsubstantiated is evidence that they have exploited it through deliberate data extraction, politically motivated surveillance, or suppression of indigenous development (Salazar-Xirinachs, 2020, pp. 44–45). The UK's National Cyber Security Centre found no malicious Chinese state activity via Huawei equipment (Taylor, 2019), and US investigations concurred (Harrell, 2019); Berman et al. (2023) attribute Western concern less to documented vulnerabilities than to competition over digital-governance norms. Kwet's (2019) digital colonialism centers on US platform monopolies, not Chinese infrastructure, and Thatcher et al. (2016) ground data colonialism in dispossession requiring demonstrated extraction, not structural proximity. Structural asymmetry in technical capacity is present, but an active dependency-deepening mechanism is asserted rather than substantiated, and foreclosure is not evidenced given documented technology transfer and joint training (Malena, 2021, p. 8). The second and third conditions are not met.

The Political Dimension: Does China's Conduct Demonstrably Constrain LAC Policy Autonomy?

Accusations of political neocolonialism rest largely on perceived ambition. Critics argue economic ties extend dependence into political and security domains, with aid, investment, and loans used to extract support in international affairs (Afonso et al., 2021), or frame engagement as a geopolitical strategy, a softer neocolonialism rebalancing power against the United States without direct control (Oberhauser, 2024; Yang & Lee, 2020).

Three grounds qualify the control thesis. First, BRI engagement is primarily economic, with infrastructure loans as development partnerships rather than instruments of dominance (Oliveira et al., 2020; Sidaway & Woon, 2017). Second, LAC states maintain diversified ties with the United States, the EU, and multilateral frameworks, so China is not displacing alternatives. Third, LAC's global position has historically been shaped more by commodity cycles and domestic rent politics than by any single external actor (Bértola & Ocampo, 2012, pp. 1–8).

Three underexamined bodies of evidence, recognition, multilateral voting, and summitry, allow more precise specification. The clearest pattern concerns the Taiwan region: Panama (2017), the Dominican Republic (2018), El Salvador (2018), Nicaragua (2021), and Honduras (2023) switched recognition to Beijing, mostly anticipating expanded trade, lending, or investment (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023). Yet seven of the Taiwan region's remaining partners are LAC states, and Paraguay and Guatemala have sustained recognition for decades at the cost of the Chinese market, hard to reconcile with foreclosed alignment. Quantitative work points the same double-edged way: trade exposure is associated with convergence toward Chinese positions in UN General Assembly voting, including on human rights (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013), and Chinese statecraft has expanded inversely to US influence (Urdinez et al., 2016). This is the strongest systematic evidence of economic-to-political conversion, but its mechanism is incentive through anticipated benefit, not conditionality through threat: it identifies alignment effects of interdependence, not benefit suspension for non-compliance, and convergence concentrates in low-salience votes.

Institutionalized diplomacy shows the same negotiated quality. At the fourth China-CELAC Forum in May 2025, attended by the presidents of Brazil, Colombia, and Chile, China announced an RMB 66 billion (about US\$9 billion) credit facility, less than half the pledge a decade earlier, consistent with the post-2015 retrenchment (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Argentina under Javier Milei is the most direct recent test: a president elected on anti-China rhetoric renewed the activated swap tranche in 2024 and 2025 (Buenos Aires Herald, 2024) before reportedly winding it down after negotiating a parallel US arrangement (South China Morning Post, 2025), exhibiting both faces of the configuration, incentives constraining a hostile government's room for rupture, and an alternative patron promptly reducing reliance on Beijing: exit exercised, not foreclosed.

The political dimension is the most unevenly evidenced. Systematic review yields no documented case in which China conditioned cooperation on specific votes, intervened in elections, or engineered compliant governments, the mechanisms Nkrumah (1966, pp. ix–xv) and Langan (2018, pp. 4–5) treat as constitutive (Afonso et al., 2021). Yang and Lee (2020) conclude that LAC states have used Chinese engagement to soft-balance against US hegemony rather than absorbing influence, supporting the agency thesis. The recognition switches and voting convergence express an incentive channel; what remains undocumented in any confirmed case is its conversion into coercion through benefit suspension, vote conditioning, or intervention. The distinction is thus between deliberate extraction of compliance and the incidental political effects of asymmetric economic ties (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2021). Structural asymmetry in

leverage is documented, but an active mechanism converting it into compliance is asserted rather than evidenced, and autonomous alignment, including with actors opposed to China, has not been foreclosed (Yang & Lee, 2020). Conditions two and three are not satisfied.

Within-Case Evidence: Ecuador's Oil-Backed Debt and the Las Bambas Conflict

The cross-domain survey establishes a pattern; this section adds process. Both cases are hard cases for the argument, each the strongest candidate for a neocolonial reading in its channel: Ecuador is the most heavily oil-collateralized borrower, and Las Bambas the largest Chinese extractive investment and most protracted mining conflict in LAC. For each, the analysis traces negotiation context, contractual architecture, policy consequences, and domestic reactions, then applies the three-condition test. Process evidence can distinguish constraint operating through contract administration from control operating through political direction, which aggregate data cannot.

Ecuador turned to Chinese finance after other channels closed. Following the 2008–2009 default on US\$3.2 billion of bonds, a strategic default under Correa's repudiation policy, the country was excluded from Western markets, and Chinese policy banks became its principal financiers (Sanderson & Forsythe, 2013). Between 2009 and 2016 it contracted successive facilities from the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank, the latter concentrated in hydropower, including the defect-plagued Coca Codo Sinclair dam (Casey & Krauss, 2018). The contracts are unusually well documented: repayment ran through proceeds accounts fed by crude deliveries, lender debits took priority, and cross-default and confidentiality clauses accompanied pricing harder than multilateral alternatives (Gelpern et al., 2023, pp. 362–374; Horn et al., 2021). This is the region's strongest contractual evidence for the first condition: future export earnings were legally committed before being earned.

The consequences materialized when oil prices collapsed in 2014–2016: with much crude pre-committed, adjustment fell on the uncommitted residual, and the constraint became politically visible. Reaction followed an electoral rather than external logic. Oil pre-sales were attacked in the National Assembly as mortgaging future production; the Moreno government reversed course after 2017, contracting a US\$4.2 billion IMF Extended Fund Facility in 2019 while renegotiating with the Chinese banks; deferrals were agreed in 2020 and a 2022 restructuring reduced obligations and released committed crude for market sale (Ray & Myers, 2023). Two points matter: the renegotiations succeeded twice and tracked Ecuadorian political transitions rather than Chinese preferences, and the parallel IMF engagement shows alternatives were priced rather than foreclosed.

Against the conditions, the first is met in its strongest regional form; the second is only partially traceable, lending continued into deteriorating fundamentals but at commercial pricing, and the post-2015 retrenchment is the opposite of dependency engineering; the third fails decisively, with exit exercised twice through renegotiation and re-diversification. The constraint operated through contract administration, automatic and renegotiable, and its bite varied with the oil price, not with Ecuadorian foreign policy.

Las Bambas is the strongest candidate in the investment channel. China's competition authority conditioned approval of the Glencore–Xstrata merger on divestment of the project, which an MMG-led consortium acquired in 2014 for about US\$6 billion, the region's largest Chinese mining acquisition. Under the new owner, the slurry pipeline in the original licensing gave way to road haulage of concentrate through highland communities never party to the

environmental impact assessment, the changes processed through abbreviated instruments without prior consultation (Rodríguez & Bazán Seminario, 2024, pp. 1061–1063): corridor communities inherited the externalities without the compensation framework.

Domestic reaction has been sustained and consequential: protests at Challhuahuacho in 2015 left fatalities; the Fuerabamba community blockaded the corridor for about two months in 2019; renewed blockades in 2021 and 2022 suspended production for extended periods; and governments oscillated between repression, recurrent states of emergency and police service agreements analyzed as cheap security, and dialogue tables producing repeatedly renegotiated compensation, resettlement, and procurement agreements. Rodríguez and Bazán Seminario (2024) argue that Chinese state capital meeting permissive host regulation generates authoritarian, para-colonial practices, and the record partially supports it: the harms and the policing were real, and the company benefited from both.

The three-condition test nonetheless locates the mechanism domestically. The first is met: an extractive enclave with profoundly asymmetric bargaining. The second fails in its neocolonial form: the instruments of control, licensing flexibilization and police agreements, were Peruvian state creations, available to any operator and documented in equivalent non-Chinese conflicts (Irwin & Gallagher, 2013); no evidence identifies a mechanism running from Beijing through MMG to Lima. The third fails visibly: communities exercised effective veto measured in production losses, the state retained regulatory authority, and the company conceded repeatedly. Agency lay below the state, with communities whose leverage was never foreclosed.

In short, the cases supply the process evidence aggregate patterns cannot: in the strongest debt case, constraint was contractual, price-contingent, and twice renegotiated; in the strongest investment case, the control mechanisms were host-state instruments and the effective counterparty was sub-national. Both approach the threshold on the first condition and recede from it on the second and third, and in both the decisive variable was domestic, the electoral cycle in Ecuador and the governance of social licensing in Peru, rather than directive capacity from Beijing. This is the configuration negotiated asymmetric interdependence is built to name.

Conclusions: Negotiated Asymmetric Interdependence and Its Implications

The findings point in a consistent direction. China's presence generates identifiable asymmetries, but no dimension satisfies the threshold for neocolonial characterization. Table 2 consolidates the dimensional assessments and Table A3 the country-level variation.

Reading the dimensions jointly clarifies where cross-domain conversion does and does not occur. The one well-evidenced pathway runs from economic engagement to diplomatic alignment: trade exposure predicts UN General Assembly voting convergence (Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013), and recognition switches have tracked anticipated benefit. The pathways the neocolonial model treats as central, finance into governance control, technology into extraction, culture into assimilation, remain undocumented regionally; and the cases approaching them most closely, Venezuela's surveillance procurement, Ecuador's collateral constraints, Argentina's space-station concession, cluster where host institutions were weakest. The governing variable is domestic institutional quality, not Chinese strategy: asymmetric influence operates where safeguards are weakest, but no evidence shows it created that weakness.

Three features of the neocolonial critique warrant closer scrutiny. First, many structural conditions that shape China–LAC relations, commodity dependence, limited institutional capacity, governance deficits, are inherited rather than externally imposed. Attributing them to Chinese engagement misattributes structural outcomes to bilateral agency and reduces incentives

Table 2. Summary of findings: Three-condition assessment by dimension

Dimension	C1: Structural Asymmetry	C2: Active Control Mechanism	C3: Foreclosure of Exit / Resistance	Verdict
Economic	Met. Primary-export concentration; collateralized lending constrains fiscal discretion (Gelpern et al., 2023; ECLAC, 2021).	Not met. Post-2015 retrenchment reflects credit-risk reassessment, not dependency engineering (Myers & Ray, 2024; Kaplan & Penfold, 2019).	Not met. Renegotiation and alternative financing documented, including Ecuador's 2020 restructuring (Ray & Myers, 2023).	Not met
Cultural	Partially met. State-backed soft-power infrastructure documented; penetration weaker than third-country flows (Bohigues & Morgenstern, 2021).	Not met. No coercive displacement; host institutions decline or terminate agreements (Nisley, 2022).	Not met. Two-directional exchange; local cultural production not foreclosed (Duarte et al., 2022).	Not met
Technological	Met. Vendor concentration in telecom infrastructure; indigenous capacity deficit (Malena, 2021; Salazar-Xirinachs, 2020).	Not met. Extraction unsubstantiated (Harrell, 2019; Taylor, 2019); ECU-911 raises governance concerns (Feldstein, 2019).	Not met. Transfer and training documented; diversification feasible, as 5G and cable routing decisions show.	Not met
Political	Met. Economic leverage documented in collateralized cases (Horn et al., 2021; Kaplan & Penfold, 2019).	Not met. Alignment operates through incentive, not documented conditionality (Afonso et al., 2021; Flores-Macías & Kreps, 2013).	Not met. Diversified alignments sustained; divergent positions persist (Yang & Lee, 2020).	Not met

Note: Assessments derive from the four empirical sections against the Table 1 criteria. Met or Partially met on C1 alone does not support a neocolonial characterization, which requires all three conditions jointly. Country variation is reported in Table A3.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

for the domestic reforms LAC's trajectory requires.

Second, the critique tends to portray LAC countries as passive recipients rather than active participants. This ignores documented instances in which governments renegotiated terms, refused projects, or leveraged Chinese competition with Western actors to improve their position (Ray & Myers, 2023). Yet state-level agency does not dissolve intra-national distribution: the pattern whereby local elites intermediate foreign capital at the expense of broader populations (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979, pp. 143–148) appears in several cases and cannot be dismissed by invoking sovereignty.

Third, the states most vocal in applying the label are themselves implicated in structurally analogous practices (Langan, 2018). This is context, not defense: a critique's validity does not depend on its source, and the productive response is to hold Chinese engagement to the same explicit criteria applied to any external actor.

These findings do not preclude substantive critique: transparency in financial flows, the governance implications of unconditional lending, and the environmental footprint of infrastructure warrant ongoing scrutiny by Chinese actors and LAC governments.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the analysis relies on secondary literature and aggregate data rather than fieldwork, so conclusions about Chinese motivations or LAC populations' experience carry interpretive constraints. Second, the most-likely design strengthens negative inference but cannot eliminate selection effects; the contrast cases mitigate but do not abolish this. The verdict also remains sensitive to the operational threshold: under the structuralist

definitions reviewed earlier, the same evidence sustains a dependency reading (Stallings, 2020). Third, the four dimensions are not exhaustive, migration, environmental governance, and multilateral behavior fall outside scope. Fourth, China–LAC relations are heterogeneous, and despite the two within-case studies, the cross-regional scope leaves many country-specific dynamics, including cases more consistent with neocolonial theory, less examined than they merit. Future research would benefit from single-country longitudinal studies and from extending the three-condition test to the excluded dimensions.

The consistency of the pattern carries the argument: the framework's explanatory weight rests not on asymmetry, which is widespread, but on the joint operation of all three conditions, and in no domain do they jointly obtain, making the choice between a neocolonial actor and a benign development partner a false dichotomy. Table A1 in the Appendix positions negotiated asymmetric interdependence relative to the two interpretive frameworks it supersedes.

The four-dimensional assessment yields not a verdict of innocence but a finding of categorical mismatch: the mechanisms through which neocolonial domination operates, deliberate dependency engineering, coercive cultural displacement, foreclosure of autonomous development, are not consistently evidenced in any domain.

Situating the Concept: What Negotiated Asymmetric Interdependence Adds

The concept's value is clearest against five adjacent frameworks, summarized in Table A2 (Appendix). Complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) captures multiple channels and the declining utility of force but was built for symmetric industrial states, bracketing developmental asymmetry and its convertibility into control. The asymmetric-interdependence tradition treats asymmetry as a power resource, through Hirschman's (1945) trade-derived influence or weaponized interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019), but presumes conversion, whereas the LAC record shows it attempted rarely, succeeding partially, and varying with host institutions. Dependency theory's sophisticated variants already contain agency, Cardoso and Faletto's (1979, pp. 143–148) associated-dependent development and Stallings's (2020) revamped framework are the nearest neighbors, but read bargains as expressions of structural position, where the present framework disaggregates by domain, specifies conjunctive criteria, and treats bargaining outcomes as evidence. South–South cooperation (Gray & Gills, 2016; Mawdsley, 2012) describes how participants frame the relationship; the present concept specifies the evidence that would contradict the solidaristic framing and finds it unmet. Post-hegemonic accounts (Ruggirozzi & Tussie, 2012) explain the regional order that gives LAC states room to maneuver but offer no dyadic metric for when a partner crosses into dominating power, the question this concept answers.

The convergence with prior scholarship is deliberate: the article does not claim to discover that China–LAC relations are asymmetric yet negotiated, a judgment found in Gonzalez-Vicente and Montoute (2021), Myers and Ray (2022), Wise (2020), and Stallings (2020). What the literature has lacked is the apparatus to make that judgment testable: a stated threshold, domain disaggregation, indicator criteria (Table 1), a consolidated assessment (Table 2), graded country scoring (Table A3), and an explicit falsification standard. The contribution is therefore methodological as much as conceptual, a replicable procedure applicable to other dyads such as China–Africa or China–Southeast Asia. Relabeling adds a word; operationalization adds a test. Documented evidence that Chinese actors suspended benefits to compel alignment, imposed terms a host could not renegotiate or exit, or systematically suppressed indigenous capacity in

any domain would require reclassifying that domain, and if regionally patterned the relationship, toward the neocolonial pole. No case meets that standard; Venezuela approaches it most closely and warrants monitoring.

The implications are theoretical and practical. For the neocolonialism debate, the reframing shifts the analytical burden from detecting intent to assessing structural outcomes, bringing the literature into dialogue with Cardoso and Faletto's (1979, pp. 172–174) distinction between dependency as a structural condition and exploitation as a relational practice. For policy, the relevant question is not whether China is a neocolonial actor, but how LAC states can strengthen the institutional and fiscal conditions under which their bounded agency becomes more effective.

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Appendix

Table A1. Conceptual framework comparison: Neocolonial framework, official narrative, and negotiated asymmetric interdependence

Analytical Dimension	Neocolonial Framework	Official “Win-Win” Narrative	Negotiated Asymmetric Interdependence (This Study)
Power distribution	Unidirectional domination by China	Equal partnership; mutual benefit	Structural asymmetry acknowledged, not equivalent to domination. Power differentials are real and consequential but do not constitute deliberate control.
LAC agency	LAC states as passive, structurally constrained victims (Nkrumah, 1966; Langan, 2018)	Fully sovereign, freely choosing partners	Bounded but genuine agency; choices made under structural constraints (Kaplan & Penfold, 2019). State agency and population welfare are analytically distinct.
Control mechanisms	Deliberate dependency engineering across all domains; systematic exploitation	None; engagement purely developmental and beneficial	Context-specific leverage (fiscal collateral, diplomatic signalling); not systematic across the region. Venezuela is the most constrained case; most LAC states retain diversified options.
Elite intermediation	Local elites complicit in neocolonial extraction (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979, pp. 143-148)	Host governments represent national interests	Elite capture documented but not China-specific; predates Chinese regional presence (Langan, 2018, pp. 4-5). Does not establish systemic neocolonial pattern.
Theoretical lineage	Nkrumah (1966); Langan (2018); dependency theory (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979)	Chinese official policy documents; South-South cooperation discourse (Mawdsley, 2012)	Cardoso & Faletto (1979): dependency as structure, not intentional domination; George & Bennett (2005) structured, focused comparison methodology.
Overall verdict	China characterized as exercising systematic neocolonial domination; LAC as structurally subjugated	China characterized as equal, benign partner	China as asymmetric but negotiated partner; both binary characterizations empirically unsupported.

Note: The “Negotiated Asymmetric Interdependence” column represents this article’s analytical contribution. It is not a claim that the relationship is unproblematic, but that the constitutive mechanisms of neocolonial control as theorized by Nkrumah (1966) and Langan (2018) are not systematically evidenced across the region.

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Table A2. Negotiated asymmetric interdependence and adjacent concepts

Adjacent Concept	Core Claim	What Negotiated Asymmetric Interdependence Adds or Alters
Complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977)	Multiple channels and muted force among broadly symmetric industrial states	Centers developmental asymmetry between unequal partners and tests its convertibility into control
Asymmetric / weaponized interdependence (Hirschman, 1945; Farrell & Newman, 2019)	Asymmetry is a power resource that the stronger party converts into leverage	Treats conversion as an empirical variable; specifies threshold criteria for when leverage amounts to domination
Dependency with agency (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Stallings, 2020)	Structural position shapes development; domestic coalitions negotiate the terms of insertion	Disaggregates by domain; conjunctive three-condition test makes the domination verdict falsifiable; agency read from renegotiation outcomes
South–South cooperation (Mawdsley, 2012; Gray & Gills, 2016)	Normative framing of horizontal solidarity, mutual benefit, and non-interference	Analytical rather than normative; specifies the evidence that would contradict the solidaristic framing
Post-hegemonic IR / regionalism (Ruggirozzi & Tussie, 2012)	Regional order after U.S. primacy: denser regional institutions and extra-hemispheric diversification	Operates at the dyadic level; specifies when a partner's asymmetry amounts to domination within the permissive context post-hegemony describes

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table A3. Country-level case assessment against the three-condition thresholds

Country	Primary Chinese Engagement	Conditions Met (of 3)	Analytical Assessment
Ecuador	CDB oil for loan agreements; infrastructure loans (2010s)	1 / 3	C1 met: oil export allocation constrained fiscal flexibility during 2015-16 commodity downturn (Gelpern et al., 2023, pp. 362-364). C2/C3 not met: Ecuador renegotiated debt in 2020 and simultaneously pursued IMF agreement, demonstrating retained external policy agency (Horn et al., 2021).
Venezuela	PDVSA oil collateralised loans; ~\$60 bn cumulative (2007-2016); China Development Bank and Ex-Im Bank	2 / 3	C1 and C2 partially met: structural fiscal dependency deepened through oil-backed borrowing; Venezuela accounted for avg. 64% of China's LAC credit lines 2010-2013 (Kaplan & Penfold, 2019, p. 3, Table 1). Kaplan & Penfold (2019, p. 37) show that China itself became ensnared in a creditor trap, lending defensively rather than strategically deepening dependency.
Peru (Las Bambas)	MMG copper mine; Chinese state enterprise operator (post-2014 acquisition)	1 / 3	C1 met: resource extraction present. C2/C3 not met: governance failure (road rerouting without community consultation leading to protests and fatalities) reflects case specific social licence failure, not systematic regional neocolonial pattern (Rodríguez & Bazán Seminario, 2024, pp. 1061–1063). Peruvian government retained national regulatory authority throughout.
Argentina	PBoC currency swap (RMB 130 bn); agricultural commodity exports	1 / 3	C1 partially met: structural commodity trade asymmetry. C2 case specific only: swap availability associated with diplomatic alignment (Gabel, 2018, pp. 201-204); simultaneously reduced reliance on IMF liquidity support. Swap availability linked to diplomatic alignment with Chinese preferences, representing case specific rather than systematic conditionality.

Note: Table 2 reports the aggregate LAC-level assessment; Table A3 documents country-level variation. Venezuela's 2/3 score approaches the threshold more closely than the regional pattern but does not override the Table 2 verdict, which Kaplan and Penfold (2019) explain by China's creditor-trap dynamic rather than intentional dependency engineering. Most LAC states have near-zero loan exposure and are not shown; Ecuador and Las Bambas receive within-case analysis.

Source: Authors' elaboration.