

## Abstract

The geopolitical implications of China's rising influence, especially in regard to growing China-US tensions is often limited to the larger system level, disregarding the role that regions can play. Additionally, the focus of scholarship and policy on the China threat rhetoric as well as implicit biases of Western IR analytical frameworks have resulted in a deficient understanding of China's motivations and foreign policy. Moreover, there are not many studies accounting for the latter in the context of the Latin American and Caribbean region, which points at a shortcoming in the literature. As such, this thesis seeks to reframe the perspectives used to understand Chinese foreign policy and offer insight into its workings, positing that ideational components (namely narratives evoking commonalities) are intrinsic to it and economic ones are secondary, contrary to common knowledge. At the same time, this thesis sustains that there is value in acknowledging the regional sub-system level in any geopolitical assessment, as it pertains to the system level interplay. To this purpose, the thesis dissects China's influence aims by grounding them on Chinese and Latin American perspectives, and relates them to China's foreign policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on mask and vaccine diplomacy. It then assesses the impact of China's health diplomacy and its main components at work by analysing public opinion, under the assumption that media is reflective of it. As such, a longitudinal content analysis study of articles published in the most popular Chilean and Argentinian newspaper is employed to this purpose. Results demonstrate that the ideational components are indeed at play, but where successful, they do not remain so in the long run, with economic ones sustaining positive ideational gains rather than viceversa. Consequently, the thesis concludes that ideational groundwork for increased Chinese influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is indeed present, and while their efforts have been unproductive thus far, there is room to question future implications. This thesis hopes to become a valuable resource for growing scholarly interest on non-Western perspectives and to encourage future research on China-LAC relations.

*Key words:* Chinese foreign policy, China–Latin America relations, mask diplomacy, *tianxia*, narrative power