

Latin America from China's Eyes

The China-Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) relationship is largely analyzed through the eyes of U.S. or LAC scholars and researchers. While this perspective is important, it doesn't include how Chinese scholars view the region, creating a major blindspot for U.S. and LAC policymakers thinking about China's future in the region.

In *The Art of War*, Sunzi admonishes that "if you know yourself and know your enemy, you will never lose 100 battles" (知己知彼, 百战不殆). In this new section *LAC from China's Eyes*, I will attempt to "know my enemy" by translating and analyzing an article or report from a Chinese scholar who specializes in Latin American and Caribbean affairs, found in the Chinese Journal of Latin American Studies. I hope that this provides interesting insights into how Chinese thought leaders view the region, and actionable open-source insight for U.S. and LAC practitioners alike.

–Leland Lazarus, Associate Director for National Security, Florida International University Jack Gordon Institute of Public Policy

Entry 2: The Adjustment of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Regional Diplomacy Response

By Ye Hailin, China Academy of Social Sciences Asia Pacific and Global Strategy Researcher And Li Mingren, Yunnan University International Relations Institute PhD researcher

Ye and Li give a comprehensive overview of how China views the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the diplomatic steps China has taken to mitigate this U.S. strategy. They first explain Xi Jinping's regional diplomatic thought, which stresses that "neighboring countries are always the priority" and that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people is based on friendly relations with neighbors and creating the "Shared Destiny for Humanity." The Belt and Road Initiative is a "deeply welcomed international public good and international cooperation platform," they add. One of China's key foreign policy accomplishments in Asia is the 2020 Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

The "Changshan Snake"

Ye and Li assert that the Trump administration's America First policy led to a decrease in U.S. strategic credibility in Asia, but the Biden administration has since sought to re-establish dominance through its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The scholars compare the U.S. strategy to the ancient "Changshan Snake" strategy proposed in Sunzi's Art of War, where soldiers surround the enemy, and the "head" and "tail" of the troops can protect each other. The U.S. is strengthening alliances around China, creating a "long military front from Japan to India" through the Quad.

In order to break the Changshan Snake strategy, China must focus on its weakest point: the snake's middle. Ye and Li define that middle as Southeast Asia; therefore, China should spend its energy on strengthening its relations with ASEAN countries. In this endeavor, China has clear competitors. Japan is a close U.S. ally, the new leader of the multi-national Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership, and an economic competitor for China in Southeast Asia. South Korea has moved from a "balanced diplomacy" under Moon Jae-In to a pro-U.S. stance under Yoon Suk-Yul, considering the U.S. as a "bridgehead." Southeast Asia has become the main battleground of influence in the U.S.-China competition. India has sought to provoke China via "problem diplomacy," bringing up border issues.

How China Should Respond to U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

Ye and Li suggest that China must prevent anything that will influence China's economic development, because "diplomacy serves economic building." This includes expanding trade with its neighbors and further developing the Belt and Road Initiative. China should also lead its own regional security system and provide security guarantees to its neighbors. This would help stop Asian countries from thinking that they must "depend on China economically and depend on the U.S. for security." The two scholars specifically state that "China does not need a collective security system like NATO, and China also does not have the ability to lead a regional security alliance." But China needs to have strategic partners like Russia, Central Asian countries via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Pakistan, ASEAN countries, and North Korea.

In conclusion, Ye and Li use a Communist Party adage to summarize China's foreign policy priorities: "big countries are key, neighboring (countries) are of first importance, developing countries are the foundation."

Assessment

This report offers a good glimpse into how Chinese thought leaders feel quite threatened by the current Asian geopolitical landscape. The reference to the Changshan Snake strategy belies current fears that China is being surrounded by U.S.-led allies and partners intent on restricting China's growth. That the scholars mention that China does not have the ability to lead a regional security alliance like NATO is a sober assessment. Their suggestion that China focus on Southeast Asia should remind U.S. policymakers to continue to fortify its relations with ASEAN countries, which they are already doing via additional security agreements with the Philippines and others.