



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 31, 2023

Xi Jinping Lures CELAC Summit to Embrace Belt and Road Initiative

SINGAPORE — Authoritarian Chinese leader Xi Jinping participated in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit last week, encouraging the Western Hemisphere to adopt the Belt and Road Chinese debt-trap scheme and stating that China views the region as a “key partner in enhancing solidarity.”

CELAC is a left-leaning platform that can be likened to the Organization of American States (OAS). It is presently conducting a head-of-state conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, hosted by socialist President Alberto Fernandez. Argentina is a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner, as are various other members of the coalition.



Cancilleria del Ecuador/Wikimedia Commons

Notably, the recent CELAC conference was an opportunity for regional left-wingers to celebrate the rise of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, otherwise known as Lula, the corrupt socialist and former president of Brazil who officially became Brazil’s head of state on January 1 this year for the third time. His predecessor, the pro-life and conservative Jair Bolsonaro, removed Brazil from the leftist coalition in 2020.

Once arrested for taking bribes while president, Lula was released from prison in a controversial overturn before his bid for president. During the CELAC conference, he lambasted world leaders who condemned human-rights crimes perpetrated by his allies in Venezuela and Cuba, instead insisting that reporters regard the communist dictatorships in both countries with “great affection.”

Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro, a major ally of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the region, became the focus of dispute at the conference, as Argentina objected to the potential presence of a wanted drug trafficker in their capital city. After conservative lawmakers warned they would expedite his arrest and extradition to the United States, Maduro suddenly pulled out from his trip, blaming the “neo-fascist right” for his doing so.

Amid this atmosphere of conflict, Xi gave a video speech from Beijing bent on promoting China’s international projects to widen Communist Party influence.

“President Xi Jinping stressed that China always supports the regional integration process of Latin America and the Caribbean,” said the Chinese foreign ministry in summing up Xi’s speech. “We highly value our relations with CELAC, and take CELAC as our key partner in enhancing solidarity among developing countries and furthering South-South cooperation.”

Xi claimed that working with China would be “characterized by equality, mutual benefit, innovation, openness and benefits for the people.... More and more countries in the region have engaged in high-quality Belt and Road cooperation with China, supported and participated in the Global Development



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Initiative and the Global Security Initiative, and are working with China in building a China-LAC community with a shared future.”

Xi concluded his speech by stressing that cooperation with China would promote “peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom.”

The BRI is a worldwide infrastructure plan in which China supplies poor countries with loans meant to be used to pay Chinese companies to build expensive infrastructure projects, often ports or railways linking remote areas together.

Many of the participating countries are situated in the most squalid regions of South Asia and Africa, but Beijing has tried to attract countries in Latin America and Europe as well, such as Ukraine, Italy, and Cuba. Even though Bolsonaro claimed to be anti-communist, his administration had indicated interest in joining the BRI prior to his defeat.

The BRI project has proven to be an insidious debt trap for many recipients. When BRI countries are not able to pay back the Chinese loans for the infrastructure work, the CCP seizes the relevant properties and undermines the countries’ sovereignty. For instance, China seized the strategically important Hambantota port in Sri Lanka after that country did not pay its BRI loans.

Yet pro-China observers seemed to echo Xi’s remarks, urging for regional cooperation with Communist China. Eugenia Dos Santos, a specialist at the Chile-based University of Santiago, said that Xi’s remarks touched on regional integration, people’s welfare, justice, and peace, among other things, and maintained China’s support for the region’s economic recovery.

“Economic integration is not only an advantage for the region, but a matter of life or death” at a time of global economic slowdown, said David Castrillon Kerrigan, an international relations academic at the Externado University of Colombia, calling regional integration an “existential issue.” Latin American consolidation will not be carried out by ideology or politics, “but by a real integration that includes all regional countries, without exclusion,” he added.

Argentine sociologist Marcelo Rodriguez said that boosting CELAC integration would help set up a relationship with China at the regional level as a whole.

The “Global Development Initiative” and “Global Security Initiative” that Xi also broached in the CELAC speech are ambiguous programs that were unveiled last year by Xi via speeches that failed to explain the objective or operational plan for either.

Of special concern is the “Global Security Initiative,” as it seems to entail international military cooperation that puts collective security above the national interests of the participating countries, though Beijing has not elucidated how it plans to organize such cooperation.

In June last year, the *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the CCP, [explained](#) that the Global Security Initiative “responds to the historical trends of economic globalization, world multipolarity, and democracy in international relations, stressing that security should feature universal benefits, equal access and inclusiveness based on mutual respect.”

China has attempted to interfere with CELAC’s affairs since at least 2015, when it organized its first “China-CELAC forum” to boost Chinese influence in Latin America and non-Hispanic nations in the region. “Since the turn of the century, China’s trade with Latin America has boomed, going from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$257 billion in 2013,” the Chilean ambassador to Beijing at the time, Jorge Heine, alleged.



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Xi hailed the 2015 meeting as a “new starting point” for China in the region, providing cooperation on trade and security.

Left-wing U.S. President Joe Biden was also invited by CELAC to participate, but declined, deploying representative Christopher Dodd to Argentina instead.



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