

International actors in Latin America: China

International Relations and Integration Processes in Latin America

4 December 2025

Maja GORAL

&

Andrew GALEA
ROBERTS

International actors in Latin America: China

To what extent does China use its position as a ‘positive actor’ in shaping its relations with Latin American states?

Table of Contents

Theoretical Framework.....	2
Introduction	3
Current Situation.....	4
Mexico, Brazil and Argentina	5
Guatemala and Paraguay	6
Central America	6
South America.....	7
Critical Assessment & Conclusion	7
References.....	8

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a constructivist theoretical framework to examine how China utilises its identity as a 'positive actor' grounded in principles of non-interference, sovereignty, and cooperation on equal terms (Reeves, 2025) in its relations with Latin American states. Constructivism emphasises that foreign policy behaviour is shaped not only by material capabilities but also by norms, ideas, and identity constructions (Wendt, 1999). This perspective contrasts with the historically dominant Western approach in Latin America, where interventionism, conditional lending, and political influence, particularly by the United States, were long employed to protect and advance national interests in the Western Hemisphere (Loveman, 2016). Within this context, China's foreign policy towards the region must be understood through the norms it seeks to project, the manner in which it approaches, and how it positions itself in contrast to these established Western patterns of engagement.

China aims to position itself as a cooperative partner of the Latin American states who draws on 'equality and cooperation for mutual benefit' and 'mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs' following its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence of 1954. Scholars such as Carlson (2011) argue that non-interference constitutes a central element of China's national identity, shaping diplomatic behaviour and reinforcing the narrative that its engagement in Latin America is non-coercive and non-ideological. In the regional context, this identity is operationalised through discourses of 'South-South cooperation', infrastructure-led development, and partnership 'on equal terms', which stand in contrast to the conditionality associated with institutions such as the IMF and World Bank (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010). Based on this approach, China can be viewed as a 'positive actor', rejecting historical imperialist narratives of Western engagement in the region, offering partnership and not intervention or a unilateral drive to protect its own interests.

The constructivist approach, however, enables us to additionally provide a critical inquiry into whether Chinese behaviour in Latin America is truly aligned with the 'positive actor' narrative or rather is it a sculpted strategy allowing for spreading Beijing's influence in the region through the use of the countries' historical apprehension towards the Western practices. Scholars such as Svampa (2016) or Ellis (2024) argue that China's practice of non-interference has become increasingly flexible and pragmatic, particularly when economic or political stakes are high. They specifically emphasise a shift from a so called Washington Consensus to a Beijing Consensus, with China growingly engaging in matters such as security in Latin America. This raises questions about whether China's identity is deployed instrumentally to legitimise influence, secure advantageous economic relationships, gain access to strategic natural resources, and enhance its geopolitical presence in a region long considered within the US sphere of influence. The tension between China's commitment to sovereignty and its growing structural power, manifested through finance, trade dependencies, and political engagement, must therefore be critically assessed.

Consequently, guided by the above theoretical framework, this paper seeks to answer the research question: *To what extent does China use its position as a 'positive actor' to shape its relations with Latin American states?*

Introduction

To fully understand the position of China as an international actor in Latin America, a broader historical context of its engagement in the region must be outlined. The country's presence in the region can be traced back to the 16th century when the relationship mostly relied on a small-scale exchange of commodities with Mexico such as spices or porcelain. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the link was mostly migration, with Chinese immigrants arriving in Peru or Cuba in search of work (Roy, 2025). During the turbulent century of the Great Wars and Cold War, China was largely focused on its domestic development. Following the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party's priority was internal consolidation, not international expansion (Lieberthal, 2004). Relations during the Cold War were limited and ideologically constrained, as most Latin American states aligned with the United States and recognised Taiwan (Song, 2024). The regional landscape began to shift in the 1980s and 1990s, when economic reforms in China and democratic transitions in Latin America opened space for pragmatic cooperation, culminating in a wave of diplomatic recognitions of the People's Republic of China (PRC) across the region (Harris and Arias, 2016).

The period of significant engagement between the actors in question began in 2001 with China joining the WTO. It is then that serious political, cultural, and economic ties started to form (Roy, 2025). Latin America became strategically important for Beijing's broader rise, offering vital access to agricultural goods, oil, and minerals, which positioned the region as a key component of China's resource security strategy (Gallagher & Porzecanski, 2010). As China's presence expanded, the US increasingly perceived this as a challenge to its long-standing dominance in the Western Hemisphere, with scholars noting that China's rise introduces 'new centres of influence' capable of contesting the existing geopolitical authority (Ellis, 2020). For Beijing, however, its involvement was framed as 'South-South cooperation', grounded in principles of mutual benefit, sovereignty, and non-interference, elements central to its constructed identity as a non-hegemonic partner (Carlson, 2011).

Over the recent years, one can observe the evolution of China's regional role through its engagement with specific countries and via shared initiatives. Since 2009 China has been Brazil's largest economic partner and a central destination of Chinese investment in infrastructure and energy (Giffoni; Becker; Pestana, 2019). Argentina has also deepened its ties with the country, especially considering the 2022 decision to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative, which can be viewed as a commitment to a long-term partnership (Roy, 2025). In both cases, the relationship is perceived as mutually beneficial and strategic as the investment goes in par with China's global energy transition goals and the Brazilian and Argentine gains from infrastructure project and trade financing (Shang, 2025).

China further strengthens its 'positive actor' narrative by situating its regional engagement within the framework of South-South cooperation, which builds upon emphasising shared experiences of colonialism, development challenges, and economic transformation (Harris & Aria, 2016). It is an initiative focused on aid, development, and trade which underlines Chinese soft power influence in the region (Roy, 2025). On top of that, the BRI has become a central instrument in promoting the identity of a partner on equal terms, with 22 Latin American countries, as of 2025, participating and receiving Chinese financing for large-scale infrastructure projects in transport, energy, and telecommunications (Nedopil, 2025).

Current Situation

China has formal relations with every Latin American state except Guatemala and Paraguay, who have both continuously recognised the Republic of China (Taiwan) since 1933 and 1957 respectively (2 of only 11 UN member states to do so) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2025).

China's trade and diplomatic prowess in the area has increased as it ascends in the world order. It has established relations with 6 Latin American countries in the 21st Century, the latest being Honduras in 2023.

From an investment perspective, China has also become dramatically more involved in Latin America, including in energy, infrastructure and manufacturing. There are conflicting sources regarding the extent of FDI in Latin America, as according to the Academic Network of Latin America and the Caribbean on China (Dussel Peters, 2025), it made up 10.6% of FDI in Latin America (and the Caribbean) in 2020-2023, compared to 0.8% in 2000-2004. According to ECLAC (CEPAL, 2025) on the other hand, China only made up 2% of FDI in 2024, though it also notes that China is under-reported due to third-country routing.

It has also deepened relations particularly with Brazil as part of the BRICS initiative, both of which being founding members in 2009. This highlights both countries' pragmatic foreign policy as they diversify their traditional relationships. Bolivia has also been a partner to this alliance since 2023.

To examine the evolution of China's relations with Latin American states, below is a comparison of exports and breakdown of developments in certain countries in Latin America, including the largest markets, (Mexico, Brazil and Argentina), the countries that do not have diplomatic relations with China (Guatemala and Paraguay), as well as 2 smaller countries from Central and South America.

Mexico, Brazil and Argentina

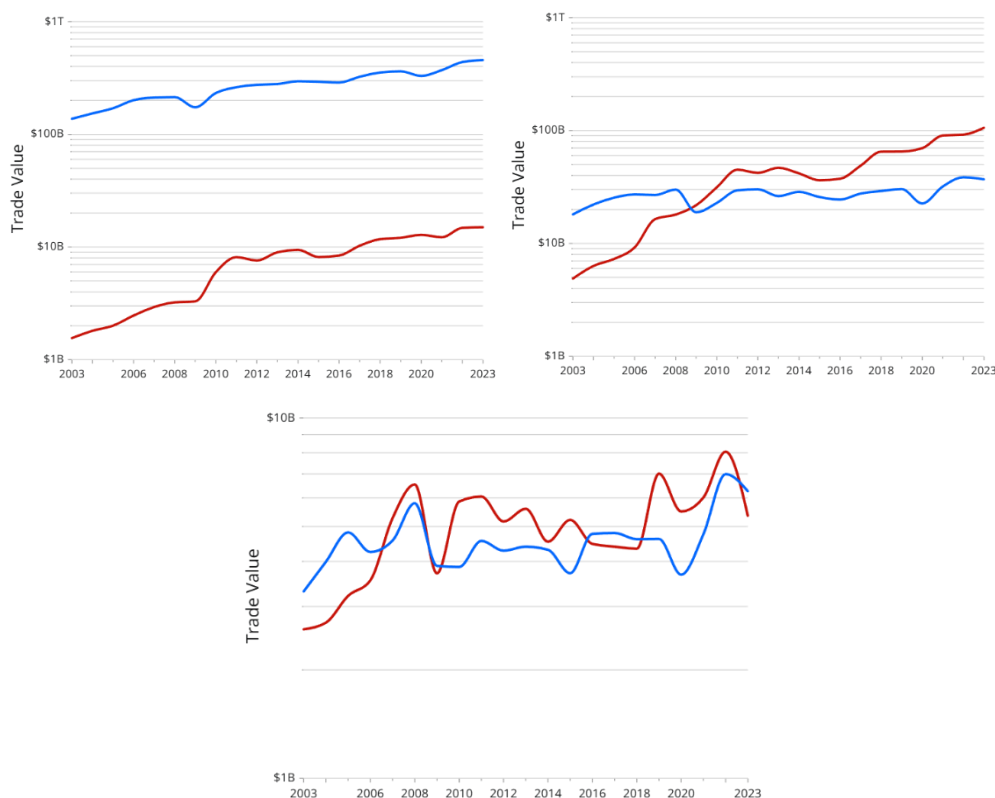


Figure 1: Mexico (L), Argentina (C) & Brazil (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: *The Observatory of Economic Complexity [OEC] (2025)*

In Latin America's three strongest economies, China's influence varies considerably.

In Mexico, while China still only has a tiny fraction of economic influence compared to its neighbour the US, for whom Mexico is still its largest economic partner¹, its influence is steadily growing. Mexico is also an important piece in trade with the US, allowing Chinese capital to flow via Mexico to the United States, with Chinese companies doubling their industrial footprint in Mexico since 2021 (Murray et al., 2024; Grant, 2024).

Conversely, in Brazil, China's influence, and even dominance in trade, has been entrenched for a while. With the BRICS initiative starting in 2009, China has cemented its position in Brazil as a 'positive actor', making sure its voice is alongside the US in the region (Ko, 2025). Similarly to how China is able to use Mexico to enter the US market, it uses Brazil to enter Paraguay, with Chinese directed, made in Brazil exports able to enter with less customs procedures and tariffs.

Finally, in Argentina, China is very close to the US in terms of trade, (though Brazil is consistently ahead of both). Despite the China-resistant rhetoric of Milei, and even the dip in 2023 exports to China, there is evidence that pragmatic economic relations continue (Muzio, 2025).

¹ Excluding the EU.

Guatemala and Paraguay

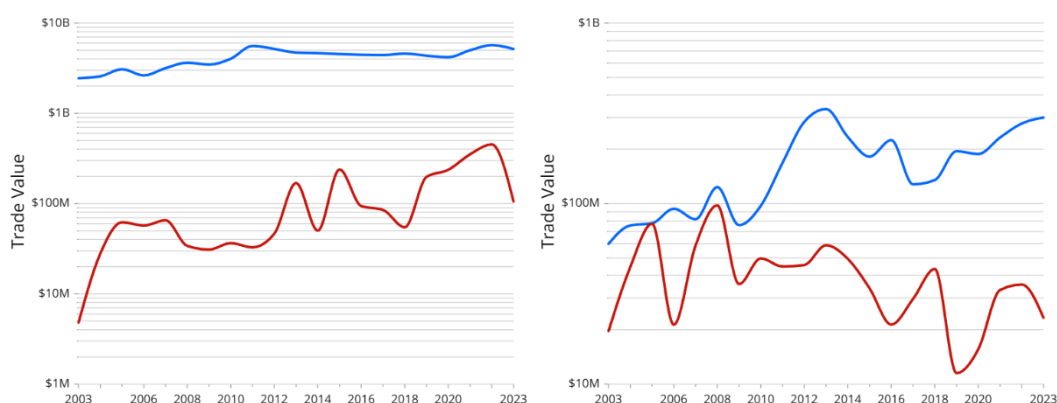


Figure 2: Guatemala (L) & Paraguay (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity [OEC] (2025)

As previously discussed, neither Guatemala nor Paraguay recognise China, and as such have faced hostility in certain international fora, cyber espionage, as well as in their economic relations (in both countries economic ties are significantly behind their neighbours, and China lags well behind the US).

In Guatemala's case, China used its veto in the UN Security Council for the 7th time² in 1997 to prevent the deployment of 155 UN military observers to Guatemala (BBC Chinese, 2011) in the context of the end of the civil war there³. Furthermore, in 2022 the Guatemalan Foreign Ministry fell victim to Chinese hackers infiltrating their computer systems, highlighting the hostile relations between the countries (Associated Press, 2025; The Straits Times, 2025).

Similarly, the Paraguayan government was also victim to a Chinese cyber attack in 2024 (Resecurity, 2025).

Central America

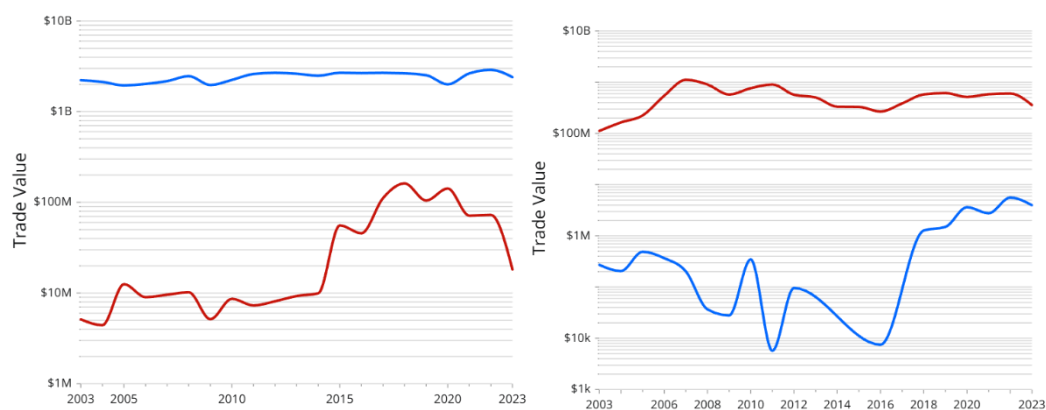


Figure 3: El Salvador (L) & Cuba (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

² Or 8th if you include the Republic of China's use of it in 1955.

³ In the end, the pre-existing UN mission in Guatemala was expanded through the General Assembly and did not require the approval of the UNSC as it did not become a full peacekeeping mission.

Source: (OEC, 2025)

In El Salvador, there is a clear boost in trade with China around the time that El Salvador switched its recognition to China in 2018, though this boost has not stayed consistent, or trended upwards, showing the limitations of diplomacy's effect on trade.

In Cuba, on the other hand, which has long been a partner to China stemming from the legacy of their communist bond, trade has been consistently strong, with China being Cuba's top export partner almost every year since 2006.

South America

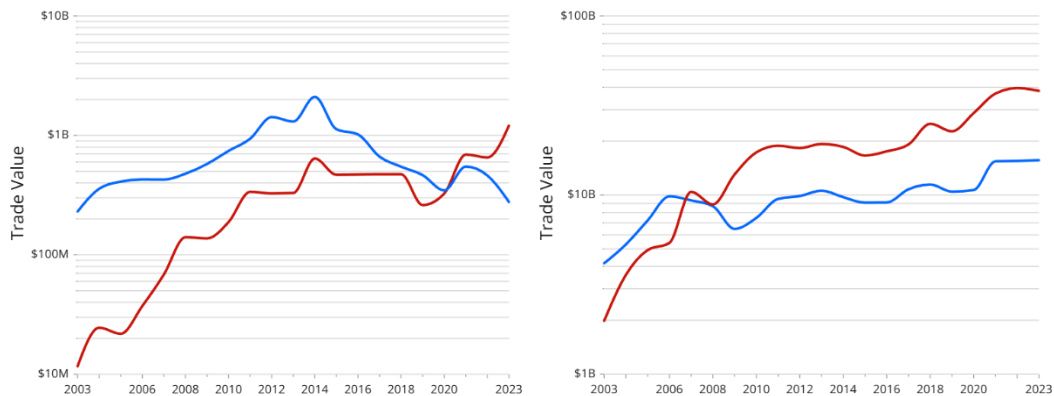


Figure 4: Bolivia (L) & Chile (R) exports to China (Red) and the US (Blue).

Source: (OEC, 2025)

Bolivia's rise in trade with China can partly be attributed to its previously mentioned partner status in BRICS, though it is also a sign of the pragmatic foreign policy pursued by Bolivia.

Similarly in Chile, China overtook the US in exports in 2009, and has grown consistently since.

Critical Assessment & Conclusion

China's performance in the region has not been universally successful, and its 'positive actor' status is questioned, especially in the context of relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) that China is so desperately trying to change. Although it has grown in presence in the larger countries in Latin America, it still does not have a strong foothold in the region compared to the US, who has a longer economic and diplomatic history in the region, besides being much closer to most Latin American states.

China can also be criticised from a dependency theory lens, as the exports from Latin America remain for the most part raw materials, though they still aid growth in the region (Palau, 2023).

In conclusion, China's influence has grown stronger in the region, though it remains heavily overshadowed by the US in many smaller countries, as well as in Mexico, the US' largest trade partner.

References

- Associated Press. (2025, April 30). *Gobierno de Guatemala dice que hackers chinos infiltraron sus sistemas informáticos de 2022 a 2025*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/guatemala-china-eeuu-hackeo-gobierno-cancilleria-a15cf5c500ee1e1f2a090e27691eb76e>
- BBC Chinese. (2011, October 5). *中俄否決敘利亞問題決議草案* [China and Russia veto UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria]. BBC Chinese. https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese_analysis/2011/10/111005_china_veto
- BRICS Policy Center. (2023, March 9). *Brazil-China Agreements*. <https://bricspolicycenter.org/en/publications/brazil-china-agreements/>
- Carlson, A. (2011). It should not only be about nationalism: China's pluralistic national identity and its implications for Chinese foreign relations. *International Studies*, 48(3–4), 223–236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881713485012>
- Colville, A. (2024, November 29). *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – China Media Project*. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/five-principles-of-peaceful-coexistence/
- Dussel Peters, E. (2025). *Monitor de la OFDI china en América Latina y el Caribe 2025*. Red ALC-China. https://docs.redalyc-china.org/monitor/images/pdfs/menuprincipal/DusselPeters_MonitorOFDI_2025_Esp.pdf
- Ellis, E. (2024, February 26). *China's Security Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean*. US Army War College – Strategic Studies Institute. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3686478/chinas-security-engagement-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>
- Ellis, R. E. (2020, June 24). *China in Latin America and the Caribbean: Hearing before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission*. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ellis_Testimony.pdf
- Gallagher, K., & Porzecanski, R. (2010). *The Dragon in the Room: China and the Future of Latin American Industrialization*. Global Development Policy Center. <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2010/10/01/the-dragon-in-the-room-china-and-the-future-of-latin-american-industrialization/>
- Grant, W. (2024, April 21). *How Chinese firms are using Mexico as a backdoor to the US*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-68825118>
- Harris, R. L., & Arias, A. A. (2016). *China's South–South Cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean*. SBGS Faculty Publications and Presentations, 24. https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/sbgs_fac/24
- Ko, P. (2025, November 21). *How China Is Using Brazil to Reshape Power in the Americas*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/how-china-is-using-brazil-to-reshape-power-in-the-americas/>

Lieberthal, K. (1995). *Governing China: From revolution through reform*. W.W. Norton.

Loveman, B. (2016, July 07). *US Foreign Policy toward Latin America in the 19th Century*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History. <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-41>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan). (2025, November 25). *Diplomatic Allies*. <https://en.mofa.gov.tw/AlliesIndex.aspx?n=1294&sms=1007>

Murray, C., Stylianou, N., de la Torre Arenas, I., & Clark, D. (2024, December 16). *How China is setting up shop in Mexico*. Financial Times. <https://ig.ft.com/china-mexico-tariffs>

Muzio, E. (2025, November 27). *El plan anti-China de Milei-Trump choca con la alianza comercial estilo macrista que aplica el gobierno*. Perfil. <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/economia/el-plan-anti-china-de-milei-trump-choca-con-la-alianza-comercial-estilo-macrista-que-aplica-el-gobierno.phtml>

Naciones Unidas Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL). (2025, November 3). *La Inversión Extranjera Directa en América Latina y el Caribe, 2025* (LC/PUB.2025/7-P/Rev.1). <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/82116-la-inversion-extranjera-directa-america-latina-caribe-2025>

Nedopil, C. (2025). *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. Green Finance & Development Center. <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

Palau, F. (2023, December 27). *Dos décadas de comercio con China han potenciado Latinoamérica, pero también 'reprimarizado' sus exportaciones*. Global Affairs, University of Navarra. <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/dos-decadas-de-comercio-con-china-han-potenciado-latinoamerica-pero-tambien-reprimarizado-sus-exportaciones>

Reeves, J. (2025, February 24). *China's expanding influence in the Middle East and North Africa*. Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2025/02/24/chinas-expanding-influence-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

Resecurity. (2025, June 13). *Paraguay is Being Targeted by Cybercriminals - 7.4 Million Citizen Records for Sale*. <https://www.resecurity.com/blog/article/paraguay-is-being-targeted-by-cybercriminals-74-million-citizen-records-for-sale>

Roy, D. (2025, June 6). *China's Growing Influence in Latin America*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri#chapter-title-0-2>

Song, Y. (2024). *Decoupling between China and Latin America? The competition and containment of the US against China in the energy field in Latin America under the Sino-US game*. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration*, 5(2), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.62051/ijsspa.v5n2.05>

Svampa, M., & Slipak, A. (2015). China in Latin America: From the commodities consensus to the Beijing consensus. *Problèmes d'Amérique latine*, 98(3), 95–122. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pal.098.0095>

The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (2025). *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*. <https://oec.world/en>

The Straits Times. (2025, April 30). *Guatemala ministry says US embassy's Chinese hack report a years-old case*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/guatemala-ministry-says-us-embassys-chinese-hack-report-a-years-old-case>

Wendt, A. (2000). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612183>

Zhou, Q. (2025, March 21). *China-Argentina Economic Ties: Key Opportunities in 2025 and Beyond*. China Briefing. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-argentina-economic-partnership-trade-investment/>