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SHIFTING GEARS: CHINESE FINANCE IN LAC, 2020

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Chinese Finance to LAC in 2020[1]

This year, for the first time since 2006, China's policy banks—China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (Eximbank)—issued no new finance to Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) governments or state-run companies. Though a first in recent China-LAC relations, the absence of financing this year is also reflective of a broader, downward trend in Chinese finance to LAC nations and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), evident since 2015 (see Figure 1).

There are multiple likely reasons for the recent downturn in Chinese sovereign lending to the LAC region. China's ability to offer state-to-state finance in 2020 was no doubt impacted to some degree by the global pandemic, for instance. China has maintained a commitment to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) advancement throughout 2020, focusing much attention on "health silk road" and "digital silk road" initiatives. But CDB and Eximbank, to a lesser degree, have also focused considerable attention on supporting "new infrastructure" and other development *within* China, as part of the country's broader recovery efforts and in anticipation of 14th Five-Year Plan focus on national economic security and competitiveness.[1, 2]

The banks' overseas activity in 2020 was focused not on sovereign loans, necessarily, but on addressing the challenges associated with pandemic-era project management. According a report published in China's *Guangming Daily*, 2020 was a difficult year for the BRI for three main reasons: 1) construction projects were suspended in certain countries; 2) global supply chain

The numbers this year are reflective of a broader, downward trend in Chinese finance to LAC nations and state-owned enterprises.

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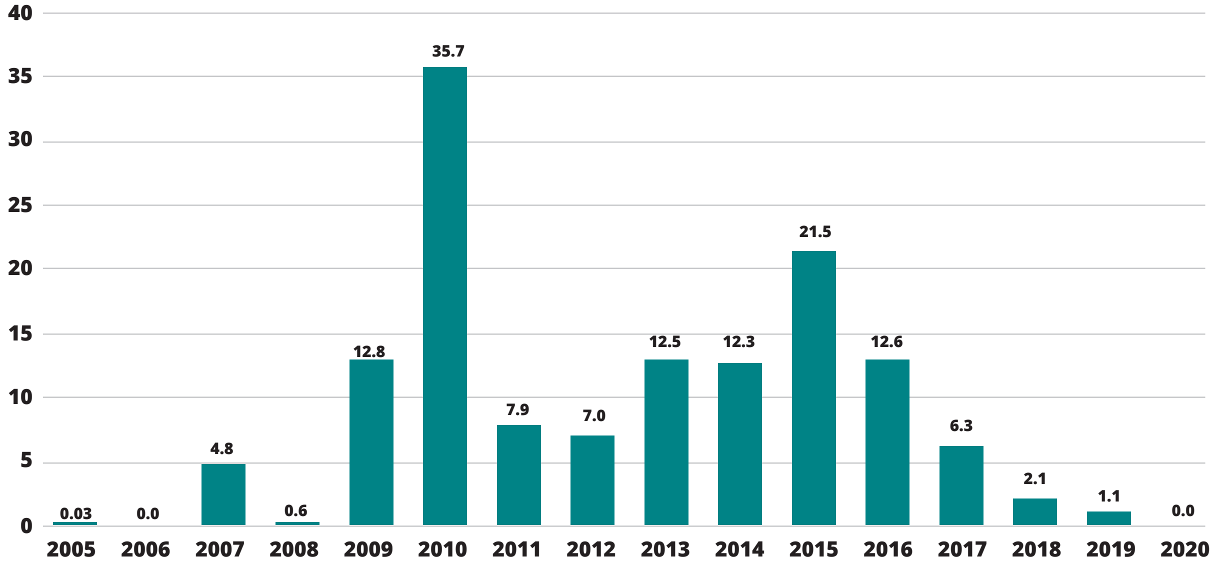
[1] A detailed description of our methodology is available at http://www.bu.edu/gdp/files/2018/08/Coding-Manual-.pdf. We add new loans to the database annually, but also revise past year estimates when and if projects did not come to fruition or were for amounts of financing different than what were earlier reported. Our list of Chinese loans to Latin America from 2005-2020 is available in the online China-Latin America Finance Database (https://www.thedialogue.org/map_list/).

FIGURE 1: CHINESE FINANCE TO LAC BY YEAR, 2005-2020 (USD BILLIONS)

Source: Gallagher, Kevin P. and Margaret Myers (2021), "China-Latin America Finance Database," Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue.



interruptions slowed the speed of construction projects; and 3) economic conditions deteriorated in some partner nations, limiting governments' ability to contribute promised funds or materials.[3] As activity halted across the globe, China's Ministry of Commerce and CDB issued a statement in February 2020 noting that high-quality projects and enterprises would be eligible to receive low-cost financing and working capital loans. According to the statement, projects would be reviewed by the Ministry of Commerce and then CDB's headquarters and provincial offices to determine likely recipients of CDB financial support.[4]

Chinese banks have grappled with a sometimes-problematic portfolio in LAC.

China's sovereign lending to the region was slowing long the before the Covid-19 pandemic, however, as China's policy banks weighed the costs and benefits of state-to-state deal-making. As Tian Yunhai, senior export in the Americas Department of CDB's International Cooperation Business Bureau, noted at the 9th International Infrastructure Investment and Construction Summit Forum in Macau in 2018, despite considerable activity in the LAC region over the past decade, CDB "has struggled to meet the needs of Latin American countries and the demands and expectations of Chinese and Latin American companies."[5] Tian detailed the challenges associated with issuing sovereign loans in LAC, including that the region's governments are "burdened by fiscal deficits, relatively high levels of debt…and insufficient capacity for new large-scale loans."[6] A 2020 report by one of CDB's private equity arms noted these and other issues, though with a focus on Argentina's economy, suggesting that "[p]opulist politics has affected macroeconomic policies, and unchecked social welfare spending has led to regular fiscal deficits, heavy external debt burdens, and rising inflation..."[7]

Chinese banks have indeed grappled with a sometimes-problematic portfolio in LAC, including the prospect of losses in Venezuela and delays in other scheduled projects. Difficulties mounted following the drop in global commodity prices, when Venezuela, also facing US sanctions, struggled to make on-time oil payments. China sought to address the situation in Venezuela by offering grace periods on principal payments and extending the life of at least one loan.[8]

With these difficulties in mind, China has refrained from extending any new credit to Venezuela, even though the country was once a primary destination for China's policy banks. Venezuela accounts for 45 percent of total policy bank finance to LAC since 2005, but the country received no new loans from CDB or Eximbank for the past four years (see Figures 2 and 3). Lending has also slowed to other

FIGURE 2: CHINESE POLICY BANK LOANS TO VENEZUELA, 2007–2020 (USD BILLIONS)

Source: Gallagher, Kevin P. and Margaret Myers (2021), "China-Latin America Finance Database," Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue.

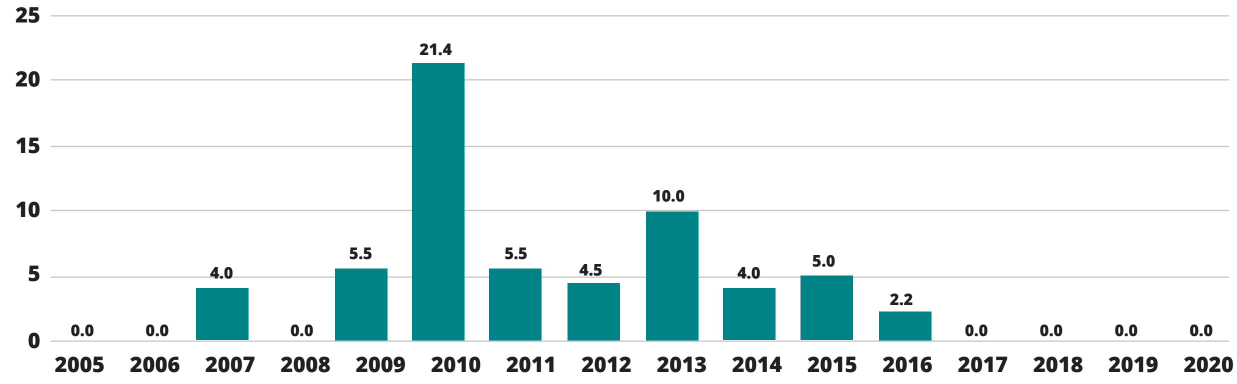
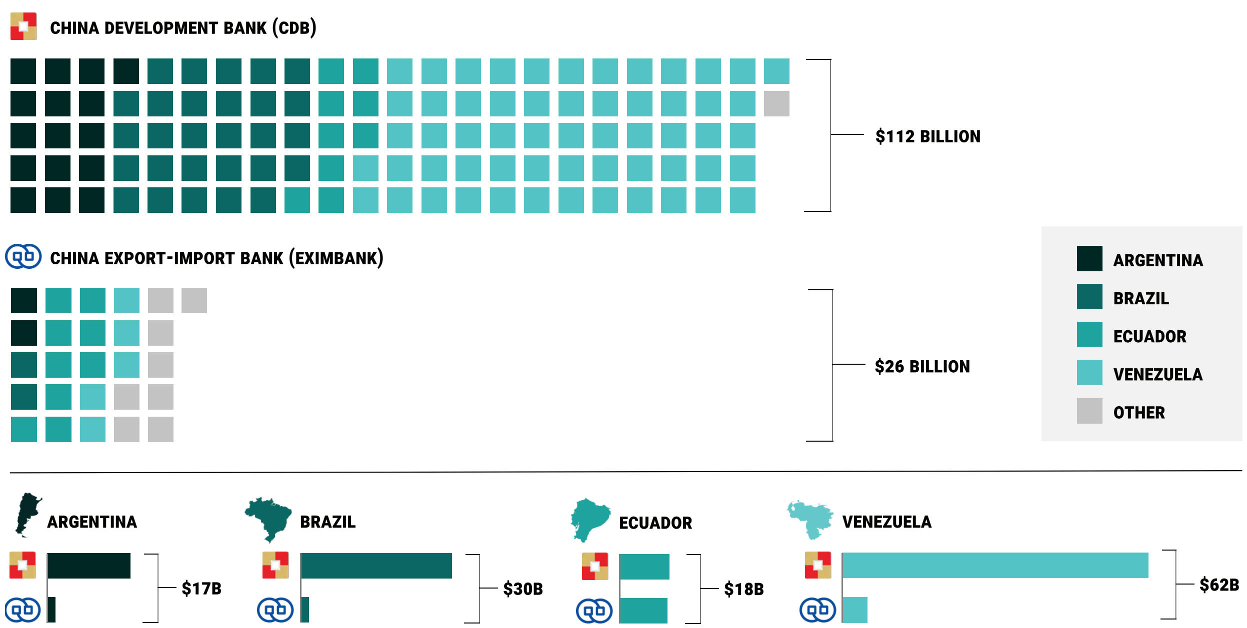


FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF POLICY BANK LENDING BY COUNTRY, 2005–2020

Source: Gallagher, Kevin P. and Margaret Myers (2021), "China-Latin America Finance Database," Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue.



traditional recipients of Chinese policy bank finance in LAC, including Brazil's Petrobras and the government of Ecuador. Like Venezuela, these countries received sizable loans from China in the early-to-mid 2010s, which were often semi-collateralized by oil. CDB last issued credit to Brazil in 2017, but nothing has materialized since, whether in support of offshore oil exploration, trade financing, or other objectives.

Ecuador was issued over $9 billion in finance from CDB and Eximbank in 2015 and 2016, when a series of infrastructure deals were negotiated by then-President Rafael Correa. But from 2017 to the present, Quito accepted a comparatively minimal $900 million. Talks began in 2020 for a possible $2.4 billion loan to Ecuador, but the deal had yet to conclude by year-end. Ecuador's Minister of Finance, Richard Martínez, noted in June that CDB would

China's record of sovereign lending to the region no longer surpasses that of other major development banks.

soon issue Ecuador $1 billion in finance and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) would provide an additional $1.4 billion. However, according to *El Universo*, negotiations stalled as early as April over state oil company Petroecuador's concerns about the details of proposed payments in oil.[9] In November 2020, Augusto de la Torre, in his role as advisor to the Ecuadorian government, noted ongoing concerns about long-term oil contracts among Petroecuador officials.[10] A possible $3.5 billion loan to Ecuador from the US Development Finance Corporation, if it comes to pass, may end up fulfilling Ecuador's fiscal needs, ceasing negotiations with CDB and ICBC.

The Covid-19-related debt crisis has probably prompted some introspection among China's major lenders, especially as they struggle with prospect of widespread default on loan payments. Noting Ecuador's financial difficulties, China Development Bank agreed this year to restructure two tranches of Ecuador's China debt. An agreement on the first tranche, totaling $417 million, was reached in August 2020. According to the arrangement, Ecuador will delay its principal payment to China by one year, resuming payments—including crude deliveries by Ecuadorian national oil company Petroecuador—in the last quarter of 2021. The loan's interest rate will remain at 7.16 percent and outstanding debt will be divided into eleven eventual payments of approximately $38 million each. A second agreement, reached in September 2020 by China Development Bank and Ecuador's Ministry of Finance, gives Ecuador a 16-month grace period on an additional $474 million in debt. Principal payments will resume in March 2022.[11] According to Reuters, China also awarded a new grace period to Venezuela in 2020, on $19 billion loans, though the existence of this deal was not confirmed by either government.[12] And Argentina worked with China to renew a bilateral currency swap agreement worth 130 billion yuan ($18.2 billion), or 43 percent of Argentina's total foreign exchange reserve, in August 2020.[13]

As wide-ranging factors put downward pressure on Chinese loans to LAC governments, China's record of sovereign lending to the region has slowed to the point that it no longer surpasses that of other major development banks. China has issued over $136 billion in credit to the region since 2005, according to Global Development Policy Center and Inter-American Dialogue estimates. But as of 2019, sovereign lending to LAC from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) exceeded China's record over the same period.

Other Sources of Finance

Even as state-to-state lending screeches to a halt, China's three regional funds—the China-LAC Industrial Cooperation Investment Fund (CLAI Fund), China-LAC Cooperation Fund (CLAC Fund), and Special Loan Program for China-Latin America Infrastructure (see Table 1)—have continued to back a growing number of LAC projects in recent years, including amid the pandemic.

The CLAI Fund, developed with CDB capital, focuses on equity investment in the fields of manufacturing, high-tech, infrastructure, energy and minerals, agriculture, financial cooperation and clean energy in Latin America, according to the fund's website.[14] As early as 2015, capital was drawn from the CLAI by China Three Gorges Corporation, which at the time was seeking a 30-year concession to operate two hydroelectric power plants in Brazil.[15] In 2016, the CLAI Fund and Three Gorges Group jointly acquired Duke Energy's hydropower assets in Brazil, making China Three Gorges the third largest power generation company in Brazil.[16] In 2020, the CLAI fund provided *renminbi* cross-border financing for the Mirador Copper Mine Project in Ecuador and supported China Three Gorges subsidiary Yangtze Power's acquisition of Luz del Sur in Peru.[17] The fund also backed Chinese artificial intelligence firm SenseTime's Series D financing project, which, according to the CLAI Fund, will help the company to accelerate overseas engagement.[18]

Much like the CLAI, the CLAC Fund is focused on energy resources, infrastructure, modern agriculture, manufacturing, technological innovation, and information technology, but with Eximbank rather than CDB capital.[19] In January 2020, China Merchants Port (CMPort) reportedly signed an agreement with the China-Portugal Cooperation Development Fund (CPD) and the CLAC Fund to transfer partial ownership of the Paranaguá Container Terminal in Brazil. China Merchants had acquired 90 percent of the container terminal in 2017.[20] The CLAC also invested in Colombia's Buritica gold mine project, making Zijin the first

TABLE 1: CHINA'S FUNDS IN LAC
Source: Author compilation.

NAME	YEAR INITIATED	TOTAL SIZE	NOTES
China-Latin American Production Capacity Cooperation Investment Fund (CLAI) (中拉产能合作投 资基金)	2015	$30 billion	PBOC, SAFE Wutongshu Investment Platform (85%) and CDB capital; to merge with CAFIC
Special Loan Program for China-Latin America Infrastructure Projects (中拉基础设施专项贷款)	2015	$20 billion	SAFE capital
China-LAC Cooperation Fund (CLAC) (中拉合作基金)	2015	$10 billion	SAFE and Eximbank capital
Brazil-China Cooperation Fund (中国 – 巴西扩大产能合作基金)	2017	$20 billion	$15 billion from CLAI; $5 billion from Brazil
IFC China-Mexico Fund (中墨投资基金)	2014	$1.2 billion	China Investment Corporation and CDB capital
China Co-Financing Fund for Latin America (中国-泛美开发银行专项基金)	2013	$2 billion	Established by the People's Bank of China and the IDB; $500 million for public sector loans and $1.5 billion for private sector finance

Chinese company to mine in Colombia. The fund's CEO Yan Qifa has otherwise visited with numerous Chinese companies, across industries, to explore opportunities for business development in LAC. In January 2021 web post, marking the fund's fifth anniversary, the CLAI reaffirmed its commitment to "supporting the Belt and Road Initiative in a market-oriented manner, promoting Chinese companies to go global in Latin America, and enhancing China's international competition."[21]

There is limited public reporting on lending from the Special Loan Program for China-Latin America Infrastructure, but CDB advisor Tian Yunhui suggested during a 2018 speech in Macau that the Special Loan Program had committed $14.2 billion to 10 infrastructure projects in 7 LAC countries.[22] According to a description of the fund on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Grenada, funded projects are required to have at least 60 percent Chinese content.[23] Also, during a July 2020 virtual meeting with top diplomats from across LAC, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed using the Special Loan Program to support national public health projects in the region. In the same meeting, Wang promised $1 billion in Chinese finance to help countries in the region to access Chinese Covid-19 vaccines.[24]

In addition to the three regional funds, Chinese and Brazilian officials also launched the $20 billion Brazil-China Cooperation Fund in 2017. Reports indicate that 75 percent of the funding for Brazil Fund comes from the CLAI, with the Brazilian government covering the remainder.[25] Chinese and Brazilian representatives reportedly agreed on possible infrastructure investment in the amount of $4 billion during the third meeting of the China-Brazil Fund's Technical Working Group meeting in August 2018.

In other cases, Chinese banks have partnered with multilateral banks in the region to co-finance select projects. The IFC's China-Mexico Fund, started in 2014 with $1.2 billion in capital, has so far successfully participated in a telecommunications project and an energy sector deal. In 2017, the IDB Invest-administered China Co-Financing Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean contributed 13 percent of a $75 billion IDB package for the Solem solar photovoltaic plant in Mexico, which was constructed by Spanish firm Grupo Ortiz.[26] A year later, the China Co-Financing Fund also partially funded construction of the Ituango hydroelectric dam in Antioquia, Colombia.[27] Unfortunately, the Ituango dam collapsed in July 2018, raising questions about the extent to which these cooperative funds are living up to their potential to combine Chinese finance with IDB risk management standards.[28] This year, according to the CLAI Fund website, CLAI and the Inter-American Development Bank agreed to establish a joint investment trust fund to expand investment and financing opportunities in Latin America.

In addition to co-financing projects and regional funds, China's four major commercial banks (ICBC, Bank of China, Agricultural Bank of China, and China Construction Bank) are increasingly active in Latin America and other regions, frequently in cooperation with other international banks. They offer a range of services, including commercial finance, trade finance, and retail banking. In 2020, ICBC provided finance for the Pamplona Cúcuta Highway in Colombia and Loma Negra cement production in Argentina. A number of other entities, sometimes affiliated with Chinese companies, are also establishing themselves in the region. In January 2020, Banco XCMG, owned by a Chinese construction company of the same name, announced its arrival in Brazil, pledging to support infrastructure projects and machinery purchases.[29]

Looking ahead, total combined Chinese finance to LAC is unlikely to ever approximate policy bank peak lending.

Looking Ahead

The clearest evidence of a potential 2021 rebound in Chinese official finance to Latin America and the Caribbean came in July 2020, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met virtually with his Latin American and Caribbean counterparts and announced that China would be offering $1 billion in loans to LAC governments to assist in the purchase of Chinese Covid-19 vaccines.[30] As of this writing, no LAC governments have taken advantage of this offer yet, but as vaccine deployment is just beginning in the region, specific deals may be signed in the coming months.

Even if China's policy banks continue to lend to LAC at relatively low levels, as they have since 2017, the combined effect of Chinese policy bank activity, co-financing initiatives, commercial bank finance, private equity investment, and other forms of engagement will ensure a sizable Chinese financial presence in the region for years to come, potentially in a wider variety of projects. In contrast to the policy bank activity in LAC, China's commercial banks have focused considerable attention on solar and wind energy projects, for instance.

Total combined Chinese finance to the region is unlikely to ever approximate policy bank peak lending, however. Nor is policy bank finance likely to increase dramatically in the coming years. Policy banks and commercial banks, though still active, face both demand and supply-side constraints when operating in the LAC region. These include greater emphasis in Beijing on the selection of bankable and "high quality" projects amidst slowing economic growth in China and—the recent uptick aside—still-diminishing foreign reserves.[31] And in LAC, Chinese projects continue to face a range of on-the-ground challenges, such as project delays and suspensions resulting from local-level opposition or often non-China-related corruption allegations. The Eximbank-backed Rositas dam project in Bolivia is still on hold following protests about the project's lack of prior consultation with affected communities.[32] Chinese company Sinohydro's Peruvian partner in the Hidrovía Amazónica project was accused in 2019 of having had privileged access to the Ministry of Transportation during key points in the project bidding process, leading to initial delays in that project.[33] And the Lima Supreme Court will soon decide whether to grant a request by the indigenous federations in Peru to require new process of prior consultation with communities affected by the Hidrovía.[34]

In addition to all of this is a sense among the policy banks that their traditional model of engagement is not well aligned with the evolving interests of Chinese companies. CDB is not among the Chinese financial institutions that are best equipped to support Chinese companies as they pursue government-led public private partnerships in the region, according to CDB's Tian Yunhai. Public-private partnerships initiated by Chinese companies are also problematic for the bank, he said, given their relatively slow rate of return and uncertainties related to project approval.[35]

Finally, it is worth noting one phenomenon that was remarkably absent from China-LAC finance relations in 2020, and does not appear to be likely in the coming months: the springing of a Chinese "debt trap." Over the last decade, as Chinese official finance to LAC expanded, observers often raised the possibility that China was intentionally laying a trap with debts that could not be repaid, with the intention of seizing infrastructure or extractive projects once loans were non-performing.[36, 37] The year 2020 provided the opportunity for such punitive measures, but China has instead reacted by negotiating grace periods and otherwise stepping back from further commitments. Neither the Chinese government nor any Chinese state-owned enterprises have seized LAC assets in reaction to loan repayment difficulties. Instead, China appears content to wait for better times,[38] allowing existing partnerships to continue when the current crisis has passed.

ENDNOTES

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