

Bibliometric Analysis of the China-CELAC Forum: Relevance, Challenges, and Prospects for Research

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Abstract

Since its creation in 2015, the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum, has facilitated the creation of a channel for dialogue on different areas of interest, playing a transformative role in shaping multilateral relations and the internal dynamics of China and Latin America. However, despite its relevance in strengthening Sino-Latin American cooperation mechanisms in practical terms, there is currently a limited and thematically concentrated academic production on the Forum. The existing literature falls short of comprehensively addressing the importance and impact of the Forum in the development of relations between these two regions. For this reason, we conducted a bibliometric study to address the transformative role of the China-CELAC Forum. Drawing from a bibliographic search in the Scopus database, a mixed approach is used to determine the relationships between cited authors, keywords, and, subsequently, the temporal evolution of the studies and main thematic axes. The analysis shows a thematically differentiated academic debate between the geopolitical-economic implications of the Forum and the China-US rivalry and their trade tensions, allowing the visualization of research opportunities for the deepening of national case studies and evaluations of “forum diplomacy”. **Keywords**— China-CELAC forum; Bibliometric Analysis; Sino-Latin American Cooperation; Forum diplomacy; Multilateralism.

Resumen

Desde su creación en 2015, el Foro China-CELAC (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños) ha facilitado la creación de un canal de diálogo sobre diferentes áreas, jugando un papel transformador en la configuración de las relaciones multilaterales y la dinámica interna de China y América Latina. Sin embargo, a pesar de su relevancia en el fortalecimiento de los mecanismos de cooperación sino-latinoamericanos en términos prácticos, actualmente existe una producción académica limitada y temáticamente concentrada. La literatura existente no aborda de manera exhaustiva su importancia y el impacto en el desarrollo de las relaciones entre estas dos regiones. Por esta razón, realizamos un estudio bibliométrico que aborde el papel transformador del Foro. A partir de una búsqueda bibliográfica en la base de datos Scopus, se utiliza un enfoque mixto para determinar las relaciones entre autores citados, palabras clave y, posteriormente, la evolución temporal de los estudios y los principales ejes temáticos. El análisis muestra un debate académico diferenciado temáticamente entre las implicaciones geopolíticas y económicas del Foro y la rivalidad entre China y Estados Unidos y sus tensiones comerciales. Ello permite visualizar oportunidades de investigación para profundizar en los estudios de casos nacionales y las evaluaciones de la “diplomacia de foros”. **Palabras Clave**— Foro China-CELAC; Análisis Bibliométrico; Cooperación Chino-Latinoamericana; Diplomacia de Foros; Multilateralismo.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, China has positioned itself as a crucial player on the global stage, forging strategic alliances that currently exert major influence on the foreign policy of many of the member states. Specifically, in Latin America, through initiatives such as the China-CELAC Forum or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian giant has established itself as a strong strategic partner that has enabled countries in the region to explore various avenues of development. In particular, the China-CELAC Forum (hereafter, the Forum), formally established in 2015, has facilitated the creation of a channel for dialogue on different areas of interest to the actors involved, shaping their multilateral relations and the internal dynamics of these two regions. However, contrary to the enormous implications that the Forum and the Sino-Latin American cooperation sub-processes have had, there is a scarce approach to the topic in the academic literature and indeed few referential documents. This represents an obstacle for academic research in order to understand the current and even future cooperation processes that are being documented academically, thus establishing the limited and thematically concentrated academic production that gives rise to the central question of this study: How has the academic literature on the China-CELAC Forum evolved since its creation in terms of thematic priorities, theoretical approaches, and linguistic patterns, and what underexplored areas emerge from this scholarly production?

After an extensive search in academic databases like Scopus, 12 documents published between 2015 and 2024 were found. As outlined in section 2.1, the Forum holds significant strategic importance, yet the scholarly work it has inspired is considerably less extensive compared to other China-led cooperative initiatives like FOCAC (Africa) or the China-CEEC forum. Furthermore, this limited body of research can be broadly grouped into two main lines of thought. The first characterizes the Forum as an effective South-South cooperation platform. It fosters long-term development between China and Latin America through the expansion of trade links, infrastructure financing, and the diversification of the region's diplomacy beyond traditionally dominant actors (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018). Notably, some authors have highlighted the importance of this Forum in strengthening South-South cooperation and have even argued for a new type of regionalism. On the other hand, a second line of thought portrays the cooperation mechanism as a means of economic dependence. It entails the risks of economic imbalances and a possible erosion of regional autonomy in the long term (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

Despite its significant contributions, the literature faces a significant problem in analyzing the Forum comprehensively because of the overemphasis given to the economic and geopolitical aspects. Other critical dimensions such as political-diplomatic, sociocultural and environmental aspects continue to be neglected. Therefore, given the importance of this mechanism for the continent, it is extremely important to apply a broad and structural perspective that transcends thematic concentration solely to the macroeconomic or geopolitical axes and incorporates sociocultural and environmental dimensions throughout the decade of the Forum's existence.

Therefore, to address this limited and thematically concentrated academic production, this study conducts a mixed-method bibliometric analysis to systematically map the scientific discourse surrounding the Forum. To that end, the 12 documents (eight in English and four in Spanish) were further studied combining a diverse array of analysis that included quantitative co-citation and co-occurrence analysis with qualitative thematic coding, seeking to systematically identify the main thematic axes developed around the Forum, and reveal underexplored areas not yet explored in previous studies. Thereby paving the way for the establishment of thematic dimensions such as political, economic, geopolitical, social, and environmental dimensions, which are defined and addressed throughout the systematic analysis. In addition, through qualitative coding, a word frequency analysis was performed within English and Spanish structures to obtain a more accurate visualization of the key concepts and their treatment in the literature. Finally, a final temporal analysis was carried out, divided into three periods based on the Forum's key ministerial meetings, understanding the redefinition of institutional priorities and progressive inclusion of new areas of interest over the years.

Some preliminary results reveal a highly thematically differentiated academic debate between the geopolitical-economic implications of the Forum and the China-US rivalry and their trade tensions. A connection between theories such as "soft power," "multilateralism," and "regionalism" and actual regional dynamics is also established through the keyword co-occurrence analysis, further pointing to "China" as the central bridge between concepts. Subsequent qualitative thematic coding generated five thematic dimensions: economic-commercial, geopolitical-strategic, political-diplomatic, social-cultural, and environmental-sustainable for both English and Spanish texts. This process underscored a prioritization of the economic and geopolitical axes, while the environmental and socio-cultural topics remain underexplored. These findings highlight critical underexplored areas for a comprehensive understanding of the Forum and contribute to the formation of a solid basis for the design of new areas of study on Sino-Latin American relations.

That way, this study provides an empirically-derived framework of areas of research to systematically analyze the Forum in the future, moving the studies beyond economic dichotomies to examine comprehensibly the structure and discourse of this mechanism, and even others. Furthermore, as a result of the limited scholarly work, by mapping the current literature around the Forum this study proposes specific lines of research for an incipient field of study, laying a conceptual and empirical basis for future studies and highlighting the most necessary thematic underexplored areas to be addressed.

The subsequent analysis is structured into six sections. The second section outlines the background of the Forum, current lines of thought, and their limitations, providing context for the analysis that follows. The third section details the research design that this analysis will follow; in turn, the fourth presents the results. The fifth section provides a cross-dimensional discussion that synthesizes the previous findings, identifying thematic priorities, tensions, and underexplored topics in academic production. Finally, the sixth section discusses the conclusions based on a systematic and exhaustive examination of existing academic production on the Forum.

2 Literature Review

The following section is divided into three parts to provide the necessary contextual and analytical basis for the study. First, it summarizes the background of the Forum, providing a broad overview of the Forum's beginnings and institutionalization, ministerial meetings, and subsequent action plans, as well as its concrete impacts in various areas. The second part outlines the dominant academic lines of thought in the current literature, providing an understanding of how the cooperation mechanism and its relevance in the region are interpreted. The last one identifies the analytical limitations that arise from these lines of thought, which allows the design of the research to be framed, addressing them, and motivating the empirical strategy developed in the following section.

2.1 China's Influence in Latin America: Background to the Forum

This subsection provides a brief background on the Forum's origins and its relevance within China's multilateral strategy in the region, setting the stage for a more detailed exploration from the beginning of relations, ministerial forums and action plans, links with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and concrete impacts in infrastructure and economy.

2.1.1 Beginnings and institutionalization

Sino-Latin American relations began in the 1990s, when China began to work on multilateral processes because of its entry into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. Specifically, in the region these processes began to consolidate in 1993, when China established a strategic partnership with Brazil, which Herrera-Vinelli described as "the deepening of political, economic, social and cultural relations" (2022, p. 108).

Subsequently, after its admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Bermejo & San Martín, 2001; Rodríguez y Rodríguez, 2003) and the implementation of the Go Global Strategy in 2001, China accelerated the processes of horizontal and "diagonal" international cooperation, with an exponential increase in exports and imports 26 times between 2000 and 2020 (Zhang & Lacerda, 2021), and the signing of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between China and countries in the region (Herrera Vinelli, 2022). This international consolidation has allowed China to position itself as a key partner in the infrastructure and strategic sectors of the region, including energy, mining and transportation (García, 2021; Herrera Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018).

Another milestone in China's relationships with Latin America was its involvement with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The CELAC, created in 2011, with the aim of becoming a space to address integration and economic cooperation issues in the region, initiated its cooperation with China in 2012 through a series of visits by high-level ministers to Latin American countries (Herrera Vinelli, 2022). This was the basis for the establishment of the Forum in the Declaration of the CELAC Summit held in Havana in January 2014, and subsequently the first ministerial meeting in 2015 (Vadell, 2018).

2.1.2 Ministerial Forums and action plans

The Forum's ministerial meetings (2015, 2018, 2021) established a cooperative mechanism through multi-year action plans and sectoral sub-forums. The First China-CELAC Ministerial Forum, which took place in January 2015 in Beijing, transformed the continent into an area focused on peace, security, investment, infrastructure, resources, education and environmental protection through the Cooperation Plan 2015-2019 (Vadell, 2018). Simultaneously, the Beijing Declaration (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015) was established, which "sought to articulate greater dialogue and understanding with various LAC countries" (Herrera Vinelli, 2022, p. 122). This is how the Summit became an unprecedented opportunity for Latin America to improve its industrial competitiveness in various fields and protect the environment (Gallagher, 2016).

In addition, this first approach resulted in forums for integration in infrastructure such as the 1st China-LAC Infrastructure Cooperation Forum in 2016, conducting in-depth discussions on how to promote mutually beneficial cooperation in infrastructure (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a). Similarly, the First China-CELAC Forum on Scientific and Technological Innovation was held in the same year, announcing a number of scientific collaboration programs between China, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as a Young Scientists Exchange Program (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016b).

The Second China-CELAC Ministerial Forum was held in 2018, and through the 1+3+6 plan, it sought to deepen the South-South cooperation between China, Latin America and the Caribbean. This plan is composed of the following: a Development Priority Plan for the region; three strategic areas of interest: investment, financial cooperation, and trade; and six strategic areas: energy, infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, innovation in science and technology, and information systems (Vadell, 2018). Finally, the Third China-CELAC Ministerial Forum was held online in 2021, which adopted the Action Plan 2022-2024 with the objective of promoting trade and investment, joint projects in science and technology, cooperation in sustainable infrastructure, environmental protection, cultural exchange programs, scholarships, and public health (Xinhua, 2021).

The subsequent action plans of the respective ministerial forums are perfect examples that illustrate the Forum's impact within the region through common interests. Therefore, the Forum constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for Latin America to achieve the most significant steps in cooperation between both parties to achieve common goals, with renewed focus on economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental axes (Xinhua, 2021).

2.1.3 Sino-Latin American cooperation impacts at the regional level

In principle, these frameworks were translated into concrete projects and policy linkages across the region through official documents such as the first 2008 White Paper for Latin America (PRC State Council, 2008), an official document of the Chinese government communicating its policies in different areas, issued to strengthen cooperation in political, economic, and security terms. Following this 2008 policy document, China deepened its ties through projects such as Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric in Ecuador through a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China in 2010 (AidData, 2010). Similarly, in 2011, a free trade agreement between China and Costa Rica came into force, liberalizing more than 90% of the trade in goods (China's Ministry of Commerce, 2011).

Subsequently, the second and final 2016 White Paper for Latin America and the Caribbean (PRC State Council, 2016) was published with the aim of improving coordination in multilateral spaces through agreements such as the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), achieved with several countries in the region, such as Chile, Peru, and Costa Rica (Herrera Vinelli, 2022). Also, there were references to the Belt and Road cooperation that paved the way for the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Chile and the BRI in 2018 (Belt and Road Portal, 2018; China-CELAC Forum, 2018). Another relevant example is COSCO's Chancay megaport (Peru), which went from a partnership in 2019 to a financed and inaugurated loan of almost \$1 billion from Chinese banks in 2024 (Thome, 2024).

With the crisis caused by COVID-19 in 2020, the Ministerial Forum mechanism covered the axes of cooperation to support public health projects, Chinese transnational trade and investment, and coordination of global governance (Herrera Vinelli, 2022). At the same time, the joint construction of the BRI project was promoted as “the bridge that links China with its main partners and strategic allies of the 21st century through a diverse agenda based on connectivity, infrastructure and trade” (Herrera Vinelli, 2022, p. 116).

Thus, for over a decade, the Forum has established itself as a key dialogue platform between two regions, where, through a flexible diplomatic architecture, non-binding commitments and action plans are formulated and submitted to each participating actor for implementation. In particular, this flexible approach represents a critical element in the field of study to understand how the Forum achieves efficacy through a non-rigid, cooperative model based on consensus. This logic is consistent with studies on “forum diplomacy,” conceptualized as the practice of states and non-state actors participating in negotiations, cooperation, or political debates within institutionalized spaces that allow collaborative responses to complex transnational problems (Haegeman et al., 2015; Melchor, 2020).

Comparative evidence from leadership forums shows how these spaces structure cooperation and produce programmatic results through declarations, action plans, and follow-up mechanisms (Kirton, 2016). The China-CELAC Forum exemplifies these dynamics, embodying innovative cooperation and multilateralism practices distinct from hard power approaches and conventional diplomatic consensus-building. Consequently, this overview clarifies the mechanism's contribution to South-South cooperation and points to the importance of systematic studies on its implications, an underexplored area in the Forum studies that is addressed in the following subsections.

2.2 Dominant strands in the literature on the China-CELAC Forum

Compared to other topics in the China-Latin America relationship, such as bilateral trade and investment dynamics (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018), geopolitical competition with the United States (Gallagher, 2016; Preciado Coronado, 2020), and infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Herrera Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018), the academic analysis of the Forum's impact has received surprisingly little attention. For instance, a systematic search for academic literature around the Forum in different databases such as Latindex, Dialnet, SciELO, and Scopus yielded a limited filtered corpus of 12 key publications.¹ See these pieces of literature in Appendix Table A.1. The systematic analysis of this corpus reveals a debate structured around two principal lines of thought: the Forum as a) an effective South-South cooperation platform and b) as a means of economic dependence.

This first line of thought positions China as an important economic actor in Latin America, which facilitates effective South-South cooperation through the Forum.² With the Forum and other international platforms (e.g., BRI), China is playing a multifaceted diplomatic strategy in the Latin American region. It has turned the giant from Asia into an important trading partner, especially for Brazil, Chile, and Peru (Legler et al., 2018; Preciado Coronado, 2020; Vadell, 2018). In addition, with the development of financial institutions, such as the BRICS New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Chinese investment in sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera Vinelli, 2022), scholars see the Forum as a cooperation mechanism with the potential to create a new type of regionalism that can foster development both in China and Latin America (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

At the same time, scholars have also raised concerns about the potential economic dependence consequences of the Forum. Although the cooperation mechanism is certainly present due to Chinese investment and financing, it can lead to dependence on Chinese commodity exports to China, also known as the “Commodity Consensus.” This describes a new economic and political-ideological order on the continent and concerns about premature deindustrialization, unfair competition, and environmental impact (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018). In the face of these problems, the development of strategies that can take full advantage of the opportunities of Sino-Latin American relations, which can mitigate their impact on regional autonomous governance and on the sovereignty of Latin American states, is promoted. This is achieved by strengthening national institutions, economic diversification, and environmental and social protection (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018; Vadell, 2018).

However, despite the relevance of this Forum in strengthening South-South cooperation as a new type of regionalism (Vadell, 2018), current studies and research lines present a notable challenge when it comes to comprehensively addressing the impact and importance of the Forum outside the economic dimension, including consequences around political, social, and environmental spheres of Latin America. These limitations reveal conceptual and empirical shortcomings in how academia frames the Forum in various areas, resulting in a thematic limitation and concentration of the academic approach. This is addressed in the next subsection, which specifies why these strands need to implement a more complete approach.

2.3 China-CELAC Forum and the lack of theoretical studies

As can be seen in the first section of the literature review, the Forum and its subsequent action plans illustrate the most significant steps in cooperation between both parties to achieve not only economic initiatives but also environmental, social, political, and geopolitical axes. These include infrastructure and energy projects such as the Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric plant in Ecuador and the Chancay megaport in Peru and the signing of Free Trade Agreements with countries such as Costa Rica, Chile, and Peru. Additionally, the framework has fostered collaboration in scientific and technological innovation through specialized sub-forums and young scientists exchange programs, while also developing cooperation mechanisms in public health, environmental protection, and political dialogue through ministerial declarations and the 2008 and 2016 White Papers.

However, the principal lines of thought mentioned above show a limited analytical framework when addressing different areas of interest within the Forum. Specifically, due to an overemphasis on the economic and geopolitical dimension, the other ones remain substantially underestimated, resulting in a thematic limitation that prevents a multidimensional assessment. Consequently, the literature on this subject remains dichotomized between these two lines of thought, which prevents a comprehensive assessment of the Forum's true global impact across all domains over time, including persistent underexplored areas and emerging agendas.

This generates both conceptual and empirical shortcomings that prevent a deep and systematic understanding of the Forum's implications across multiple potential dimensions. Therefore, given the identified limited and thematically concentrated academic production, the purpose of this study is to map the Forum's academic footprint by conducting a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. This will provide an empirically-derived framework of areas of research to systematically analyze the Forum and propose specific lines of research for an incipient field of study, laying a conceptual and empirical basis for future studies. The next section presents the research design for this analysis.

3 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods bibliometric research design to directly address the limitations identified in the lines of thought defined above. Specifically, this research strategy follows a five-step process based on the 12 documents identified in the database search. It starts with i) a quantitative analysis of co-citations and ii) keyword co-occurrence to map the academic structure around the field, followed by iii) qualitative thematic coding to identify underlying narratives and underexplored topics, iv) word frequency analysis to visualize key concepts, and v) a temporal analysis based on key ministerial meetings to track the evolution of institutional priorities. Together, these integrated analyzes result in a comprehensive assessment of the academic discourse of the Forum in different languages and time periods. Before diving into the detailed research strategy process, the next lines briefly discuss the mixed-method bibliometric research.

3.1 Mixed-methods bibliometric research

Bibliometrics, first formally defined by Pritchard (1969), has been conceptualized in diverse ways by numerous scholars, allowing the assessment of scientific production in terms of quantity, quality, and impact across several topics, journals, authors, and countries (Salinas Ríos & García López, 2022). Accordingly, through an analysis of metadata extracted from scholarly research databases, bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive perspective on the current advancements in any given field of study (Osareh, 1996). More specifically, and applied to this study, this metadata commonly includes publication titles, citations, and keywords that can be used to generate a wide range of analyses and visual representations to elucidate the research landscape, as will be done with the quantitative analysis software VOSviewer (version 1.6.20).

Furthermore, bibliometric analyses can complement meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews, thereby enhancing the overall understanding of a given research area (Zupic & Čater, 2015). In that sense and having outlined the quantitative insights provided by bibliometric analysis, it is crucial to sequentially complement these findings with a qualitative approach for a deeper understanding of the underlying themes and narratives, establishing the mixed-method bibliometric research applied in this analysis (Hernández Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018).

Specifically, the qualitative phase relied on the interpretive coding of textual data using an original analytical framework of five dimensions, assisted by the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1.32924). This framework was developed by the systematization of key cooperation areas from the Forum's strategy and subsequent official documents, as established in the literature review, ensuring a comprehensive and structured analysis process of the Forum's axes (economic-commercial, political-diplomatic, geopolitical-strategic, sociocultural, and environmental-sustainable). This original framework was subsequently implemented in a word frequency analysis within the same software, providing additional ways to refine the reading of thematic emphases.

3.2 Co-citation and keyword co-occurrence analysis

The co-citation and keyword co-occurrence analyses were used to systematically map the academic structure around the Forum, providing methodological rigor in quantifiable terms even within the limited identified corpus of literature. The co-citation analysis is conducted to facilitate the identification of groups of authors who are frequently co-cited within the bibliographies of the corpus, thereby revealing the academic basis and schools of thought that shape the Forum research within the scholarly discourse around the Forum. In turn, the keyword co-occurrence analysis, which maps the thematic structure by identifying those terms that commonly appear in tandem within the 12 texts on the Forum, reveals thematic priorities within the primary documents.

The software VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was utilized to conduct the co-citation and Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis. It was selected because, unlike graph-based tools like Bibliometrix (R-based) or CiteSpace, VOSviewer employs the VOS (Visualization of Similarities) mapping technique, which ensures that the distance between nodes accurately reflects the strength of their relationship, facilitating the identification of thematic clusters. That said, it helped generate a wide range of quantitative analyzes and visual representations to elucidate the research landscape and identify the thematic concentration in the present corpus.

For both analyzes, the unit of analysis within the software was initially defined as all authors and keywords cited. Subsequently, a full counting method was applied in the VOSviewer interface, followed by establishing a minimum threshold for each instance. These thresholds were not predetermined but were set during the analytical phase based on the initial results generated by the software to ensure a viable network visualization; their specific values and justification are detailed in the Results section. This approach enabled a complete and integrated visualization, which allowed a comprehensive assessment of the actual attention within the literature.

3.3 Thematic dimension coding

Based on the quantitative mapping, a subsequent qualitative analysis was conducted to identify five analytical dimensions which will help analyze the principal thematic focuses on the academic literature around the Forum. This framework was implemented by importing the filtered corpus of 12 texts extracted from Scopus written in English and Spanish, also generating two parallel structures segmented by language to ensure consistency. The first focused on eight documents in English and the other on four documents in Spanish, applying identical categorization frameworks in five axes: Economic-trade dimension (*dimensión económica-comercial* in Spanish); Environmental and sustainable dimension (*dimensión medioambiental y sostenible* in Spanish); Geopolitical and strategic dimension (*dimensión geopolítica y estratégica* in Spanish); Political-diplomatic dimension (*dimensión política-diplomática* in Spanish); and, Social and cultural dimension (*dimensión social y cultural* in Spanish).

To do so, this step relied on the ATLAS.ti software (version 25.0.1.32924) and its intentional AI-assisted coding feature, which allows the software to suggest codes based on the user's specific research goals and questions, improving the efficiency and depth of the inductive coding process while maintaining the researcher's interpretive control. This provides a seamless link between qualitative insights and quantitative patterns, making it an ideal tool for mixed-methods bibliometric research.

To elucidate the coding process, frequencies indicate the count of text segments coded in each thematic category. In ATLAS.ti, a coded segment is a portion of text, be it a sentence, paragraph, or a collection of sentences, that is pertinent to a particular analytical dimension. For example, a paragraph detailing Chinese investment in infrastructure projects in Latin America as part of the Belt and Road Initiative would be categorized under the economic-commercial dimension. Likewise, a section that discusses the Forum as a tool affecting regional power dynamics or as an element of the China-US rivalry would be classified within the geopolitical-strategic dimension. Consequently, the frequency of each dimension represents the total number of coded segments attributed to that category across the documents examined within each language group.

This process was implemented with the descriptive definitions in Table 1, which served as a conceptual basis to scan the texts for semantic patterns and terms related to the principal content of the respective dimension. After the initial codes were generated, they were manually reviewed to ensure precision and contextual accuracy, forming a validation cycle run separately for the English and Spanish document groups, maintaining linguistic integrity. Furthermore, given the unequal number of documents in each language (eight in English and four in Spanish), the frequencies were normalized by the total number of coded segments per language, allowing a proportional comparison between thematic dimensions and an effective comparative analysis.

This parallel coding approach enabled a comparative assessment of how, and to what extent, each document addressed the thematic dimensions, facilitating the visualization of the main differences between the topics of interest around the Forum and the evolution of these topics over the years. Additionally, by unifying quantitative and qualitative analyzes around the same category axis, it is possible to cover political and geopolitical issues, economic cooperation, sustainable development, and socio-cultural exchanges in a more comprehensive and exhaustive manner, ensuring holistic comprehension of the Forum's critical contributions and challenges.

Table 1: Thematic Codes

Code/Dimension	Description
Economic-commercial	Trade relations, investment flows, financing, infrastructure, and the “commodity consensus”.
Political-diplomatic	Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, South-South co-operation, CELAC’s role, and Chinese foreign policy strategies.
Geopolitical-strategic	Power asymmetries, regional autonomy, China-US rivalry, and strategic positioning in Latin America.
Social-cultural	Academic exchange, cultural diplomacy, educational programs, and societal perceptions of China-LAC co-operation.
Environmental-sustainable	Ecological impacts, sustainable development, green finance, and environmental protection initiatives.

Source: Own elaboration.

3.4 Word frequency and temporal evolution analysis

In parallel, a word frequency analysis was performed within each English and Spanish structure to identify the precise terminology and scholarly emphasis within each linguistic corpus. This analysis beyond the coding framework illustrates empirical evidence of thematic dominance in the academic discussion, generating a language-specific landscape that facilitates the understanding of the corpus before tracking their temporal evolution. For this, the ATLAS.ti software was used because of its robust Word Cloud and Word List tools, which enable the automated extraction of high-frequency terms in different languages, unlike general word processors, ensuring that frequency analysis is academically relevant and not limited to a simple count of common words.

After excluding stop words (e.g., articles and connectors), thresholds were established for this word frequency analysis: 60 mentions for English documents and 40 in Spanish. The selection of these different thresholds responds to the numerical difference of texts in each language (X in English and Y in Spanish), and also the greater number of irrelevant terms or stop words derived from the documents in English compared to those in Spanish. Overall, these established thresholds facilitate a more accurate visualization of the key concepts and their respective treatment in the literature, for this case, the 12 selected documents. In this way, through the integration of bibliometric methods with qualitative coding and word frequency analysis, this study provides a comprehensive examination of how the Forum has been researched and discussed in academic publications.

Finally, to determine how the academic discussion evolved over the years, the Forum’s life span was divided into three periods (2015-2018, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024) based on its key ministerial meetings, which, as documented in Subsection 2.1, serve as a critical point that redefines institutional priorities and drives the progressive inclusion of new areas of interest when addressing the Forum and its agenda.

Using both the coding data (thematic dimension coding) and the bibliometric outputs (Co-citation and Keyword Co-occurrence, and word frequency analyzes), a manual comparative analysis was carried out, allowing the identification of emerging themes and highlighting their evolution and potential diversification that exceed the economic and geopolitical dimension. To do so, we display the main focus and the secondary theme throughout each period. We consider that a period presents a main focus when a thematic dimension constitutes the dominant lens that guides the document's core argument. In turn, a secondary theme is identified when another dimension reaches notable relevance, substantively complementing or contextualizing the main focus without directing the primary analytical framework.

In sum, with the integration of this mixed-methods bibliometric research design, this study presents a comprehensive framework for elucidating the academic discourse surrounding the Forum. Bibliometric analysis elucidates co-citation and co-occurrence patterns, offering a macro-level perspective on the evolution of the field, while, in conjunction with the qualitative phase, it is complemented by examining the underlying thematic axes and conceptual nuances of the literature. Together, this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of trends, underexplored areas, and future trajectories in research related to the Forum, thus expanding the thematic coverage and integrating limited evidence. The next section presents the results.

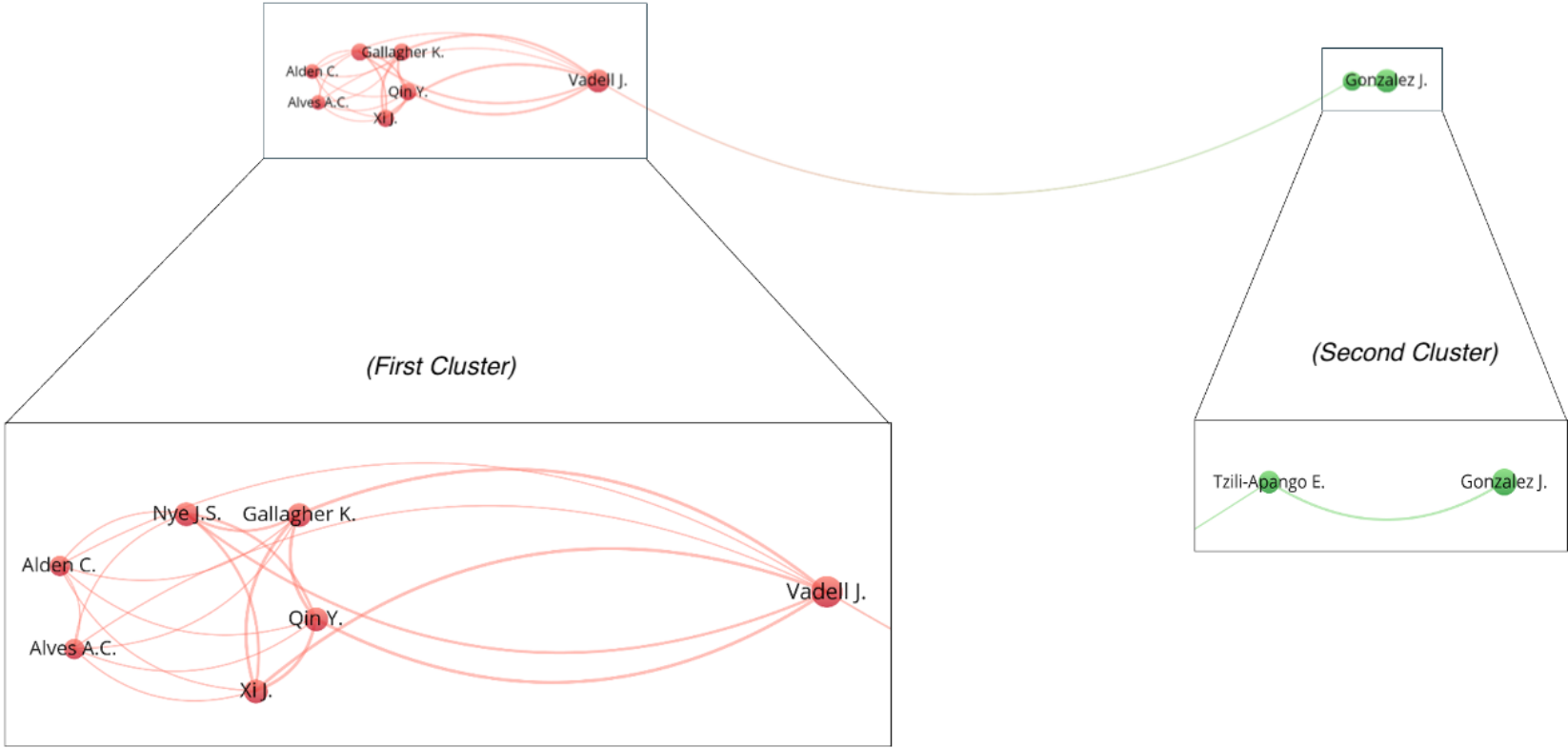
4 Analysis of Results

This section addresses the research question: How has the academic literature on the China-CELAC Forum evolved since its creation in terms of thematic priorities, theoretical approaches, and linguistic patterns, and what underexplored areas emerge from this scholarly production? The results are organized in order to first reveal the academic basis and thematic relations through the quantitative co-citation and co-occurrence keyword analysis. Subsequently, qualitative methods are implemented to provide an integral examination of the content and areas of emphasis across the corpus, which leads to a thematic dimension coding, word frequency, and temporal evolution analysis. Finally, the results are synthesized into a section of main trends and critical underexplored areas through a cross-dimensional discussion, providing a comprehensive mapping of the scholarly discourse around the Forum.

4.1 Co-citation network of authors

The co-citation analysis produced a total of 397 co-cited authors. To identify well-established and connected scholarly networks, a minimum citation threshold of three was applied, a viable criterion considering the maximum of five co-citations identified by VOSviewer. This threshold ensured the selection of substantively linked authors, of which only nine met the established criteria. This yielded a complete co-citation network, as presented in the final interpretation of the software results in Figure 1, in which the nodes represent the authors cited with a size proportional to their citation frequency and links that reflect these co-citation relationships within the analyzed research.

Figure 1: Network of Co-Citations



Notes: Node size represents the frequency of citations of each author. Colors indicate clusters of authors identified through the VOSviewer clustering algorithm. Links represent co-citation relationships between authors.
Sources: Elaboration based on Scopus metadata.

Among the most notable characteristics, the distribution in two “clusters” is observed, each represented by a different color, which stands for shared theoretical approaches within the scholarly discourse, allowing immediate visual identification of thematic clusters. As a result, the analysis demonstrates the structuring of the academic debate into two identifiable lines of inquiry, clearly differentiated through a single significant Vadell-Tzili link. In this same line, the clusters present a notable disparity, where the first cluster comprises seven authors with a high density of internal connections and the second consists of only two, reinforcing this thematic fragmentation even more.

Within the first cluster, authors such as Alden, Alves, Gallagher, Nye, Qin, Vadell, and Xi appear, who represent a significant number of citations together, with citation counts ranging from three to seven. Based on the predominant themes in their cited works, this cluster concentrates a high percentage of the theoretical debate on the geopolitical and economic implications of the Forum and related themes, particularly financial dependence (Gallagher 2016) and the examination of geopolitical positioning (Vadell, 2022). In addition, this cluster exhibits a common focus on theoretical foundations such as the soft power framework (Keohane & Nye., 1998; Qin, 2018) and strategic foundations (Xi, 2017) of Chinese expansion, covering, in large part, common themes around the structuring of this flexible diplomatic model and the mechanisms under which it is established.

Such is the case of Alden and Alves (2017), who, through the framework of forum diplomacy, analyze these Forum platforms as rule-establishment mechanisms at the regional level. Similarly, Gallagher (2016) and Vadell (2022) analyze the Chinese multilateral model in practice and its role as a key tool within the continent as a financing mechanism for state development, highlighting at the same time the risks of long-term economic dependence.

The second cluster displays a reduced group given its smaller total number of links, but is notably cohesive, in which authors such as González and Tzili-Apango appear, the latter being connected to the first group through Vadell. However, despite their size, these authors present a relative weight of seven citations, covering themes around the economic rivalry between China and the United States, as well as practical implications in the region (González et al., 2023; Tzili-Apango & Legler, 2020). More specifically, the high connection between these two nodes demonstrates a specialized focus on the themes of hegemony, economic dependence, and trade disputes, quite distinct from the theoretical focus addressed in the first cluster.

Both authors explore the Chinese multilateral mechanism in the region, positioning it for economic and geopolitical positioning against the United States, highlighting increased trade links with southern states and the consequences of these processes within the productive chains of the countries, generating bilateral tensions. Additionally, the authors within this cluster also address challenges related to the export of raw materials to Latin America, its perpetuation, and the economic and political dependence of this process (González et al., 2023; Tzili-Apango & Legler, 2020).

Therefore, the co-citation analysis shows a thematically differentiated academic field around the Forum, being structured into two heterogeneous clusters with a minimal interconnection where a dominant cluster demonstrates a consolidated scholarly focus on geopolitical and economic implications through established theoretical frameworks. In the case of the second cluster, it reveals a specialized focus on themes that are quite distinct from the theoretical focus addressed in the first one, such as hegemony, economic

dependence, and trade disputes. As a result, this quantitative mapping provides an academic basis for understanding the current thematic focus within the literature, which will be complemented in the subsequent subsection through a keyword co-occurrence analysis to examine the thematic emphases present in the primary texts themselves.

4.2 Keyword co-occurrence analysis

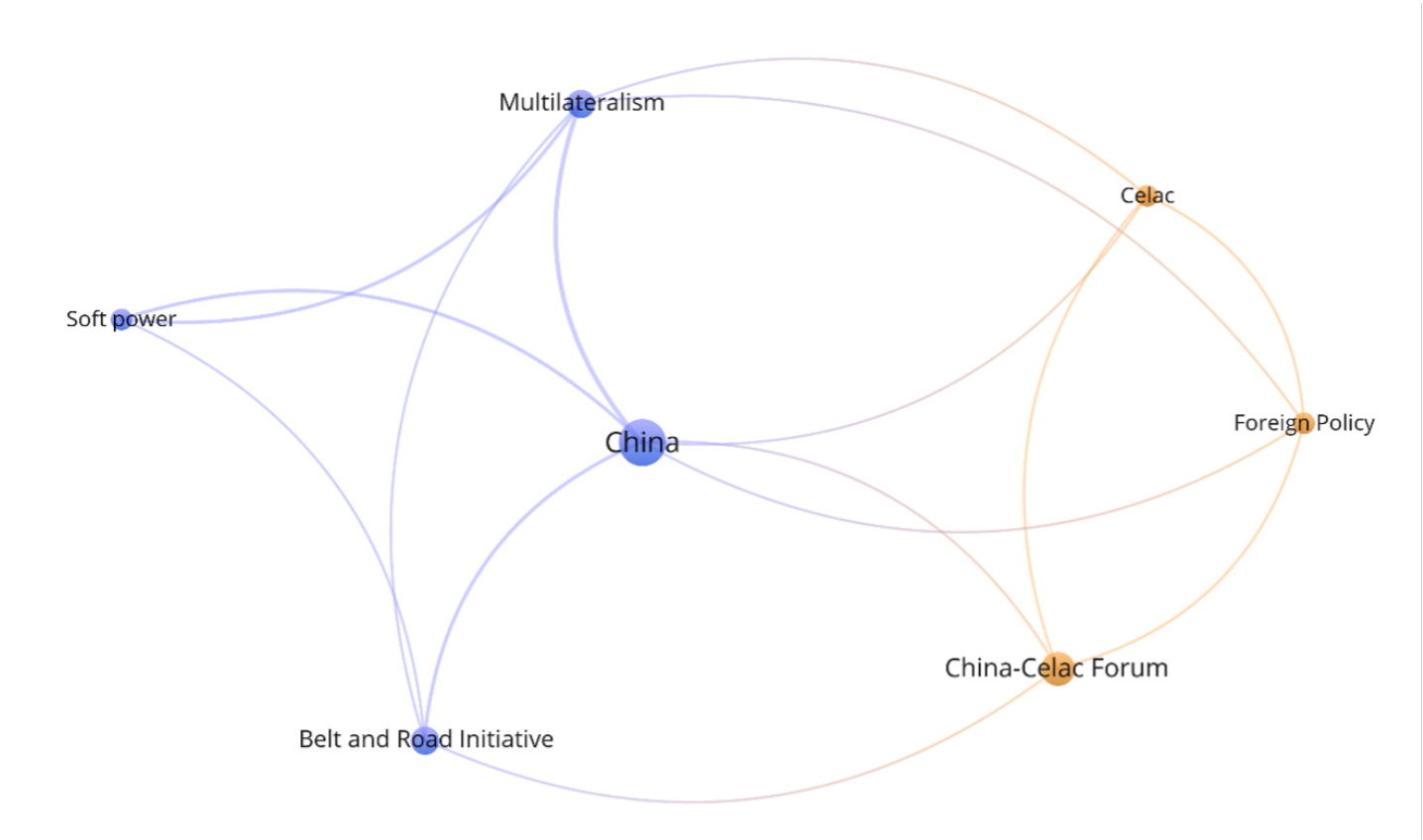
Subsequently, a co-occurrence analysis was conducted to identify the keywords that could appear together in the selected documents. This was done by establishing all keywords as the unit of analysis utilizing the complete count method, followed by setting a minimum co-occurrence threshold of two. This threshold was selected from a maximum occurrence of three to obtain a broader and more realistic map of conceptual relationships within the literature, generating a clearer network of principal addressed themes. The process resulted in a total of 62 keywords, of which only seven satisfied the defined parameters, as shown in Figure 2.

We observe that, in the establishment of the nodes and clusters, the keyword co-occurrence analysis also employs a color-coding visualization to distinguish thematic clusters, indicating groups of semantically related terms. Concretely, the keyword “China” positions itself as the one with the highest density, even acting as a bridge node between the generated groups and serving particularly to unite the conceptual discussions between concepts and real dynamics. In the same line, this central node presents high-frequency links both with elements of theory and with those referring to the regional platform, which reinforces an approach and understanding of the studied mechanism centered on the Asian giant, its perspective and strategies, and not so much in the dynamics of its Latin American counterpart, both theoretically and practically.

In the case of the two main groups or “clusters,” the first features conceptual and strategic terms of the discourse on China, such as “Belt and Road Initiative” (three occurrences), “China” (seven occurrences), “multilateralism” (three occurrences), and “soft power” (two occurrences), demonstrating the interest of the authors in emphasizing areas of study related to soft power dynamics, the various initiatives of China in Latin America, and the importance of multilateral strategies within the framework of cooperation within the Forum. Concretely, this first cluster constitutes a framework of understanding of multilateral platforms, legitimized through soft power and more flexible multilateral models, as is the case of the BRI, whose perception does not fall on that of a traditionally established project, but rather on that of a multilateral initiative reinforced in narratives of cooperation and mutual benefit among its participants. Soft power is also an element of critical relevance in contextualizing this theme, as it serves as the primary theoretical foundation among scholars establishing the discursive basis of the mechanisms implemented by China through cultural and political attraction.

In the second cluster, we find terms such as: “CELAC” (two occurrences), “China-CELAC Forum” (four occurrences) and “foreign policy” (two occurrences), highlighting a perspective focused on specific issues related to the foreign policy of the involved countries and the role of CELAC as a platform of regional integration in relations with China. Despite forming a smaller cluster, these elements mark an important thematic block for understanding the incorporation of Latin American dynamics within existing studies around the Forum.

Figure 2: Network of Co-Occurrences



Notes: Node size represents the frequency of citations of each author. Colors indicate clusters of authors identified through the VOSviewer clustering algorithm. Links represent co-citation relationships between authors.
Sources: Elaboration based on Scopus metadata.

As such, the term “CELAC” demonstrates the inclusion of the region as a capable actor within the mechanism, positioned as independent, with an influential decision-making capacity, which reinforces the multilateral ideal of the Forum and its role as a channel of dialogue and cooperation. Similarly, the term “foreign policy” also places a relevant interpretation of Chinese foreign policy, since through this lens the priorities and practices of Beijing are implemented on the continent. Together, these elements, along with the “China-CELAC Forum, construct a narrative around a more strategic position—re-framing the previous one about cooperation— along with the coherence of the discourse and its actual implementation.

In summary, the keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals a dominant China-centric discourse with two differentiated thematic orientations focused on Chinese strategic framework and soft power mechanisms, and a second one that places a relevant interpretation of Chinese foreign policy priorities and practices that Beijing implements in the continent. This second quantitative mapping visualizes how scholarly attention is predominantly centered on China’s initiatives, while the Latin America perspectives receive less emphasis. Based on these results, the following subsection applies a qualitative thematic coding using the original analytical framework of five dimensions to analyze the principal thematic focuses in the academic literature around the Forum, thereby deepening the understanding of the conceptual priorities in the actual scholarly discourse.

4.3 Thematic dimension coding

The thematic dimension coding considers the language in which the texts were produced: English and Spanish. Given the unequal number of documents, it focuses on the proportional distribution of subcodes within each language, as observed in Table 2, which reveals the frequency of dimensions by language. The distribution of the analysis among the English documents is 28.6% for all subcodes to the economic-commercial dimension; 26.9% to the geopolitical and strategic dimension; 20.1% to the political-diplomatic dimension; 13.0% to the social-cultural dimension; and, 11.4% to the environmental-sustainable dimension (from a total of 1,930 subcodes implemented). Thus, a clear dominant focus on the economic-commercial and geopolitical aspects is visualized, with comparatively less attention to an environmental and socio-cultural approach within current studies.

For the four texts in Spanish, the economic-commercial dimension represents 26.7%; the political-diplomatic dimension 24.8%; the geopolitical and strategic dimension 22.8%; the social and cultural dimension 14.7%; and the environmental and sustainable dimension 11.0% (from a total of 1,411 subcodes). In this case, the analysis in Spanish presents a joint emphasis on economic and diplomatic dimensions and slightly higher attention to socio-cultural aspects than in the case of English studies.

The evidence shows a first scenario in which the English and Spanish research prioritizes trade flows, infrastructure financing processes, credits, and business models associated with the Forum and the BRI. Within this approach, there is also a critical discourse about the asymmetry of the proposed financial mechanisms with risks spanning from sovereign over-indebtedness to structural dependence on Beijing, perpetuating problems historically present on the continent. This was the case of Gallagher (2016) and Vadell (2022) previously mentioned, who identify China as a key actor in the process of recommodification of Latin American exports.

Table 2: Distribution of Qualitative Subcodes by Thematic Dimension and Language

Thematic Dimension	English (%)	Spanish (%)
Economic-Commercial	28.6	26.7
Geopolitical-Strategic	26.9	22.8
Political-Diplomatic	20.1	24.8
Social-Cultural	13.0	14.7
Environmental-Sustainable	11.4	11.0
Total	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

In the case of the geopolitical and strategic dimension, English-language studies mostly address the Forum as a soft power tool, used to exert Chinese influence on the continent against the United States. This allows the Asian giant to be capable of applying great geopolitical pressure in favor of Beijing's interests in the region. In the case of Spanish literature, there is a greater focus on the analysis of traditional powers' reactions to China's positioning in the region and its short, medium, and long-term implications. This positioning generates discussions about the establishment of new projects in Latin America and, above all, the purpose behind these.

In English texts, the political-diplomatic dimension pays special attention to institutional mechanisms, their functioning, and structuring through the Forum. These texts have a particular interest in the 'no conditionality' of processes, aiming to recognize soft power dynamics that seek to position themselves as limitations or place national interests over Latin America. For example, Alden and Alves (2017) detail China's insistence on norms such as non-conditionality, equality, and mutual benefit, characterizing Chinese forum diplomacy as capable of shaping cooperation rules without imposing preconditions or policies. However, Spanish literature focuses on addressing official discourses and the results of ministerial meetings, as in the case of official documents generated after each Forum, the Action Plan, and the Ministerial Declaration. These documents are mainly characterized by a logic of respect for sovereignty and mutual collaboration, which highlight the dynamics of equality and equity for all participating actors.

Finally, regarding the least explored dimensions in both languages, the socio-cultural and environmental ones are posed as less critically explored thematic axes within studies concerning the Forum. Despite being areas of increasing global emphasis in recent years, there still exists a great lack of research that holistically integrates implications and advancements according to the Forum's evolution. The proportional distribution of subcodes reveals that both English and Spanish literature dedicate comparable attention to projects related to renewable and conservation energies. However, these dimensions are presented less systematically than other dimensions, demonstrating the critical need for study.

Thus, after the analysis, concepts and keywords linked to each dimension were observed, whose subcodes indicate the most and least frequent thematic axes addressed in the documents. This is the case of the dominance of the economic–commercial dimension in both languages through the high mention of investments, infrastructures, and bilateral trade, as well as the strategic relevance of the competition between China and the United States and its implications in the region in the geopolitical and strategic dimension.

This has given rise to a significantly refined conceptual understanding of the Forum as a research area, allowing the identification of both the connections between dimensions and the relevance of concepts in each thematic axis. Similarly, the use of an integrative approach helped demonstrate the current deficiencies and critical underexplored Forum's research themes, paving the way for new research avenues that can address these voids and facilitate the recognition of causes, phenomena, and implications of utmost importance around the Forum.

4.4 Word frequency analysis by language

Following the same language distinction, Figure 3 shows the comparison of term frequency between the English and Spanish documents. In the case of the former, terms such as *desarrollo*, *cooperación*, *económica*, *inversiones*, *gobierno*, *foro*, *infraestructura*, *geopolítica*, as well as specific references to countries such as *Japón*, *México*, *Brasil*, and *Asia* demonstrate the joint interest in research about the economic and commercial spheres of Chinese policy in a comparative take across various continents (see panel 3a).

In addition, terms related to geopolitics and the Latin American position vis-à-vis the expansion of the Chinese presence are used: *bri*, *ruta*, and *franja*. These topics are frequently discussed outside the Forum by authors such as Wang (2023), who highlights the geopolitical implications of the BRI for China's relations with the countries along the route and its impact on the global geopolitical landscape.

In the case of the English texts, the most notable terms are *development*, *economic*, *multilateralism*, *power*, *sustainable*, *bri*, *agenda*, and *policy*, as well as specific references to countries such as *Mexico* and *Brazil* (panel 3b). Thus, compared to terms used in Spanish texts, one can distinguish different mentions on the topic of sustainability (*sustainable*). So, it is important to consider its implications at the international and regional levels regarding policies and projects related to the BRI. Furthermore, with mentions of terms such as *focac*, *macao*, and *Africa* it is evident a research area comparing Chinese policy across various continents, as in relations with Latin America and Africa, which, according to Van Der Putten et al. (2016), would be part of China's strategy to increase its presence in Central Asia and nearby zones of strategic importance.

Thus, through word frequency analysis conducted in both languages, the existence of a thematic basis pertinent to the previously established coding process was observed, in which English texts mention aspects related to sustainable development and global policies involving diverse actors on the international scale. Spanish texts show greater interest in economic, infrastructure, and investment dynamics, which is in line with the previously conducted coding analysis, in which both English and Spanish research place special emphasis on trade flows, infrastructure financing processes, credits, and business models associated with the Forum and the BRI.

Generally, throughout this analysis, a contrast of research approaches and interests is observed between documents published in English and those published in Spanish. These differences include some themes depending on the region, giving rise to new possible research areas in relation to the study of the Forum. Similarly, thematic intersections between the two languages are glimpsed, as in references to the BRI, expressed through terms such as *silk*, *bri*, *belt*, and *road* and their proximity to terms such as *economic*, *infrastructure*, and *cooperation*. This provides with debates on development, trade, and investment present in the documents, demonstrating both a multisectoral approach to Chinese initiatives in Latin America and their development in the Forum's research scope, as well as correct pertinence to the prior coding process.

Another relevant feature to consider are sustainability and development patterns. As the English texts show greater interest and connection with terms such as “development” and “sustainable”, the latter being less common in general, demonstrating the growing importance of the environmental and sustainable dimension. Meanwhile, the Spanish texts do not present the term *sustainable*, but others such as *infraestructura*, *desarrollo*, and *inversiones*, suggesting contextual associations between environmental issues and the planning of major infrastructure initiatives.

Similarly, geopolitical terms show parallel approaches to the Forum. For the English texts, words such as *policy*, *foreign*, *power*, *strategic*, and *Africa* show a scholarly focus on global competition patterns and the type of Chinese strategies in diverse regions. In the case of the Spanish texts, the use of terms such as *eua*, *Asia*, *chino*, and *mundial* demonstrates an approach to the position of Latin America vis-à-vis China and how this works against historically established dynamics such as that of the United States. This evidences China's broader geopolitical strategy that challenges major powers, such as the United States, Japan, and India, through the BRI, intensifying global geopolitical competition (Wang, 2023). Thus, having established the predominant terms patterns, the research proceeds to trace the temporal evolution of these thematic dimensions across key periods of the Forum, examining how these thematic priorities have progressed.

4.5 Temporal evolution analysis

As mentioned in the research design, the Forum's life span was divided into three periods (2015-2018, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024) based on key ministerial meetings. Table 3 synthesizes the dominant thematic focus for each period, subsequently providing the specific evidence to support these trends using the twelve documents analyzed.

4.5.1 Period 1 (2015-2018)

Beginning in 2015, academic production emphasized political-diplomatic aspects during the First Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, highlighting the inaugural presidential visits of Xi Jinping to Latin America under the concept of non-interference in other states' affairs, the use of public diplomacy, and the pursuit of multilateral cooperation within its roadmap. Similarly, there is a significant economic focus through the implementation of the “1+3+6” plan for 2015-2019 and the financing lines established within these initial diplomatic channels between actors. The geopolitical vision behind the Forum is also raised, as given the great predominance of the U.S., the Forum positions itself as a key strategic response toward a more multipolar global focus.

Table 3: Evolution of Dominant Thematic Dimensions by Period

Period	N° of papers	Main Focus	Emerging-Secondary Theme
Period 1 (2015–2018)	2	• Political-diplomatic foundation • Geopolitical positioning vs. US • Initial economic agenda	• South–South cooperation • Infrastructure projects
Period 2 (2019-2021)	4	• Environmental/social concerns emerge • Development geopolitics • US–China rivalry continues	• Governance risks • Societal responses
Period 3 (2022-2024)	6	• Forum institutionalization • Economic cooperation • Operational principles	• Cultural cooperation • Environmental dimensions remain underexplored

Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, with respect to social or environmental aspects, these themes are marginally addressed. Although they have been formally present in the Forum's official documents since its inception, they did not represent central axes of interest in the literature regarding the agenda that the Forum (Jiang, 2015).

In 2017 and 2018, the literature gained great interest in regional countries and their inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that occurred at the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum in Santiago (2018)– the formal invitation for Latin American countries to join this initiative. It then tilted the main focus of interest around the BRI objectives and new trade routes with Latin American States after significant flows of Chinese investments in infrastructure and transportation areas (Lavut, 2018).

This brought about challenges in the conditionalities for recipient countries of these funds, as well as in the positioning of the Asian giant on the continent at the expense of the United States. Collectively, this period represented the forum-related study's political, economic, and strategic dynamics themes, showing China's adoption of more protectionist policies. Regarding the social or environmental axes, a marginal focus is again presented, where within the literature of this analyzed period, the social theme is only briefly mentioned, without any exploration of its implications (Lavut, 2018).

4.5.2 Period 2 (2019-2021)

For the period between 2019 and 2021, in addition to observing an increase in research around the Forum, previously unconsidered axes began to be addressed, such as environmental and social themes, thus witnessing an evolution in the areas where the mechanism gains relevance. Environmentally, for example, addressed economic re-primarization, neo-extractivism, and their negative environmental impacts, highlighting sustainability concerns about environmental sustainability and the need to implement megaprojects considering their environmental impact. Along the same lines, the geopolitics of development and its implications for planning projects are highlighted, where their execution depends on population acceptance or resistance (Preciado Coronado, 2020).

Similarly, this period and its literature also cover political, economic, and strategic axes, addressing China's growing influence as a global power, its geopolitical positioning relative to the U.S., and the strong structuring of multilateral mechanisms in the region, enabling projects such as developing a transcontinental railway as part of the BRI. The U.S. confrontational approach is also discussed regarding the use of these processes as tools that favor Chinese national interests, undermine governance and state autonomy (Small, 2020).

4.5.3 Period 3 (2022-2024)

Regarding the 2022-2024 period, research on the Forum becomes more pronounced; however, the increase in studies does not equate to continuing a trend focused on lagging thematic axes, such as the social-environmental dimension. In contrast, in response to China's significant influence in Latin America, studies have primarily addressed political, economic, and strategic themes, as in Vadell (2022), whose article focuses on Chinese power projection through Beijing's multilateral soft power relations. However, authors like dos Santos (2023) positioned forum mechanisms as key facilitators of bilateral economic cooperation, providing a diversified approach to economy, trade, and culture.

It is also notable that, strategically, within this period, the Forum is discussed more examined on its structure and implementation foundations than in previous years, considered a key element for consolidating China's regional presence (Terui Villegas & González García, 2024) and, simultaneously, an essential multilateral platform promoting dialogue and equality operationalizing principles of non-conditionality, mutual benefits, and non-interference (dos Santos, 2023). In particular, this latter approach is also highly mentioned in the current period, showing perhaps not a subsequent evolution in assimilating environmental themes but strategic and social ones, where the Forum acts and is analyzed through structuring dialogue channels and addressing regional issues multilaterally.

In this way, documents from 2015 to 2018 mainly addressed the economic-commercial aspects of the Forum and their implications within a scenario of Chinese positioning against the United States, focusing on promoting free trade and boosting economic integration. Regarding subsequent texts, we observe that as summit diplomacy was consolidated as the main cooperation mechanism between China and Latin America, the spectrum of themes around the mechanism's regional articulation began to broaden the thematic scope, starting with the inclusion of thematic axes for the pragmatic fulfillment of new global demands that the Forum must address. Among these, we note the incorporation of social, cultural, and environmental spheres in research, representing a highly relevant step toward to comprehensively understanding the importance and impact of the Forum in political, economic, and social spheres.

5 Cross-Dimensional Discussion

Drawing from the previous results and different thematic dimensions, the following arguments were determined to address the main resulting trends holistically and transversally in the analyzes, functioning as a synthesized section from previous steps that identifies thematic priorities, tensions, and underexplored areas in the academic production on the Forum. The specific evidence supporting these trends is provided through the following five dimensions.

5.1 Economic-commercial dimension

In the fields of economy and development, the 2015 "1+3+6" framework guides the main approaches to cooperation in trade, investment, and financing, with six sectoral priorities. In parallel, Chinese development banks are identified as the main actors in the infrastructure, energy, and transportation financing processes, while concessional loans and cooperation funds also function as significant mechanisms in this dimension. In concrete terms, the literature addresses the description and analysis of megaprojects such as bio-oceanic railways and industrial parks employing Chinese contractors and local labor, about which logistical problems, oil supply clauses, and doubts about cost transparency are discussed. Nevertheless, in terms of economic projects resulting from the Forum, critical perspectives emerge about long-term implications, as large loan initiatives to the region raise concerns about dependency dynamics that may arise from these. The described risks range from over-indebtedness to dependency towards Beijing, which generates a discussion about China's proposals in favor of its positioning as the next hegemon over Latin American countries.

5.2 Political-diplomatic dimension

Through the analysis, the political-diplomatic dimension reveals central aspects in the scholarly discourse around multilateralism processes. Since its creation in 2015, literature on the Forum has paid special attention to sustained summit diplomacy based on the resulting documentation, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China (2015) Beijing Declaration inaugurating ministerial dialogue and the China-CELAC Forum's (2018) Santiago Declaration formalizing Beijing's invitation to Latin American states to join the BRI. Collectively, operations through non-binding documents and principles of respect, equality, and non-conditionality have gained focus in recent years, after a decade of the mechanism.

Furthermore, this dimension largely encompasses China's short- and long-term regional objectives, transversally addressing the vision of increasing trade and investments through various projects enhancing regional connectivity. Simultaneously, China is presented as a defender of multilateralism and South-South cooperation, and as a strategic actor using multilateral means to counter U.S. global unilateralism. However, throughout the analysis, difficulties in platform articulation and its objectives across the continent, particularly within individual national contexts. Likewise, the dimension extensively addresses the positioning of Chinese interests in the region, posing a critical challenge to state autonomy, driving the reassessment of Beijing's multilateral mechanisms and their purpose within operational areas.

5.3 Geopolitical-strategic dimension

The studies address this dimension through a shifting global power dynamic and regional autonomy. Within geopolitical and strategic aspects, Chinese multilateral mechanisms are analyzed as part of a transition process towards a multipolar order vis-à-vis the United States, which raises more specialized studies on global economic realignment, cross-cutting themes of the line of study. Furthermore, the Forum is framed as an autonomous horizontal platform that allows Latin America to articulate itself outside US tutelage, positioning these multilateral processes in the region as an opportunity to leave behind highly hierarchical mechanisms. Simultaneously, within the analyzed literature, a high approach to Chinese expansion and its establishment on the international scene as a power is observed, which against the United States poses a risk to the maintenance of its geopolitical positioning on a global scale.

5.4 Social-cultural dimension

In the Social and cultural dimension, as demonstrated in the chronological analysis, research related to the Forum showed brief analytical mentions around social and cultural themes, failing to explore implications through soft power methods within Latin American states. Despite this, within the most recent studies, the Chinese mechanism is characterized as an essential multilateral platform for the promotion of dialogue and equality grounded in norms of non-conditionality, mutual benefits, and non-interference in internal affairs. This places a discussion more inclined to understand the Forum through a critical analysis lens in which its horizontal structure signals an evolution from traditional and binding diplomatic processes to more flexible and effective forms.

5.5 Environmental-sustainable dimension

Finally, similarly to the previous dimension, environmental issues were strongly marginalized to superficial mentions until the second period. It began gaining recognition as a significant axis of important implications within the discussion around the Forum. Notably, the emerging literature presents topics of criticism of neo-extractivism and calls for rigorous impact studies, paving the way for the importance of the environmental approach within the structuring and implementation of projects arising around the Forum. Although not consistently positioned, its proposal within the research will establish a comprehensive framework with which distinct aspects of the mechanism will be analyzed.

As a result, the economic-commercial dimension showed a greater diversity of positions, in both the expansion of trade links and infrastructure financing as opportunities of great relevance for the region and its development. This is the case of new development financial institutions, such as the BRICS New Development Bank, and Chinese investment in sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure (Gallagher, 2016; Herrera Vinelli, 2022; Vadell, 2018). Others point out the possibility of economic dependence that involves the risk of long-term economic imbalances with dependence on the export of raw materials to China and the “Commodities Consensus,” describing a new economic and political-ideological order on the continent (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

Regarding geopolitical-strategic aspects, the Forum is seen as a means of diversifying alliances, expanding influence, and becoming an important trading partner, especially in Brazil, Chile, and Peru (Legler et al., 2018; Preciado Coronado, 2020; Vadell, 2018). However, it is also argued that the competition between China and the United States in the region can erode regional autonomy and reproduce patterns of dependence (Gallagher, 2016; Legler et al., 2018).

6 Conclusions

Since its inception, the China-CELAC Forum has established itself as a structured dialogue platform, strengthened China’s presence in Latin America significantly and consolidating it as a strategic trade and investment partner. This increasing influence challenged the quasi-hegemonic position previously held by other global powers in the region. To systematically examine this phenomenon, this study conducted a mixed bibliometric-qualitative analysis to address the research question: How has the academic literature on Forum evolved in terms of thematic priorities, theoretical approaches, and linguistic patterns, and what underexplored areas emerge from this scholarly production?

Hence, the analysis reveals a limited and thematically concentrated academic production in the literature concerning the political-diplomatic, socio-cultural, and environmental implications of the Forum, particularly when compared to other regional organizations and trade alliances. From this perspective, the scarcity of academic research has hindered the development of a comprehensive assessment of the Forum’s broader implications. Despite its strategic relevance, this lack of academic attention has made it difficult to build a well-rounded perspective not only on the Forum’s impact but, more importantly, on understanding the challenges and limitations that shape the current dynamics between China and Latin America. To address this limited attention, this study applied a mixed-methods bibliometric approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Through this approach, the analysis highlights that, despite the Forum's great relevance in various areas of interest in the study of Sino-Latin American relations, its academic research on it remains severely limited, leaving open questions about its regional consequences, benefits, and risks, as well as its impact on the international arena and its implications as a flexible regional forum that contrasts with historically established traditional diplomatic formats in interstate relations. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize language-based limitations in the analysis of China-CELAC relations.

As observed, English-language studies tend to focus on topics related to sustainability, multilateralism, and comparative studies with other Chinese-led forums. In contrast, Spanish-language research emphasizes development cooperation in infrastructure, investment flows, and geopolitical implications of China's growing role in the region. This linguistic variation corresponds with the temporal distribution of publications: English-language academic literature is more prevalent during Periods 2 and 3 (2019-2024), when the Forum's agenda broadened to encompass sustainability and environmental topics. Differently, Spanish-language research consistently emphasizes the infrastructure and geopolitical aspects that were prominent in Period 1 (2015-2018) throughout the decade.

Similarly, the evolution of academic interest in the Forum between 2015 and 2024 reveals two distinct lines of thought in which, during the first five years, research focused primarily on economic integration, trade flows, and FTAs, with limited attention to bilateral investment expansion and regional trade agreements. However, later periods transitioned to sustainability concerns, emphasizing the long-term sociocultural and environmental dimensions of China's influence in Latin America.

As a result, although studies on the Forum have mainly focused on economic cooperation, the Forum itself has expanded beyond trade and investment, extending into dimensions of global and regional relevance, including social, cultural, environmental, and sustainability issues. Notably, environment and sustainability have emerged as key areas of interest given their global significance, and for that reason, the Forum's engagement with these themes and their transversality within other dimensions allow a contextualization of China's environmental vision and Latin America's efforts to adapt these dynamics.

In parallel, this evolution and its continental implications reflect China's strategic use of soft power as a key instrument for strengthening its influence in Latin America. The emergence of this Forum underscores a strategic shift in China's foreign policy towards regional multilateralism, moving beyond bilateral engagements to a more institutionalized and flexible framework for cooperation. Moreover, the Forum has provided an integrated and adaptable approach to the dynamics of exchange between actors. Within the framework of "forum diplomacy," this flexibility has allowed China to successfully adapt to global dynamics, developing a more assertive and proactive diplomatic strategy.

This strategic repositioning has been further evidenced over the last decade, where China not only has consolidated strong multilateral processes with significant projections, but has also become the primary economic partner of several countries in the region, such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru. This undoubtedly establishes a focus of interest on the configuration of Sino-Latin American trade and to the Forum's mechanisms that have intervened in the current scenario, enabling, through this approach, projections of this relationship in the future via the Forum.

However, despite China's consolidation as a key partner in trade and investment, significant challenges remain in strengthening cooperation between both actors, including the articulation of objectives within States. Among the most pressing problems, the socioeconomic stratification of Latin American societies places itself within the focus of interest. This particular challenge directly impedes the multilateral effectiveness of mechanisms like the Forum, as formulating a unified and coherent regional agenda capable of balancing the asymmetric relationship between China and Latin America becomes a factor that depends on navigating volatile national contexts.

Consequently, the study opens the door to several lines of inquiry that could deepen our understanding of the Forum's long-term implications within different fields of study, such as social, cultural, environmental, and sustainable development, whose relevance lies in the current international context of recent problems that require a joint response rather than an individual one. Along the same lines, understanding the logic behind its functioning and application in contrast to other regional mechanisms within multilateral governance frameworks, as is the case with China in other regional cooperation processes in Asia and Africa, becomes another relevant area of study. Furthermore, it is necessary to continue to address new thematic axes around the Forum to achieve more detailed assessments of Chinese investments in strategic sectors, particularly within the framework of "forum diplomacy," as a tool to elucidate China's multilateral approach to global governance.

Notes

¹ A systematic search in databases showed Scopus yielding the most substantial results, with 14 documents. The heterogeneous language distribution of these documents, combined with a lack of certified linguistic competence to systematically translate the Russian and Portuguese texts, led to applying a filter retaining only English and Spanish studies. This resulted in a final corpus of 12 documents, which forms the basis for all subsequent analyses. It should be noted that databases indexing Chinese-language literature (e.g., CNKI) were not included due to the scope of this research and linguistic limitations. Future research could extend this analysis to Chinese sources to provide a more comprehensive picture.

² Gallagher (2016) also address the positioning of China as an important economic actor in Latin America, challenging the traditional hegemony of the United States.

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Appendix

Appendix Table A.1: List of publications in the Scopus database under the topic “China-CELAC Forum”

Authors	Year	Title	Language
Jiang	2015	<i>China’s New Leadership and the New Development of China-Latin America Relations</i>	English
Li and Zhu	2019	<i>The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Latin America and the Caribbean</i>	English
Small	2020	<i>Latin America and the Caribbean Bring the Western Hemisphere into the Belt and Road</i>	English
Vadell	2022	<i>China’s Bilateral and Minilateral Relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean: the Case of China-CELAC Forum</i>	English
Banik and Bull	2022	<i>Multilateralism to the Rescue? Beijing’s Support for Multilateral Institutions during the COVID-19 Crisis</i>	English
dos Santos, Li, and Alves	2023	<i>The New Face of Multilateralism: The Case of “Chinese” Forums</i>	English
dos Santos	2023	<i>The Role of Forum Macao in the People’s Republic of China Foreign Policy</i>	English
Aminian and Calderón Villarreal	2024	<i>China-Mexico Economic Relationship in the Context of China’s Penetration in Latin America</i>	English
Lavut	2018	<i>La iniciativa china “La Franja y La Ruta” y los países de América Latina y el Caribe</i>	Spanish
Preciado Coronado	2020	<i>Geopolítica de la planeación del desarrollo: el Consejo Suramericano de Infraestructura y Planeamiento (COSIPLAN-UNASUR) en el Foro CELAC-China</i>	Spanish
García	2021	<i>América Latina y el Caribe en el siglo asiático: un análisis comparativo de las relaciones de Japón y China con sus socios latinoamericanos desde la perspectiva del derecho internacional económico</i>	Spanish
Terui Villegas and González García	2024	<i>El Foro China-CELAC en la disputa por la hegemonía económica global entre Estados Unidos y China, en América Latina y el Caribe</i>	Spanish

Source: Own elaboration.