

10 | Asia-Latin America Interactions from a Subnational Perspective

Vladimir Rouvinski
Icesi University

This piece is devoted to the emerging issues resulting from the growing incidence of interactions between Asia and Latin America at a subnational level. This growth is manifested by an increasing number of mutual visits by members of regional and local governments in Asia and Latin America, often accompanied by the signing of formal agreements. This piece is also about the increase in flows of international development cooperation originating in Asia that find their way into Latin American regions and provinces with no need for the central government's protagonist role. International migration, informal commerce, transnational crime, and cultural interactions are just some of the other aspects Asia-Latin America relations that can be analyzed from a subnational perspective.

What does it mean to establish a "subnational perspective"? In international relations and international law, the term "subnational" has been, until recently, associated with the concept of "paradiplomacy." It has also referred to a set of actions performed by subnational entities in the international arena through the establishment of official and semiofficial contacts in public, private, or mixed domains in other countries within the limits established by the home country's constitution. Research from this perspective, however, has been restricted to certain countries or regions that, due to their constitutional arrangements, provide a wider window of opportunity to promote international relations. Some studies have demonstrated that the dynamics of interactions on a subnational level do not necessarily correspond to the level of formal autonomy that subnational units enjoy. In many parts of Latin America, international involvement is seen as an engine that fosters social and economic development, and a significant number of cities, regions, and provinces already possess or have started to design their own international policies. Stronger relations with Asia constitute a key point of the agenda in more than just a few cases.

In this context, a study of interactions between Asia and Latin America from a subnational perspective necessarily includes a diversity of international activities that are distinguishable from interactions taking place at the national level. This approach may enrich our understanding of current and future dynamics in the relationships between Asia and Latin America by allowing us to identify their new and distinct features.

Twin Cities Movement

City twinning is one of the most traditional manifestations of international activities at a subnational level. Currently, Latin American cities and territories have more than a hundred cases of established relationships with cities and territories in Asia (see Table 1). Brazil accounts for half

of these. The city twinning movement has acquired new impetus with the increased conquest of international space by subnational actors. Cities and territories have decided to go global, changing the “rules of the game” in international relations. The agreements are not political in nature; rather, they tend to promote economic and cultural contacts, open new “entrance points” in the subcontinent for countries such as China and India, and strengthen “people-to-people connections.”

Table 1: Sister Cities Agreements, Asia and Latin America

Cities and territories in Latin America	With Cities and Territories in:			
	Japan	Korea	China and Taiwan	Other
Argentina	2		3	
Bolivia			2 (Taiwan)	
Brazil	44	2	15	
Chile	2		3	
Colombia	2	1	4 (China), 1 (Taiwan)	2 (India)
Costa Rica			1	
Ecuador			1	1 (Indonesia)
El Salvador			1 (Taiwan)	
Guatemala			1 (Taiwan)	
Honduras			1 (Taiwan)	
Mexico	5	5	4	2 (India)
Nicaragua			1 (Taiwan)	
Panama			1 (Taiwan)	
Paraguay	1		1 (Taiwan)	
Peru	2	1	4	1 (Philippines)
Uruguay			1	
Venezuela	2		6	
TOTAL	60	9	51	6

Source: Author's own calculations.

Decentralized Cooperation for Development

Many international cooperation agents are keen to promote cooperation at a subnational level, which they consider more efficient for reaching their objectives. Subnational actors deal directly with their partners in regions and provinces, public and private alike, often with the participation of regional and provincial international cooperation agencies. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), Accra Agenda for Action (2008), and Busan Partnership Document (2011) called upon international donors to align their cooperation efforts more with requirements at subnational levels. Japan, which has been traditionally very active in providing development assistance to Latin America, and newly emerged Asian donors are exploring new subnational opportunities.

The “hunt” for resources for international development cooperation has become a favorite sport for many local and regional political leaders in Latin America, who often make campaign promises to attract resources from abroad. In many cases, a promise of increased resources and formal development plans has led local and regional political elites to walk the extra mile to reach an agreement with international partners. Regional and local authorities may also be more flexible than the central government when negotiating conditions and agreements with international cooperation actors.

Networking and Regional Groupings

Networking and regional grouping is one of the less explored, but potentially one of the most interesting topics of research on Asia-Latin America interactions from a subnational perspective. In Latin America, the incidence of regional and local actors in foreign policy decision-making processes differs from country to country, but in general terms it remains weak compared to the actors in the center. It is possible to identify certain pressure groups linked to various provinces or localities that attempt to influence the government’s foreign policy decision-making process. Depending on their interests, these subnational actors resist the deepening of relations with Asia. In such cases, Asian actors may look for ways to establish collaborative relations with subnational and non-state actors to improve their standing in negotiations with the center.

Asian actors may also take advantage of the role played by subnational actors by aligning themselves with existing groupings that are keen to promote the interests of entire subnational regions. Those interactions are especially important to investments in infrastructure and other long-term commitments. Some subnational regions in Latin America can be characterized by particularly high rates of informal commerce with Asia, higher migration flows, and an increased incidence related to transnational crime. Studies focusing on this “local” dimension of international politics with Asia undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of the relations between Asia and Latin America.

Keeping the above observations in mind, the following factors must be taken into consideration when defining a research agenda for studying Asia-Latin America interactions from a subnational perspective:

- The growth of subnational actors in the international arena in many parts of the world.
- The opportunities, as well as challenges, a changing world order poses for subnational actors.
- Decentralization processes in Latin America and the strengthening of the roles played by subnational entities.
- The interests of subnational actors in going “global.”
- Interest among new Asian players in Latin America in diversifying their “entrance” points and the ways they deal with Latin America.
- The growth of interactions of Asian actors with Latin America at the subnational level.

A comparative approach to the study of Asia-Latin American interactions from a subnational perspective would be desirable to achieve the required level of generalization. For instance, it can be useful to compare interactions involving Asian actors in Latin America at a subnational level with similar interactions in other parts of the world. Emerging questions may include the following: Do specific Asian actors such as China use the same strategy in Latin America as in other regions? How different, or similar, are Chinese activities in Latin America at the subnational level compared to Chinese activities in other regions of the world? Are there differences in the way specific Asian actors deal with distinct subnational regions within the same country? What about their strategy in different Latin America countries? What are the differences and similarities among Asian actors? In brief, subnational scenarios offer a rich opportunity, which has not yet been properly explored, to examine Asia-Latin American interactions from a comparative perspective.

