



DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-46-61

EDN: TCLRCC

Research article / Научная статья

The Global South Partnership for Sustainable Development: China — CELAC Cooperation on Food Security

Olga V. Volosyuk  , Ilya S. Kozylov 

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

 ovolosiuk@hse.ru

Abstract. The article analyzes the development of cooperation between China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in the field of food security within the broader context of the Global South's international structures. As one of the world's largest agricultural exporters, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) represents a strategic partner for China, which over the past two decades has actively sought to diversify its external supplies and reduce the risks of one-sided dependence on traditional partners. The authors examine the evolution of the agrifood dialogue, the institutionalization of cooperation, and the formation of multilevel platforms (the China — CELAC Forum, specialized ministerial meetings, working groups, etc.), as well as the dynamics of trade and investment in the agricultural sector. Methodologically, the study draws on political economy and institutional approaches and employs the concept of the Global South. The theoretical framework incorporates liberal institutionalism and the theory of complex interdependence. Case study and process-tracing methods are applied to the China — CELAC relationship, alongside document analysis and descriptive statistics on trade and investment. The paper also explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional agrifood systems and the evolution of China's food security policy, including the shift from the concept of grain self-sufficiency to the new “expanded food” doctrine, as well as the transformation of China's approach to global food chains. The article identifies a new partnership model in which China views CELAC countries not only as an important source of raw materials, but also as a platform for technological, institutional, and investment innovation in the food sector. It concludes that a sustainable model of South — South cooperation is emerging — one capable of promoting sustainable development and adaptation to global challenges. The study further identifies the mechanisms for institutionalizing agrifood dialogue between the actors under consideration, assesses the achievements of this dialogue during the first decade of the Forum, and outlines prospects for further deepening cooperation in the global fight against hunger and food inequality.

Key words: Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, agrifood cooperation, sustainable development, institutionalization, South — South cooperation, investment, supply diversification, technological innovation, grain self-sufficiency

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Authors' contributions. O. V. Volosyuk: conceptualization, elaboration of research methodology, scientific supervision of the research, writing parts of the manuscript, editing the manuscript. I. S. Kozylov: data collection and validation, conducting the study, writing parts of the manuscript. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the article.


Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding sources. Support from the Individual Research Program of the HSE Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs is gratefully acknowledged.

For citation: Volosyuk, O. V., & Kozylov, I. S. (2026). The Global South partnership for sustainable development: China — CELAC cooperation on food security. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 26(1), 46–61. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-46-61>; EDN: TCLRCC

Партнерство Глобального Юга во имя устойчивого развития: сотрудничество Китая и СЕЛАК по вопросам продовольственной безопасности

О. В. Волосюк  , И. С. Козылов 

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»,
Москва, Российская Федерация
 ovolosiuk@hse.ru

Аннотация. Проанализировано развитие сотрудничества между Китаем и Сообществом государств Латинской Америки и Карибского бассейна (СЕЛАК) в сфере продовольственной безопасности в контексте глобальных структур Глобального Юга. Регион Латинской Америки и Карибского бассейна (ЛАКБ), являясь одним из крупнейших мировых экспортеров продукции сельского хозяйства, выступает стратегическим партнером для Китая, который в последние два десятилетия осуществляет активные шаги, с одной стороны, для диверсификации внешних поставок, а с другой — для минимизации рисков односторонней зависимости от традиционных поставщиков. Авторы рассматривают эволюцию агропродовольственного диалога, институционализацию сотрудничества и формирование многоуровневых платформ (Форум Китай — СЕЛАК, специализированные министерские встречи, рабочие группы и т. д.), а также анализируют динамику торгового обмена и инвестиций в аграрный сектор. Методологически статья опирается на политэкономический и институциональный подходы и концепт Глобального Юга. Теоретическая рамка включает либеральный институционализм и теорию сложной взаимозависимости; применены метод кейс-стади (Китай — СЕЛАК) и метод отслеживания процессов (*process-tracing*), а также метод анализа документов и описательная статистика торговли и инвестиций. Освещены влияние пандемии COVID-19 на региональные агропродовольственные системы, эволюция китайской политики продовольственной безопасности, включая переход от концепции зерновой самодостаточности к новой доктрине «расширенного понимания продовольствия», а также трансформация китайского подхода к глобальным продовольственным цепочкам. Выявлен новый формат партнерства: Китай рассматривает страны СЕЛАК не только как важный сырьевой плацдарм, но и как площадку для технологических, институциональных и инвестиционных инноваций в сфере продовольствия. Сделан вывод о формировании устойчивой модели сотрудничества Юг — Юг, способной обеспечить

устойчивое развитие и адаптацию к глобальным вызовам. В исследовании также раскрыты механизмы институционализации агропродовольственного диалога между рассматриваемыми акторами, оцениваются достижения в рамках этого диалога за первое десятилетие проведения Форума и перспективы дальнейшего углубления сотрудничества в контексте глобальной борьбы с голодом и продовольственным неравенством.

Ключевые слова: Сообщество государств Латинской Америки и Карибского бассейна, агропродовольственное сотрудничество, устойчивое развитие, институционализация, сотрудничество Юг — Юг, инвестиции, диверсификация поставок, технологические инновации, зерновая самодостаточность

Вклад авторов. Волосюк О.В.: концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования, научное руководство исследованием, написание разделов рукописи, редактирование рукописи. Козылов И.С.: сбор и оценивание данных, проведение исследования, написание разделов рукописи. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Сведения о финансировании. Работа подготовлена при грантовой поддержке факультета мировой экономики и мировой политики НИУ ВШЭ в 2026 году.

Для цитирования: Волосюк О.В., Козылов И.С. Партнерство Глобального Юга во имя устойчивого развития: сотрудничество Китая и СЕЛАК по вопросам продовольственной безопасности // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2026. Т. 26, № 1. С. 46–61. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2026-26-1-46-61>; EDN: TCLRCC

Introduction

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is a key link in the global food system. The region has become the world's largest food exporter: it accounts for 14% of global food production and around 45% of net global agricultural exports.¹ LAC countries are leading exporters of cereals, oilseeds, meat, sugar, coffee, and other commodities. They supply food to hundreds of millions of people outside the region, playing a critical role in ensuring global food security. However, until the early 21st century, the People's Republic of China (PRC) remained a secondary trading partner for LAC countries traditionally oriented towards

the United States and Europe: in 2000, bilateral trade amounted to just USD 12 billion.² China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 prompted it to intensify cooperation with LAC, above all by expanding economic ties. Amid a sustained commodity price boom fueled by strong Chinese demand, between 2003 and 2013 the region became a major supplier to China of energy, minerals, and agricultural products. Average annual GDP growth in LAC during this period reached 4.8%, almost twice the region's historical growth rate (Guo, 2023, p. 120), while trade turnover with China by 2010 increased by 31.2% compared to 2000 (Dussel Peters, 2013, p. 361).

¹ Latin America and the Caribbean Are “Pillar for World Food Security” // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. April 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-are-pillar-for-world-food-security/-en> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

² China Commits \$10 Billion in Fresh Credit to Latin America // The Economic Times. May 13, 2025. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-commits-10-billion-in-fresh-credit-to-latin-america/articleshow/121129755.cms> (accessed: 10.06.2025).

By 2010, China had become LAC's third-largest trading partner after the United States and the European Union (EU), ranking first among external trade partners for Brazil, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Paraguay (Dussel Peters, 2013, pp. 361–362). In parallel, Beijing was building ties with regional organizations. Already in the 1990s, the PRC obtained observer status at the Inter-American Development Bank and the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI). In the 2000s, it gained observer status at the Organization of American States and the Latin American Parliament, signed an agreement establishing a mechanism for political consultation and cooperation with the Andean Community, and joined the donor countries of the Inter-American Development Bank, thereby expanding China's participation in financing regional projects alongside the United States and the EU. China also established partnership relations with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and took part in the work of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the UN Economic and Social Council's regional commission (Borzova, Torkunova & Agaev, 2018, p. 33; Prokhorenko, 2024).

The establishment of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in December 2011, which brought together 33 LAC countries, created a basis for advancing relations to a higher level through stronger institutional cooperation and laid the groundwork for the China — CELAC Forum.

Academic research on China — CELAC relations emerged immediately after the Forum's establishment. This cooperation has been examined through the lens of South — South relations (Ayllón Pino & Emmerich, 2015; Vadell, 2018), the Forum's institutionalization

(Mosquera & Morales Ruvalcaba, 2018; Borzova, Torkunova & Agaev, 2018; Regueiro et al., 2024), as a necessary multilateral complement to successful bilateral relations between China and individual LAC states (Bonilla Soria & Herrera-Vinelli, 2020; Herrera-Vinelli, 2022), or as a new level of cooperation aimed at achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Lajous & Sosa, 2020).

Latin American scholars have focused on assessing food security conditions in the region, especially during the pandemic (Luque Zúñiga, Moreno Salazar Calderón & Lanchipa Ale, 2021), and from this perspective have analyzed international food cooperation, whether with the United States, the EU, or China (Endara Muñoz, 2018; Terui Villegas & González García, 2024).

In contemporary Chinese scholarship, cooperation with CELAC is treated as part of a strategy of secure dependence (安全依赖, *ānquán yīlài*) and the diversification of food imports. LAC is seen as a strategic buffer that reduces the risks of one-sided dependence. Chinese researchers emphasize complementarity: China needs reliable suppliers, while LAC countries require stable export markets. The latest approaches broaden the conventional criteria of food security by adding parameters such as autonomy and resilience (Zheng, 2024). Food cooperation is assessed as *gaodù xiànshíxìng* (高度现实性) — highly realistic and policy-relevant, which became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Xu, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Pan et al., 2020; Pu & Zhong, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). Overall, the literature highlights the role of secure interdependence as a foundation for sustainable and effective partnership amid global crises (Lu et al., 2022; Zheng, 2024).

Despite the importance and timeliness of the topic, there is still a notable lack of both Russian- and English-language studies that

comprehensively analyze cooperation between China and Latin American countries in the sphere of food security. A number of recent publications focus primarily on China's interaction with Southeast Asian countries (Smirnova, 2024; 2025), while the Latin American direction remains insufficiently explored. This gap underpins the scholarly novelty and relevance of the present study.

The study's theoretical and methodological foundation combines political-economy and institutional approaches, using the concept of the Global South as an analytical lens through which to examine transformations in the world food system. The theoretical framework draws on liberal institutionalism and the theory of complex interdependence, which treat forums and regimes as mechanisms for reducing transaction costs and strengthening the resilience of supply chains.

Methodologically, the research relies on a combination of comparative-historical analysis, case studies of key institutional initiatives, and the interpretation of discursive and political-economic practices reflected in official documents, academic literature, and expert assessments on both sides. Special attention is paid to the multi-level institutionalization of the agrifood dialogue and to the role of intergovernmental platforms in shaping new cooperation mechanisms. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the partnership's dynamics, makes it possible to identify specific features of Chinese and Latin American food strategies, and helps assess their impact on sustainable development and the institutional design of interregional interaction.

Establishment of the China — CELAC Forum

China responded positively to the establishment of CELAC and, as early as 2012, proposed a set of initiatives for collective cooperation with LAC, including an agricultural support fund and the creation of an emergency food reserve mechanism. Despite Beijing's readiness to provide a USD 10 billion credit line, these ideas initially received little support from Latin American countries. It was only after phased negotiations supported by ECLAC, Venezuela and Cuba that the parties announced the establishment of the China — CELAC Forum in 2014. The Forum was conceived as a key instrument for multilateral projects (Guo, 2023, p. 118). President Xi Jinping viewed the Forum as the principal vehicle for implementing multilateral initiatives, which would make it possible to build a solid political consensus for comprehensive cooperation.³

The Forum was designed as a multi-level structure: in addition to summit-level meetings, it included ministerial meetings and meetings of national coordinators, as well as the establishment of working groups and specialized forums, including one on agriculture. As early as 2013, Beijing hosted a Special Forum of Ministers of Agriculture, which laid the foundations for the agricultural track: joint science and technology centers, investment support, and technology exchange.⁴ A USD 50 million fund was established to finance bilateral projects. The Beijing Declaration, adopted at the conclusion of the Forum, consolidated the key goals and became the basis for subsequent cooperation in this track.⁵

In 2015, the first ministerial meeting of the Forum took place in the PRC capital, where the Cooperation Plan for 2015–2019 was presented,

³ Wang Yi. Planning Together for Development and Revitalization, Building Together a China — LAC Community with a Shared Future // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. May 14, 2025. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/wjbz/jh/202505/t20250513_11622018.html (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴ China — Latin America and the Caribbean Agricultural Ministers Forum // China — CELAC Forum. July 6, 2015. URL: http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/zyjz_1/zylyft/nybzlt/201507/t20150706_6803078.htm (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁵ Ibid.

oriented towards Global South cooperation across all areas (Borzova, Torkunova & Agaev, 2018, p. 34). The parties set the goal of increasing trade turnover to USD 500 billion by 2025. By 2017, it had already reached USD 266 billion — 53% of the planned target.⁶ At the same time, attention focused on infrastructure and trade, while agricultural cooperation remained secondary.⁷

In 2016, China published a White Paper on its relations with Latin America. Compared with the first White Paper issued in 2008, the 2016 document emphasized the implementation of “new concepts, new approaches, and new measures in China’s policy towards LAC,”⁸ including support for human resource development, infrastructure construction, agriculture and food security, poverty reduction, climate change mitigation, humanitarian assistance, and more (Roncal Vattuone, 2022, pp. 8–14). Both the 2008 and 2016 White Papers clearly prioritized trade, investment, and cooperation in finance, energy, and infrastructure, with agriculture addressed only thereafter (Vadell, 2018, p. 23).

The second ministerial meeting of the Forum, held in Santiago in January 2018 with the participation of 31 countries from the region, was used by Beijing to promote initiatives for mutually

beneficial development, above all, inviting LAC states to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The parties reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development, poverty reduction, and integrating efforts to implement the UN 2030 Agenda,⁹ but meetings of agriculture ministers were put on hold.

Overall, China — CELAC joint plans in the food sphere were initially largely declarative. It was only from 2019 onwards that priorities shifted towards deepening agricultural cooperation;¹⁰ however, the COVID-19 pandemic altered both sides’ agendas and forced adjustments to previously agreed cooperation plans.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Agriculture in LAC

The pandemic caused serious disruptions to agrifood systems in LAC countries. Restrictions on the movement of people led to labor shortages during peak fieldwork seasons, difficulties in transporting harvests, and higher production and logistics costs. The temporary closure of food markets, restaurants, and export channels deprived farmers of their traditional marketing outlets. Processing industries were affected by shortages of raw

⁶ ECLAC Highlights Importance and Opportunity in Strengthening Ties between China and Latin America and the Caribbean // Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. January 22, 2018. URL: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-highlights-importance-and-opportunity-strengthening-ties-between-china-and-latin> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁷ CELAC — China Plan de Cooperación (2015–2019) // Observatorio de la Política China. URL: http://politica-china.org/imxd/noticias/doc/1422442529CELAC_China_Plan_de_Cooperacion_2015-2019.pdf (accessed: 26.06.2025).

⁸ See: Full Text of China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean // Xinhuanet. November 24, 2016. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-11/24/c_135855286.htm (accessed: 12.06.2025); Aguilera-Castillo A., Gil-Barragan J.M. China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean: Ten Years After // E-International Relations. November 5, 2018. URL: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/11/05/chinas-policy-paper-on-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-ten-years-after/> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁹ ECLAC Highlights Importance and Opportunity in Strengthening Ties between China and Latin America and the Caribbean // Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. January 22, 2018. URL: <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-highlights-importance-and-opportunity-strengthening-ties-between-china-and-latin> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

¹⁰ Zhong guo yu La gong ti cheng yuan guo you xian ling yu he zuo gong tong xing dong ji hua (2019–2021) [China — CELAC Joint Action Plan on Priority Areas of Cooperation (2019–2021)] // Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waijiao bu [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China]. February 2, 2018. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/201802/t20180202_343157.shtml (accessed: 25.06.2025).

materials and the suspension of operations at a number of enterprises. As a result, rural incomes declined, and food vulnerability increased among low-income groups (Luque Zúñiga, Moreno Salazar Calderón & Lanchipa Ale, 2021, p. 74). Speaking on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu described the so-called LAC “food security paradox”: “The growing scale of hunger, poverty, and undernourishment is a paradox for a region that makes a significant contribution to global food supplies and produces enough food to feed its entire population.”¹¹

According to FAO data, LAC’s gross domestic product fell by 7.7% in 2020.¹² A decline in prices and a contraction in global demand led to a 23% drop in the region’s agricultural exports. China alone reduced its purchases from the region by 21.7%. Compared to 2019, export dynamics for the region’s key export items deteriorated in March 2020, soybeans, beef, coffee, fruit, and vegetables. Colombia’s coffee exports fell by 12.1%, while Brazil’s beef exports recorded a 43% decline. The value of fruit and vegetable exports fell by 5.1% in Chile and by 17% in Peru. Soybean

exports were the only ones to show positive dynamics: increasing by 23.3% in Paraguay and by 27.9% in Brazil. Overall, during the first half of 2020, agricultural commodity prices fell by 5.2%.¹³ Taken together, these factors produced unprecedented challenges to efforts to combat hunger and poverty. FAO data indicate that undernourishment in the region in 2020–2021 rose above the pre-pandemic level¹⁴ and only began to decline in 2022, affecting 6.5% of the population versus 7% a year earlier.¹⁵ Qu Dongyu noted that COVID-19 exacerbated inequality and risked setting Latin America’s fight against hunger back by 20 years.¹⁶

As the first link in supply chains and a strategically significant sector, agriculture plays a key role in shaping transport and logistics services. In 2020, cargo dynamics in LAC seaports registered a 5% decline compared to 2019. The reduction in port and shipping volumes affected both intra- and extra-regional flows, with consequences for the exchange and distribution of food among countries in the region, as well as for supplies to other parts of the world,¹⁷ and threatened the stabilization of trade relations between China and LAC countries.

¹¹ Agrifood Systems Transformation Can Help Resolve Latin America’s Food “Paradox” // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. September 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.fao.org/americas/news/news-detail/Agrifood-systems-transformation-can-help-resolve-Latin-America-s-food-paradox/-en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

¹² Latin America and the Caribbean Are “Pillar for World Food Security” // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. April 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-are-pillar-for-world-food-security/-en> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

¹³ Quicaña E. Efectos de la COVID-19 en la economía rural de América Latina // Organización Internacional de Trabajo. 11 de noviembre de 2020. P. 5–7. URL: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40americas/%40ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_760656.pdf (accessed: 12.06.2025)..

¹⁴ The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022 : Repurposing Food and Agricultural Policies to Make Healthy Diets More Affordable. Rome : FAO, 2022. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

¹⁵ Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023 // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. URL: <https://www.fao.org/americas/publicaciones/panorama/2023/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

¹⁶ FAO Supports China — Latin America and the Caribbean Partnership to Boost Agri-Food Systems // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/FAO-supports-China-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-partnership-to-boost-agri-food-systems/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

¹⁷ Quicaña E. Efectos de la COVID-19 en la economía rural de América Latina // Organización Internacional de Trabajo. 11 de noviembre de 2020. P. 5–7. URL: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40americas/%40ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_760656.pdf (accessed: 12.06.2025).

The pandemic also triggered a large-scale crisis in China, calling into question the then-dominant concept of food security.

Evolution of China's Food Security Concept: From Grain Self-Sufficiency to the "Expanded Food" Approach

Historically, China's food security policy has been based on the principle of self-sufficiency in terms of grain, as encapsulated by the slogan, "Keep the Chinese rice bowl firmly in our own hands."¹⁸ The 2019 State Council White Paper on food security reaffirmed this orientation: meeting 95% of domestic demand through domestic production, while treating imports as a tool for product diversification and technological support.¹⁹ This approach enabled the mobilization of domestic resources, rising yields, and the minimization of dependence on external markets, allowing China to increase grain output for 20 consecutive years and, by 2018, to cover 95% of the basic needs of a population of nearly 1.4 billion.²⁰

However, as living standards rose and consumption patterns changed, China began to move away from a grain-only criterion. Chinese diets became richer in animal protein, fruits, vegetables, and seafood. Already in the mid-2010s, Xi Jinping called for a shift from a narrow grain paradigm to an "expanded concept of food"

(大食物观, *dà shíwù guān*).²¹ A key feature of this approach is its recognition of the need for a multi-level system that includes not only traditional cereals but also livestock products, fisheries, wild foods, and marine and microbial resources.²² Policy thus shifted toward a more flexible strategy in which moderate but diversified imports complement domestic production, while ensuring supply chain stability becomes a priority.

Chinese government experts noted that between 1978 and 2022, annual per capita grain consumption in the PRC declined from 248 to 130 kg, as diets expanded to include more protein, vegetables, and fruit.²³ The new food strategy, as set out in Party documents and in public statements by China's leadership, implied a transition from absolute grain autarky to a sustainable balance between domestic production and external sources, provided these sources are reliable and do not create strategic risks. In this context, attention focused on so-called secure dependence: China accepted a moderate degree of reliance on external markets if it rested on resilient, diversified partnerships that minimized the risks of sanctions or supply disruptions.

By the early 2020s, this doctrine had fully taken shape in China: food security was increasingly understood not merely as a question of aggregate grain volumes, but also as ensuring the quality, diversity, and resilience of the overall

¹⁸ Zhong guo de liang shi an quan [China's Food Security] // Guowuyuan Xinwen Bangongshi [State Council Information Office]. October 14, 2019. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-10/14/content_5439410.htm (accessed: 24.06.2025).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See: Wang Y. Zong shu ji de ren min qing huai: "Yao shu li da shi wu guan" [The General Secretary's Feelings for the People: "We Must Establish the 'Expanded Food' Concept"] // CCTV zhibo [CCTV Live]. April 21, 2024. (In Chinese). URL: <https://news.cctv.com/2024/04/21/ARTIEfG6rSbx18Wo7Nt6dyJ3240421.shtml> htm (accessed: 25.06.2025); Shu li he jian xing da shi wu guan [Building and Implementing the "Expanded Food" Concept] // Renmin Ribao [People's Daily]. May 13, 2024. (In Chinese). URL: https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbwap/html/2024-07/04/nw.D110000renmrb_20240704_3-09.htm (accessed: 25.06.2025).

²² Shu li he jian xing da shi wu guan [Building and Implementing the "Expanded Food" Concept] // Renmin Ribao [People's Daily]. May 13, 2024. (In Chinese). URL: https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbwap/html/2024-07/04/nw.D110000renmrb_20240704_3-09.htm (accessed: 25.06.2025).

²³ Ibid.

food system. This helps to explain the rapid growth in interest in expanding external supply channels and, in particular, in strategic partnership with LAC, which China viewed as a long-term reserve for meeting rising demand for protein, oilseeds, feed, and tropical crops — demand that could not be fully met through domestic production alone. This shift in thinking and policy formed the foundation for China's subsequent decisions regarding global food cooperation.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Catalyst for China's Turn toward CELAC

The emergence of COVID-19 in China in late 2019 triggered a sharp economic downturn that affected crop production, supply chains, and farmers' incomes. Under quarantine conditions, seed supplies were disrupted; only a small share of seed warehouses remained operational, which delayed spring planting and reduced rice yields by at least 5%. As a result, the incomes were hit for 40% of Chinese workers employed in the agricultural sector, and the production of staple cereals came under threat (Pan et al., 2020, p. 7). Lockdown measures complicated the functioning of the entire food supply system, causing a decline in demand and the accumulation of surpluses (Pu & Zhong, 2020, pp. 2–3). Livestock production was particularly severely affected due to feed shortages, logistical disruptions, and market closures (Pan et al., 2020, p. 9).

In spring 2020, global logistics disruptions added further pressure: container shipping slowed, logistics costs increased, and tensions in trade with Australia and the United States led to disruptions in supplies of key commodities, above all soybeans and feed (Vista Monzalsha, Kusuma Paksi & Dafa Hanggariksa, 2023, pp. 162). The trade conflict with the United States acted as an external catalyst for a strategic pivot, since China did not receive the volumes of goods (notably soybeans) envisaged by the agreements concluded in early 2020 (Arapova, 2022, p. 110).

In response to these challenges, Beijing adopted emergency measures, supporting the operation of agricultural enterprises, accelerating the resumption of production, opened “green corridors” for imports, and expanding market access for foreign suppliers (Pan et al., 2020, pp. 13–14). Grain imports (especially corn/maize, wheat, and barley) increased sharply in 2020,²⁴ and a dedicated chapter on food security appeared in the Five-Year Plan (Lu et al., 2022, p. 7). These and other steps signaled China's new strategic orientation towards domestic stability amid global instability.

Against the backdrop of the US — China trade conflict, China strengthened its food partnership with LAC: purchases of soybeans, corn/maize, beef, and fruit from the region increased, while investments in logistics reshaped the geography of imports.²⁵ LAC's share in China's imports rose to 25%, while the US share fell to 14%, enabling China to reduce its dependence on the American market.²⁶

²⁴ Import of Corn and Wheat to China Reached Record Levels in 2020 // IDK.Expert. January 19, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://exp.idk.ru/news/world/import-kukuruzy-i-pshenicy-v-kitaj-v-2020-godu-dostig-rekordnykh-znachenij/542319/> (accessed: 10.03.2025).

²⁵ See: Huang Sh. 3 yue Ba xi da dou chu kou liang po ji lu Zhong guo mao yi shang ji ji xia dan [In March, Brazil's Soybean Exports Hit a Record; Chinese Traders Placed Orders Actively] // Caixin. April 10, 2020. (In Chinese). URL: <https://economy.caixin.com/2020-04-10/101541088.html> (accessed: 12.06.2025); Zhong liang ji tuan Ba xi gong si jing de Sang tuo si gang yi ma tou te xu jing ying quan [COFCO International's Brazil Unit Obtained the Concession for Santos Port Berth STS11] // Xinhuashe Jinrong [Xinhua Finance]. April 1, 2022. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.cnfin.com/gs-lb/detail/20220401/3573343_1.html (accessed: 25.06.2025).

²⁶ Wang G. Zhong guo zai Nan mei jian ju xing ma tou, que bao ti dai Mei guo liang shi [China Builds a Giant Port Terminal in South America to Replace US Grain] // Guancha [The Observer]. May 14, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.guancha.cn/international/2025_05_14_775800.shtml (accessed: 25.06.2025).

Institutionalization of Food Cooperation, 2021–2025

Against this backdrop, on 24 February 2021, after an almost eight-year hiatus, the Second China — CELAC Forum of Ministers of Agriculture convened. Its central theme was to achieve a new level of agricultural cooperation, grounded in economic complementarity in the post-pandemic period. Alicia Bárcena, the Executive Secretary of the ECLAC, argued that cooperation should focus on the digitalization of agriculture, the social and economic integration of small-scale family farmers, and a science-based agroecological transition,²⁷ with a particular emphasis on integrating small family farmers into modern agrifood chains. According to ECLAC, as early as 2015 LAC countries had around 16.5 million family farms, accounting for 80% of domestic food production.²⁸ Traditionally, however, these farms faced difficulties in accessing finance, technology, and marketing networks. Cooperation with China has opened up new opportunities for their social and economic inclusion. Qu Dongyu also underscored this point, noting that “investments in agriculture in low-income countries, especially in family and small-scale farming, have a greater impact on poverty reduction than investments in other sectors.”²⁹ The China — CELAC partnership in agricultural trade has helped

to raise farmers’ incomes and integrate them into global value chains.

The Forum emphasized that the success of small farms is impossible without innovation in agrotechnologies: agroecological methods and modern mechanization were presented as pathways to greater resilience and deeper integration into cooperative networks. Experience-sharing programs were launched, drawing on the Chinese model of agricultural science parks and demonstration centers, while digitalization and farmer support were framed as interlinked objectives. In December 2021, at the Third Ministerial Meeting of the China — CELAC Forum, the parties agreed on a new Joint Action Plan (2022–2024); the regularization of forum meetings and the establishment of issue-specific working groups further advanced the institutionalization of cooperation.³⁰

In 2023, China initiated the establishment of a Coordination Center for Agricultural Cooperation with LAC, along with a set of laboratories and demonstration projects, highlighting the reduction of dependence on the United States through increased procurement from Brazil and Argentina.³¹ By 2024, a clear “turn to the South” had become evident in China’s food strategy, with CELAC countries increasingly being viewed as a reliable and strategically important source of agricultural products.

²⁷ FAO Supports China — Latin America and the Caribbean Partnership to Boost Agri-Food Systems // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/FAO-supports-China-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-partnership-to-boost-agri-food-systems/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

²⁸ Seguridad alimentaria, nutrición y erradicación del hambre. CELAC 2025 : Elementos para el debate y la cooperación regionales // CEPAL. Julio de 2016. P. 46. URL: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f1cb6e6-3a6f-4fe8-8c6d-7b107b934a6d/content> (accessed: 02.06.2025).

²⁹ FAO Supports China — Latin America and the Caribbean Partnership to Boost Agri-Food Systems // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/FAO-supports-China-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-partnership-to-boost-agri-food-systems/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

³⁰ Zhong guo yu La gong ti cheng yuan guo you xian ling yu he zuo gong tong xing dong ji hua (2019–2021) [China — CELAC Joint Action Plan on Priority Areas of Cooperation (2019–2021)] // Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waijiao bu [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China]. February 2, 2018. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/201802/t20180202_343157.shtml (accessed: 25.06.2025).

³¹ Wang G. Zhong guo zai Nan mei jian ju xing ma tou, que bao ti dai Mei guo liang shi [China Builds a Giant Port Terminal in South America to Replace US Grain] // Guancha [The Observer]. May 14, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.guancha.cn/international/2025_05_14_775800.shtml (accessed: 25.06.2025).

At subsequent forums, including those held in Weifang (2024) and Beijing (2025), the parties endorsed initiatives on climate-resilient agricultural projects, technology exchange, and green agriculture. In particular, a new Joint Plan for 2025–2027 was adopted,³² aimed at implementing food-security projects, developing green agriculture, and launching joint programs on high-tech farming systems, data exchange on food markets, and other innovations. The final documents highlighted the priority of food security, support for the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind” in the context of food security cooperation between China and Brazil, and endorsement of Brazil’s proposal to establish a Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty.³³

This Brazilian initiative, advanced within the G20, is intended to mobilize states around the implementation of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger). China and CELAC jointly lobby for its promotion, and the FAO has described the Alliance as one of the key opportunities to draw attention to the problem of food inequality.³⁴ China also announced new measures to support the region, including a concessional credit line of RMB 66 billion (around USD 9.2 billion) for development projects, noting that China — CELAC trade volume

reached USD 515 billion by the end of 2024, up from USD 450 billion in 2023.³⁵

Notably, food-related issues were given the same level of importance as China’s traditionally prioritized themes of infrastructure and investment. The Forum institutionalized food cooperation, making it subject to regular planning and monitoring.

Complementarity between CELAC and China in Food Cooperation

For China, the world’s largest food importer, LAC countries are strategic partners, while growing demand from the PRC creates new export markets for producers in the region. China has become a key export destination for the agrifood sector in a number of LAC states: by 2024, it had overtaken the United States to become the largest trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay.³⁶ As early as 2020, Brazil not only surpassed the United States, but also became the dominant supplier of soybeans for China’s processing industry and livestock sector.³⁷ Beyond soybeans, China began to rapidly expand imports of corn/maize from Brazil, especially after 2022, when the crisis in Ukraine disrupted traditional supplies of feed grains. By 2024, Brazilian corn/

³² Zai zhe chang kaimu shi shang, Xi Jinping wei gong jian Zhong-La mingyun gongtongti bohua xin lantu [At This Opening Ceremony, Xi Jinping Presented a New “Roadmap” for Building a China — Latin America Community with a Shared Future] // Gongchandangyuan wang [Communist Party Member Network]. May 14, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: <https://www.12371.cn/2025/05/14/ARTI1747203064862563.shtml> (accessed: 25.06.2025).

³³ Declaración de Beijing de la Cuarta Reunión Ministerial del Foro China — Celac // Gobierno de Colombia. May 13, 2025. URL: <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/declaracion-beijing-cuarta-reunion-ministerial-foro-china-celac> (accessed: 25.06.2025).

³⁴ FAO Joins the Global Alliance to Combat Hunger and Poverty // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. October 12, 2024. URL: <https://www.fao.org/social-protection/news-and-events/news/news-detail/fao-joins-the-global-alliance-to-combat-hunger-and-poverty/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

³⁵ China Commits \$10 Billion in Fresh Credit to Latin America // The Economic Times. May 13, 2025. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-commits-10-billion-in-fresh-credit-to-latin-america/articleshow/121129755.cms> (accessed: 10.06.2025).

³⁶ Domini P. Abrazando el mercado chino en Shanghai: Países latinoamericanos fortalecen presencia en CIIE 2024 apostando por innovación y diversificación // Xinhua. November 8, 2024. URL: <https://spanish.news.cn/20241108/2aa9f9bc0d0a4caf86b73d9ffde85fcc/c.html> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

³⁷ Zhong-La nong ye he zuo niu dai la de geng jin [China — Latin America Agricultural Ties Grow Even Stronger] // Renmin Ribao [People’s Daily]. May 13, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/pc/content/202505/13/content_30072678.html (accessed: 26.06.2025).

maize ranked first by volume among China's corn/maize imports.³⁸ Brazil and Argentina became the main suppliers of beef, displacing Australia and the United States. Between 2018 and 2024, Brazil's beef exports to China nearly tripled, while Argentina's beef exports to China increased more than fourteenfold between 2015 and 2024.³⁹ Imports of fruit from Latin America also grew markedly (sweet cherries, plums, and blueberries from Chile; avocados, mangoes, and blueberries from Peru; etc.⁴⁰), amid stagnating supplies from the United States.

To consolidate a long-term partnership, China articulated specific targets. At the 2021 Forum of Ministers of Agriculture, China's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Tang Renjian proposed raising bilateral agricultural trade to USD 100 billion and increasing direct investment in the LAC agrifood sector to at least USD 5 billion.⁴¹ These benchmarks were welcomed by Latin American partners, given that trade in agricultural products between China and CELAC had already doubled between 2014 and

2023, reaching USD 81 billion.⁴² This has enabled Latin American producers to integrate more deeply into trade with China, while enabling China to secure a more diverse food supply chain. Chinese investment has complemented large-scale infrastructure projects, including the construction of terminals by the *China Oil and Foodstuffs Corporation (COFCO)* in Brazil,⁴³ the development of ports and transport corridors in the region,⁴⁴ as well as investments in food processing, agro-fintech, and greenhouse farming.

China — CELAC cooperation is increasingly moving beyond bilateral formats and is also implemented through FAO platforms, where since 2019 the position of Director-General has been held by the PRC representative Qu Dongyu. China finances technical assistance through the FAO South — South cooperation fund; a CELAC regional program for agrifood digitalization has been launched; joint innovation centers and credit lines have been established to support agricultural projects and rural areas. In 2021, with support from this fund, a regional program

³⁸ 2024 nian wo guo da zong nong chan pin jin kou lai yuan guo pai xing bang: Ba xi bao chi jue dui you shi wen ju shou wei [Ranking of China's Suppliers of Major Agricultural Commodities in 2024: Brazil Retains Absolute Leadership] // *Shijie Nonghua Wang* [AgroPages]. February 25, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: <https://cn.agropages.com/news/NewsDetail---34128.htm> (accessed: 25.06.2025).

³⁹ Xiao E. How Latin American Beef Exporters Can Succeed in China's Evolving Import Market // *China Briefing*. June 10, 2025. URL: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-latin-america-beef-trade-2025/> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴⁰ See: China Boosts Trade with Latin America, Increasing Chilean Cherry Imports // *FreshPlaza*. November 21, 2024. URL: <https://www.freshplaza.com/latin-america/article/9680761/china-boosts-trade-with-latin-america-increasing-chilean-cherry-imports/> (accessed: 01.08.2025); Frozen Peruvian Avocados, Blueberries and Mangos Nearing China Market Access // *Produce Report*. November 21, 2024. URL: <https://www.producereport.com/article/frozen-peruvian-avocados-blueberries-mangos-nearing-china-market-access> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴¹ FAO Supports China — Latin America and the Caribbean Partnership to Boost Agri-Food Systems // *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/FAO-supports-China-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-partnership-to-boost-agri-food-systems/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴² 3rd China — CELAC Ministerial Forum on Agriculture Held in East China // *Xinhua*. July 2, 2024. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20240702/f9a6de631cc74cbe8bfce0891a2410be/c.html> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴³ See: Wang G. Zhong guo zai Nan mei jian ju xing ma tou, que bao ti dai Mei guo liang shi [China Builds a Giant Port Terminal in South America to Replace US Grain] // *Guancha* [The Observer]. May 14, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: https://www.guancha.cn/international/2025_05_14_775800.shtml (accessed: 25.06.2025); Zhong liang ju zi tou jian Ba xi gang kou ma tou! po qie bing jing qiang hua hai wai ye wu [COFCO Invests Heavily in Building a Brazilian Port Terminal, Easing Bottlenecks and Strengthening Overseas Business] // *Xinlang Caijing* [Sina Finance]. January 15, 2025. (In Chinese). URL: <https://finance.sina.cn/futuremarket/ncpzx/2025-01-15/detail-ineeznmf7327972.d.html> (accessed: 25.06.2025).

⁴⁴ China entrará a Sudamérica a través de un megapuerto en Perú y debilitará a EE. UU // *La Nación*. 11 de noviembre de 2024. URL: <https://www.lanacion.com.py/mundo/2024/11/11/china-entrara-a-sudamerica-a-traves-de-un-megapuerto-en-peru-y-debilitara-a-ee-uu/> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

to digitalize the agrifood sector in 12 CELAC countries was launched, intended to promote knowledge exchange and development drawing on China's experience in digital agriculture.⁴⁵ This is what Honduras's Minister of Agriculture, L. Suazo, referred to when welcoming China's efforts to advance South — South cooperation in the food sphere.⁴⁶ With Chinese investment and technology, LAC countries have been able to partially modernize their agrifood sector while addressing the “food security paradox.”

The severity of this problem prompted CELAC, supported by the FAO, to develop in 2014 the Food Security, Nutrition and the Eradication of Hunger Plan for CELAC 2025 (SAN CELAC–2025) (Lajous & Sosa, 2020, p. 108), and in 2024 the SAN CELAC–2030 plan.⁴⁷ Within this framework, measures are promoted to strengthen social nutrition programs, school meal schemes, and support for family farming, taking into account both financial and technical assistance from China. These initiatives complement the core agenda and reinforce mutual understanding between the peoples of China and Latin America.

Conclusion

Over the first decade of the China — CELAC Forum, the partners achieved substantial results. The most visible indicator of this has been the sharp expansion of trade, which by 2025 exceeded

USD 500 billion. Agrifood trade, a foundational component of these ties, grew particularly rapidly, doubling between 2014 and 2023. The Chinese market provided CELAC countries with stable demand for their products even when global prices fell. In turn, Chinese consumers gained access to a wider variety of food products at more favorable prices. A dense institutional architecture of cooperation has taken shape: four full-format forums have been held, more than a dozen sectoral dialogues conducted, and eight permanent thematic platforms established. Under the Forum's umbrella, over 100 projects and initiatives have been implemented across multiple areas, from raising agricultural productivity and promoting science-and-technology exchanges to poverty reduction programs.

Over ten years, the China — CELAC Forum has established itself as an effective cooperation mechanism and continues to gain institutional resilience. It has proven its value as a flexible and open platform that allows the agenda to be recalibrated as the international context changes, serving, in particular, as an instrument for adapting cooperation to new challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the integration of food security into the agenda, while geopolitical tensions accelerated dialogue on strengthening the resilience of trade supply chains.

During this period, China — CELAC cooperation in food security has become both durable and institutionalized. Multi-level

⁴⁵ See: *FAO Supports China — Latin America and the Caribbean Partnership to Boost Agri-Food Systems* // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/FAO-supports-China-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean-partnership-to-boost-agri-food-systems/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025); *Centro de Innovación Alimentaria Sostenible China — América Latina y el Caribe es inaugurado en Sanya* // Xinhua. November 9, 2024. URL: <https://spanish.xinhuanet.com/20241109/372bcbccc28d4d1584818cd95cf1f2a4/c.html> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴⁶ *Tercer Foro Ministerial sobre agricultura China — CELAC se realiza en este de China* // Xinhua News Agency. July 3 2024. URL: <https://spanish.xinhuanet.com/20240703/908b0082512b49b9ad80968b50bb8c69/c.html> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

⁴⁷ *FAO Members in Latin America and the Caribbean Discuss How to Reduce Hunger and Inequality in World's Largest Agrifood Exporting Region* // Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. March 18, 2024. URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-members-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-discuss-how-to-reduce-hunger-and-inequality-in-world-s-largest-agrifood-exporting-region/en> (accessed: 12.06.2025).

platforms for continuous agrifood dialogue have been established. This has enabled China to not only diversify its external supply sources and reduce its dependence on traditional partners, but also stimulate the adoption of technological and institutional innovations in the agricultural sectors of LAC countries. Significant growth in investment and trade has been accompanied by the development of coordination mechanisms and joint responses to emerging challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic became a major stress test for regional agrifood systems and accelerated the transformation of China's food security policy: China moved from the concept of grain self-sufficiency to the doctrine of "expanded food," while deepening cooperation with CELAC countries within global food supply chains. This process was accompanied, on the one hand, by the expansion of trade and, on the other, by the formation of a new partnership model, in which LAC serves not only as a raw-material base but also as a platform for technological, institutional, and investment innovation.

The role of CELAC countries as a guarantor of the global food supply and China's role as the largest consumer and investor provide a robust foundation for complementarity. Consequently, a new model of South — South cooperation has emerged, in which Global South countries jointly influence global food policy. Close multilateral coordination has also been achieved on key issues, above all food security and sustainable agriculture. Resilience remains the key term in the agenda, understood in three dimensions, economic, social, and environmental. At the current stage, cooperation is moving beyond the simple expansion of trade towards the more complex task of transforming agrifood systems in the direction of sustainable development. In this respect, the parties' interests largely align with the UN's global objectives. China and CELAC countries demonstrate readiness to pursue these goals jointly, together defending the interests of developing states within the global food security agenda.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 10.08.2025

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 12.10.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 18.12.2025

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About the authors:

Volosyuk Olga Vilenovna — PhD, Dr.Sc. (History), Professor, Academic Supervisor, Department of Regional Studies, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, HSE University; 17 Malaya Ordynka St, Moscow, 119017, Russian Federation; eLibrary SPIN-code: 1076-5507; ORCID: 0000-0002-3115-6978; e-mail: ovolosiuk@hse.ru

Kozylov Ilya Sergeevich — Lecturer, PhD Student, Department of Foreign Regional Studies, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, HSE University; 17 Malaya Ordynka St, Moscow, 119017, Russian Federation; eLibrary SPIN-code: 7282-9307; ORCID: 0009-0007-4513-2110; e-mail: ikozylov@hse.ru