China’s Eye on Ecuador: What Chinese Trade with Ecuador Reveals about China’s Economic Expansion into South America

Thomas P. Narins
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Thomas P. Narins, University of California Los Angeles, USA

Abstract: Because of its rapid and sustained economic growth, China has become an important centerpiece for understanding contemporary geo-economics and geopolitics. This article argues that examining China’s relationship with Ecuador—one of the smallest countries in South America—helps to explain the extent to which Chinese businesses are attempting to geographically diversify their investments as a strategy for securing long-term energy supplies and developing new and more lucrative markets in the region. This paper focuses on recent Chinese-Ecuadorian infrastructure and trade discussions in light of shifting hemispheric geopolitics and engages a set of broader questions about development in South America. These questions are: 1) What can Chinese trade with Ecuador tell us about China’s economic expansion into South America? and 2) How has Ecuador responded to China’s political and economic in-roads in the region? Using trade data and interviews with a diplomat, this article highlights Ecuador’s role in China’s strategy of economic growth through geographic diversification.

Keywords: China, Ecuador, Trade, Infrastructure

Introduction

Because of the close relationship between economic growth and political power, China’s growing economy has catapulted this historically self-reliant country into the global political spotlight over the last three decades. While China’s seemingly insatiable need for resources has dominated mainstream media, in terms of overseas foreign direct investment, China is still considered to be part of the ‘developing-world’. Nevertheless, because of its rapid and sustained economic growth, China has become an important centerpiece for understanding contemporary geo-economics. Significant scholarly emphasis has been focused on understanding China from within its borders. As was the case with the rise of Europe and the United States, China’s economic position, as one of the world’s next major economies, is similarly not confined to its domestic boundaries alone. The rise of contemporary China, however, is different from that of Europe and the United States. China is not (and has not) pursued a strategy of territorial aggrandizement as a way

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1 See, Nolan, P. and Zhang, J. ‘Global Competition After the Financial Crisis’, New Left Review, July-Aug 2010 for a detailed explanation of how traditional core economies (e.g., the Netherlands) still account for the majority of overseas direct investment.

of expanding its national footprint. Modern day China is not carrying out a colonial project of subjugation and control of foreign territory and peoples. Much to the contrary, China today is struggling to maintain order and domestic stability in its own territory.

In order to maintain domestic stability, and to avert popular political dissatisfaction, the Chinese government has crafted policies to promote economic growth through international trade and overseas investment. China has relied heavily on trade with the United States and the European Union as a way of increasing its national currency reserves. To date, China’s central government has accumulated reserves valued at US$3.2 trillion. This massive buildup of capital is one of the major reasons explaining China’s desire and ability to venture overseas for investment opportunities. While the United States and Europe still represent major markets for Chinese products, competition in these already developed regions is substantial. Since the early years of China’s opening to international trade, the US and Europe have provided Chinese firms with large and lucrative markets for their products, technological innovation, and modern business management education. Ever since Deng Xiaoping opened China’s economy to the outside world in 1978, China has developed a dependency on regions beyond its borders. In this article, I argue that examining China’s relationship with Ecuador – one of the smallest countries in South America – helps to explain the extent to which Chinese businesses are attempting to geographically diversify their investments as a strategy for securing long-term energy supplies and developing new and more lucrative markets in South America.

China is now in the midst of moving towards the next phase of economic dependency with the international community. Having established strong market connections with Europe and the United States, China today is focused on expanding its trade with the developing world. An emerging body of political science scholarship has addressed this recent trend. Ecuador is used as a case study in this article to highlight the increasing geographic extension of China’s economic dependency on the outside world. To be clear, Ecuador itself does not represent a key market for China’s economic expansion but it contains several geographic features that are appealing to China’s trade-dependent economy. To explore these topics, I first consider the role China’s ‘National Team’ of industries plays in driving Chinese overseas expansion. I then consider Chinese-South American trade relations and offer an explanation for their relatively recent relevance and importance. Finally, examining the overall logic behind Chinese business interests in three types of projects in Ecuador will offer some insights into the ways in which Chinese capital is actually being used to extend China’s economy into and increase its dependency on parts of the developing world today.

The ‘National Team’ and the Move beyond China’s Borders

Before examining the specific case of Ecuador, it is first helpful to understand how China’s overseas investment and trade is financed on a general level. Ever since China’s opening to international commerce, Chinese trade and related international investment initiatives were undertaken largely by China’s State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). As the economic drivers

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3 Recently, Chinese peacekeeping forces have been participating in United Nations-sanctioned peacekeeping missions. However, this participation has been limited to assisting with goals determined by the United Nations and not for China’s direct economic or political advance.
4 Chinese Ambassador Wu Jiamin, Personal Communication, Los Angeles, CA, October 14, 2011.
of the centrally planned Chinese economy, SOEs were the most well funded organizational units in China and continued to be so during the country’s transition to a market-based economy. As such, China’s SOEs were the only domestic economic entities capable of investing capital overseas for the purpose of obtaining significant, large-scale returns on investment. Today, former Chinese SOEs have become China’s ‘National Team’ of industries, which are managed by members of China’s ruling elite. As a recent article in the *Economist* notes: “[These] firms are giants that until now have been inward-looking but are starting to use their vast resources abroad.” Companies such as China National Petroleum Group Co., Sinopec, Baosteel Group Corp., and Taiyuan Steel Group Co. are all considered to be part of China’s ‘National Team’ of companies. Because of their historic roots in China’s centrally planned economy, these firms focus on the acquisition of primary commodities and natural resources. These resources include petroleum, natural gas, minerals and foodstuffs. Due to these companies’ experiences acquiring commodities and natural resources, coupled with these companies’ connections to the Chinese government, it is no coincidence that most media and academic discussions relating to Chinese companies’ presence in world regions beyond China’s borders is focused on topics related to large scale, primary product and energy resource acquisition.

There are two main factors that account for China’s interest in and success at acquiring natural resources from around the world. First, in order to continue to manufacture the extremely wide array of consumer goods that other national economies in the developed and developing world demand, primary products such as petroleum, wood, copper, iron and other minerals are purchased using long-term contracts and are then shipped to China, where these ‘inputs’ are added to the production-cycle of a variety of consumer products sold in the world economy today. Second, industrial sectors that were previously government funded and administered continue to be ‘government supervised’ in the sense that many of the leaders of the major ‘National Team’ industries are members of China’s Central Planning Committee.

In light of contemporary world trade – where advances in transportation technologies and communication technologies have contributed to the rise of a single world market – these Chinese ‘National Team’ firms have engaged in the exchange of manufactured goods for raw materials across vast distances. Modern Chinese companies’ supply-chains are notable both for their globe-spanning reach and for their contribution to production efficiency. Important studies have revealed that China’s economic forays into Southeast Asia and Africa account for significant raw material inputs, which contribute to China’s manufacturing-intensive economy. In addition, one such study emphasizes that learning how to engage in international development and trade is just as important an aim for China as is securing long-term access to energy resources. Due to their continued access to large pools of capital,

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8 Walter & Howie 2011.
China’s ‘National Team’ industries are financially well positioned to lead China’s economic expansion beyond its borders.

The Basis for the Relatively Late Rise of Chinese-south American Trade Relations

Over the course of the last decade, China has noticeably increased its economic engagement with South America. As the world region that is geographically furthest from China (See Figure 1), South America has come to represent Chinese traders’ and investors’ ‘last domain’. In addition, the strengthening of Chinese-South American trade relations signifies that China has come ‘full-circle’ and has become a fully global trading and investing state. While Chinese peoples’ connections with South America span several centuries, it is only more recently (since the later half of the twentieth century) that trade relations between these two regions have begun to develop.

Recent increases in Chinese investment in the region’s raw materials began skyrocketing exponentially in the year 2000. The growth of China’s trade with South America not only represents a geographical expansion of China’s trading network but also highlights the extension of its dependency on the developing world. It is crucial to note that China’s ability to obtain stable and increasing amounts of energy resources (such as Venezuelan and Ecuadorian petroleum) contributes directly to Chinese leadership’s ability to keep the domestic economy growing. While no single South American state accounts for the majority of Chinese oil imports, having strong business ties with multiple petroleum producing nations in the region allows China to geographically diversify its oil supply and hedge against potential oil embargoes in the region brought on by future political instability. For Chinese leaders, economic growth is absolutely essential to maintaining national political stability and legitimacy as the national ruling party.

Because of China’s vast financial resources, the country is under increasing pressure to use its economic strength to further domestic economic development. Paradoxically, China is now faced with addressing its rising prominence in the world while simultaneously recognizing its dependence on the global economy. The scale and speed with which China is expanding is unique and its leadership is setting a historical precedent for rapid state-led development.

China’s longest running historic trading relationships are with: Vietnam (formerly Annam, a vassal state of China), Japan and Korea—states that are located geographically closest to China’s borders. Considering that South America is the world region furthest from China, it is logical that economic relations between these two regions have only developed more recently. This reality is consistent with the First Law of Geography, which states that places that are closer to each other in time and space have a stronger relation to each other (i.e. are more connected to each other) than places that are farther away from each other in time and

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12 In terms of all major inhabited world regions.
As China’s economic engagement with this region has only recently begun to expand, significant empirical studies, on the political and economic impacts of such bi-regional trade and investment, are only now coming to the forefront of geopolitics and geo-economics.

![Figure 1: China’s Place in the World, Source: Based on “China Highlights” Map](image)

**The Logic behind China’s Economic Expansion into Ecuador**

Advances in containerized shipping and seaport building have played a major role in facilitating Chinese companies’ access to resources located in geographically distinct world regions. Large China-based companies such as Chinese Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH) have facilitated the reliable transport of large amounts of globally sourced natural resource inputs into the Chinese economy. As with all investors, Chinese transportation and infrastructural firms value stability and diversification when deciding where to invest geographically.

China’s desire to trade with and invest in Ecuador stems from China’s desire to invest in a diverse array of politically stable countries located in geographically dispersed world regions. This strategy is designed to prevent the complete shut off of important resources (especially energy resources) to China in the event that any one natural resource rich region becomes isolated from the world economy due to a natural disaster, regional conflict or war. Given this background, China’s economic expansion into Ecuador is a logical investment move.

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16 For an excellent discussion of how containerization contributed to the dramatic expansion of world economy see M. Levinson’s: *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*. 

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THOMAS P. NARINS
As South America’s fourth smallest sovereign state by area, Ecuador’s physical and political geography provides various attractive features for Chinese state and private investors. With regards to its political structure, Ecuador is a relatively stable democracy. Rafael Correa is the country’s democratically elected President. President Correa is a U.S.-trained economist with a doctorate from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. In 2007, Correa convened Ecuador’s Constituent Assembly in order to rewrite the country’s constitution. Ecuador’s ability to function within the community of nations and modernize its constitutional legislation peacefully – in order to meet the needs of current times – illustrates the countries’ political adaptability, and by extension, stability. Apart from the country’s political geography, Ecuador’s physical geographical features contribute to the country’s attractiveness as a destination for Chinese overseas direct investment (ODI). Its proximity to the Pacific Ocean, its petroleum resource wealth and its physical separation from other politically unstable oil-endowed states (i.e. Venezuela) are also points of attraction for Chinese investors interested in finding new sources of trade-related investment opportunities and markets that together factor into facilitating and extending China’s contemporary production boom.

In addition to its desire to obtain access to large amounts of critical natural resources, China is equally focused on expanding its economy into new markets. Ecuador is not only located on the Pacific Ocean, but is also one of the closes points in South America to China. Ecuador has been viewed by private-Chinese interests as a natural place to develop trade and encourage Chinese trade-related investments (again considering the First Law of Geography). Access to new Latin American markets represents a crucial component of the continued growth of the Chinese economy, and by extension to the stability of China’s domestic political environment. As mentioned earlier, the political stability brought on by Chinese leaders’ ability to enable continued national economic growth is key to the legitimacy of China’s governing politicians. Because China is one of the world’s largest exporters of mass-produced manufactured goods, trade understandably plays a central role in the planning concerns of China’s Ministry of Commerce. Trade here includes current trade of foreign commodities for Chinese manufactured goods and also the creation of infrastructure to create and open up new trading routes to access new markets in South America.

Crucial here is the recognition that new markets may not necessarily exist yet – as is the case with the potential markets in the interior regions of Brazil. However, inherent in all business plans is the consideration given to the future projections that company leadership, ownership and critics analyze carefully. According to Mr. Eddie Bedon, the Ecuadorian Consul General in Los Angeles, CA, Ecuador’s official trade policy is one in which the nation-state is open for business and neither favors China nor discriminates against it. After all, Ecuador (like most other Latin American countries), still conducts a sizeable portion (40% in Ecuador’s case) of its trade with the United States. So the idea that China’s rapid increase of trade with the region will suddenly eliminate the United States as major trading partner and therefore as a political force in the region in the near future is highly doubtful. Despite the failure of US trade and investment to uplift and facilitate Latin American national development to date, trade between the Northern and Southern American continents is still significant and financially valuable.

17 French Guiana, which has less area than Ecuador and appears to be a separate sovereign entity on most maps of South America, is actually an official overseas department of France.
18 Personal Communication, July 6, 2011, Los Angeles, CA. 18 Ibid.
In spite of the solid and significant trading relationship that exists between the United States and Ecuador, China’s international economic expansion is attractive because Ecuador is interested in exploring alternatives to the U.S. development model. Not only is the scale of China’s global economic expansion attractive to Latin American governments (such as Ecuador’s) wishing to grow their own domestic economies, but the distinct political geography of China itself also offers an alternate way of understanding nation-state level economic development. Headed by a non-Western, communist (in-name) government that has direct connections with the ‘National Team’ of industries, China is well aware of its potential to represent an alternate path towards development in the ‘third world’.\textsuperscript{19}

Access to energy ranks as one of the most important drivers of China’s economy and represents an industrial sector that is very well represented in the developing world – especially in Latin America. In 2010, global economic growth led to a 5.6% growth in world energy consumption—the fastest annual growth rate ever recorded.\textsuperscript{20} According to the British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy, China’s economy accounts for one-fifth of the world’s energy.\textsuperscript{21} Part of the reason China requires so much energy is that consumption in China is increasing dramatically. Chinese energy consumption here means: both the amount of energy Chinese citizens use for their daily lives and the energy needs of Chinese companies that produce products for domestic consumption and for export that consumers in international markets purchase. As a region, Latin America is playing an increasingly important role in meeting China’s energy demands. According to the same BP report, in 2006, Latin America accounted for 6% of Chinese oil imports and in 2010 Latin America accounted for 13.7% of China’s oil imports. This percentage doubling of oil exports to China over these four years has helped to solidify China’s trading interests and growing dependence on the region.

Selecting Ecuador, which has an economy with a GDP predominantly driven by the sale of one main natural resource—petroleum—aids in clarifying the main driving factors behind China’s interest in the region. The Chinese central government and several of its National Team firms are well positioned (both financially and in terms of technical expertise) to acquire and manage Ecuadorian oil fields and deposits. Access to Ecuador’s petroleum reserves and promoting the expansion of access to interior South American markets for Chinese products, account for China’s two main economic interests in Ecuador.

**Three ways that Chinese Interests are Engaging Economically with Ecuador**

Having identified these two key expansionary drivers – access to petroleum and new markets acquisition – upon which the China-Ecuadorian relationship is based, the following section will examine three recent projects involving Chinese firms in Ecuador. There are three notable ways through which Chinese firms have attempted to expand economically into the country. These activities include: 1) the purchasing of Ecuadorian oil fields and a pipeline to ensure a stable and sizeable flow of petroleum for China; 2) the attempted investment and upgrade


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
of the Port of Manta for the purpose of expediting Chinese-Latin American trans-pacific trade; and 3) the financing of the Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric complex to learn and profit from energy production in the country.

Currently, China’s primary economic interest in Ecuador is oil. In 2005, Andes Petroleum (a joint venture between Sinopec and the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)) purchased oil and pipeline interests in Ecuador for US$1.42 billion. With this purchase, the Chinese market began to obtain access to significant amounts of petroleum. This investment translates into 218,200 barrels of oil per day available for use in the Chinese economy and also includes the capacity to transport 450,000 barrels of oil per day along a 500 km pipeline.

The second major Chinese business interest in Ecuador relates to the port of Manta, a natural deep-sea port that is also one of the closest points on the South American mainland to China. In September 2006, The Manta Port Authority granted Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH), a Hong Kong-based privately held company, the right to invest US$523 million to develop & operate the port at Manta into a major international trading hub capable of handling 2.2 million containers per year as part of a 30-year operating deal. Part of HPH’s interest in developing the cargo capacity of Manta related to discussions that Ecuador and Brazil had in relation to developing a trans-continental trading corridor connecting the Pacific with coastal Brazil. In this scenario, Manta would act as the western terminus of this trading route. Around this same time, President Correa suggested to Chinese authorities that he would like to attract Chinese airlines to fly directly to Manta and entertained the possibility that a Chinese company might be given the rights to operate Manta’s airport.

The third major economic activity of Chinese investors in Ecuador is the Coca Codo Sinclair Hydroelectric complex. With Chinese investment, this power station will eventually provide power to a large portion of Southeastern Ecuador. As the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) is the principle financier of the construction of this complex, the bank would recoup its initial profits from this power station. In 2009, however, Ecuadorian President Correa stated that the terms and conditions set by the Exim Bank were in violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty. In June 2010, after several months of additional negotiations, China and Ecuador finally did agree on the construction of a hydroelectric dam to be built in Ecuador by Sinohydro. The actual financing of this project involved Ecuador taking out a 15-year, $1.7 billion loan. Under these terms, Ecuador would be repaying the construction costs for this hydroelectric project to China’s Exim-Bank, by allowing China to sell the electricity generated by it for a period of 15 years. After this time, management and profits from the sale of electricity would be transferred to the state of Ecuador. Use of the Chinese Export Import Bank is one of the ways that China disperses its investments for infrastructural projects beyond its borders.

Rather than being the next global conquering (or hegemonic) power, Chinese-based companies’ engagement with different projects in Latin America, on the whole, is proceeding

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25 Ellis, R.E. 2009, p. 133.
in a manner that respects the sovereignty of countries in the region. HPH’s interest in developing the port of Manta exemplifies this behavior. On the surface, the construction of a port that would facilitate trade between manufacturers in China and large Brazilian metropolises via boat, rail and highway, appears to be of mutual interest to both Chinese and Latin American concerns alike. In fact, Bolivia, Brazil and Chile have been in discussions with each other about investing in a transcontinental route (corredor bioceánico) for sometime. In the case of the port of Manta’s redevelopment and expansion, Ecuador would be working with Brazil to help make Chinese business connections a reality. While the HPH-Manta port deal ultimately did not materialize, HPH’s attempt to develop Ecuadorian infrastructure in order to reach the very large and lucrative Brazilian market clearly shows the intentions of a major China-based port operator and signals a growing trading affinity between these two regions.

The previous examples of Chinese investments in Ecuadorian oil, a hydropower station financing and construction agreement, and an attempted investment in developing the port of Manta, all show how actors in the Chinese economy perceive opportunities in Ecuador. Economic engagement related to natural resource harvesting and infrastructural projects between these two nation-states is growing. This growth helps to underscore the rapid nature and increasing extent of China’s dependence on Latin America for its energy resources and, by extension, its future continued growth as a major world economy. Figure 2 shows the rapid rate at which Chinese-Ecuadorian trade has increased from 2002–2010. Both Ecuadorian and Chinese exports exhibit substantial annual growth through 2008 after which exports for both countries begin to decline – though less so for China. These data support the complementarity of the Chinese and Ecuadorian economies. Based on the principle of comparative advantage, China and Ecuador are currently trading those commodities that they each produce most efficiently – Ecuador’s main export to China is petroleum, while China’s main export to Ecuador encompasses a range of household and electronic products. According to international trade theory, this bilateral trading relationship should expand over the long term and the overall productivity derived from the trading of Chinese goods for Ecuadorian goods should increase as well.

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27 Ellis, R.E. 2010. p. 133.
Conclusion

This paper shows that China’s economic expansion into developing world regions is increasing China’s dependency on peripheral, resource-rich countries. Using Ecuador as a case study, I have considered examples of contemporary investment projects to illustrate some of the major motivators behind Chinese overseas interests in Latin America. Chinese investments in Ecuadorian oil fields, the attempted expansion of the Port of Manta and the development of a hydropower project illustrate the coordinating abilities and financial resources behind China’s ‘National Team’ industries and Chinese multi-national corporations. These firms’ attempted and successful investments illustrate their economic and practical intentions as China’s economic interests expand beyond China’s borders. Selecting Ecuador as one of several major petroleum providers in Latin America (along with Brazil and Venezuela) enables China to diversify its supply of this crucial energy input and serves to lessen the risk of a complete petroleum shortfall should the political stability or security of any particular regime in Latin America fail or collapse. Attempted investment at the port of Manta shows the important role geography plays in the efficiency concerns that highlight Chinese business and trading interests in the region. While the HPH investment agreement ultimately did not materialize, such an effort on the part of this large Hong Kong-based port operating company does show the intentions of Chinese shipping concerns with respect to China’s relations with the region. Finally, growth in bilateral Chinese-Ecuadorian trade is benefiting China and has the potential to open up new, larger Latin American markets as well.
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**About the Author**

*Thomas P. Narins*

Thomas is pursuing a Ph.D. in the UCLA Department of Geography. He is fascinated by China’s economic rise and political influence on global and regional politics. Before UCLA, Tom earned a bachelor’s degree in government focusing on US-China relations and a master’s degree in business administration with an emphasis on international business. He has held several positions including one at a joint-venture company with projects in both China and Latin America where he witnessed the positive and negative effects of rapid economic growth in these regions.
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