

Geopolitics in Central America: China and El Salvador in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the People's Republic of China's (PRC) interest in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) was driven first by its thirst for natural resources, then by its obsession with national unity, advanced by stripping Taiwan of international recognition. In 2020 these motives were augmented by a third – geopolitical competition with the US.

Central American countries have their own reasons for approaching the PRC (or Taiwan): their economic interest in development and political interest in relations with patrons alternative to the US, with its chequered history especially in El Salvador. Excepting Costa Rica, which recognised the PRC in 2007, all other Central American countries – Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama – had recognised Taiwan as “China” before June 2017, when President Juan Carlos Varela of Panama recognised the PRC instead ([Mendez and Alden, 2019](#)).

A year later, on 21 August 2018, El Salvador became the second Central American country to follow suit. Taiwan still enjoys recognition from four Central America countries, nine in all of LAC (see Table 1). El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America and is locked out of the Caribbean. With Guatemala and Honduras, it forms the Northern Triangle, a subregion plagued with gang violence, drug-trafficking, and corruption, tempting its citizens to immigrate. The country has very few natural resources, so it is contended that Beijing's interest lies in subverting Taiwan and, since Panama's switch, contesting Washington's influence.

Table 1: Diplomatic Allies of Taipei in LAC as of December 2019

Country	Date diplomatic ties established
Belize	13 October 1989
Guatemala	15 June 1933
Haiti	25 April 1956
Honduras	6 November 1944
Nicaragua	6 November 1990
Paraguay	8 July 1957
Saint Lucia	30 April 2007
St. Kitts and Nevis	9 October 1983
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	15 August 1981

Source: ([Author's Table; dates from: Esteban, 2008](#))

Organisation of the chapter. There are four sections. The first reviews El Salvador’s economic and foreign relations. The second summarises Taipei’s history with El Salvador (1954-2018). The third examines PRC-El Salvador relations. The fourth concludes, prospecting future relations, and briefly assessing Washington’s reaction.

ECONOMIC & FOREIGN RELATIONS

To contextualise its new ties with Beijing, El Salvador’s historical economic relations overall are first examined. The country’s foreign policy turns on: (1) regional integration; (2) national sovereignty; (3) development cooperation; (4) trade and investment; (5) Salvadorans living overseas. Prioritising agendas differently in different parts of the world, it gives top priority overall to trade; partly explaining the shift to Beijing, as the PRC looms ever larger as a trading partner.

El Salvador Economic Relations

The latest COMTRADE 2018 figures show that El Salvador’s top import source is the United States, followed by Guatemala, then China. It exports, first, to the United States, secondly to Honduras, then Guatemala. China in seventh place is insignificant, but Salvadorans hope their new relations with the PRC may change now this. ([ITC, 2019](#)). The data indicate significant trade imbalances (see Table 2).

Table 2. Top 10 trading Partners of El Salvador in 2018 (US Dollar thousand)

Partners	Balance in value in 2018	Exported value in 2018	Imported value in 2018
United States of America	-2446602	1577645	4024247
Guatemala	-622445	815760	1438205
China	-809828	85395	895223
Mexico	-737650	65288	802938
Honduras	329231	838522	509291
Panama	-261157	121683	382840
Costa Rica	-75849	258566	334415
Nicaragua	92616	397923	305307
Spain	-189693	49035	238728
Korea	-158228	12180	170408

Source: ([ITC, 2019](#))

El Salvador’s development has been painfully slow, a trend likely to continue through the next few years. Hobbled by fiscal constraints and low domestic savings, the economy can sustain only moderate credit growth. The country is a member of the Central American Economic Integration System (SICA) and hosts its Secretariat General. In 2018 El Salvador joined Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama in an FTA with South Korea. Salvadoran ratification should happen under the pro-business President Bukele, as relations with Korea are viewed positively by all political factions.

EL SALVADOR & TAIPEI

Esteban ([2008](#)) reports El Salvador established official diplomatic ties with Taipei on 9 December 1954. There was apparently no mission; rather, in 1955 “Dr. Kidding Wang was concurrently the Minister to Honduras, El Salvador and Lebanon” ([Klein, 1963: 65](#)). In 1957 Taipei opened a Diplomatic Legation in San Salvador, elevated to the rank of Embassy in 1961 ([MOFA-Taiwan, 2016](#)).

The Early Years

During the 1960s Taipei concentrated on thwarting the PRC's attempts to unseat it in the UN General Assembly, and relations with LAC were about rallying support for this effort. Taipei felt secure in Washington's recognition, knowing that most of LAC would follow its lead. This suddenly and dramatically changed in 1971, when 76 countries voted for Beijing, with only 35 supporting Taiwan, including El Salvador. Seventeen countries abstained and three were absent (UN, 1971). This landmark UN Resolution enshrined the One-China Policy "to restore all its rights to the People's Republic of China and to recognize the representatives of its Government as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations" (UN, 1971: 2). LAC did not tip the balance in this contest, but it represented an important voting bloc that triggered a diplomatic offensive by Beijing (see Table 3).

Table 3: LAC Countries Votes for UN Resolution 2758 in favour of seating the PRC at the UN in 1971 (only LAC countries with diplomatic ties to Beijing are included).

Votes in Favour (7 of 76)	Votes Against (12 of 35)	Abstained (5 of 17)
Chile	El Salvador	Argentina
Cuba	Bolivia	Barbados
Ecuador	Brazil	Colombia
Guyana	Costa Rica	Jamaica
Mexico	Dominican Republic	Panama
Peru	Guatemala	
Trinidad and Tobago	Haiti	
	Honduras	
	Nicaragua	
	Paraguay	
	Uruguay	
	Venezuela	

Source: Author's compilation from (UN, 1971)

El Salvador and Taiwan from 1971 to the present

"Nixon's visit to the PRC in 1972, Japan's recognition of the mainland government in the same year, and Washington's termination of diplomatic ties with Taipei, enabling to establish official relations with [the PRC on January 1] 1979" further set back Taipei's cause (Wang, 1990: 155). Thereafter, Beijing became proactive in LAC. Several LAC states switched to the PRC at this time (more below). The upshot was that Taipei paid more heed to the region. Central Americans soon realised they could benefit. In March 1973 a mission of businessmen from El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama arrived in Taipei, headed by El Salvador's Ambassador to Taipei, Walter Beneke, who stated "the purpose of the trip was to get to know Taiwan. ... the mission said they had heard of Taiwan's economic development and wanted to see it for themselves" (Reuters cited in: British Pathé, 1973).

A few years later, in May 2000 Chen Shui-bian from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the political party championing independence from the PRC, was elected Taiwan's President. He held office until 2008 and was significant for El Salvador and Central America in general because he "made yearly state visits to [the region] during his tenure and attended almost all of the swearing in sessions for new Central American Presidents" (Alexander, 2014: 208). In May 2001 he attended the second Summit of Central American Presidents in El Salvador, organised to strengthen economic ties between Taiwan and Central America. It was during this visit that Chen broached the idea of an FTA with El Salvador. Taiwan had in mind closer ties with the US at that time, and in this context, Chen thought it a good idea to treat with El Salvador.

Taipei wanted to safeguard its interests, fully aware that the PRC was at the stage of finalising its negotiations for entry into the WTO. Shortly thereafter, China acceded to that organisation on 10 November 2001 (effective 10 December 2001). The PRC's membership was "one of the most difficult to date... [it] spanned 185 months, which is one of the longest accessions to ever take place in the history of the GATT/WTO" ([Scalera, 2017: 41](#)).

It was so difficult partly because Beijing did not anticipate the fierce opposition from countries like Mexico which opposed until the very end out of worry over the effect on their national economy of the privileges to be accorded to one of their fiercest direct competitors. El Salvador went one step farther to become the only country "to officially oppose China's membership by invoking the non-application clause ... In so doing, El Salvador was not bound to treat China as a member of the WTO" ([Scalera, 2017: 40](#)).

El Salvador's *démarche* did not prevent the PRC's membership of the WTO, but did slightly delay the signing approval ceremony, because Taiwan and El Salvador were concerned that Beijing could stop Taipei's accession once it was admitted. Taiwan became a member of the WTO on 11 November 2001 (effective 1 January 2002) ([WTO, 2019](#)). Not surprisingly, a few months later Taiwan delivered an official proposal to advance FTA negotiations with El Salvador. Taipei's Ambassador made a statement on 26 November 2001 that they had been interested for some time, but that Taiwan had been waiting for membership of the WTO.

In September 2005 President Chen came back to the region for a state visit to El Salvador along with Panama and Guatemala. During this trip he launched "the so-called 'Jung Pang,' or 'co-prosperity' initiative, consisting of a \$250 million fund set aside to encourage investment by Taiwanese companies in allied countries" ([Erikson and Chen, 2007: 78](#)). The following year (2006) El Salvador started FTA negotiations with Taipei. After four rounds it signed the agreement with Taiwan on May 2007, which entered into force in March 2008. It was negotiated and signed in conjunction with Honduras, and so it is often referred to as the "Trilateral Agreement" but its content "enshrines two separate bilateral treaty relations" ([Chen, 2007: 91](#)). Experts argue that this FTA is superficial; Wise, for instance, excludes it from her analysis of transpacific trade agreements "because the coverage [was] so limited and the commitments so shallow that they fail to approximate the minimal necessary standards at the World Trade Organization (WTO)" ([Wise, 2016: 76](#)).

The Beijing drain gets started – El Salvador and Taipei from 2007 to 2018

In mid-2007 Taipei took a massive blow to its quest for international recognition when Costa Rica, an important country in Central America, on 1 June 2007 decided to switch from Taipei to Beijing ([Fornes and Mendez, 2018](#)). Not surprisingly, President Chen came to El Salvador as well as Honduras and Nicaragua the following month, in August 2007, "then to Guatemala and St Lucia in January 2008, with the purpose of securing diplomatic support" ([Alexander, 2014: 208](#)).

In early 2008 Ma Ying-jeou was elected Taiwan's President for the Kuomintang (KMT), the political party that stands with Beijing on a "one China" policy ([Tang et al., 2017](#)). During his presidency (2008-2016) Beijing and Taipei kept a gentlemen's agreement that the PRC would not seek to subvert Taiwan's international recognition. Visits from Taipei to the region continued, mostly for Presidential inaugurations (e.g. President Ma visited El Salvador to attend the inauguration of President Mauricio Funes), and Taipei did not feel entirely under threat.

But then, in early 2016, the Taiwanese elected Tsai Ing-wen President, the leader of the DPP which, as noted above, is the party championing independence from the PRC. This ended the gentlemen’s agreement that had lasted through the Ma Administration. On 13 January 2017 President Tsai visited El Salvador for the first time, which President Sánchez Cerén celebrated by awarding her the country’s highest distinction. This visit was part of a larger strategy to cut a high profile in the region to keep its allies there faithful to Taipei amid fears that Beijing could begin wooing them away. The fear proved prescient. Six months later, in June 2017, Panama switched to Beijing, a move imitated by the Dominican Republic in May 2018 and by El Salvador itself in August 2018 ([Mendez and Alden, 2019](#)).

EL SALVADOR & BEIJING – THE BIRTH OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP

As the 24th country in LAC to recognise the PRC, El Salvador has been advancing relations with Beijing as much as it can. El Salvador showed agency in shifting recognition to the PRC, but in truth the decision was not entirely San Salvador’s. It takes two to tango and the tempo and timing were Beijing’s alone. Beijing’s motives were obvious. Panama’s decision to establish ties with the PRC in 2017 had the most impact on the Salvadoran decision to abandon Taiwan, as it highlighted the clear economic benefits that could flow to the region as a whole.

Early Encounters with Beijing – people-to-people diplomacy and Friendship Associations

In October 1952 El Salvador had an early encounter with the PRC, when it sent a delegation of three to the *Asian and Pacific Regions Peace Conference* in Beijing. There were hundreds of delegates attending this meeting, including a total of 110 delegates from twelve LAC countries ([Ratliff, 1969: 58](#)). The Conference is an early example of cultural diplomacy by the PRC to promote its agenda and ideas.

In 1954 the PRC created the *Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries* (CPAFFC) a putatively unofficial agency “to carry out foreign relations work ... [and to] serve as a link in the friendly relations between the Chinese people and ... the world” ([Sutter, 2011: 70](#)). The work of CPAFFC was effective all over the world because it enabled China to promote its official agenda in a manner that would not have created frictions if it had happened in countries with diplomatic recognition of the PRC. Six years after its creation, CPAFFC sponsored the inauguration of the *China-Latin America and Caribbean Friendship Association* (CHILAC) on 6 March 1960 ([Gonzales, 2011](#)).

At this juncture not a single country in LAC recognised the PRC diplomatically, a situation that was to change in 28 September 1960, when Cuba became the first country in the region to recognise Beijing. Subsequent years saw the founding of chapters in almost every LAC country, including El Salvador, and these Friendship Associations played an important role in driving private and public sector interest toward Beijing, and was also therefore not the only factor, certainly, but an important one in Beijing’s winning diplomatic recognition of many countries in the region. A total of 24 LAC countries have diplomatic ties with Beijing as at the time of publication (see Table 4).

Table 4: PRC – Diplomatic Relations with LAC (1960-2019)

Country	Country's Leader	China's Leader	Date Established
1. Cuba	Fidel Castro	Mao Zedong	28 September 1960
2. Chile	Salvador Allende	Mao Zedong	15 December 1970

3.	Peru	Juan Velasco	Mao Zedong	02 November 1971
4.	Mexico	Luis Echeverría	Mao Zedong	14 February 1972
5.	Argentina	Alejandro Agustín-Lanusse	Mao Zedong	19 February 1972
6.	Guyana	Linden Forbes Burnham	Mao Zedong	27 June 1972
7.	Jamaica	Michael Manley	Mao Zedong	21 November 1972
8.	Trinidad and Tobago	Eric Eustace Williams	Mao Zedong	20 June 1974
9.	Venezuela	Carlos Andrés Pérez	Mao Zedong	28 June 1974
10.	Brazil	Ernesto Geisel	Mao Zedong	15 August 1974
11.	Suriname	Johan Ferrier	Mao Zedong	28 May 1976
12.	Barbados	Jon Michael Geoffrey	Hua Guofeng	30 May 1977
13.	Ecuador	Jaime Roldós Aguilera	Hua Guofeng	02 January 1980
14.	Colombia	Julio César Turbay Ayala	Hua Guofeng	07 February 1980
15.	Antigua and Barbuda	Vere Bird	Hu Yaobang	01 January 1983
16.	Bolivia	Hernán Siles Zuazo	Hu Yaobang	09 July 1985
17.	Grenada	Herbert Bleize	Hu Yaobang	01 October 1985 [†]
18.	Uruguay	Julio María Sanguinetti	Zhao Ziyang	03 February 1988
19.	Bahamas	Hubert Ingraham	Jiang Zemin	23 May 1997
20.	Dominica	Roosevelt Skerrit	Hu Jintao	23 March 2004
21.	Costa Rica	Óscar Arias	Hu Jintao	01 June 2007
22.	Panama	Juan Carlos Varela	Xi Jinping	12 June 2017
23.	Dominican Republic	Danilo Medina	Xi Jinping	01 May 2018
24.	El Salvador	Salvador Sánchez Cerén	Xi Jinping	21 August 2018

Source: Author's table from multiple sources.

[†] Grenada first established diplomatic relations with the PRC on 1 October 1985, but because Grenada also reached out to Taiwan in 1989, the PRC severed relations with it on 7 August 1989. Both sides resumed relations much later, on 20 January 2005 ([Fornes and Mendez, 2018](#)).

In 2007 CHILAC joined forces with its parent organisation CPAFFC and the PRC to host the First China-Latin American People-to-People Friendship Forum in 2007 in Chongqing, China. A year later Beijing published its First White Paper on China and LAC ([Tsai and Liu, 2012](#)). In 2009 the Second Friendship Forum was celebrated in Havana, which was followed in 2011 by a Third Friendship Forum in Fuzhou. At this third one Juan Manuel Flores of El Salvador was appointed Vice-President of CHILAC ([Gonzales, 2011](#)). With the simultaneous creation

in 2011 of the China-CELAC Forum (CCF) – a globalization gambit in which China tried to enter into the governance of CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States founded by political leaders of the left, – the Friendship Forum became even more political, as “it was incorporated as a subforum of CCF” ([MOFA-China, 2016: 32](#)). This ostensibly non-governmental forum started to have an official flavor. Subsequent forums were held in San Jose, Costa Rica (2013) and most recently in Hangzhou, China (2015).

In this context *Expo-Shanghai* in September 2010 was turned into an opportunity by Beijing to facilitate *rapprochement* with El Salvador. At this trade fair held in Shanghai businessmen and policy makers from El Salvador met with representatives of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce as well as the Friendship Association of China and Latin America. Flores attended as head of AASC and as an FMLN politician. Local newspapers reported that this was the first time the Salvadoran flag had waved alongside the PRC flag ([El Pais, 2010](#)).

A few months later, on 25 October 2010 the Chinese Chamber of Commerce opened its first office in El Salvador to provide advice and information and to foster trade relations between the countries. A China Expo in El Salvador took place in November 2010 ([La Prensa, 2010](#)). The founding of the Salvadoran-China Chamber of Commerce was important in initiating a thaw between Beijing and El Salvador, because one of the problems was the massive trade deficit El Salvador had developed with China. Only 1% of El Salvador’s exports went to China in 2012. It has been argued as well that San Salvador was interested in letting Beijing open a commercial office in El Salvador in 2013 to break their dependency on the commercial offices in Costa Rica ([Sandi Meza, 2015](#)).

In 2015 San Salvador opened an official commercial office in Shanghai, which moved to Beijing in mid-2017, more than a year before the establishment of diplomatic ties ([Pino, 2017](#)). Both countries seem to have been preparing for the switch. This illustrates the importance of informal acts and unofficial instruments in the foreign policy-making process, even such things as friendship associations and chambers of commerce ([Mendez, 2018](#), [see also: Jing et al., 2020](#)). Scholars have long argued that these kinds of associations have been historically important to the Chinese diaspora as “self-help organisations to deal with an uncertain or even hostile new environment” ([Backman and Butler, 2004](#)). In the case of El Salvador it seems that they are also useful as soft power and public diplomacy tools in the hands of either Taipei or Beijing.

It is sometimes assumed that Beijing has to work hard to convince conservative policy-makers in traditional Latin American societies to abandon Taipei, but in reality, most countries in the region are eager to switch. According to an ex-President of the Dominican Republic, which also switched from Taipei to Beijing in 2018, they would have switched a long time ago, but “it is not up to them: ‘the decision is made by Beijing’... Panama tried for years to convince Beijing to open the door to them but China refused it and several other nations in order to avoid precipitating a diplomatic crisis by stripping Taipei of international personhood” ([Fornes and Mendez, 2018: 57-58](#)). This seemingly counterintuitive finding is consistent with the story of El Salvador.

Current State of Affairs

The mutual diplomatic recognition of El Salvador and China was announced on 21 August 2018 from Beijing, where the Foreign Minister of El Salvador and his Chinese counterpart co-signed the official *communiqué*. President Sánchez Cerén announced it via televised speech

([RREE, 2018](#)). The *démarche* was deeply criticised by members of the opposition who disagreed with the decision. Matters were rushed along and the first official delegation from El Salvador travelled to Beijing in mid-September 2018. The meetings were deeply criticised for failure to involve the private sector. Critics remarked how unusual it was that the talks did not “include representatives that can contribute more on the subject of a commercial relationship with China” ([cited in: Campos Madrid, 2018](#)). But El Salvador’s Finance Minister dismissed these complaints, arguing that not including business this time was the right decision because it was the first official visit ([Linares, 2018](#)).

In November 2018 ex-President Sánchez Cerén on a State Visit to China met with President Xi Jinping, who publicly reminded him “to stick to the one China principle” ([Ng, 2019](#)). A total of 13 agreements were signed during this visit ranging from bank cooperation and embassy to transport connectivity ([Morales, 2019](#)). One of the most significant agreements was the one endorsing the BRI ([Mendez and Alden, 2019](#)), but it remains unclear how El Salvador would be supposed to implement it. Sánchez Cerén then travelled to Shanghai to attend the first China International Import Expo (CIIE), which Beijing set up to facilitate trade flows between Belt and Road countries around the world. On 17 December 2018 Sánchez Cerén accredited the first PRC Ambassador to San Salvador, Ou Jianhong, whom Xi had appointed in early December ([Morales, 2019](#)).

The first month of 2019 was fairly quiet in terms of diplomatic developments in the run-up to the Presidential election on 3 February. It was won by Niyab Bukele, an inexperienced and outsider politician member of the *Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional* (GANU) party. Both countries have hinted that they will study the possibility of a Free Trade Agreement, but it remains unclear whether conditions would allow either negotiation or implementation. This seems to have inspired in mid-February 2019 a move by Salvador’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cancel the FTA with Taiwan, even to announcing it would terminate from 15 March 2019 ([Guzman, 2019](#)), but the Salvadoran Supreme Court reversed the cancellation shortly before the deadline ([Webber, 2019](#)). Although Taipei has never been a significant trading partners of El Salvador – in 2018 it was the 12th most significant trade partner in terms of exports and 13th most important one in terms of imports ([ITC, 2019](#)), – certain sectors would be badly affected if the trade terms were altered (sugar and coffee traders are the top exporters to Taiwan).

San Salvador opened its Embassy in Beijing on 29 April 2019, an event attended mostly by government officials, including the Salvadoran Export and Investment Promotion Agency (PROESA) ([RREE, 2019](#)). PROESA argues that El Salvador’s geographical location “in north Central America, as well as port and airport infrastructure, could also make it a convenient hub for cargo arriving via the Pacific and heading towards the Atlantic coast, or to North or South America” ([Xinhua, 2018](#)). But this is not entirely accurate. El Salvador is the only country in Central America without access to the Atlantic and the rate of investment in infrastructure as a percentage of GDP has been way below the recommended 6.2% per year ([Mendez, 2019](#)). The latest available figures are from 2015 and show El Salvador investing only 1.83% of GDP in infrastructure, which is even below the already low regional average ([INFRALATAM, 2019](#)).

GEOPOLITICS IN PLAY – FLYING TO WASHINGTON, BUT ENDING IN BEIJING

Reportedly, US National Security Advisor John Bolton, to warn him against switching from Taipei to Beijing, telephoned then-President Sánchez Cerén, who ignored him ([Harris, 2018](#)). Forty-eight hours later Washington was reacting strongly. Administration press secretary

Sanders denounced the decision as impacting “the economic health and security of the entire Americas region [and that it would] result in a re-evaluation of [the US] relationship with El Salvador” ([Sanders, 2018](#)). Shortly thereafter, on 7 September 2018 Washington recalled its Ambassador to El Salvador, Jean Manes (and their top diplomats in Panama and the Dominican Republic), for consultations on how to move forward in the aftermath of San Salvador’s de-recognition of Taiwan ([Nauert, 2018](#), [Wong, 2018](#)).

On 12 February 2019 John Bolton made a second call to El Salvador, this time to speak to President-elect Bukele. Bolton tweeted that they “discussed ways to strengthen the U.S.-El Salvador friendship and to collaborate to restore democracy in Venezuela and counter Chinese predatory practices in the hemisphere” ([cited in: Gao, 2019](#)). In mid-March 2019 President-elect Bukele travelled to Washington and made his first public remarks regarding Beijing since the election, stating, “China does not respect the rules of commerce, manipulates its currency and meddles into other countries’ democracies” ([cited in: SCMP, 2019b](#)). Beijing immediately pushed back, stating that China is not meddling in the internal affairs of El Salvador ([Renteria, 2019](#)).

Bukele reiterated at the 49th Washington Conference on the Americas on 7 May 2019, one of the most important yearly political events in the Western Hemisphere, that the diplomatic switch from Taipei to Beijing was not a transparent decision. He also stated, “I’ll be frank, we’re not going to do what’s most convenient for America or China [PRC]. We’re going to do what’s best for El Salvador. That could mean being back with Taiwan, [or it] could be staying with China. It’s an ongoing discussion” ([Bukele cited in: Pacheco, 2009](#)).

Bukele took office on 1 June 2019 and undertook an ambitious *démarche of rapprochement* with Washington instead of Beijing. He entered on his country’s Presidency with what scholars have called “fantasy agency” – the idea that “something will turn up” to save the day ([Mendez and Turzi, 2020](#), [Mendez, 2017](#)). In an incredibly naïve manoeuvre Bukele wrote an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* on 23 July 2019 in which he appealed to the US for more foreign direct investment in El Salvador ([Bukele, 2019](#)). Certainly, the US is the country’s foremost trading partner for both exports and imports, but it is a fraught relationship; – more so now that Trump has announced an end of aid to El Salvador as well as Guatemala and Honduras, because of the deep-rooted belief that the three are boosting illegal immigration to the United States ([Reuters, 2019](#)).

While campaigning in 2018, Bukele chided his predecessor for suddenly switching to the PRC. Right after the election in February 2019, his spokesman promised that relations with China would be scrutinised ([Lo, 2019](#)). But walking away from China is easier said than done. Other Latin American leaders have failed before, from Argentine Presidential candidate Macri campaigning to lessen his country’s dependency on China ([Curia, 2015](#)), to Lenin Moreno censuring his predecessor for engaging Ecuador too deeply in debt to China ([Casey and Krauss, 2018](#)). Once in power, they realise China’s embeddedness in their economies entangles any pushback. Even Brazil’s Bolsonaro had to warm up to Beijing and accept the Chinese ambassador’s public invitation to visit China ([Brito, 2019](#)). He completed this in October 2019 and immediately welcomed Xi Jinping to Brazil the next month, in November 2019.

Bukele has confronted the very same issues. He began his Presidency hoping in Washington, but by December 2019 he had had run to Beijing on a state visit, obliged by US neglect to go begging. He obtained a number of “gigantic” non-refundable pledges from Xi Jinping (Beijing

did not disclose the amount); *viz.*, the usual football stadium, library and water plant ([SCMP, 2019a](#)). Regardless of size, these projects are hardly what El Salvador needs for its long-term economic development. Small states like El Salvador “welcome China’s liberal internationalist grand bargain, which purports to converge on their development preferences” ([Mendez and Alden, 2019: 5](#)). Bukele has shown very little agency in obtaining these deals. He may be doing it to win favor from a clueless public for his political party to gain seats in the parliamentary elections of March 2021, but he is advancing no foreign policy strategy. The country’s “GDP growth will fall to 1% in 2020, given the cancellation of TPS [Temporary Protected Status] and a weak US economy” ([EIU, 2019](#)). A rebound had been projected for 2024, but this is far from certain under Bukele’s leadership, which shows limited capacity for innovation, strategy and knowhow in matters of international affairs, so far.

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