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EAST ASIAN COOPERATION APPROACHES TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: THE CASES OF JAPAN, CHINA, AND SOUTH KOREA[1]

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1. Introduction

Despite recent efforts promoted during the 21st century by several countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela, among others, to support regional integration and foster collaboration, especially through South-South and Triangular Cooperation, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) remains a region full of disparities.

Historically, the region's economies have been tied to the extraction of raw materials, agriculture, livestock practices, and other activities linked to the primary sector of the economy. This situation has created a strong dependence on industrialized countries that, based on Cardoso and Faletto (1971), could have led to the region's persistent inequality.

Additionally, the region has been the victim of political instability, social turmoil, and even natural disasters. This situation made LAC countries historic recipients of Official Development Assistance (ODA) from traditional donors, especially the United States (the U.S.) and European countries, as well as emerging donors in recent years.

The 21st century has been marked by several global events that have shaped development cooperation—including the 9/11 attacks, the 2007–2008 financial crisis, and China's rise as a global actor. Although LAC is not the primary destination of development cooperation initiatives led by Asian

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countries, increasing interconnectedness since 2015—driven by economic, political, and social factors, as well as the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—has fostered closer ties, as Asian countries seek to project and promote their development cooperation models abroad.

Amidst this evolving context, this paper aims to analyze and compare the development cooperation approaches promoted by Japan, China, and South Korea toward the LAC region during the post-2015 period. To this end, the following research question is posed:

What are the similarities and differences in the development cooperation approaches promoted by Japan, China, and South Korea toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the post-2015 period?

Japan is an established traditional donor, which holds a significant position in the realm of development cooperation due to its longstanding tradition of providing ODA. In 2022, Japan's ODA contribution reached $20.103 billion, placing it only behind the U.S. and Germany (OECD, 2024). While Asia, followed by Africa, remains the main focus of Japanese cooperation, there has been a consistent allocation of ODA to LAC, ranging between 5% and 10% from 2000 to 2022, as documented by the White Papers on Development Cooperation annually published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MoFA). Therefore, as Asplund and Soderberg (2017) highlighted, Japan's foreign aid presents a compelling case study that offers valuable insights into regional and even global dynamics linked to development cooperation.

Japan's policy to the region is based on the guidelines established in the ODA Charters (2015) (2023) and the White Papers on Development Cooperation issued by the MoFA. These documents unveil that Japan aims to contribute to addressing the disparities in the sustainable development of LAC nations, taking into account the presence of Nikkei communities in the region as a catalyst to nurture cooperative relations.

In the case of China, "it has become the main trading partner of South American countries, displacing the U.S. and the European Union (the E.U) (Serbin, 2024, 109). Moreover, Dollar (2017, 3) highlighted that "the $106 billion that China has already invested in LAC is significant, and the cooperation initiatives are certain to grow substantially in upcoming years".

Unlike traditional donors, China promotes development cooperation through the South-South Cooperation (SSC) modality. Consequently, the rise of China in the economic and political fields has challenged the cooperation models promoted by traditional donors worldwide, including the LAC region.

South Korea had a relatively recent history as a recipient country.

However, since 1996, it has become an OECD member and represents one of the most successful emerging donor cases in rapid succession.

South Korea's cooperation with LAC started in the early 1990s. Korea's ODA to LAC increased steadily until 2018, when it reached the $ 215 million peak (IDB, 2022). Additionally, Korea's latest five-year strategy (2021–2025) aims to double the ODA budget and focus on several areas to achieve sustainable development. Therefore, in a regional dynamic in which LAC countries are looking for new partnerships beyond traditional donors and avoiding the confrontation between the U.S. and China, the South Korean cooperation model is attractive for those countries aiming to diversify their alliances.

At this point, it is necessary to mention that the academic literature on East Asian cooperation approaches toward LAC have mainly focused on individual countries, such as Japan, China, or South Korea, rather than analyzing them from a comparative perspective.[3] Moreover, the few comparative studies, such as those by Levy and Rose (2019) or Garcia (2020), usually select the cases of Japan and China from a general perspective, including trade and bilateral relations, and often leave aside the case of South Korea.

2. Analytical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts the analytical frameworks proposed by Lancaster (2007) and Kragelund (2019) to examine development cooperation in terms of institutions, ideas, interests, organizations, and vectors. These dimensions are used to characterize the cooperation models implemented by Japan, China, and South Korea toward LAC during the post-2015 period.

The "institutions" are those that establish the rules of the political dynamics, e.g., electoral rules, presidential systems, and the legislature's role. The "ideas" refer to worldviews and principal beliefs shared by a significant part of the public and political elites that characterize cooperation processes. The "interests" are the goals that the government aims to achieve through cooperation dynamics. "Organizations" refers to the location within the government of tasks related to a major function or program of government. Although Lancaster did not consider international organizations

3 For example, Japan's cooperation with LAC has been studied by Potter (2015) and Myers and Kuwayama (2016), among others. China's South-South relations with the region have been analyzed by Gallagher and Irvin (2015), Dollar (2017), and Dussel (2021), among others. South Korea's engagement with LAC has been researched by Faure (2016), Ayhan (2017), and Ellis (2022), among others.

in her framework, due to their increasing importance and proliferation, the author included regional and international forums in which countries have memberships and promote cooperation initiatives. Finally, the "vectors" are defined as the way of engagement between two or more countries involved in development cooperation.

It is essential to note that these dimensions are intertwined and can vary over time. Consequently, the selection of this analytical framework, rather than analyzing isolated aspects, aims to comprehensively characterize the cooperation approaches implemented by Japan, China, and South Korea in their relations with LAC.

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on the analysis of both primary and secondary sources relevant to the development cooperation strategies of Japan, China, and South Korea toward LAC. Primary sources include books, reports, statistics, surveys, serial publications, national laws, international treaties, and other materials issued by local, state, and national government agencies. These include institutions such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the China Development Bank, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), as well as relevant multilateral organizations. Secondary sources consist of academic literature that examines the bilateral and multilateral relations between the selected countries and LAC, with particular attention to development cooperation modalities, policy orientations, and institutional frameworks.

3. Japan's Development Cooperation Approach

Japan's cooperative engagements in LAC have their roots in the early 1900s. Originally, these began as aid projects to assist Japanese immigrants, primarily in Brazil, Paraguay, and Peru. These involvements entailed offering economic support for constructing basic infrastructure and promoting agriculture, livestock activities, and small businesses (IDB, 2013).

Likewise, at different times through the 21st century, Japan has been the most important donor for Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, Dominica, Grenada, Panama, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, Mexico, Brazil, and Peru. In this direction, Myers and Kuwayama (2016) argued that LAC countries are considered important political allies nowadays as Japan actively promotes its global governance and development approach.

3.1 Institutions

Japan's development cooperation system operates within the framework of a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament. Within this political structure, multiple parties coexist, the most prominent being the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has dominated Japanese politics—either independently or in coalition—for nearly the entire period since 1955, with the exception of 2009 to 2012 (Lancaster, 2007).

Lancaster (2007) also showed how, historically, the LDP has internally molded ODA policies, while opposition parties have generally supported Japan's aid. This dynamic generated a situation in which the role of the Prime Minister was restricted without significant involvement in ODA policy. However, she pointed out that since the beginning of the century, Japanese legislators have started to take more interest in the effectiveness and accountability of the country's cooperation system due to internal and external criticism, a generational change in the composition of the Diet, and episodes of mismanagement in aid budgets.

Additionally, during the second administration of Shinzo Abe (2012-2019), the figure of the Prime Minister had a more preponderant role. In this direction, Kamiya (2020, 1) highlighted that:

> Shinzo Abe will be remembered as a consequential prime minister who advanced a vision of the international order that would be comfortable both for Japan and the rest of the international community and promoted the international cooperation necessary to achieve such an order.

An example of Shinzo Abe's prominent role in development cooperation was the creation of the SDGs Promotion Headquarters; a cabinet body headed by the Prime Minister and composed of all ministers, on May 20, 2016. This entity aims to ensure a whole-of-government approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda in a comprehensive and effective manner (MoFA Japan, 2020). As of December 2024, 15 meetings have been held, addressing various topics to promote and implement the SDGs more effectively, both domestically and internationally (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2024).

Although Shinzo Abe is no longer in power,[4] the LDP remains Japan's most significant political force. Consequently, subsequent Prime Ministers—Yoshihide Suga, Fumio Kishida, and Shigeru Ishiba—have each maintained,

4 Editor´s note: Former Prime Minister Abe was killed by a political opponent in 2022. From October 2025 onwards, Prime Minister Ishiba was replaced by Sanae Takasihi current Prime Minister in November 2025..

with distinct policy orientations, a political and strategic continuity in Japan's approach toward LAC.

3.2 Ideas

The ideas promoted by Japan through cooperation initiatives in the region are based on the "Together" strategy, launched in 2014 by Prime Minister Abe. This strategy relied on three guiding principles:

> 1. To progress together in connectivity of economies by enhancing a free and open international economic system.
> 2. To lead together toward the connectivity of values supported on a rule-based multilateralism.
> 3. To inspire together in connective of wisdom with the aim to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. (MoFA Japan, 2021)

Similarly, the 2015 ODA Charter established that:

> Japan will provide assistance to foster an environment more conducive to economic development through trade and investment, among others, and to extend necessary cooperation against a backdrop of internal disparities which exist even in countries that have achieved considerable progress in development. Consideration will be given to the presence of ethnic Japanese ("Nikkei") communities in the region, which serves as a strong bond between Japan and the region (MoFA Japan, 2015, 8).

All these documents (the Together strategy, the 2015 ODA Charter, and the White Papers on Development Cooperation) underline the historical connections between Japan and the region based on enduring and amicable relations, primarily attributed to the substantial Nikkei community, which surpasses 2 million (Zavarce, 2022).

Since key diplomatic allies of Japan in LAC are also considered Pacific countries, including Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, and Chile, Japan advocates for the principles of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, launched by Prime Minister Abe in 2016. This strategy is based on three central pillars: 1) Promotion and establishment of the international rule of law, freedom of navigation and trade; 2) Pursuit of economic prosperity; and 3) Commitment

for peace and stability (MoFA Japan, 2019).

It is necessary to mention that Japan released a new Development Cooperation Charter in 2023. While it does not make reference to Latin America or any other specific region, the document highlights the following principles for ensuring the appropriateness of development cooperation:

> 1. Situation regarding consolidation of democratization, the rule of law and the protection of basic human rights.
> 2. Avoidance of any use of development cooperation for military purposes or for aggravation of international conflicts.
> 3. Situation regarding military expenditures, development and production of weapons of mass destruction and missiles, export and import of arms, etc.
> 4. Impact of development on the environment and climate change.
> 5. Debt sustainability.
> 6. Promotion of inclusive societies, including gender mainstreaming, and ensuring fairness.
> 7. Preventing fraud and corruption.
> 8. Security and safety of development cooperation personnel. (MoFA Japan, 2023).

It is also important to note that during Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Brazil in May 2024, he delivered a speech entitled "Paving a Pathway to 'Human Dignity' with Latin America and the Caribbean" at Sao Paulo University, where he presented his vision to nurture cooperation with LAC based on four pillars:

> 1. Ensuring the free and open international order based on the rule of law
> 2. Overcoming common challenges that humanity faces, such as the environment and climate change
> 3. Pursuing prosperity that can be shared by all people in the world and does not come at others' expense
> 4. People-to-people ties (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2024)

Moreover, as a traditional donor and an OECD-DAC member, Japan has embraced the principles and ideas established in the 2005 Paris

Declaration, the 2011 Busan Partnership and the 2016 Nairobi Partnership when promoting cooperation with recipient countries.

3.3 Interests

According to the latest "Diplomatic Initiative Toward LAC," Japan will pursue new partnerships with the region based on traditional diplomatic approaches (e.g., bilateral policy coordination, collaboration in the international arena, development cooperation, economic relations, and people to people exchanges) in increasingly important affairs such as 1) maritime issues and gender equality, 2) Nikkei community. (MoFA Japan, 2024).

However, when addressing Japan's interests in the region, it is important to note that historically, Japan has not sought a prominent role in LAC, as the region is considered part of the U.S. traditional sphere of influence (Potter, 2015 and Garcia, 2020). Therefore, as bilateral and multilateral relations have evolved, Miyachi (2017) argued that Japan's approach to the region has been built on four pillars: 1) coordination with U.S. diplomacy; 2) maximization of economic interests; 3) establishment of friendship with as many countries as possible to obtain support in the UN; and 4) prioritization of countries and issues related to Japanese immigrants.

Table 1: Japan's ODA Top 5 Disbursements to the LAC region (2017-2021)[5]

(Unit: Millions of Dollars[4])

2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Country	Total (General Expenditure)	Country	Total (General Expenditure)	Country	Total (General Expenditure)	Country	Total (General Expenditure)	Country	Total (General Expenditure)
Costa Rica	**55.74 (14.96%)**	**Brazil**	**67.73 (14.96%)**	**Brazil**	**61.78 (14.96%)**	**Brazil**	**157.36 (24.42%)**	**Brazil**	**312.93 (43.98%)**
Brazil	**48.12 (12.91%)**	**Peru**	**58.89 (13.01%)**	**Paraguay**	**56.00 (13.56%)**	**Mexico**	**112.78 (17.50%)**	**Panama**	**75.55 (10.61%)**
Peru	**37.23 (9.99%)**	**Costa Rica**	**48.74 (10.77%)**	**Costa Rica**	**35.16 (8.51%)**	**El Salvador**	**62.76 (9.74%)**	**Paraguay**	**44.93 (6.31%)**
Cuba	35.72 (9.59%)	Cuba	47.48 (10.49%)	Peru	32.50 (7.87%)	Paraguay	53.44 (8.29%)	El Salvador	38.71 (5.44%)
Paraguay	23.29 (6.25%)	Haiti	43.33 (9.57%)	Honduras	24.24 (5.87%)	Guatemala	42.00 (6.51%)	Guatemala	24.70 (3.47%)

Source: Elaborated by the author based on MoFA Japan (2018-2022)

Table 1 reflects the amount allocated by Japan to LAC countries during the 2017-2021 period. The distribution patterns outlined above revealed that

5 The total amount (100%) of ODA disbursement for the LAC region by year was as follows: 372.45 (2017), 452.46 (2018), 412.83 (2019), 644.28 (2020), and 711.41 (2021)..

Japan places special emphasis on cooperation with Brazil, Peru, Costa Rica, and Paraguay (highlighted cells).

The relevance of Brazil, Peru, and Paraguay lies in their status as destination countries for the most significant settlements of Japanese nationals and their descendants outside of Japan. Brazil has approximately 2.7 million Nikkei residents, Peru about 200,000, and Paraguay around 10,000 (JICA, 2024).

Brazil is also important for Japan's economic interests, as evidenced by placing second in the number of Japanese corporations in LAC, surpassed only by Mexico (JETRO, 2019). Paraguay is one of the leading producers and exporters of soybeans worldwide, with Japan being one of its primary destinations (Embajada del Japón en Paraguay, 2012). Furthermore, Peru stands out as one of the selected nations in the region with which Japan has an Economic Partnership Agreement (MoFA Japan, 2020). This agreement serves as a framework for fostering economic cooperation, trade liberalization, and strengthening bilateral ties.

The relations between Japan and Costa Rica differ from the other cases. Japan sees this Central American nation as a like-minded country that shares common principles like peace, democracy, and human rights. Another essential feature of this relation is environmental preservation. Because of this, Japan proactively shares knowledge and experiences based on its best practices for sustainable development in Costa Rica. Besides, Costa Rica is a strategic ally for promoting Japan's triangular cooperation in the region (Embajada del Japón en Costa Rica, 2021).

Additionally, amidst China's growing presence in the region, Myers (2024) claimed that Japan and the U.S. "have expressed interest in modernizing and expanding their partnership in an era of strategic competition between the U.S. and China," adding that "many bilateral and multilateral platforms offer opportunities both to strengthen ties and improve coordination when supporting partners in the so-called Global South," including LAC.

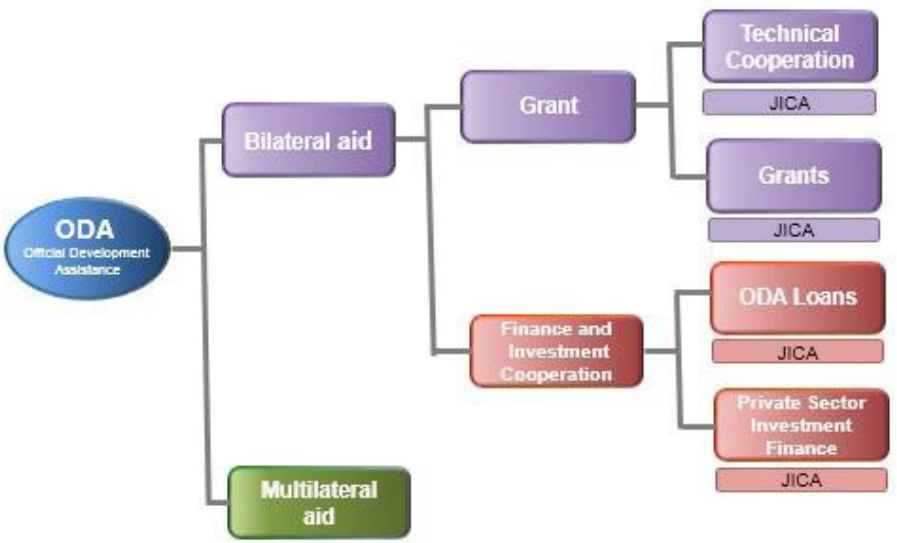
The dynamic explained above exposes that while Japan's coordination with the U.S. is important, its approach pursues multiple goals in LAC, taking into account new markets, Japanese communities abroad, and other diplomatic interests.

3.4 Organizations and Vectors/Schemes

The Japanese development system underwent a significant

restructuring in 2008 when most ODA channels were consolidated in the new JICA. Since then, JICA has managed concessional yen loans, grant aid, and technical cooperation. JICA has also promoted triangular cooperation, which involves collaboration between Japan and a former aid recipient in assisting a current aid recipient.

Figure 1: Japan's ODA



Source: Japan International Cooperation Agency (2024)

Likewise, the MoFA of Japan manages a lone bilateral aid budget line dedicated to human security, named the Grassroots Human Security Grant program. Through this initiative, the Japanese government provides financial resources to NGOs and local administrative units through the Japanese embassies. In addition, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation participates in developing cooperation policies providing non-ODA lending (Katada, 2020).

Another important initiative is the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers program (JOCV).[6] Based on official data, 10.081 JOCVs, 2.206

6 JOCV is an international voluntary service established in 1965, which JICA provides under the supervision of the MoFA. It has three main objectives: "1) to provide technical assistance to developing countries, 2) to promote friendship and mutual understanding with foreign

senior volunteers, and 2.089 youth and senior volunteers for Nikkei Communities have decided to take part in projects in LAC (JICA, 2020).

Beyond ODA, in recent years, Japan has also promoted the use of other official flows (OOF), which the OECD (2022) defines as official sector transactions that do not meet ODA criteria. In this direction, the Development Cooperation Charter (2023) establishes that OOF are managed by organizations such as the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, Nippon Export and Investment Insurance, Japan Overseas Infrastructure Investment Corporation for Transport & Urban Development, Fund Corporation for the Overseas Development of Japan's ICT and Postal Services, and Japan Organization for Metals and Energy Security.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan used multiple schemes to provide economic cooperation to LAC countries. For example, UNICEF (2022) reported that in 2022, as part of efforts to accelerate the vaccination rate in the region, the Japanese government allocated US$10 million to strengthen cold chain systems and build local capacities for vaccine management in Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Honduras. This amount complemented a 2021 donation of US$11.11 million to six other countries in the region, for enhancing COVID-19 vaccination capacities.

3.5 Regional/International Organizations

Historically, Japan has prioritized diplomatic relations with LAC countries through bilateral channels. However, when partnering with regional or international organizations, Japan has preferred to engage through the agencies within the UN system. For example, between 2002 and 2023, Japan, through the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, sponsored 298 projects, of which 13,2% are distributed in LAC (UNTFHS, 2023). Likewise, since 2006, Japan has been a member state of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Besides, Japan has at times collaborated with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), relying on it as a central multilateral platform to consolidate financial engagement and deliver multiple development programs in LAC (Garcia, 2020).

countries, and 3) to widen the perspective of young Japanese about the world" (Okabe et al. 2019, 2)..

4. China's South-South Cooperation Approach

Traditionally, China was seen as a recipient country, receiving aid from Japan and other established donors. However, China surpassed Japan as the second-largest economy in the world in 2010 and has transformed itself into the most active cooperation provider outside of the OECD, competing against traditional actors in the development system and challenging their approaches worldwide.

4.1 Institutions

China's cooperation model is supported by a hybrid institutional structure—neither purely presidential nor parliamentary—in which, according to the 2018 Constitution, the National People's Congress appoints the President. However, it is necessary to point out that despite the different transformations that China has undergone in recent years due to its incredible economic growth, one characteristic remains constant, namely the political monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China's ruling party since 1949 (Brown, 2016a).

In addition, Brown (2016b) showed how, since 2012, when Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the CCP, there has been an increasing concentration of power around his figure. A key example of this trend is the 2018 amendment to the Constitution of China, which removed the restriction that limited the President and Vice President to two consecutive terms, paving the way for his political consolidation.

China's cooperation policies are not exempt from this control, Yu (2024, 3) argued that "under President Xi, Beijing's foreign policymaking has evolved from a more pluralistic approach – with various ministries and agencies partially shaping the final decision – into a form of centralized decision-making by President Xi and his lieutenants within the politburo". However, she also emphasized that despite the centralization of foreign policy under Xi Jinping, Chinese leaders still seek expertise from the country's wider strategic community, including academics, policy experts, and former officials.

This evolution in foreign policymaking illustrates how Xi's political consolidation extends beyond domestic affairs and into China's external engagements, a dynamic commonly observed in Global South countries, particularly within the BRICS group, where executive power often plays a

dominant role in shaping foreign policy.

4.2. Ideas

China's foreign policy is based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non- interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

Also, aiming to differentiate itself from traditional donors and OECD members, China's cooperation approach is framed into the South-South relations and cooperation modality (Kragelund, 2019). Because of this, China hardly crafts its narrative with expressions like aid, donor, or recipient. Therefore, "the dominant rhetoric from the Chinese side is that it engages with the recipients of its aid and other resources as a partner rather than being involved in a donor-recipient relationship" (Stallings, 2016, 73).

China's cooperation policy with the region is established in the Policy Paper on LAC. It states that:

> Based on equality and mutual benefit, the comprehensive and cooperative partnership between China and LAC is oriented toward common development. China is committed to building a new relationship with LAC with five salient features, namely, sincerity and mutual trust in the political field, win-win cooperation on the economic front, mutual learning in culture, close coordination in international affairs, as well as mutual reinforcement between China's cooperation with the region as a whole and its bilateral relations with individual countries in the region (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

Furthermore, the document recognized a number of fields to establish regional cooperation projects led by China. These are political, economic, social, cultural, people-to-people, international collaboration, peace, security, and judicial affairs.

In 2021, China launched a White Paper entitled "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, which drew China's Principles for Development Cooperation: Respecting each other as equals; Doing the best we can to help; Focusing on development and improving people's lives; Providing the means for independent development; Conducting effective cooperation in

diverse forms; Ensuring delivery and sustainability; Being open and inclusive to promote exchanges and mutual learning; and Advancing with the times and breaking new ground (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

These principles updated the Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries, adopted in 1964, and reflect China's intention to adapt its cooperation model to a more dynamic international cooperation system.

4.3. Interests

China's increasing interest is closely tied to securing access to critical raw materials and agricultural products, including but not limited to petroleum, minerals, and soybeans. Simultaneously, the CCP is actively working to cultivate political backing for its commitment to the One-China Policy, a move designed to diplomatically isolate Taiwan and enhance China's influence. China is also nurturing soft power, projecting its development model based on infrastructure and industrialization, and attempting to weaken the development models supported by traditional International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and the IDB. Beyond these geopolitical aims, China also aspires to generate new opportunities and markets, providing advantageous conditions for the promotion of Chinese goods. This multifaceted approach underscores China's comprehensive strategy to bolster its presence and influence on both economic and political fronts within LAC (Zavarce, 2022).

In order to achieve China's wider interests in the region, the White Paper on Development Cooperation (2021) highlighted the importance of the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) for its foreign policy, stating that through this platform, China aims to enhance policy coordination with its international partners, strengthen infrastructure connectivity to connect China with the world through air, land and sea, promote trade, deep financial integration, and foster closer people-to-people ties.

When partnering with LAC nations, China has given priority to left and center-left-likeminded oriented governments with closer political identities, which have also been accused, mainly by the Western countries, of poor governance and lack of the rule of law, e.g., Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (Alvaro & Minaya, 2015). Still, China has also promoted cooperation to a lesser extent with more conservative and pro-U.S. governments, such as Colombia during the Santos and Duque

administrations or Guyana during the Granger and Ali administrations.

Consequently, Chinese financial entities have become alternative sources of economic resources for countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela, which, because of their large foreign debts and radical political models, have been unable to access resources from traditional financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the IDB.

4.4. Organizations and Vectors/Schemes

In contrast to other regions, Chinese investment in LAC has grown in recent years. LAC countries started joining the BRI[7] in 2017, opening new opportunities for China – Latin America trade, investment, and cooperation in several fields (Baker McKenzie, 2020).

Since China is not an OECD member and does not have to report to an intergovernmental entity periodically, there is a lack of public data and information regarding its cooperation projects. In addition, China's approach combines resources traditionally categorized as ODA with OOF. This situation makes it difficult to assess China's cooperation realistically. (Gallagher & Irvin, 2015).

However, China has been increasing the availability of statistical data regarding cooperation initiatives. The White Paper on Development Cooperation (2021, 11) showed how, from 2013 to 2018, China allocated a total of RMB 270.2 billion for foreign assistance: Grants of RMB 127.8 billion, Interest-free loans of RMB 11.3 billion, and Concessional loans of RMB 131.1 billion, specifying the field and partner countries involved.

In addition, other estimations calculated that China has disbursed investments and contracts in the region as follows:

7 Currently, twenty two LAC countries have signed agreements under the BRI (Green Finance and Development Center, 2024)..

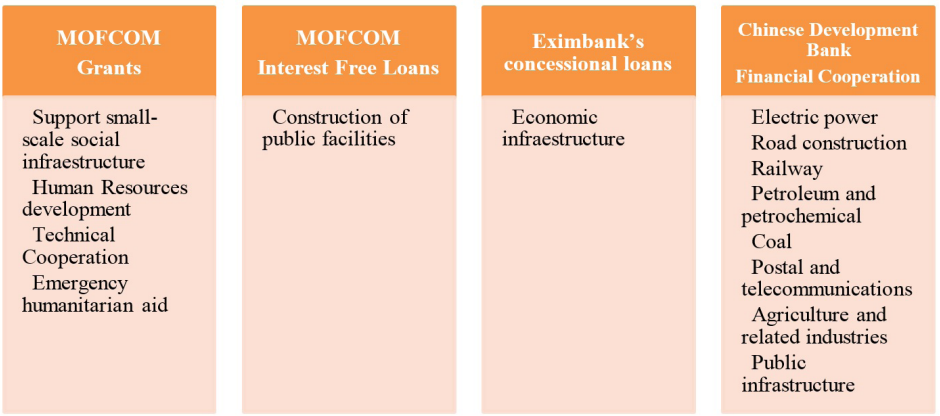
Table 2: China's Top 5 Disbursements in LAC[8]

Country	Amount (%)[7]
Venezuela	$59.2 B (49.15%)
Brazil	$ 32.4 B (26.90%)
Ecuador	$ 11.8 B (9.79%)
Argentina	$ 7.7 B (6.39%)
Bolivia	$ 3.2 B (2.65%)

Source: Ray & Myers (2024)

These financial flows, as illustrated in Figure 2, have three main components: grants and interest-free loans, managed by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), concessional loans handled by the Eximbank, and other sources of financial cooperation sponsored by the Chinese Development Bank (Gallagher & Irvin, 2015; Stallings, 2016).

Figure 2: Type of China's Aid

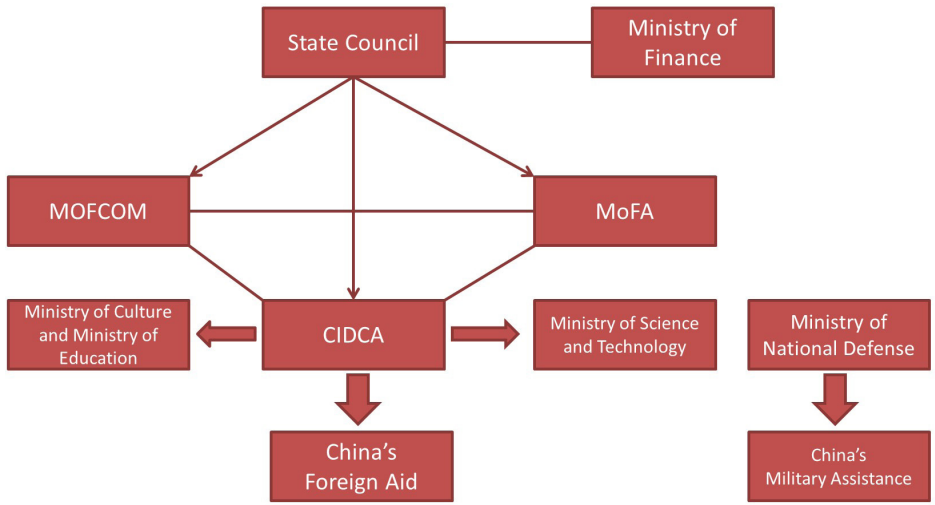


Source: Elaborated by the author (2024)

Beyond the MOFCOM, the Eximbank, and the Chinese Development Bank, China's internal architecture includes several other organizations, as reflected in Figure 3:

8 The total amount (100%) of development finance disbursed for the LAC region in 2023 was $ 120.4 B..

Figure 3: China's Aid System



Source: Azis and Basen (2023)

However, despite its complex organizational architecture, after a period of expansion, there has been an increasing focus on establishing a dedicated cooperation agency in recent years, China's International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), created in 2018.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China strengthened the significance of the Digital Silk Road, bringing new opportunities through the so-called Health Silk Road. In this sense, many LAC nations received sanitary and medical equipment from China. Similarly, LAC countries used China's digital solutions to address the pandemic.[9]

Moreover, from 2019 to 2021 China donated nearly $215 million in supplies to the region, ranging from surgical gloves to advanced thermal imaging technologies, and offered $1 billion in loans for vaccine purchases (Wilson Center, 2021). Likewise, according to Stuenkel (2021), by mid-May 2020, China had exported more than 250 million Covid-19 vaccine doses globally overall, or 42 percent of its total production, being the LAC region the

9 For example, different companies such as Alipay and Tencent have developed health apps that generate QR codes indicating a user's health status, and Alibaba is already offering its cloud services to model regional COVID-19 outbreaks and connect patients to health professionals (Malena, 2021)..

recipient of more than half of China's total exports, around 165 million doses.

4.5 Regional/International Organizations

Over the past decade, China has actively nurtured its relations with the region, primarily through the CELAC platform. The CELAC-China forum was established on July 17th, 2014, at the end of the 6th Summit of the BRICS in Brasília. As observed by Garcia (2020), China has deliberately chosen this avenue as its preferred mode of engagement with the region in which the U.S., European countries, or Japan do not participate.

China's engagement with CELAC was strengthened at the first ministerial meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, held in Beijing, on January 8th and 9th, 2015. There, Xi Jinping set a $500 billion goal in inter-regional trade and $250 billion of FDI until 2019. This strategy was supported by a "1+3+6" framework, which intended to generate inclusive growth and sustainable development through "three engines" (trade, investment, and cooperation) in "six" fields: energy and resources, infrastructure, agriculture, manufacturing, technological innovation, and information technologies. (Dussel, 2021).

China renewed its commitment to the region in April 2025, at the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum, celebrated in Beijing. During the opening ceremony, Xi Jinping launched five programs (Solidarity, Development, Civilization, Peace, and People to People) that advance shared development and revitalization, and contribute to a China-LAC community with a shared future. Among the benefits of these programs are new opportunities for economic cooperation as well as 3,500 government scholarships, 10,000 training opportunities in China, 500 International Chinese Language Teachers Scholarships, 300 training opportunities for poverty reduction professionals, and 1,000 funded placements through the Chinese Bridge program (China-CELAC Forum, 2025).

Another relevant organization for China's cooperation is the Chinese-founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in which nowadays, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay are full non-regional members.

5. South Korea's Cooperation Approach

Not long ago, South Korea was still considered a recipient country,

receiving ODA from the U.S., Japan, and other major donors. However, between the 1980s and the 2000s, the country experienced rapid economic growth, becoming a developed country, joining the OECD in 1996, and since 2010, being an OECD-DAC member. Due to this situation, development cooperation with different regions of the world, including LAC, represents an important topic in South Korea's foreign policy

5.1 Institutions

South Korea's cooperation approach relies on a presidential system established in its constitution (1987). According to the constitutional text, "the Prime Minister shall be appointed by the President with the consent of the National Assembly." This is important since Korea's Framework Act on International Development Cooperation (2014) designates the Prime Minister as the ultimate authority for Korean development cooperation.

The Prime Minister exercises authority through the Committee for International Development Cooperation, a high-level body composed of 25 members: 15 ministers, 3 heads of agencies, and 7 civil society experts. This Committee is responsible for (1) formulating the Mid-term ODA Policy and Annual Implementation Plans; (2) conducting evaluations; (3) coordinating ODA policies and plans; and (4) addressing other matters deemed important and recommended by the chairperson (ODA Korea, 2023).

Consequently, although South Korea operates under a presidential system, its constitutional framework delegates the responsibility of leading the policy-making process linked to cooperation policies to the Prime Minister's Office.

5.2 Ideas

South Korea, as a proactive member of the OECD-DAC, promotes the principles established in the 2005 Paris Declaration: ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability. Likewise, South Korea embraced the principles agreed upon in the 2011 Busan Partnership and reiterated in 2016 in Nairobi to make development cooperation effective: ownership of development priorities by developing countries, a focus on results, partnerships for development, and transparency and shared responsibility.

In 2021, aiming to comply with international commitments and

make aid more effective, KOICA launched its Mid-term Sectoral Strategy to promote development cooperation. This strategy seeks to align South Korea's cooperation with the 2030 Agenda. Thus, KOICA promotes policies oriented to:

> Inclusive development through quality education; ensuring health rights for all; peaceful, just, and inclusive societies; securing a stable and affluent life for rural people; water as a natural right; promoting sustainable development through righteous energy production and consumption; sustainable transportation for all; creating inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and communities; contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through STI; limiting the rise in global average temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius and a planet safe from the climate crisis; establishing an equal society without discrimination based on gender and ensuring dignity for everyone; and promoting human rights for all in partner countries through people-centered development cooperation. (KOICA, 2021).

Additionally, in addressing cooperation with LAC in particular, Korean authorities have highlighted mutual trust as a foundational principle for relations with the region (ECLAC, 2022). This principle was emphasized by former Prime Minister Han Duck-soo during his visit to Latin America in 2022, as well as by Latin American diplomats and in official documents from multilateral forums involving South Korea and LAC countries.

5.3 Interests

South Korea considers the LAC region an important growing market with multiple partners. In this sense, the IDB reported that:

> Bilateral trade in goods took off, growing at an impressive annual rate of 11.5% between 1990 and 2021, more than twice the growth rate of trade with Japan. In 2021, it reached US$57 billion—an all-time high. The trade boom was followed by US$26 billion in investments by Korean firms in the region since 2000. (IDB, 2022, 11)

Additionally, ever since becoming a member of the OECD, South Korea has prioritized development assistance in its foreign policy agenda

(Faure, 2016). Therefore, international agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development allow the country to fulfill its duty as an OECD-DAC member and portray itself as a bridge between developing and developed countries based on its experience.

Moreover, Lopez Aymes emphasized that "Korean and Latin American scholars, as well as some government officials, normally consider that Korea and its firms aim for natural resources (mining, agricultural goods, and notably energy sources) and cheap labor for assembly work" (2012, 1). Consequently, South Korea, which imports 95% of its energy, sees in LAC a region with one of the largest energy reserves in the world, which can secure the supply of energy resources virtually free of geopolitical risks.

Table 3 shows the top LAC recipients of South Korea's in recent years:

Table 3: KOICA top recipients (2017-2021) (Unit: Thousand US$)[10]

2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total	Country	Total
(13) 1. Bolivia	10.653 (17%)	**(13) 1. Paraguay**	12.750 (16%)	**(16) 1. Bolivia**	12.602 (16%)	**(9) 1. Paraguay**	13.817 (21%)	**(8) 1. Paraguay**	16.098 (23%)
(16) 2. Peru	9.515 (15%)	**(15) 2. Bolivia**	12.166 (15%)	**(18) 2. Paraguay**	12.465 (16%)	**(18) 2. Colombia**	9.027 (14%)	**(17) 2. Colombia**	10.932 (15%)
		(16) 3. Peru	11.522 (14%)	**(20) 3. Peru**	9.719 (12%)			**(19) 3. Bolivia**	9.958 (14%)

Source: KOICA (2018-2022)

In this dynamic, Bolivia and Paraguay were among the first countries to receive Korean Migration. Kim and Lee pointed out that "since the first official emigrants landed in Brazil in 1963, thousands of Koreans moved to farm plantations in Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia until the early 1980s" (2016, 79).

Likewise, both countries have vast quantities of natural resources; Paraguay is rich in hydropower, timber, iron ore, manganese, and limestone, and Bolivia in lithium, tin, natural gas, petroleum, zinc, tungsten, antimony, silver, iron, lead, gold, timber, hydropower (CIA, 2023). Moreover, both nations are linked to Mercosur as State parties.

In the cases of Colombia and Peru, these countries are among the few nations with Free Trade Agreements with South Korea. Peru is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. These partnerships work

10 The total amount (100%) of ODA disbursement for the LAC region by year was as follows: $62.632 (2017), $81.405 (2018), $79.726 (2019), $ 66.358 (2020), $70.884 (2021)..

as catalysts for promoting cooperation among their participants.

5.4 Organizations and Vectors/Schemes

South Korea's ODA organizational structure is given by the Framework Act on International Development Cooperation (2014), which established in Article 9[11] that following the guidelines emanated from the Committee for International Development Cooperation, led by the Prime Minister, the main organizations in charge of supervising cooperation policies are the MoFA and the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Under the supervision of the MoFA, KOICA is the leading agency in charge of ODA. It was established in April 1991 as a government-funded agency to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of Korea's ODA by unifying the segmented aid programs implemented by different ministries (KOICA, 2024).

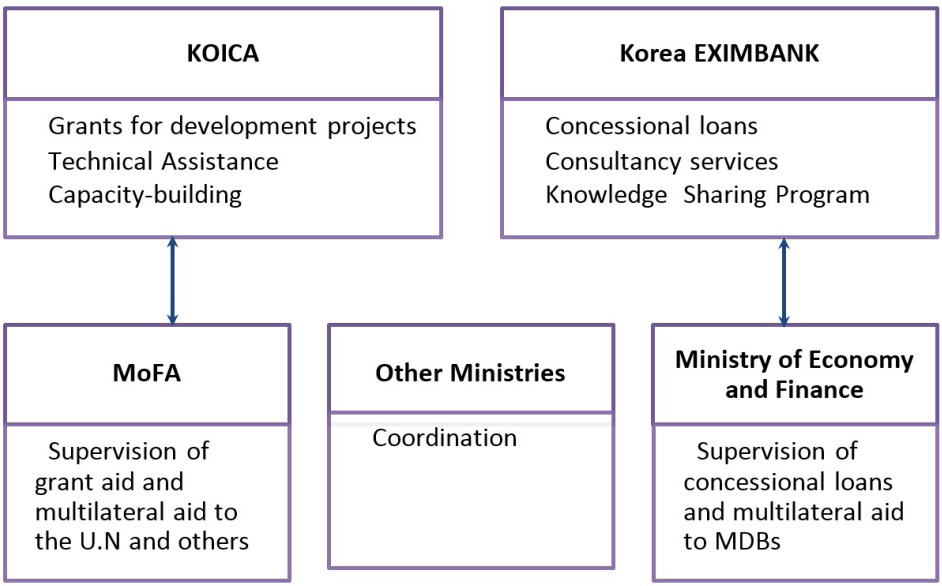
KOICA led wide cooperation initiatives such as projects, overseas volunteer groups, global training, public-private partnerships, overseas emergency relief, and collaboration with international organizations, focusing on healthcare, education, governance-peace, agriculture and fisheries, technology-environment-energy, and cross-cutting issues.

Another important agency within South Korea's cooperation system is the EXIMBANK, "established with aims to facilitate the development of Korea's economy and enhance economic cooperation with foreign countries through the provision of financial supports for export and import transactions, overseas investments projects, and the development of overseas natural resources" (Korea Eximbank, 2024).

Consequently, figure 4 draws South Korea's organizations and vectors for development cooperation:

11 Article 9:
(1) Loans, among bilateral development cooperation, shall be supervised by the Minister of Economy and Finance, and grant aid by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
(2) Cooperation with international financial institutions under the Act on the Measures for the Admission to International Financial Institutions, among multilateral development cooperation, shall be supervised by the Minister of Economy and Finance and cooperation with other organizations by the Minister of Foreign Affairs..

Figure 4: South Korea's ODA organizational structure



Source: Elaborated by the author (2024)

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020, KOICA established the ABC program to strengthen the capacities of beneficiary countries through comprehensive emergency assistance, humanitarian support, and coordination with existing projects. According to Quispe and Llatas (n.d.) and KOICA's 2022 annual report, eight countries in Central and South America received 14 projects with a total budget of USD 5,300,015, benefiting 9,436,462 individuals. Paraguay, Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru were the primary recipients.

5.5 Regional/International organizations

Beyond bilateral channels, South Korea's engagement with the region has been nurtured mainly through two regional organizations: the IDB and ECLAC.

South Korea became a non-borrowing member of the IDB in 2005. In this direction, since 2012, Korea has financed development projects in the region through the IBD for more than US$ 550.6 million in areas such

as innovation, poverty reduction, private-sector development, and public capacity-building (IDB, 2022).

South Korea also joined ECLAC on July 23rd, 2007. Since then, several cooperation agreements have been signed mainly for promoting trade and investment, as well as sharing and applying development knowledge to achieve the goals established in the 2030 Agenda, based on the previous South Korea's development experiences.

6. Comparing the cooperation approaches of Japan, China, and South Korea to Latin America and the Caribbean

This section aims to contrast the approaches undertaken by Japan, China, and South Korea during the post-2015 period to identify their similarities and differences. In this direction, a comparison based on institutions, ideas, interests, organizations - vectors/schemes, and regional/international organizations is presented as follows:

Firstly, regarding institutions, we can see that Japan's political model is based on a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament called the Diet, as Lancaster (2007) highlighted in her study of the country. In contrast, China, in theory and as reflected in its 2018 Constitution, has implemented a hybrid system in which the National People's Congress appoints the President. Meanwhile, South Korea follows a presidential system in which the President, as Head of State, chooses a Prime Minister.

However, to not overlook the political dynamics that shape the three systems, it is necessary to consider the nature of the political regimes and the practices established within each. In this regard, assessments made by independent organizations—such as the Freedom in the World Report, the Democracy Index, and the World Report, published annually by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and Human Rights Watch, respectively—enable a more comprehensive understanding of the internal political dynamics (institutions) in the countries under study.

The Freedom Report (2025) characterized Japan as a multiparty parliamentary democracy in which political rights and civil liberties are generally well respected. Similarly, despite the recent controversial attempt by former President Yoon Suk Yeol to declare martial law, the same report labeled South Korea as a democratic system with regular rotations of power and robust political pluralism, with the largest parties representing conservative and liberal views. Both countries are also categorized as democracies, Japan as a "full democracy" and South Korea as a "flawed democracy" by the Democracy

Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024) and recognized for having a positive record of human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

On the other hand, the same reports considered China as an "authoritarian regime" in which the ruling CCP continues to tighten control over all aspects of life and governance, including the state bureaucracy. The reports also highlighted the concentration of power in the executive branch, especially in the figure of Xi Jinping, and the constant violation of human rights by the government party.

In relation to the ideas promoted through the cooperation initiatives supported by these countries, first, Japan bases its cooperation on the principles established in the ODA Charters (2015, 2023), such as sharing knowledge and best practices centered on Japan's own development experience, freedom, democracy, and respect for fundamental human rights and the rule of law. Likewise, Japan embraced the principles promoted by OECD-DAC members. Moreover, when focusing specifically on the Latin American region, Japan bases its cooperation on the principles established in the "Together" initiative and the Free and Open-Indo Pacific Strategy.

It is fundamental to point out that the ideas promoted by Japan through its development cooperation, as stated in the ODA Charters (2015 and 2023), are intertwined with Japan's national interest.

Similar to Japan, to some extent, South Korea, as an OECD-DAC member, embraces the principles and ideas agreed upon within this group. Therefore, when promoting cooperation abroad, the South Korean government supports the principles established in the 2005 Paris Declaration, the 2011 Busan Partnership, and the 2016 Nairobi Partnership such as country ownership, focus on results, inclusive partnership, transparency, and mutual accountability.

On the other hand, China has built its cooperation philosophy on the rhetoric of countries of the South, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. The specific ideas promoted by the Chinese government in this region are established in China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean.

The ideas that the three countries promote through their development cooperation initiatives are intrinsically linked to the interests they pursue in LAC. In this direction, Japan's ODA to the region is driven primarily by economic and commercial interests linked to the consolidation of new markets for Japanese firms and the protection of the interests of its

financial institutions. However, Japan also aims to contribute to the region's poverty reduction, protect Japanese communities abroad, and promote democratization while maintaining the best possible relations with the U.S., its principal international ally and, historically, the most influential country in this region.

In the case of China, the country has promoted development cooperation in the LAC region primarily for the motivation of a developmental state. In this sense, China has sought access to natural resources and created new and alternative markets for Chinese goods and investment. Nevertheless, amidst the increasing global tensions, the country has also promoted its One China Policy and projected soft power in the region through the BRI.

Regarding South Korea, it has fostered engagement with the region by aiming to secure new markets for its firms through increased trade and investment, fulfill its duty as an OECD-DAC member by acting as a bridge between developed and developing countries and supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and guarantee its supply of natural resources from LAC, a region considered virtually free of geopolitical risks.

Based on the interests promoted by these three countries, and without denying the specific political interests and differences in their approaches, it is possible to say that East Asian approaches have prioritized economic and developmental interests in LAC.

At the national level, since 2008, with the launching of the new JICA, Japan has centered most of its ODA initiatives within this organization (Katada, 2020). Similarly, South Korea established KOICA as an agency to unify the fragmented aid programs previously implemented by various ministries. However, it is important to note that, in both countries, other institutions remain involved in the broader development cooperation architecture beyond these centralized bodies.

In China, three main organizations are involved in cooperation policies at the ministerial level: the MoFA, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Commerce. Additionally, CIDCA, Eximbank, and the Chinese Development Bank, among several other organizations, take part in the different stages of the policy-making process.

At the international level, Japan and South Korea have historically promoted cooperation initiatives in LAC through bilateral channels. However, when engaging with regional organizations, these countries prefer to partner with traditional institutions such as the UN, its agencies, and the IDB to establish regional cooperation projects.

Contrarily, since 2014, China has bet on the China-CELAC forum as

the primary regional organization to promote cooperation projects with the region. China has also used the AIIB to finance several developments in LAC.

Finally, about vectors/schemes, Japan has cooperated with LAC through the primary North-South Cooperation schemes established by the OECD, which include grants, loans, and technical cooperation. The country has also included other cooperation initiatives under the concept of OOF in recent years. This cooperation resulted in multiple projects addressing disaster risk reduction, environmental issues, climate change, economic and infrastructure development, medical and healthcare, education, and peacebuilding. Similarly, South Korea has implemented cooperation through grants, loans, technical assistance, consultancy services, capacity building, and knowledge-sharing programs.

Even though China considers itself a SSC practitioner, it has also promoted cooperation with the LAC region through grants, interest-free loans, concessional loans, and other activities of financial cooperation, replicating, to some extent, and without taking the payment conditions and field of investment into consideration, the approach used by Japan and South Korea.

7. Conclusion

Historically, Japan has been a proactive contributor to development cooperation. Although LAC is not the primary destination for Japan's ODA, the region has received consistent support during the post-2015 period. In contrast, China has emerged as a rising provider in the region, challenging the dominance of traditional donors such as the U.S., the E.U., and even Japan. While South Korea is a relatively recent donor, it is increasingly viewed as an alternative development partner for LAC countries, particularly in the context of growing geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S.

When comparing these three cases, we can observe both similarities and differences, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of Development Cooperation Approaches

Dimension	Country		
	Japan	China	South Korea
Institutions	- Constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system (Democratic)	- Hybrid system (Authoritarian)	- Presidential system (Democratic)
Ideas	- OECD-DAC principles - ODA Charter - Juntos - Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy - Human Dignity	- Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence - Policy Paper on LAC - White Paper on Development Cooperation	- OECD-DAC principles - Mutual trust
Interests	- Seek new markets - Promote Sustainable Development - Protect its nationals - Reinforce U.S-Japan Alliance	- Seek new markets - Obtain natural resources - Achieve support for the One-China Policy - Increase political influence - Infrastructure connectivity	- Seek new markets - Promote Sustainable Development - Obtain natural resources
Organizations	JICA + other organizations	Complex Ministerial Architecture	KOICA + other organizations
Vectors	- ODA - OOF **(Financial Cooperation)**	- South-South Cooperation - Foreign Aid - FDI **(Financial Cooperation)**	- ODA **(Financial Cooperation)**
Regional Organizations	- IDB - UN Agencies	- CELAC-China Forum - AIIB	- IDB - UN Agencies

Source: Elaborated by the author (2024)

Beyond the similarities and differences among these countries, it is important to highlight the vast opportunities for cooperation in LAC, a region marked by significant disparities and development gaps. For example, recent reports by ECLAC (2022) and the IDB (2023) indicate that, in line with trends observed in other emerging economies, financial flows to LAC have declined in recent quarters. This trend is likely to continue and may even deepen with the ongoing reorganization of USAID promoted by the Trump administration. Furthermore, nearly 18% of the population lives on less than US$3.10 per day,

pushing poverty levels above those recorded a decade ago. In addition, long-term economic growth is currently estimated at around 2%, a rate insufficient to meet the development goals of most countries in the region.

Amidst this reality, international agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and the Paris Agreement provide a framework for traditional donors, emerging providers from the Global South, and other stakeholders to avoid overlapping initiatives and enhance the effectiveness of development cooperation.

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes and compares the development cooperation approaches promoted by Japan, China, and South Korea toward the Latin American and Caribbean region in the post 2015 period. The study applies the analytical frameworks of Lancaster (2007)—institutions, ideas, interests, and organizations—and Kragelund (2019)—vectors—relying on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources. The findings indicate that, while each country's cooperation approach has its own features—for instance, Japan and South Korea are OECD members, whereas China is a practitioner of South-South cooperation—all three prioritize financial cooperation over other forms of engagement.

KEYWORDS
Japan, China, South Korea, Latin America and the Caribbean, Development Cooperation

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