



AUTHORITARIANISM

WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS:

COOPERATION AND CONTROL IN NICARAGUA, EL SALVADOR, AND HONDURAS

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The mission of Expediente Abierto is to produce and disseminate high-quality investigative journalism and content that strengthen critical analysis, civic engagement, and the defense of democracy in Central America.



CREDITS

Author: César E. Santos

Editing: Javier Meléndez and Sergio Cabrales

Coordination: Javier Meléndez

Design: Expediente Abierto



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report examines the nature and implications of cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and three Central American countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras—through the analytical framework of the “arenas of authoritarian cooperation”: administrative, public policy, institutional, and ideational.

The central argument is that relations with China is not limited to conventional economic or diplomatic dimensions, but rather constitutes a multidimensional network of ties encompassing technological transfer, elite training, institutional interaction, and the dissemination of regulatory frameworks. In contexts of democratic erosion, these dynamics can contribute—without the need for direct coercion—to strengthening state capacities that favor the concentration of power and social control.

The three countries analyzed exhibit varying degrees of democratic decline, allowing for an examination of how a common strategy of international projection can generate differentiated effects depending on domestic political conditions. In this sense, the report does not posit a mechanical relationship between Chinese cooperation and the advance of authoritarianism in Central America, rather, it demonstrates a functional affinity between certain instruments of cooperation and the needs of illiberal regimes.

The main finding is that these arenas do not operate in isolation, but rather as an interdependent system. Technology enables new state capacities; institutional cooperation facilitates their adoption; and the ideational dimension contributes to legitimizing them. The result is a cumulative process that simultaneously strengthens China's strategic projection and the governance capacities—including coercive ones—of the recipient states.

KEY FINDINGS BY ARENA

Administrative Arena: Security and Coercive Capacities

Security cooperation reveals the clearest contrasts among the three countries. **Nicaragua** stands out as the most advanced case, where relations with China have directly contributed to strengthening the state's coercive apparatus. Police training programs, the provision of equipment, and the transfer of operational practices have become integrated into an already highly centralized security system geared toward regime preservation.

This has been accompanied by an emerging dimension of military cooperation, which includes the acquisition of equipment and the development of institutional ties between armed forces. Although still incipient, this dimension introduces an additional geopolitical component, particularly regarding the potential dual-use applications of infrastructure.

In **El Salvador**, security cooperation remains at a more limited level. Institutional contacts, political-military dialogue, and the opening of formal communication channels predominate, without any significant transfer of coercive capabilities thus far. Nevertheless, the trend points toward the gradual institutionalization of these ties, suggesting that the security dimension could expand in the medium term.

Honduras, for its part, shows no significant evidence of police or military cooperation with China. This absence is noteworthy, as it reduces Chinese penetration into sensitive sectors of the state. However, it also reflects the still incipient nature of the bilateral relationship, rather than a structural exclusion from this arena.

Taken together, this dimension reveals that security cooperation is highly dependent on the political context. In authoritarian and closed systems, such as Nicaragua, it tends to expand rapidly and deeply. In contrast, in countries with greater pluralism or alternative international alignments, such as Honduras, such cooperation remains more limited.

Public Policy Arena: Technology, Dependence, and Control

The public policy arena constitutes the most strategic axis of cooperation, as it shapes the technological and regulatory architecture of the state. Here, the differences between countries are less about type and more about intensity.

Nicaragua represents the most advanced case of integration into the Chinese technological ecosystem. The expansion of digital infrastructure, telecommunications, and integrated information systems has been rapid and profound, with the participation of multiple Chinese firms in key sectors.

These developments carry implications that extend beyond administrative modernization. The architecture of the implemented systems—based on real-time monitoring, data centralization, and integrated platforms—gives them a dual character. In an authoritarian context, these technologies not only improve state management, but can also strengthen surveillance, communications control, and the ability to anticipate dissent.

El Salvador presents a different pattern, centered on human capital development and knowledge transfer. Training programs, exchanges with technology companies, and the integration of Chinese actors into the education system have facilitated the socialization of officials and professionals into models of digital governance associated with China.

This process is combined with the gradual adoption of specific technologies—in areas such as facial recognition and telecommunications infrastructure—within a context of growing concentration of power. The outcome is not necessarily a replication of the Chinese model, but rather a selective adaptation that can strengthen state capacities for control in subtler ways.

In **Honduras**, cooperation has focused on sectors such as energy and urban digitalization. Although less advanced, elements are already emerging that could lead to technological dependencies, particularly in telecommunications and monitoring systems. The principal risk is not immediate but cumulative: the difficulty of reversing these integrations once they become consolidated.

In general terms, this arena demonstrates that technology functions as a cross-cutting vector of influence. Unlike security cooperation, it does not require explicit

ideological alignment nor does it generate immediate political costs, yet it can produce deep and enduring effects on the state's capacity to manage—and control—society.

Institutional Arena: Elites, Learning, and State Reconfiguration

Institutional cooperation reveals a consistent logic across all three countries: an emphasis on the training, socialization, and articulation of political, administrative, and judicial elites.

In **Nicaragua**, this dimension reaches a particularly high level of integration. Ties between the Chinese Communist Party and the Sandinista National Liberation Front function as an organic channel for political and ideological exchange, complemented by cadre training programs and judicial cooperation.

This type of interaction is not limited to technical transfer, but also involves the circulation of governance models, organizational practices, and conceptions of state power. In a highly centralized regime, these inputs reinforce existing dynamics of control and concentration.

El Salvador presents a more recent but rapidly institutionalizing process. Cooperation includes exchanges between supreme courts, prosecutors' offices, and political parties, as well as training programs for public officials. Particularly relevant is the growing relationship between the CCP and Nuevas Ideas, which points toward a more permanent structuring of these ties.

In the case of **Honduras**, institutional cooperation remains at an early stage, but it is already evident across several areas, including judicial exchanges, training programs for public officials, and contacts between political parties. However, these ties remain more fragmented and less intense than those observed in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Even so, the pattern observed in those countries suggest that, given the appropriate political conditions, these mechanisms could expand and consolidate relatively quickly.

This arena demonstrates that China's strategy does not seek to transform entire institutional systems outright, but rather to influence key actors and strategic sectors within the state apparatus. Elite training, exchanges between political parties, and judicial cooperation function as privileged channels for this form of influence.

Ideational Arena: Legitimacy and Normative Convergence

The ideational dimension articulates and gives coherence to the entire cooperation. Through discourse, narratives, and political concepts, China promotes an interpretive framework that legitimizes both its international presence and the practices of recipient regimes.

Across all three countries, there is a relatively homogeneous circulation of discursive repertoires centered on principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, development without conditions, and multipolarity.

In **Nicaragua**, this discourse is fully integrated into the regime's official narrative, reinforcing its confrontation with the West and its rejection of international human rights standards. In **El Salvador**, it is articulated within a political project that redefines legitimacy in terms of efficiency, security, and results, while downplaying the importance of institutional checks and balances. In **Honduras**, it appears in a more incipient form, primarily as a legitimizing language for the reorientation of its foreign policy in favor of Beijing.

What makes this arena particularly significant is that it does not impose an ideological model directly, but rather reconfigures the framework of what is considered politically acceptable. By displacing liberal democracy as the universal reference point, it facilitates the adoption of alternative governance practices.

Conclusions

The analysis of the four arenas allows us to identify a common logic: cooperation between China and Central American countries functions as a multidimensional ecosystem of influence in which different forms of interaction reinforce one another.

First, these arenas should be understood as interdependent. Technological transfer has a greater impact when combined with elite training; institutional cooperation becomes more effective when accompanied by ideational frameworks that legitimize it; and security cooperation is strengthened when embedded within broader technological architectures. This systemic character explains why the effects of cooperation are not immediate, but cumulative.

Second, relations with China follow a logic of mutual benefit. For Beijing, they provide a means of expanding strategic presence, promoting its technological

standards, and strengthening its position as a global actor. For recipient governments, they offer access to resources, technology, and legitimacy without the conditions and obligations typically associated with Western cooperation. In illiberal contexts, these benefits can translate into enhanced capacities for political and administrative control.

Third, the cases analyzed show different trajectories. Nicaragua represents a scenario of deep integration into an authoritarian ecosystem; El Salvador, a model of pragmatic adoption that combines multiple partners and technologies; and Honduras, an initial phase in which it is still possible to shape the course of the relationship. These differences underscore that the impact of cooperation ultimately depends on the internal conditions of each country.

Finally, the report highlights significant implications for public policy and security analysis. China's influence in the region extends beyond infrastructure and trade into less visible yet strategically significant areas, such as judicial cooperation, elite training, and the dissemination of regulatory frameworks. Likewise, increasing integration into Chinese technological ecosystems introduces risks associated with dependency, information security, and strategic autonomy.

In this sense, the main challenge is not merely to evaluate the economic benefits of cooperation, but to understand its long-term effects on institutional quality, the distribution of power, and the State's capacity to exercise control over society.

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INTRODUCTION

This report examines the nature, mechanisms, and implications of cooperation between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and illiberal regimes in Central America, with particular attention to Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. Its purpose is twofold. First, it seeks to empirically characterize the contemporary forms of engagement between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and governments in the region that exhibit varying degrees of democratic erosion. Second, it aims to situate these dynamics within a broader framework of systemic competition and authoritarian dissemination, in which international cooperation ceases to be a neutral process and instead acquires political, institutional, and security implications.

The cases analyzed in this report suggest the emergence of pragmatic and multidimensional ties between the CCP and governments that, while not homogeneous, share illiberal characteristics and trajectories of institutional weakening. In this sense, cooperation extends beyond the transfer of material resources or the execution of infrastructure projects, encompassing institutional, technological, and ideational dimensions that may contribute—directly or indirectly—to the consolidation or deepening of authoritarian practices.

The regional context in which this cooperation takes place is particularly significant. According to the typology presented in the *V-Dem Report on the State of Global Democracy 2026* (see Lindberg, 2026), Nicaragua is classified as a closed autocracy, El Salvador as an electoral autocracy, and Honduras as a “grey zone electoral democracy,” that is, with tendencies that place it on the threshold of becoming an electoral autocracy. These categories not only reflect varying degrees of democratic decline, but also shape the ways in which governments interact with external actors and absorb models, technologies, and resources from China.

Nicaragua represents the most extreme case of authoritarian closure in the region. Following the 2024 constitutional reform, the regime led by Daniel Ortega and

Rosario Murillo has consolidated a highly concentrated power structure, with sultan-like characteristics, in which the co-presidents, their family circle, and close associates directly control the main levers of the state. This process has been accompanied by the complete dismantling of civic space, the outlawing of social organizations, absolute control over the media, and the systematic persecution of opponents.

This has been compounded by the spread of transnational repressive practices, particularly in Costa Rica, where Nicaraguan exiles have been subjected to surveillance, harassment, intimidation, and even assassination. In this context, cooperation with China takes place within a closed institutional environment in which checks and balances are nonexistent and opportunities for public scrutiny are minimal.

El Salvador, for its part, illustrates a different yet convergent trajectory in terms of power concentration. The constitutional and legal reforms approved in 2025, which enable the indefinite reelection of President Nayib Bukele, mark a turning point in the country's institutional architecture. These measures have been accompanied by laws targeting nongovernmental organizations, the indefinite extension of the state of emergency, and the imprisonment of actors linked to human rights advocacy. Although the regime retains formal elements of electoral competition, the progressive weakening of institutional checks and balances, the co-optation of the judicial system, and the restriction of civil liberties place it in the category of electoral autocracy. In this environment, cooperation with China develops within a framework of increasing decision-making centralization, where political incentives favor opaque and rapidly implemented agreements.

Honduras presents a more ambiguous and dynamic scenario. The country combines formal democratic institutions with structural weaknesses related to the rule of law, electoral integrity, and corruption control. The most recent electoral process, despite Nasry Asfura's democratic victory, exposed the institutional fragility of the system: fraud narratives, partisan disputes within the National Electoral Council, episodes of electoral violence, and the persistent influence of narcotrafficking as a destabilizing factor.

Likewise, the presence of political actors with illiberal orientations, such as the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE), underscores that Honduras's democratic

trajectory remains open and subject to tensions. In this context, engagement with China does not occur in a vacuum, but rather within an environment where state capacities are limited and institutional vulnerabilities may amplify the effects of external cooperation.

Based on this overview, the report argues that cooperation between China and these regimes should not be understood solely in economic or diplomatic terms, but rather as a set of practices that, in certain contexts, can reinforce dynamics of power concentration, opacity, and social control. Without assuming a mechanical or deterministic relationship, the analysis proposes to examine how different arenas of cooperation—infrastructure, technology, elite training, and governance—interact with the internal characteristics of each regime, generating distinct risks for both democratic quality and the security and strategic autonomy of states in the region.

The analysis presented in this report is based on a qualitative methodology supported by computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), through which the content of press releases, institutional documents, and secondary sources, including expert analyses and public policy papers, was examined. Priority was given to official Chinese-language sources—such as statements from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese embassies, and CCP organs—as well as a diverse range of media outlets, including *Xinhua*, *Sina.com*, *News from Overseas Chinese Bureau (NMOB)*, and Taiwanese media such as *Central News Agency* and *Liberty Times*.

As previous studies have noted, analyzing Mandarin-language sources provides access to a greater volume of information and to nuanced insights often absent from Spanish- or English-language sources (see Santos, 2025). This evidence was triangulated with documents issued by the foreign ministries of the Central American countries analyzed, as well as with local and regional press. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts on Chinese influence in the hemisphere, particularly in areas such as security, technology, and disinformation, in order to refine and contextualize the findings.



ARENAS OF AUTHORITARIAN COOPERATION AND CHINA'S STRATEGIC PROJECTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

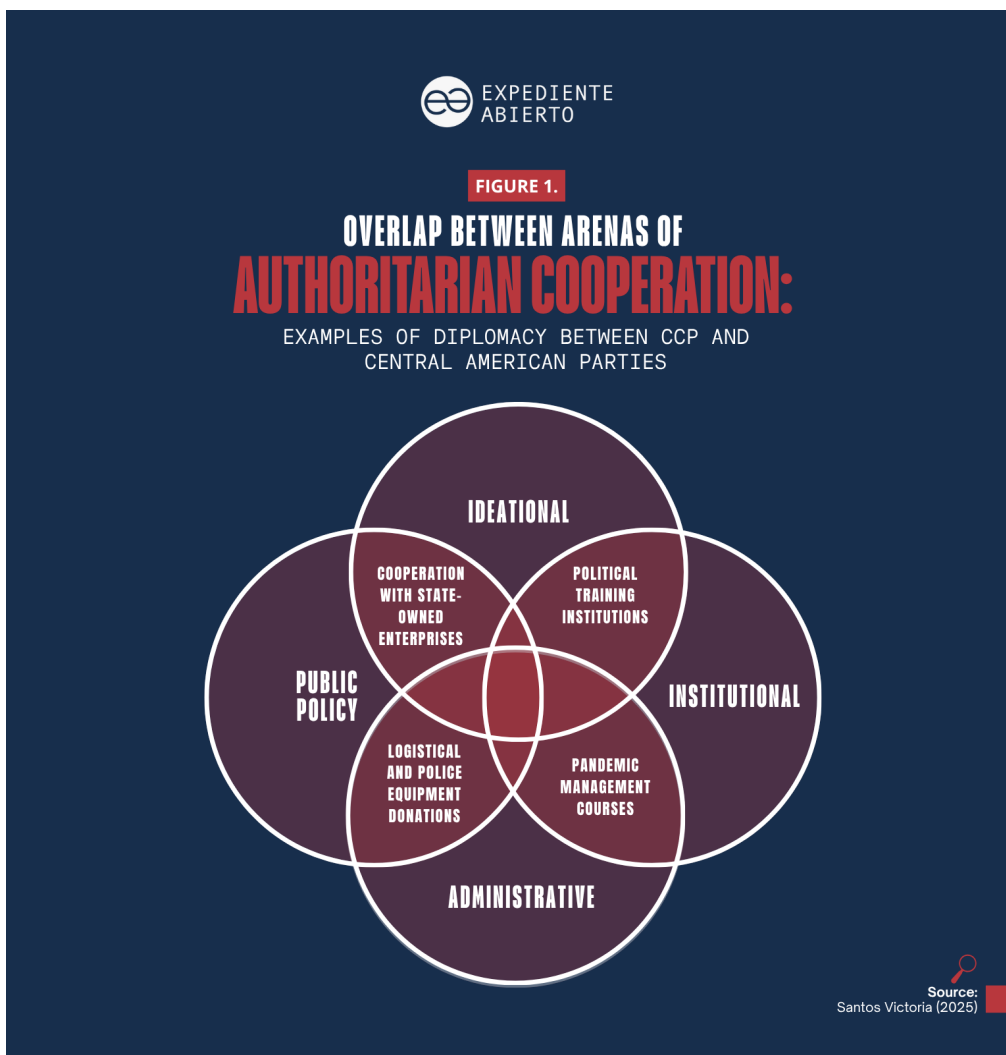
The growing rapprochement between China and several illiberal regimes in Latin America has generated new dynamics of political, technological, and institutional cooperation that extend beyond the traditional frameworks of economic diplomacy. To understand these interactions, it is useful to draw on the concept of arenas of authoritarian cooperation, understood as the specific spaces in which institutional, technological, ideational, and administrative exchanges develop between non-democratic or hybrid regimes.

These arenas make it possible to identify the concrete mechanisms through which state capacities are transferred, governance repertoires are disseminated, and political affinities are constructed between state and party actors. Rather than understanding authoritarian influence as a linear or exclusively ideological process, the concept of arenas allows us to observe how different dimensions of cooperation—technical, political, and ideational—interact with one another in practice.

This approach is linked to the analytical framework of *Authoritarian Gravity Centers*, proposed by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2020), according to which certain consolidated authoritarian regimes—such as China—function as poles of normative, institutional, and technological attraction for other governments, generating processes of authoritarian learning and political convergence beyond their immediate regional environments. These gravity centers do not necessarily impose institutional models directly, but rather generate ecosystems of cooperation and political socialization that facilitate the dissemination of authoritarian practices and discourses.

These arenas, however, are not isolated compartments. In practice, they are deeply interconnected and often unfold simultaneously, reinforcing both the state

capacities of the recipient regimes and China’s strategic projection. The interaction between these arenas produces a cumulative effect: technical transfers can reinforce political narratives, while ideational convergence facilitates the adoption of public policies and institutional mechanisms compatible with the Chinese model.



Furthermore, these arenas allow us to link the concrete practices of cooperation observed in Central America—the focus of this study—with the strategic guidelines defined by Beijing in the White Paper titled *China’s Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean*—published in 2025—which establishes the principal axes of cooperation between China and the region through programs of political solidarity, development, civilization, security, and social connectivity.

Thus, the central hypothesis guiding this study is that the perspective of the arenas of authoritarian cooperation provides a systematic way to interpret the strategic

axes outlined in the White Paper by demonstrating how they materialize through concrete practices of interaction between China and illiberal regimes in Latin America.

Moreover, this theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing contemporary relations between China and certain Central American countries. The cases of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras provide an ideal empirical setting for examining how the various arenas of cooperation conceptualized here unfold in contexts characterized by processes of power concentration, institutional weakening, and the reconfiguration of state control mechanisms. In these countries, growing engagement with China in areas such as security, technology, and governance makes it possible to observe more clearly the interaction between the transfer of state capacities and domestic power dynamics.



ARENAS OF AUTHORITARIAN COOPERATION

ADMINISTRATIVE ARENA

The administrative arena refers to cooperation between state agencies responsible for technical governance functions, particularly those related to public safety, state administration, and domestic order control. In the case of relations between China and several Latin American countries, this arena manifests primarily through police cooperation programs, training for security forces, and the provision of technological equipment to institutions responsible for public order. The White Paper explicitly identifies these areas within the framework of the Peace Program, which promotes military exchanges, police cooperation, and cybersecurity cooperation between China and Latin American countries (Xinhua Español, 2025a).

This arena can be understood as a form of transfer of the state's coercive capabilities, insofar as it involves the circulation of operational doctrines, surveillance technologies, and administrative models related to the control of public order. In authoritarian or hybrid contexts, this type of cooperation may contribute to strengthening the state's coercive apparatus, expanding governments' ability to monitor, deter, or repress political opposition. In this sense, the administrative arena can be conceptualized as a space of cooperation for repression, where technical capabilities that reinforce state control over society are transferred.

At the same time, this cooperation enables China to expand its institutional presence within strategic sectors of the state apparatus of partner countries, particularly in sensitive areas such as public safety, intelligence, and crisis management. Within this framework, we also consider the provision and development of strategic infrastructure with potential civil-military use, as these projects, beyond reinforcing Chinese supply chains in conflict scenarios (Ellis, 2026), can enable intelligence and espionage capabilities that serve both the

authoritarian sponsor and recipient governments, while also providing logistical support for the deployment of conventional military capabilities.

PUBLIC POLICY ARENA

The public policy arena refers to cooperation aimed at transferring regulatory models, governance technologies, and strategic infrastructure that directly influence the formulation and implementation of public policies. In Latin America, this cooperation is expressed primarily through projects related to digital infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, transportation, smart cities, artificial intelligence, and data management. Through these projects, Chinese technology companies—many of them linked to the state—participate in the design and implementation of public policies in sectors critical to economic and technological development.

Unlike the administrative arena, which focuses on strengthening the operational and coercive capacities of the state—including infrastructure such as ports or logistics hubs that can be used by both the recipient and the sponsor states to facilitate the deployment of such capacities—the public policy arena centers on shaping regulatory frameworks, technological architectures, and information management systems. While certain infrastructures—particularly in telecommunications and digital systems—may have security applications, this analysis classifies them within this arena insofar as their predominant function is associated with governance, regulation, and systemic-scale data management.

From China's strategic perspective, this arena plays a central role in the internationalization of its industrial policy objectives. The expansion of Chinese technologies, standards, and platforms into foreign markets contributes to initiatives such as *Made in China 2025* and *China Standards 2035* (Deng, 2022), which seek to position China as a global leader in strategic technological sectors. Likewise, this cooperation facilitates the promotion of technological governance models compatible with illiberal political systems, particularly in areas such as data management, digital surveillance, and centralized economic planning.

As Kevin Sheives, director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), notes, initiatives such as *Made in China 2025* seek to position China as a leader in strategic sectors, establishing guidelines that shape both its companies and its governance system. As these firms expand internationally, they export not only products, but also management structures, financing models, and ties to the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, the Chinese corporate presence abroad is not solely economic, but also carries political and governance implications (K. Sheives, personal communication, April 6, 2026).

From the perspective of recipient regimes, this arena provides access to technologies, financing, and infrastructure that are often unavailable through Western partners due to the fiscal, regulatory, and transparency standards promoted by liberal democracies. In authoritarian or hybrid contexts, moreover, this cooperation not only strengthens state capacities in social management and control, but can also generate domestic political and economic incentives conducive to the reproduction of power. In the words of Carlos Augusto Chacón, director of the Hernán Echavarría Olózaga Institute of Political Science:

In some cases, Chinese technology can indeed meet certain technological needs and reduce dependence on the West. However, this creates a new dependency, this time on China. This dependency is not only technological, but also political, given that Chinese technological development is closely tied to the Chinese Communist Party. For example, in the case of 5G networks, countries can adopt this technology, but they face risks in terms of security, information integrity, and strategic autonomy. In fact, within the European Union there are already discussions about limiting relations with countries that depend entirely on 5G infrastructure controlled by China. In this sense, although it is possible to replace Western technology, the cost could be international isolation and total dependence on the Chinese technological ecosystem. (C. A. Chacón, personal communication, March 24, 2026)

In particular, the negotiation and implementation of investment projects involving Chinese companies—frequently structured through intergovernmental agreements, opaque financing, or uncompetitive contracting schemes—tend to operate in environments with low accountability. This can favor discretionary resource allocation, facilitate rent capture by political and economic elites, and reinforce patrimonial logics of power.

Under these types of arrangements, public policy cooperation serves not only developmental or modernization purposes, but can also become integrated into circuits of political and economic accumulation characteristic of spoils systems, where the distribution of material benefits contributes to the consolidation of ruling coalitions, as observed by Evan Ellis, analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (E. Ellis, personal communication, March 17, 2026).

These initiatives fall within the White Paper's Development Program, which promotes cooperation in infrastructure, technological innovation, manufacturing, artificial intelligence, and the digital economy between China and Latin America (Xinhua Español, 2025a). In this way, the public policy arena functions simultaneously as an instrument of China's economic expansion and as a mechanism for strengthening—both institutionally and politically—recipient illiberal regimes, linking dimensions of state modernization with practices of power reproduction.

INSTITUTIONAL ARENA

The institutional arena encompasses interactions aimed at strengthening ties between political parties, parliaments, state agencies, and governing elites. These interactions include delegation exchanges, official visits, political cadre training programs, parliamentary cooperation, and mechanisms for intergovernmental dialogue. In China's case, these activities have been driven primarily through the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (ILD), which maintains relations with political parties in numerous countries.

Through these exchanges, China promotes institutional learning in areas such as party organization, political discipline, strategic planning, and state governance. These programs also facilitate the construction of transnational political networks linking ruling elites in different countries to the Chinese political system, as well as the reconfiguration of the state in areas such as constitutional engineering, the rule of law, electoral processes, and party systems.

From the perspective of the White Paper, this arena is linked primarily to the Solidarity Program, which promotes exchanges between political parties, legislatures, and intergovernmental dialogue mechanisms between China and

Latin American countries; although it is also connected to the Peace Program, which advances the Chinese perspective on the judicial system and the rule of law (Xinhua Español, 2025a).

Beyond its diplomatic dimension, the institutional arena contributes to strengthening political relations between China and recipient governments by consolidating networks of trust among governing elites and facilitating strategic convergence on international policy issues. Similarly, it promotes normative and institutional arrangements detached from representative democracy, favoring illiberal mechanisms of political and social control.

IDEATIONAL ARENA

The ideational arena is situated on the plane of ideas, discourses, and narratives that accompany and legitimize cooperation between China and the illiberal political regimes in the region.

Within this sphere, China promotes a set of narratives linked to its own conception of soft power (Repnikova, 2022), presenting the Chinese development model as a viable alternative to Western liberal democracy. One of the central elements of this discourse is the notion that economic growth, political stability, and technological development can be achieved without adopting liberal democratic institutions.

This discursive framework legitimizes non-democratic forms of governance by portraying them as alternative models, capable of ensuring stability, state efficiency, and economic growth. In this sense, the narrative of “development without political liberalization” functions as a form of international legitimation for authoritarian or hybrid regimes.

These discourses are also linked to China’s broader international project, articulated through initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative, and the Global Governance Initiative, all of which seek to reform the liberal international order toward a multipolar system (Economy, 2024). Within this framework, China promotes narratives associated with the Global South, South-South cooperation, and the supposed unconditionality of its international assistance. These ideas present China as a partner that respects national sovereignty and as an alternative

to what Beijing characterizes as Western hegemony and interference in the international system.

The White Paper emphasizes precisely these discursive elements by portraying cooperation between China and Latin America as part of the construction of a “community with a shared future” among countries of the Global South, particularly through the Solidarity, Development, and Civilization Programs (Xinhua Español, 2025a).

The ideational arena, therefore, plays a key role in the architecture of authoritarian cooperation: it legitimizes interactions across the other arenas, facilitates political convergence among governing elites, and contributes to expanding China’s normative influence within the international system.

TABLE 1.

ARENAS

OF AUTHORITARIAN COOPERATION AND THEIR LINK TO CHINA'S STRATEGY TOWARD LATIN AMERICA

CHARACTERISTICS	TYPE OF COOPERATION	WHITE PAPER PROGRAM	ASSOCIATED RISKS
Transfer of state security and control capabilities	Police, military, and cybersecurity cooperation	Peace Program	Repression and violence, social control, geopolitical escalation
Transfer of regulatory models, technologies, and infrastructure	Telecommunications , smart cities, AI	Development Program	Corruption, opacity, technological dependence, and dual-use technologies
Relations between political parties, parliaments, and political elites	Partisan diplomacy, cadre training, judicial cooperation, and law enforcement	Solidarity Program	Elite capture, socialization of illiberal governance models
Dissemination of discourses and narratives favorable to the Chinese model	Soft power, South-South cooperation, multipolarity	Solidarity, Development, and Civilization Programs	Propaganda, disinformation, legitimization of authoritarianism

ARENA
ADMINISTRATIVE

ARENA
PUBLIC POLICY

ARENA
INSTITUTIONAL

ARENA
IDEATIONAL



Source:

Prepared by the author based on Xinhua Español (2025a) and Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2020)



COOPERATION FOR REPRESSION: CHINA AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE ARENA IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Nicaragua: Police and Military Cooperation Within the Framework of the Strategic Partnership with China

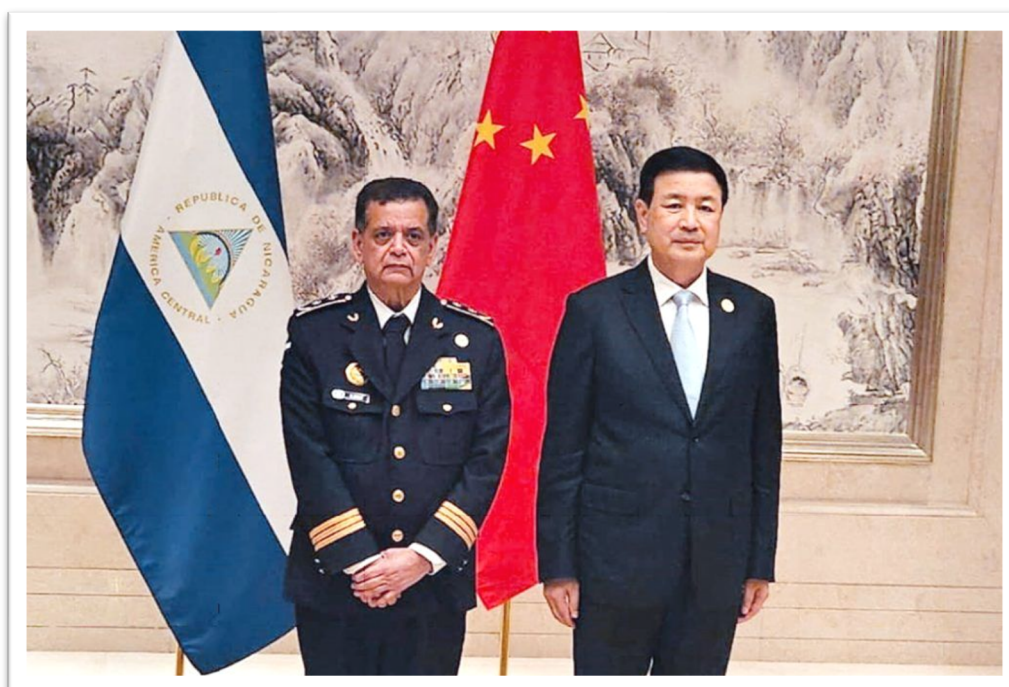
Administrative cooperation between China and Nicaragua on security matters has expanded significantly since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in December 2021. This process reached a turning point with the formal establishment of a strategic partnership between Beijing and Managua in 2023, which institutionalized both governments' commitment to deepening cooperation across multiple areas, including public security, strategic infrastructure, and coordination between state agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023b).

Some analyses indicate that the Nicaraguan government has constructed a highly centralized security structure oriented toward regime preservation. This apparatus includes the Nicaraguan Army, the National Police, and paramilitary networks that operate in a coordinated manner on tasks related to social control and political repression (Meléndez, 2026).

In this context, international cooperation plays an important role in strengthening the state's coercive capabilities. Historically, allies such as Cuba and Russia have contributed to different dimensions of this security system, particularly in intelligence and military cooperation. China's gradual incorporation into this ecosystem represents a new phase in the internationalization of the regime's security apparatus, characterized primarily by the expansion of police cooperation and the development of projects with potential strategic implications (Meléndez, 2026).

Police Cooperation and the Strengthening of the Security Apparatus

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations, security authorities from both countries have held bilateral meetings aimed at strengthening cooperation between their police institutions. These meetings have served to discuss training programs, exchanges of experience in public security, and mechanisms for operational cooperation between agencies responsible for maintaining internal order. This is illustrated by meetings such as the one that took place in 2024 between Francisco Díaz Madriz, director of the Nicaraguan National Police, and Wang Xiaohong, China's Minister of Public Security (Qiao, 2024).



Francisco Díaz Madriz Meets With Wang Xiaohong in China (2024)

Source: Qiao (2024)

Police training constitutes one of the main mechanisms through which this cooperation materializes. Training programs promoted by China's Ministry of Public Security have trained Nicaraguan officers in various technical areas related to public order control and criminal investigation. The content of these programs includes riot-control tactics, forensic investigation, dignitary protection, patrol techniques, and the use of surveillance technologies.

Some reports indicate that instructors from Chinese public security departments have directly participated in training programs for Nicaraguan police officers, including training in criminal sciences, police martial arts, motorized escort, and the use of drones in security operations (Liberty Times, 2024).

The scope of these training programs is significant. Recent reports indicate that thousands of National Police officers have received training linked to international public security cooperation, including training provided by Chinese instructors in riot control tactics and protest management (Central News Agency [CNA], 2024). This type of cooperation involves the transfer of operational doctrines and institutional practices that can strengthen the state's capacity to exercise control over the population.

In addition to training, police cooperation also includes material assistance and the provision of equipment. A notable example is the donation of police supplies from China's Ministry of Public Security to the National Police of Nicaragua, an act accompanied by official ceremonies and statements emphasizing the importance of bilateral cooperation in public security (Embassy of the PRC in Nicaragua, 2022). This type of assistance contributes to modernizing the operational capabilities of police forces and reinforces institutional ties between the security agencies of both countries.

Cooperation is also reflected in Nicaragua's participation in international security platforms organized by China. Delegations from the National Police have participated in international police exhibitions held in China, where public security technologies, surveillance tools, and technological solutions for urban control are showcased (Qiao, 2025b). These events allow Nicaraguan security forces access to technologies developed by Chinese firms, including digital surveillance systems, data analysis, and urban security management tools.

As Ellis (2026a) notes, this police cooperation forms part of a broader strategy by Beijing to expand its institutional presence in the country through direct ties with key state agencies. In particular, the strengthening of ties between China's Ministry of Public Security and the National Police of Nicaragua constitutes one of the most active channels of the bilateral relationship in the security sphere. Through training, technical assistance, and equipment transfers, China contributes to strengthening the operational capabilities of Nicaragua's security

apparatus while simultaneously expanding its institutional influence within the state (Ellis, 2026a).

Military Cooperation and Strategic Projection

Alongside police cooperation, Sino-Nicaraguan relations also include an emerging dimension of military and strategic cooperation. Although the level of interaction between the armed forces of both countries remains relatively limited compared to police cooperation, various indicators suggest growing interest in strengthening ties between military institutions.

One of the most visible examples of this cooperation is the participation of Chinese military delegations in official ceremonies held by the Nicaraguan Army. A contingent from the honor guard of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) participated in anniversary celebrations of the Nicaraguan army, a symbolic gesture reflecting both countries' willingness to deepen military relations (Wang, 2024). Such exchanges form part of China's military diplomacy, which seeks to build institutional ties with the armed forces of partner countries through visits, joint exercises, and participation in commemorative events.

The strengthening of military cooperation is also evident in the establishment of permanent diplomatic channels between the defense institutions of both countries. Nicaragua has appointed military representatives in Beijing and promoted contacts between its defense authorities and their Chinese counterparts, suggesting growing interest in developing institutional relations in the military sphere. In this regard, in 2023, Ortega appointed General Juan José Membreño López as military, naval, and air attaché at the Nicaraguan Embassy in China, while Lieutenant Bismarck Valle Castro was appointed deputy military attaché (Nicaragua Investiga, 2023).

In this context, military cooperation has begun to take on a more concrete dimension through agreements involving the acquisition of technology and equipment. On May 11, 2025, the Nicaraguan government signed a contract with the Chinese company Poly Technologies (PolyTech), a subsidiary of China Poly Group Corporation, which specializes in missiles and other military products. The agreement includes the purchase of technology systems, transportation

equipment, communications systems, and weaponry, under the official justification of “strengthening the defense of sovereignty and peace” (Nicaragua Investiga, 2025).

However, this type of relationship raises important questions, particularly given that PolyTech was sanctioned by the United States in June 2024 for facilitating the trade of sensitive military technologies to sanctioned Russian defense companies in the context of the war in Ukraine (Nicaragua Investiga, 2025). This precedent suggests that Sino-Nicaraguan military cooperation carries implications not only in terms of defensive capabilities, but also regarding Nicaragua’s geopolitical positioning within security and technology transfer networks associated with China.

An additional element illustrating the emerging dimension of this cooperation is the visit of the Chinese training vessel *Silk Road Ark* to Nicaragua, officially presented as an academic exchange and maritime cooperation mission. Such deployments form part of China’s naval diplomacy, aimed at strengthening ties with partner countries through training activities, cultural exchange, and technical cooperation. However, several analyses have pointed out that vessels of this kind have broader functions than officially declared, including intelligence gathering, electronic reconnaissance, and the assessment of strategic port infrastructure (Ellis, 2026; McFields, 2026).

In this sense, the presence of the *Silk Road Ark* in Nicaraguan ports is an indicator of China’s growing maritime projection in the region and its interest in developing logistical capabilities and operational knowledge in the Caribbean, in a context in which the boundaries between civilian cooperation, military diplomacy, and strategic activities are becoming increasingly blurred.

In addition to exchanges between armed forces, several infrastructure projects linked to bilateral cooperation have generated debate over their possible strategic implications. One of the most discussed cases involves the development of port infrastructure in Nicaragua with the participation of Chinese firms. Analysts have pointed to the possibility that China could participate in the construction of a deep-water port on the country’s Caribbean coast, a project that could improve regional maritime connectivity and strengthen logistical infrastructure linked to China’s naval expansion (Luo, 2024).

Other infrastructure projects have also raised concerns regarding potential dual civilian-military uses. The proposal to construct a new airport financed by China in Nicaragua has become the subject of debate due to doubts about its commercial viability and its strategic location (CNA, 2025). Although the Nicaraguan government has presented the project as an economic development initiative, some analysts argue that facilities of this type could have logistical applications in the event of deeper military cooperation in the future (Ellis, 2026).

From the perspective of the arenas of authoritarian cooperation, the Nicaraguan case illustrates how the administrative arena can function as a channel for the transfer of coercive capabilities and the strengthening of strategic alliances between authoritarian regimes. Cooperation with China is embedded within an already existing security ecosystem in the country, contributing to reinforcing the capabilities of the state apparatus while simultaneously expanding Beijing's strategic presence in Central America.

El Salvador: Police and Military Cooperation With China

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and El Salvador in 2018 opened a new avenue for interaction between the two countries in the areas of security and defense. Although cooperation in these fields remains relatively limited compared to other dimensions of the bilateral relationship, the available evidence points to the gradual institutionalization of channels of dialogue between military and security actors, as well as Beijing's interest in establishing ties with the Salvadoran armed forces.

Political-Military Dialogue and Institutional Contacts

One of the earliest indicators of this rapprochement can be observed in exchanges between military representatives and Salvadoran authorities following the establishment of diplomatic relations. During a meeting with Salvadoran officials and representatives of the Academy of Advanced Strategic Studies, David Munguía—Minister of National Defense during the Sánchez Cerén administration, now convicted for ties to gangs—expressed his interest in deepening bilateral cooperation with China and highlighted the importance of

these exchanges for strengthening relations between the two countries (Zhou, 2019).

This type of meeting forms part of a recurring pattern in China's military diplomacy toward partner countries, through which Beijing seeks to establish direct relationships with foreign military elites via strategic dialogues, official visits, and exchange forums. In the case of El Salvador, these contacts constitute one of the first steps toward the creation of institutional communication channels between the armed forces of both countries.

The consolidation of these ties became more evident in later stages of the bilateral relationship, particularly under the administration of Nayib Bukele. In July 2024, Chinese ambassador to El Salvador Zhang Yanhui, accompanied by the newly appointed Chinese defense attaché to the country, Dai Zenggang, paid an official visit to the Salvadoran Minister of National, during which both sides exchanged views on strengthening cooperation in relevant defense areas (Embassy of the PRC in El Salvador, 2024).

The participation of the Chinese defense attaché in this meeting is a significant indicator of the institutionalization of military ties between the two countries. The presence of military attachés forms part of the standard mechanisms used by China to develop defense cooperation relationships, facilitating information exchange, the organization of official visits, and the exploration of potential cooperation projects.



Zhang Yanhui and Dai Zenggang Meet in El Salvador With René Francis Merino, Minister of National Defense (2024)

Source: Embassy of the PRC in El Salvador (2024)

Strategic Dimension and Geopolitical Perceptions

The rapprochement between China and El Salvador on security matters has also generated concern internationally, especially in the United States. Various analysts and U.S. officials have pointed to the possibility that Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in the country could carry strategic or military implications (see *Expediente Público*, 2024a).

In particular, the Salvadoran port of La Unión has been identified as a point of geopolitical interest due to its location on the Pacific coast and the port development plans promoted following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Some analyses have suggested that the strengthening of Chinese presence at this port could have strategic implications, which has generated concern in U.S. political circles (Li, 2018).

Although there is no evidence that China has established military facilities in El Salvador, these interpretations reflect how the growing rapprochement between Beijing and San Salvador in strategic sectors—including logistical infrastructure

and military relations—is perceived by some international actors within the framework of geopolitical competition between great powers.

Honduras: Lack of Security Cooperation With China

Unlike the cases of Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador, the available evidence does not currently indicate any development of police or military cooperation between China and Honduras. This absence is significant within the framework of the administrative arena, as it suggests that, at least during the initial phase of the bilateral relationship, interaction between the two countries has not included the transfer of security capabilities, police cooperation, or relevant institutional ties between armed forces.

One explanation for this situation lies in the recent establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, formalized in March 2023 following Honduras's break with Taiwan. This short period of interaction has limited the degree of institutionalization of the bilateral relationship and concentrated diplomatic efforts on areas considered priorities by both sides (Zhou and Interesse, 2023).

Second, the bilateral agenda has focused primarily on economic and trade objectives, particularly negotiations over a free trade agreement and the expansion of trade. Honduran officials have stated that the principal advances in the bilateral relationship have taken place in sectors such as trade, agricultural cooperation, and educational exchanges, areas considered priorities within the relationship with China (Xinhua Español, 2025b; Ardon, 2025).

In this context, the lack of cooperation in the police or military spheres does not necessarily imply that Sino-Honduran relations lack relevance for the analysis of authoritarian cooperation. Rather, it reflects the still incipient and poorly institutionalized character of the bilateral relationship, as well as the priority both governments have assigned to the economic dimension of their ties.

As will be discussed in later sections, this does not mean that interaction between China and Honduras is entirely detached from the dynamics of authoritarian cooperation. On the contrary, in other arenas—particularly those related to

institutional cooperation, cadre training, and the dissemination of governance models—signs of interaction are beginning to appear that are relevant for analyzing Chinese influence in Central America.

The Administrative Arena of the Sino–Central American Cooperation

A comparative examination of the three cases reveals highly differentiated levels of development in administrative cooperation between China and the countries analyzed. While Nicaragua exhibits broad cooperation that includes police dimensions and emerging signs of military interaction, El Salvador demonstrates a more limited level centered on diplomatic contacts and institutional dialogue among defense authorities. Honduras, on the other hand, presents no clear evidence of police or military cooperation with China to date.

These differences reflect, first and foremost, the degree of political alignment between Central American governments and Beijing, as well as the timing of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Nicaragua reestablished relations with China in 2021 amid the growing international isolation of the Ortega regime, which favored the rapid expansion of cooperation in sensitive areas such as public security.

El Salvador, which established diplomatic relations in 2018, has developed ties primarily in the trade, investment, and institutional spheres—as later sections will show—while the security dimension remains in an exploratory phase, whose development is conditioned by the close relationship between Nayib Bukele and the second administration of Donald Trump. However, unlike the Sandinista political monopoly in Nicaragua, relations between China and El Salvador shows a cross-cutting evolution between administrations: as demonstrated by exchanges between military officials during the Sánchez Cerén and Bukele administrations, cooperation has maintained continuity and a gradual tendency toward deepening, reflecting a pattern of adaptation in China’s strategy in response to leadership changes (see Santos, 2025).

Honduras, for its part, only established relations with Beijing in 2023, which largely explains the absence of concrete initiatives in this arena. Strategically, the limited or nonexistent security cooperation with China, according to publicly available evidence, reduces the risks of penetration into sensitive sectors of the state apparatus. Under the government of Nasry Asfura, this situation constitutes a favorable starting point, insofar as there are currently no structural dependencies in coercive or intelligence sectors comparable to those observed in Nicaragua, where the repressive and intelligence apparatus maintains cooperative ties with external actors such as China, Russia, and Cuba (Meléndez, 2026).

A second important difference concerns the types of institutions involved in the cooperation. In Nicaragua, interaction occurs primarily with agencies responsible for internal state control, especially the National Police and, to a lesser extent, the military establishment. This cooperation includes training, equipment provision, and access to public security technologies. In El Salvador, in contrast, contacts have developed mainly through diplomatic-military channels, such as meetings between defense ministers, official visits, and the establishment of military attachés. Honduras, at the moment, does not show comparable institutional ties in the security sphere.

Finally, the cases also differ in the strategic significance of the cooperation. In Nicaragua, the combination of infrastructure projects and police cooperation has generated concerns regarding the strengthening of the regime's coercive apparatus. In El Salvador, attention has focused on the potential civilian-military use of certain infrastructures—such as the port of La Unión—with possible implications for security and intelligence operations. In Honduras, on the other hand, cooperation has concentrated on economic and development sectors, without evidence of a comparable security dimension.

These patterns suggest that the administrative arena, far from being uniform, depends on factors such as the degree of consolidation of bilateral relations, the strategic priorities of the governments involved, their international alignments, and the domestic political context of each country. According to Professor Evan Ellis:

When we talk about security cooperation, the most important elements are not necessarily the traditional ones. There are certainly classic forms of cooperation—for example, sending Nicaraguan military and police personnel to China for training—but my impression is that the benefit of this for the regime is relatively marginal. Rather, it benefits China by allowing it to develop long-term relationships and access. (E. Ellis, personal communication, March 17, 2026)



TECHNOLOGY, GOVERNANCE, AND CONTROL: THE PUBLIC POLICY ARENA

Nicaragua: Growing Technological Dependence on China

Cooperation between China and Nicaragua in the public policy arena has intensified significantly since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations in December 2021 and, especially, following the elevation of the bilateral relationship to the level of a strategic partnership in 2023. This new political framework has facilitated the rapid expansion of cooperation initiatives in strategic sectors such as telecommunications, digital infrastructure, energy, transportation, urban development, and emergency management.

From the analytical perspective of this research, these processes reflect Nicaragua's growing integration into Beijing's global development agenda, characterized by the dissemination of Chinese technological standards, the deployment of Chinese state-owned or state-linked firms in strategic sectors, and the promotion of new areas of technological innovation associated with the so-called "new productive forces." At the same time, this cooperation provides the Daniel Ortega regime with access to financing, infrastructure, and technology outside Western circuits, reinforcing its autonomy from external pressures and expanding its state capabilities.

Digital Infrastructure and Strategic Development Projects

A primary focus of this cooperation can be observed in the expansion of digital infrastructure and telecommunications, where Chinese firms have assumed a central role in the country's technological modernization projects. The Nicaraguan government has actively promoted collaboration with companies such as Huawei, particularly in the development of telecommunications networks and technological platforms linked to state digitalization. In April 2025, during a meeting with Huawei executives, President Daniel Ortega reiterated his government's willingness to expand cooperation with Chinese firms, highlighting

their role in the country's technological and economic development (Deutsche Welle [DW], 2025a).

This cooperation involves not only investments or specific projects, but also Nicaragua's gradual incorporation into technological ecosystems dominated by Chinese firms, contributing to the dissemination of technological standards and digital architectures promoted by Beijing. This process has been accompanied by a broader strategy aimed at advancing the digital transformation of the Nicaraguan state. Representatives of the Nicaraguan government, such as former ambassador to China Michael Campbell, have highlighted the potential of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence to improve efficiency across multiple sectors of public administration, including health, agriculture, infrastructure, and disaster management (Guangming, 2023).

This discourse reflects the convergence between China's technological agenda—which promotes artificial intelligence, big data, and digital platforms as engines of development—and the priorities of the Nicaraguan regime regarding state modernization. In this sense, technological cooperation carries not only economic implications, but also contributes to shaping the country's public policy orientations, aligning them with development and technological governance models promoted by China.

A second focus of this cooperation is developing in the field of strategic infrastructure and economic development projects, where Chinese state-owned enterprises play an increasingly important role. Delegations from the Nicaraguan government have held meetings with numerous Chinese companies—including Huawei, PowerChina, China Communications Construction Company, China Communications Services International, CAMCE, and Yutong—with the goal of advancing projects in areas such as electrification, renewable energy, telecommunications, public transportation, urban development, and disaster prevention (Diario Barricada, 2025). These initiatives form part of a broader effort to integrate the Nicaraguan economy into the cooperation networks promoted by China in Latin America, particularly within the framework of the China-CELAC Forum and the Belt and Road Initiative (Qiao, 2025a).

Monitoring Technologies and Digital Governance

A third key focus in this arena is the development of technological infrastructure related to emergency management, monitoring, and integrated information systems, in which Chinese technology companies also participate. A prime example is the National Emergency Response System (SINAREM, *Sistema Nacional de Atención a Emergencias*), which incorporates command centers, communication networks, data platforms, and technological tools to coordinate the state response to emergency situations (Percent Technology, 2025).

These types of projects are officially presented as initiatives aimed at improving administrative efficiency and the state's capacity to respond to natural disasters or public health emergencies. However, the technological architecture of these systems—based on real-time monitoring, data integration, and centralized command centers—reveals their potentially dual nature, insofar as they can also be employed for surveillance or state control functions.



Su Meng, President of Percent Technology, at the Presentation of the SINAREM Project in Nicaragua (2025)

Source: Percent Technology (2025)

In this regard, some technological cooperation projects between China and Nicaragua have generated concerns about their potential use in surveillance and communications control systems. The Nicaraguan government has promoted the entry of telecommunications companies linked to Chinese capital under favorable regulatory conditions, including tax advantages and privileged access to private networks and contracts with public institutions (Centroamérica360, 2025).

In May 2025, for example, several agreements were signed aimed at expanding the country's digital and logistics infrastructure with support from the PRC. Notable among these was the "Digital Connectivity Project" aimed at strengthening telecommunications in Nicaragua, as well as a contract with the Chinese company International Communications Services Company (CCSI) for the installation of intelligent logistics management platforms at the Julia Herrera Logistics Center in Corinto (Nicaragua Investiga, 2025).

Analysts have noted that the expansion of digital infrastructure controlled by Chinese technology companies could enhance the state's capacity to monitor communications and manage information flows within the country (Polyakova and Walker, 2026). In authoritarian contexts such as Nicaragua, where information control and surveillance of opponents constitute central elements of the government's strategy, the incorporation of these technologies acquires a particular political significance.

These developments should also be interpreted in light of the growing international spread of "digital authoritarianism" models associated with the expansion of surveillance technologies, data analysis, and information control. Chinese technology companies have played a central role in exporting this type of infrastructure across different regions of the world, providing telecommunications systems, data management platforms, and technological solutions for smart cities, public security, and state administration (Weber, 2025).

Cooperation in this arena also contributes to consolidating the Nicaraguan regime's autonomy from traditional Western sources of financing and technology. Following the deterioration of relations between the Ortega government and numerous Western countries—particularly after the repression of the 2018 protests and the subsequent imposition of international sanctions—cooperation with China has emerged as a strategic alternative for infrastructure, technology,

and economic development projects. By providing financing, technology, and technical assistance without political conditions related to human rights or democratic governance, China offers the Nicaraguan regime a partner willing to support its development and state consolidation agenda.

El Salvador: Navigating the Sino-American Technological Dispute

One of the central mechanisms of cooperation between China and El Salvador in the public policy arena is the training of Salvadoran officials and civil servants in China, particularly in areas related to state planning, institutional governance, and technological development. These programs have established themselves as an important channel for both the transfer of technical knowledge and for exposing administrative elites to state modernization approaches linked to the digital transformation and knowledge economy promoted by Beijing.

A clear example is the training program on policy planning and institutional development organized by the University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. During this program, Salvadoran delegations visited companies such as China Mobile and BYD in order to study their technological development models, business strategies, and applications in digital infrastructure (University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025a; University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025b).

Participants also analyze the trajectory of Chinese state-owned enterprises, their international expansion, and the technological applications associated with “digital infrastructure, including telecommunications networks and connectivity services” (University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025a). The delegation also visited Huawei Technologies in Shenzhen, where solutions related to 5G technology, energy systems, and integrated technological platforms used in processes of state digitalization were presented (University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025c).

Such initiatives fulfill simultaneous functions: they facilitate the transfer of knowledge regarding planning and technological development, familiarize Salvadoran officials into governance models associated with Chinese development,

and contribute to the building of networks between administrative elites and technology companies, which can enable future partnerships in strategic sectors. In this sense, these programs represent not merely technical cooperation, but also mechanisms for the dissemination of digital governance frameworks.



Salvadoran Officials Receive Training at Huawei Facilities in Shenzhen (2025)
Source: University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2025c)

From a broader strategic perspective, this emphasis on the socialization of technological knowledge and digital governance models also aligns with the objectives of the China Standards 2035 initiative. Through these training, exchange, and technical cooperation programs, Beijing not only transfers capabilities, but also promotes the early adoption of technological standards, digital architectures, and regulatory frameworks compatible with its own industrial ecosystem. This enables China to position itself advantageously in the global competition for standards in key sectors such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and smart cities, generating forms of technological dependency that may hinder the entry of competitors and consolidate its long-term influence (Wilson, 2020).

These processes of elite training and socialization are complemented by the growing integration of Chinese technology companies into the Salvadoran educational ecosystem, reinforcing the structural dimension of this cooperation. A significant example is the inauguration of the Huawei ICT Academy at the University of El Salvador, conceived as a center for specialized training in information and communication technologies, including areas such as artificial

intelligence, cloud computing, 5G, and cybersecurity (University of El Salvador, 2025). This program provides access to international certifications, virtual simulators, and global competitions, contributing to the development of human capital aligned with the demands of the digital economy and Chinese standards in this field.

Initiatives such as the global Seeds for the Future program, whose regional summit was held in El Salvador in 2024 with the participation of more than 130 young people from Latin America and the Caribbean, deepen this logic of knowledge transfer, cultural exchange, and network-building between emerging talent and the Chinese technological ecosystem (Invest in El Salvador, 2024). This is complemented by direct cooperation with the public education system, such as the donation of Huawei IdeaHub smart screens to Salvadoran schools under agreements with the Ministry of Education, aimed at advancing classroom digitalization and pedagogical modernization (Li, 2024).

The consolidation of this educational ecosystem was not a spontaneous process, but rather one that accelerated significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a context marked by fiscal constraints, institutional limitations, and operational urgencies within the public system, Huawei deepened its presence at the University of El Salvador through a gradual sequence of donations and training initiatives. Since 2020, the company provided information and communication technology equipment for the implementation of pilot digital training programs, later reinforced with additional infrastructure aimed at interactive teaching. This process not only expanded the university's technological capabilities, but also institutionalized Huawei's presence in its physical and pedagogical spaces, positioning it as a legitimate technological partner in educational modernization (Aguilar Antonio, 2026).

Public policy cooperation is also linked to learning processes from the Chinese digital economy model. At an investment promotion conference in Hangzhou, El Salvador's ambassador to China emphasized the country's interest in replicating elements of the Chinese experience in building technological ecosystems oriented toward economic growth (Cao, 2024). In parallel, Chinese technology companies have begun participating in projects related to digital infrastructure, innovation, and the modernization of public services. For example, technologies such as

artificial intelligence systems and facial recognition tools used at the National Library—which was also built by Chinese companies—enable facilities to operate without permanent staff presence (Cao, 2024).

These developments demonstrate how cooperation in public policy translates into the concrete adoption of automated management technologies and administrative digitalization, in line with the smart city models promoted by China. Within this process, some of the transferred technologies—although presented in terms of efficiency or security—incorporate potential surveillance and data-collection capabilities. These include facial recognition systems implemented in public infrastructure (Cao, 2024), telecommunications infrastructure developed by companies such as Huawei (Zhao, 2019), and advanced connectivity technologies presented to Salvadoran officials during training programs (University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025a).

These tools constitute central components of state digitalization, but they may also facilitate the monitoring of public spaces, the mass collection of data, and the expansion of digital surveillance capabilities. Consequently, their incorporation through institutional cooperation mechanisms may strengthen the state's digital governance capabilities in contexts where public security and crime control occupy a central place on the political agenda.

Bukele: Opportunism or Multi-Alignment?

In the case of El Salvador, cooperation with China in the public policy arena is characterized by a strong dimension of institutional learning and technological transfer, centered on the digital economy, technological infrastructure, and state modernization. Through training programs, institutional visits, and contacts with technology companies, Salvadoran officials are exposed to Chinese approaches to digital development and state management.

This process not only facilitates the transfer of technical knowledge, but also promotes the adoption of digital infrastructure and technologies developed by Chinese companies, some of which incorporate tools with surveillance or control potential. Consequently, technological cooperation between the two countries can contribute to the expansion of state capabilities for digital governance, with

implications both for administrative modernization and for the balance between security, control, and civil liberties.

At the same time, this cooperation must be understood within the framework of the multi-alignment strategies deployed by the Nayib Bukele administration, aimed at simultaneously instrumentalizing its ties with both China and the United States in pursuit of domestic objectives and international positioning. The openness toward Chinese technologies and models coexists with initiatives developed alongside U.S. actors in strategic sectors, including emerging fields such as artificial intelligence. An illustrative example is the agreement with Elon Musk's company xAI to implement the Grok system within El Salvador's public education system, presented as a pioneering nationwide personalized learning program (DW, 2025b).

This type of initiative reveals that El Salvador's technological integration does not respond to exclusive alignment with a single bloc, but rather to a pragmatic logic of partner diversification. However, far from neutralizing risks, this approach can amplify state capabilities in sensitive areas—such as data management, artificial intelligence, and digital surveillance—by combining technological inputs from different ecosystems within a context characterized by the concentration of power and the weakness of institutional checks and balances.

Honduras: Learning the Chinese Technological Model

In the case of Honduras, cooperation with China in the public policy arena has concentrated primarily on two strategic areas: the energy transition linked to the so-called “Green Silk Road” and the digitalization of public administration, particularly in areas such as smart cities, telecommunications, and urban monitoring systems.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2023, both governments have promoted these sectors as pillars of the new bilateral relationship. These processes reflect the progress of the technological and development agenda driven by Beijing, characterized by the dissemination of Chinese technological standards, the expansion of Chinese state-owned or state-affiliated enterprises, and the provision of strategic infrastructure in key sectors.

At the same time, this cooperation offered the Honduran state new sources of financing, technology, and infrastructure outside traditional circuits dominated by democratic actors, in line with the orientation of the Xiomara Castro administration (2021–2025), whose anti-Western rhetoric and rapprochement with actors associated with the so-called Axis of Upheaval reflected an active search for strategic diversification in external alliances (see *Expediente Abierto*, 2024).

Energy Transition and Cooperation in Green Infrastructure

One of the most visible axes of bilateral cooperation lies in the energy sector. Honduran and Chinese authorities have presented this collaboration as part of a strategy to accelerate the transition to renewable energy and strengthen the country's energy infrastructure.

In an interview published by Chinese media, Honduras's ambassador to China, Salvador Moncada, stated that bilateral cooperation seeks to transform the Honduran energy system through the development of clean energy sources such as hydroelectric, solar, and green hydrogen projects within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (*Sina.com*, 2025). This vision aligns with projects driven by Chinese companies such as PowerChina and with multilateral initiatives linked to energy cooperation promoted by Beijing.

Cooperation in this sector has deepened through agreements between energy institutions of both countries. In 2025, for example, the Global Energy Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization (GEIDCO), headquartered in Beijing, signed a letter of intent with the Honduran Ministry of Energy to collaborate in areas such as energy system planning, energy storage, and technological innovation in renewable energy (Hondudiario, 2025).

At the same time, China's National Energy Administration reported on meetings with the Honduran Minister of Energy aimed at strengthening cooperation in energy technologies and specialized talent development (National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC, 2025). These agreements reflect how energy cooperation is not limited to isolated infrastructure projects, but also incorporates technological transfer, sectoral planning, and institutional coordination.

However, in Honduras, this cooperation has also been accompanied by questions regarding transparency in the implementation of certain projects. In particular, the contract awarded to China Energy Engineering Group Northeast for the supply of power generation equipment took place through a single-bidder process, generating criticism over the lack of competition (Madrid, 2024). Likewise, the Choloma solar park project, promoted by the company Danasun, has been marked by the absence of clear public information on the agreements and investment conditions, reflecting limitations in data access and accountability within the country's energy sector (Madrid, 2026).

From the perspective of the public policy arena, these processes carry implications that extend beyond the energy sector. Honduras's integration into Chinese-led energy cooperation networks can contribute to reorienting the country's technological and regulatory development framework by introducing standards, technologies, and planning models linked to the Chinese industrial ecosystem. At the same time, this cooperation expands the Honduran state's autonomy from Western providers of energy infrastructure and financing for development projects. Furthermore, in contexts of institutional weakness, such arrangements can also create opportunities for opacity and corruption, particularly in the awarding of contracts, project management, and public oversight, potentially benefiting illiberal elites in power.

State Digitalization, Smart Cities, and Monitoring Technologies

The second axis of Sino-Honduran cooperation in public policy relates to state digitalization and the development of urban management technologies. In recent years, Honduran officials have participated in training programs organized by Chinese institutions on digital governance and smart city development.

One such program brought together officials from various Honduran institutions—including the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of the Interior, and municipal authorities—to study applications of big data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and digital urban management platforms (Yang, 2025). During these activities, participants learned about tools such as “urban brains,” intelligent monitoring systems, and digital platforms for managing traffic, public services, and urban security.



Manuel Díaz Galéas, Former Attorney General of Honduras, During the Training Seminar on the Construction of Smart Cities. Weihai, China (2025)
Source: Yang (2025)

In another exchange, a delegation of Honduran journalists visited the Jiangbei District Smart City Management Center, where they observed urban monitoring systems based on sensors, camera networks, and real-time data analysis platforms (Jiangbei District Urban Management Office, 2023). These systems form part of the technological architecture of so-called “smart cities,” a model of urban governance that China actively promotes through its international cooperation initiatives.

In the Honduran case, these initiatives are connected to the development of technological infrastructure related to public security, particularly the 911 National Emergency System. Investigative reporting by *Expediente Público* (2024b) has noted that the system incorporates video surveillance and automated vehicle license plate recognition technologies, some of which were awarded to companies with technological ties to Huawei. It has also been documented that Huawei signed cooperation agreements with the state-owned company Hondutel for the development of telecommunications infrastructure, which has raised concerns regarding the possibility that these technologies could enable access to sensitive data or expand state monitoring capabilities (Madrid, 2023).

The dual nature of these technologies is particularly relevant in the analysis of cooperation in public policy. Video surveillance systems, facial recognition, data analytics, and advanced telecommunications infrastructure can contribute to

improving administrative efficiency and public security, while simultaneously expanding the state's capacity to collect information and monitor public spaces. In Honduras, this dimension is especially significant given the centrality of the 911 system within the country's national security infrastructure and the existence of thousands of surveillance cameras connected to the state network (*Expediente Público*, 2024b; 2024c).

Moreover, as Aguilar Antonio (2026) notes, the technological expansion of companies such as Huawei in Honduras has not been limited to the strictly technical domains, but has also been accompanied by a strategy of social and educational legitimization. Beginning in 2020, within the context of the pandemic and following the impact of Hurricanes Eta and Iota, the company strengthened its presence through educational cooperation initiatives and humanitarian assistance. Particularly notable was the creation of a Huawei Technology Academy in partnership with the Technological University of Honduras (UTH), conceived as a space for collaboration between teaching, research, and institutional engagement, as well as its integration into global programs such as Seeds for the Future.

At the same time, actions such as the donation of basic supplies through emergency authorities contributed to strengthening their position as a local social actor. These types of interventions, accompanied by a narrative of deep roots in the country, suggest that humanitarian and educational legitimacy can function as complementary mechanisms that mitigates political scrutiny over growing technological dependence, even in contexts where there is already a significant presence in critical infrastructure (Aguilar Antonio, 2026).

Regional Implications of Technological-Repressive Cooperation

The expansion of technological cooperation with China in Central America should not be interpreted solely through the lens of state modernization or technical capabilities. At its more strategic dimension, this cooperation can expand states' ability to monitor, classify, anticipate, and shape social behavior through digital infrastructure, telecommunications, monitoring systems, data platforms, and artificial intelligence tools.

As recent analyses warn, the Chinese model has evolved from more selective and intimidating forms of censorship toward a broader repertoire of surveillance, authoritarian information curation, and social control supported by data technologies, biometric recognition, and language models capable of automating the detection and suppression of sensitive content. Moreover, these instruments are no longer confined to China's domestic space: Beijing actively exports components of this ecosystem through telecommunications, 5G, smart cities, and other tools associated with the so-called Digital Silk Road (Polyakova and Walker, 2026; Weber, 2025).

In this sense, the political significance of Chinese technology lies not only in its potential use for overt repression, but also in its utility for more subtle, routine, and less visible forms of control. Recent literature on China points precisely to a dual logic of repression: on the one hand, highly coercive and explicit mechanisms; on the other, everyday repression based on diffuse surveillance, induced self-censorship, algorithmic risk management, and preventive behavioral correction (Ong, 2023). Real-time monitoring technologies, city brains, database integration, and new AI models enable states not only to observe the population, but also to assist or even automate state decisions about when to intervene, whom to monitor, and how to deter dissent before it crystallizes into open protest.

According to Kevin Sheives:

The challenge arises when countries begin to integrate these technologies across the entire technology chain—from hardware to software and artificial intelligence. As this integration deepens, vulnerabilities increase. This is closely tied to China’s cybersecurity law, which allows the state to access corporate data without prior notice or justification. This framework has also been applied in places like Hong Kong, where it has been used to monitor dissidents, including those abroad. As a result, greater technological dependence can generate significant risks, including unauthorized or covert access to data. As cyber capabilities continue to advance, these risks become increasingly pronounced. (K. Sheives, personal communication, April 6, 2026)

From this perspective, Nicaragua appears as the most concerning of the three cases. The depth of its engagement with China in telecommunications, digital infrastructure, integrated information systems, and monitoring platforms coincides with the consolidation of an openly autocratic regime whose control apparatus already depends on the surveillance of opposition actors, restrictions on civic space, and the repressive management of information.

In this sense, the incorporation of Chinese technologies not only strengthens general state capabilities: it may increase the density, precision, and sustainability of political control. More than simply enabling episodes of visible violence, these tools can reinforce a low-intensity but highly permanent form of repression based on digital traceability, communications monitoring, preemptive deterrence, and more sophisticated censorship. Nicaragua, therefore, is not merely receiving infrastructure: it is progressively integrating itself into a technological ecosystem compatible with the authoritarian reproduction of power.

El Salvador presents a different, though no less significant, risk. Unlike Nicaragua, where autocratization is more consolidated and ties with China have expanded rapidly across multiple strategic sectors, technological cooperation in El Salvador has advanced through cadre training, institutional learning, the exposure of officials to Chinese digital governance models, and the gradual adoption of tools with surveillance potential, such as facial recognition, advanced connectivity, and telecommunications infrastructure.

Within a context of increasing concentration of power and weakening checks and balances, these technologies can be employed not necessarily to replicate systems

of mass repression, but to refine more selective and administratively efficient forms of state control: monitoring public spaces, expanding citizen profiling capabilities, and increasing the government's ability to regulate information flows and deter behaviors deemed risky by the government. The issue, in short, is not only what technology is adopted, but what type of regime incorporates it and under what institutional controls.

Honduras, for its part, presents a different challenge for Nasry Asfura's government. Unlike Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador, the main risk today does not appear to be the immediate consolidation of a digital repression apparatus serving an already mature authoritarian project, but rather the potential creation of inherited technological dependencies, especially in telecommunications, video surveillance, smart cities, and systems linked to public security. If these dependencies deepen, the new government could face increasing costs to review contracts, replace providers, or reorient the state's digital architecture. This is particularly delicate in the telecommunications sector, where the presence of Huawei and associated technology partners could become not only a national security issue, but also a point of diplomatic friction with Washington.

Comparative experience shows that the adoption of sensitive Chinese technologies has caused tensions even between the United States and ideologically aligned governments—such as Bolsonaro in Brazil and Piñera in Chile—meaning that deeper Honduran dependence in this area could complicate bilateral relations with the Trump administration. In this regard, the challenge for Asfura will be deciding to what extent Honduras wishes to continue integrating into Chinese digital ecosystems that may prove incompatible with its security priorities and hemispheric alignment.

With respect to Asfura's promise to restore ties with Taiwan and China's growing presence in strategic Honduran sectors, an additional dilemma emerges. As Carlos Augusto Chacón warns, the main risk of these configurations lies in the leverage they generate: control over critical infrastructure can become a tool of political or diplomatic coercion in response to decisions contrary to Beijing's interests (C. A. Chacón, personal communication, March 24, 2026). This introduces a direct constraint on the strategic autonomy of the Honduran state.

Taken together, the three cases suggest that technological cooperation with China is not politically neutral. In consolidated authoritarian regimes such as Nicaragua, it can directly reinforce infrastructures of control and repression; in more hybrid

or consolidating autocracies, such as El Salvador, it can expand less visible instruments of surveillance and coercive governance; and in relatively more open contexts, such as Honduras, it can create strategic dependencies that shape future decisions regarding foreign policy, security, and technology regulation. The central implication is that discussions surrounding Chinese technology in the region should not be limited to costs, efficiency, or modernization, but should explicitly incorporate its effects on freedom, institutional autonomy, and geopolitical equilibrium.

For Evan Ellis, analyst at CSIS, technological cooperation with China is, in reality, the main arena through which authoritarian regimes can leverage mechanisms of repression:

What really makes the difference are electronic systems in the security sphere. These systems contribute more directly to regime survival. For example, in Ecuador, during Rafael Correa's government, the ECU-911 system was implemented; in Bolivia, under Evo Morales, the BOL-110 system; and in Cuba, telecommunications control systems. (E. Ellis, personal communication, March 17, 2026)

TABLE 2.

COOPERATION IN THE PUBLIC POLICY ARENA: CHINA AND CENTRAL AMERICA



NICARAGUA

DIMENSION: MAIN SECTORS

- TELECOMMUNICATIONS
- DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- ENERGY
- TRANSPORTATION
- EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT



ROLE OF CHINESE COMPANIES

EXTENSIVE
(HUAWEI, POWERCHINA, CCCC,
CAMCE, AMONG OTHERS)

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER:

HIGH, WITH INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND INTEGRATED SYSTEMS

ELITE TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING:

- LIMITED IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL FIELD

TECHNOLOGIES WITH DUAL POTENTIAL:

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE, MONITORING SYSTEMS, AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS



EL SALVADOR

DIMENSION: MAIN SECTORS

- DIGITAL ECONOMY
- TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- STATE DIGITALIZATION



ROLE OF CHINESE COMPANIES

TECHNOLOGICAL PRESENCE,
HUMAN CAPITAL TRAINING, AND
PRESENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL
SECTOR

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER:

MODERATE-TO-HIGH, PRIMARILY THROUGH TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION

ELITE TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING:

- HIGH, WITH A STRONG EDUCATIONAL COMPONENT, EMPLOYABILITY, AND NARRATIVES OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

TECHNOLOGIES WITH DUAL POTENTIAL:

FACIAL RECOGNITION, TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS, AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS



HONDURAS

DIMENSION: MAIN SECTORS

- RENEWABLE ENERGY
- SMART CITIES
- TELECOMMUNICATIONS



ROLE OF CHINESE COMPANIES

PARTICIPATION IN ENERGY,
TELECOMMUNICATIONS, AND
MONITORING SYSTEMS, WITH
STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL
LEGITIMIZATION

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER:

INITIAL BUT GROWING, LINKED TO TECHNICAL TRAINING AND DIGITALIZATION PROJECTS

ELITE TRAINING/CAPACITY BUILDING:

- MODERATE, PRIMARILY IN DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND SMART CITIES

TECHNOLOGIES WITH DUAL POTENTIAL:

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE, URBAN MONITORING SYSTEMS, AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS



Redesigning the State: Cooperation in the Institutional Arena

Nicaragua: Ideological and Organizational Ties

In the case of Nicaragua, institutional cooperation with China is primarily channeled through ties between the Chinese Communist Party and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), the ruling party under the leadership of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo. These exchanges constitute a privileged channel for political socialization and the transfer of governance experiences between dominant parties.

An illustrative example is the meeting held in July 2023 between Li Mingxiang, Vice Minister of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee, and a delegation of FSLN cadres led by Loyda Barreda. During the meeting, the Chinese official presented the foundations of Chinese-style modernization, while the Sandinista delegation expressed its interest in learning from the CCP's experience in party and state leadership and in expanding cooperation between the two countries through interparty exchanges (ILD, 2023).

These types of meetings demonstrate how institutional cooperation between the two countries is not limited to traditional state diplomacy, but also develops through organic relations between ruling parties, a characteristic instrument of the CCP's party diplomacy (see Santos, 2025).

Training of Personnel, Judicial Cooperation, and the Transfer of Governance Experiences

The institutional arena materializes through systematic training and cooperation programs directed at political cadres, as well as public officials and actors within the Nicaraguan legal system, facilitating the circulation of ideas, administrative practices, and governance frameworks associated with the Chinese experience.

Among the identified mechanisms, the following stand out:

- **Training programs aimed at FSLN cadres and state officials.** In September 2022, Chinese ambassador to Nicaragua, Chen Xi, delivered an online lecture aimed at officials from the ruling party and government, organized in collaboration with the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua. The event brought together tens of thousands of participants from the state apparatus and local governments and focused on presenting the achievements of the Chinese development model and the leadership of the CCP (Hong Kong China Review, 2022).
- **Political training programs in CCP schools in China.** Delegations of Sandinista cadres have participated in courses organized by institutions linked to the CCP apparatus, such as the Hubei Party School of the Hubei Provincial Committee, where they received training on Xi Jinping Thought, party-building, and the Chinese experience in development and governance in September 2025 (Party School of the Hubei Provincial Committee, 2025).
- **Study visits and institutional exchanges at the subnational level,** in which FSLN delegations have learned about local governance, rural development, and public administration in different regions of China, such as the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Foreign Affairs Office of Yunnan Province, 2024) and Kunming University of Science and Technology (2023). These training sessions have been attended by figures such as the aforementioned Loyda Barreda, Ramona Rodríguez—former rector of the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN)—and Francisco Valenzuela, mayor of Estelí, a city in northeastern Nicaragua located approximately 150 kilometers from the capital, Managua.
- **Judicial cooperation between the supreme courts of both countries.** In June 2023, Zhang Jun, president of the Supreme People’s Court of China, held a videoconference with Alba Luz Ramos, president of Supreme Court of Justice of Nicaragua. The meeting established a channel for cooperation in the judicial field, including exchanges on judicial administration, judge training, and criminal justice practices (Supreme People’s Court of the PRC, 2023a). Chinese authorities have also met with figures such as Wendy Morales, Nicaragua’s Attorney General, Ana Julia

Guido—former Attorney General and now magistrate; and Alba Luz Ramos, former president of the Nicaraguan Supreme Court (Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2022; 2025c).



Ambassador Qu Yuhui Meets in Nicaragua With Attorney General Wendy Morales (2025)
Source: Embassy of China in Nicaragua (2025)

These initiatives suggest that institutional cooperation between China and Nicaragua operates as a mechanism for the training and socialization of political, administrative, and judicial elites, through which governance experiences are transferred and ties are strengthened between the ruling party, the state apparatus, and the country's legal institutions.

El Salvador: Trans-Ideological Authoritarianism

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and El Salvador in 2018, bilateral cooperation has included a set of institutional exchanges aimed at strengthening state capacities, exchanging governance experiences, and training public officials.

These exchanges have developed primarily through three mechanisms: judicial and law-enforcement cooperation, public official training programs, and links between political parties. Together, these mechanisms have created a network of relationships between state institutions and political actors that constitutes an important dimension of bilateral cooperation.

Judicial Cooperation and the Criminal Justice System

One of the most visible components of institutional cooperation between the two countries is the development of exchanges among institutions within the judicial and criminal justice systems. These exchanges have included official visits, high-level meetings, and the signing of cooperation agreements between courts and prosecutors' offices.

In the judicial sphere, delegations from the Supreme Court of Justice of El Salvador have held meetings with the Supreme People's Court of China to exchange experiences regarding judicial operations and institutional reform, particularly following Bukele's rise to power. At one of these meetings, held in December 2019, the president of the Supreme People's Court of China emphasized that judicial exchanges and cooperation constituted an important element in the development of bilateral relations between the two countries, while also expressing China's interest in strengthening ties with the Salvadoran Supreme Court through exchanges of experience in areas such as the computerization of courts and the training of judges (Supreme People's Court of the PRC, 2019).

These judicial exchanges were further deepened by the visit to China by the president of the Supreme Court of El Salvador, Óscar Alberto López. During this September 2023 visit, both parties agreed to strengthen bilateral judicial

cooperation and signed a memorandum of understanding on exchanges and cooperation between the Supreme People's Court of China and the Salvadoran Supreme Court, institutionalizing channels of cooperation between the two institutions (Supreme People's Court of the PRC, 2023b).

Cooperation has also extended to the area of public prosecutors' offices. In March 2024, Ying Yong, Procurator-General of the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China, held a meeting in Beijing with Salvadoran Attorney General Rodolfo Delgado aimed at strengthening exchanges and cooperation between the prosecutorial authorities of both countries (Yu, 2024). As a result of this meeting, both institutions signed a memorandum of understanding designed to promote cooperation between their prosecutorial bodies, including exchanges of experience in building the rule of law, the digitalization of prosecutorial systems, and cooperation in combating transnational crime.

For their part, officials from El Salvador's Attorney General's Office have also participated in exchanges with Chinese educational institutions to discuss possible mechanisms of cooperation in human resource development and professional training in areas related to law and public administration (Liu, 2025). Judicial cooperation has also been promoted through diplomatic channels. For example, Ambassador Zhang Yanhui has held meetings with the Salvadoran Attorney General to discuss strengthening bilateral judicial cooperation and expanding exchanges between the legal institutions of both countries (Embassy of China in El Salvador, 2025).

Exchanges Between Political Parties

Institutional cooperation has also developed through ties between the Chinese Communist Party and Salvadoran political actors, particularly the ruling party *Nuevas Ideas*. These exchanges form part of the party diplomacy that China maintains with political parties from various countries, regardless of their ideological orientations.

In November 2025, a delegation of *Nuevas Ideas* cadres visited China and held a meeting with representatives of the International Liaison Department of the CCP. During the meeting, both sides discussed experiences related to party management and state governance, as well as the development strategies adopted by China over

recent decades (ILD, 2025b). The Salvadoran representatives—led by Silvio Aquino, director of the *Nuevas Ideas* training school—expressed their interest in learning from the CCP’s experience in economic development planning and state administration, emphasizing the importance of the medium- and long-term development plans implemented by the Chinese government.

These recent exchanges complement other mechanisms of direct engagement between the Chinese Communist Party and *Nuevas Ideas*, pointing toward a gradual deepening of party cooperation. In addition to bilateral meetings with Salvadoran leaders, contacts have been established focused on political training and organizational strengthening for the ruling party. In this context, cooperation agreements signed during high-level visits to Beijing—including meetings led by Vice President Félix Ulloa and party leader Xavier Zablah Bukele—stand out, particularly those aimed at cadre training and the exchange of experiences in governance and state planning (Santos, 2025).

Likewise, *Expediente Público* revealed the creation of a *Nuevas Ideas* cadre-training school supported by the CCP, conceived as a space for political education and organizational development within the party (Lemus, 2025). Initiatives of this type suggest a more structured level of cooperation, extending beyond occasional meetings and moving toward the institutionalization of ties between the two organizations. These mechanisms reflect a sustained engagement strategy combining political dialogue, elite training, and the transfer of party experiences between the CCP and *Nuevas Ideas*.



Photograph 6. Silvio Aquino, Director of the *Nuevas Ideas* Training School, Meets With Ma Hui, Vice Minister of the ILD, at the National Archives of China (2025)

Source: ILD (2025)

Subnational Cooperation

Institutional cooperation between China and El Salvador has also extended to the subnational level. Delegations of Salvadoran mayors have traveled to Chinese cities to explore opportunities for cooperation in areas such as agriculture, tourism, and local economic development.

For example, a delegation led by the president of the Association of Municipalities of El Salvador visited the city of Weinan in Shaanxi Province, where they held meetings with local authorities to discuss potential mechanisms of cooperation in sectors such as modern agriculture, tourism, and industrial development (Political and Legal Affairs Committee of the CCP Municipal Committee in Weinan, 2019). This type of subnational exchange allows for the expansion of bilateral cooperation beyond central governments and facilitates the establishment of cooperation networks with local authorities.

The exchanges described above demonstrate that institutional cooperation between China and El Salvador operates across multiple levels of the state and political apparatus, including courts, prosecutors' offices, government agencies,

political parties, and local governments. Through these channels, China promotes the exchange of experiences in areas such as state governance, public administration, judicial management, and economic development planning. While these exchanges do not necessarily entail the direct transfer of institutions, they do contribute to the circulation of knowledge, administrative practices, and governance experiences among state actors in both countries, thereby consolidating an important institutional dimension within the bilateral relationship.

Training of Public Officials

Finally, another observable component of institutional cooperation between China and El Salvador has been the development of training and capacity-building programs aimed at public officials. These programs, organized primarily by institutions linked to China's Ministry of Commerce, aim to promote the exchange of knowledge and experiences in areas related to public administration, economic development, and public policy formulation.

One example of these initiatives is the training course on the public-private partnership model organized for Salvadoran officials. This program, which included participants from the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Economy of El Salvador, featured lectures, seminars, and presentations on China's experience in infrastructure development through public-private partnership schemes (Xi, 2021).

Honduras and the Diversification of International Allies

Institutional cooperation between China and Honduras has developed primarily through three mechanisms: exchanges among judicial institutions, training programs for officials within the justice system, and ties between political parties. These mechanisms emerged especially after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2023 and have contributed to creating channels of interaction among political, judicial, and party elites.

Judicial Cooperation

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, there have been exchanges between courts, participation in international judicial forums organized by China, and diplomatic contacts aimed at strengthening cooperation between legal institutions. One significant example was the participation of the President of the Supreme Court of Justice of Honduras, Rebeca Ráquel Obando, in the Maritime Silk Road International Forum on Judicial Cooperation held in Quanzhou in 2023. The event brought together judicial representatives from more than ten countries to discuss topics such as the role of supreme courts in the administration of justice, international mechanisms for resolving trade disputes, and cooperation on transnational crimes (Xinhua, 2023).

Forums of this kind form part of China's efforts to promote judicial cooperation among countries linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, with the aim of strengthening institutional exchanges between courts and developing legal cooperation mechanisms that facilitate trade, dispute resolution, and law enforcement in transnational contexts (Xinhua, 2023).

Cooperation has also developed through diplomatic channels. In October 2024, China's ambassador to Honduras held a meeting with Ráquel Obando, president of the Supreme Court of Justice, to discuss the deepening of judicial cooperation between the two countries. During the meeting, both sides exchanged views on strengthening ties between judicial institutions and expanding bilateral cooperation in this field (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2024b).



Ambassador Yu Bo Meets With Rebeca Ráquel Obando in Honduras (2024)

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC (2024b)

Training of Officials and Cooperation Between Parties

Another important component of institutional cooperation between China and Honduras is the training of officials and the development of exchanges between political parties. These initiatives form part of international training programs organized by Chinese institutions, as well as the party diplomacy promoted by the International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

In the judicial sphere, Honduran officials have participated in training programs organized by Chinese institutions. For example, Lissien Chiuz, coordinating judge of the Administrative Litigation Court, participated in a training workshop in Shanghai on the digital transformation of judicial systems, where tools such as digital case management platforms, virtual hearings, and online justice systems were discussed (Fan, 2025).

During this program, Chinese experts presented the functioning of “cloud justice” systems, which allow judicial processes to be managed digitally, including document filing, online mediation, and the administration of court records through technological platforms. These initiatives form part of the broader

digitalization of China's judicial system and are presented as potential models for the modernization of judicial systems in other countries (Fan, 2025).

Institutional cooperation has also extended into the sphere of political parties. Delegations from Honduras's Liberty and Refoundation Party (Libre) have held meetings with representatives of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (ILD) to exchange experiences in governance and political management. In one such meeting, led by Gerardo Torres—vice minister of foreign affairs during Xiomara Castro's presidency—and Ma Hui—vice minister of the ILD—both sides emphasized their interest in strengthening inter-party exchanges and promoting mutual learning regarding experiences in government and public administration (ILD, 2024).

Subsequently, in July 2025, another delegation of Libre party cadres visited China to deepen exchanges on governance and strengthen cooperation between the two parties. During these meetings, Chinese representatives expressed their desire to expand inter-party exchanges and promote the sharing of experiences on political development and state governance (ILD, 2025a).



ELITE CAPTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION: A RECURRING PATTERN OF CHINA IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The analysis reveals the existence of similar mechanisms—exchanges between judicial institutions, public official training programs, and ties between political parties—although with significant differences in their depth and degree of institutionalization. In Nicaragua, these mechanisms display a denser and more organic character, particularly through the relationship between the CCP and the FSLN, which functions as a stable channel for political socialization and alignment among ruling elites. In El Salvador, cooperation has expanded rapidly, encompassing state, party, and technical dimensions within an ongoing process of institutionalization; while in Honduras, these exchanges remain in a more incipient and fragmented phase, marked by recent contacts and less organizational density.

Beyond these differences, the three cases reveal a common feature: the centrality of political, administrative, and judicial elites as vectors of China’s transnational diplomacy. Institutional cooperation is not geared toward at the broad dissemination of public policies, but rather at the training, socialization, and articulation of strategic nuclei within the state and party apparatus, enabling China to build relationships of influence through closed decision-making circuits. In this regard, the ILD plays a key role as an intermediary in party diplomacy, facilitating exchanges between ruling parties, promoting cadre training, and articulating transnational networks of political elites that operate alongside—and sometimes above—traditional diplomatic channels.

Furthermore, judicial cooperation acquires particular relevance when analyzed through the lens of “autocratic legalism.” Rather than constituting a simple technical transfer, these exchanges can contribute to the circulation of legal practices and institutional models that, under the guise of modernization and strengthening the rule of law, can be used to consolidate executive power, reconfigure institutional oversight mechanisms, and limit accountability (see

Scheppele, 2018). According to Juan Pablo Cardenal, former correspondent in China for several Spanish newspapers:

No one is saying that countries like El Salvador will change their Constitutions from beginning to end as a consequence of these [judicial] exchanges with China. But they may change certain elements that China can persuade them to adopt through the discourse of efficiency. This coincides with the Chinese regime's argument that certain public goods justify sacrificing individual and collective rights. (J. P. Cardenal, personal communication, March 25, 2026)

For his part, Kevin Sheives argues:

In the judicial sphere, the Chinese system has very particular characteristics: lawyers can be appointed by the state, access to evidence is often restricted, and prolonged detentions without clear charges may occur. In general, it is a system that prioritizes the interests of the party and the state. Therefore, when countries participate in judicial cooperation or party exchanges with China, they are not only receiving technical knowledge, but are also being exposed to elements that may be anti-democratic or authoritarian. (K. Sheives, personal communication, April 6, 2026)

In the case of Honduras, and particularly following Nasry Asfura's rise to power, this pattern of cooperation centered on elite capture remains, for now, in an early phase. However, this should not be interpreted as an absence of risk. Comparative experience shows that the CCP's party diplomacy mechanisms—through the ILD—operate pragmatically, building ties with governments of different ideological leanings, as illustrated by the case of El Salvador, where the establishment of relations with China under the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) government (left-wing) was followed by a deepening of ties under the *Nuevas Ideas* administration (right-wing).

In this sense, the current low density of these exchanges in Honduras can be understood more as a window of opportunity than as a guarantee. If expanded, these channels—including judicial exchanges, cadre training, and party ties—could facilitate greater influence within strategic sectors of the state. Consequently, their evolution will depend less on the ideological orientation of the Asfura government than on its political will, strategic calculations, and the degree of pressure exerted by the United States to maintain red lines with the PRC.

TABLE 3.

INSTITUCIONAL COOPERATION: BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL AMÉRICA

Dimension	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Honduras
Inter-Party Exchanges	Exchanges between party-states: CCP and FSLN	Predominance of Nuevas Ideas, history with the FMLN	Institutional and technocratic cooperation
Judicial Cooperation	Contacts between Supreme Courts	Agreements and memoranda between courts and prosecutors' offices	Exchanges and participation in forums
Training of Civil Servants	Political and administrative training for Sandinista cadres	Capacity-building programs for public officials	Initial training for judges and public officials
Level of Institutionalization	High	Medium-high	Low-medium
Predominant Feature	Political and ideological socialization	Institutional and technocratic cooperation	Institutional ties in formation



THE IDEATIONAL ARENA AS A NARRATIVES AND LEGITIMACY DISPUTE

Nicaragua and the Confrontation With the United States

The ideational arena of China–Nicaragua cooperation is configured in a highly coherent and dense manner around a set of shared normative principles between China and the Nicaraguan government, which function as a legitimizing basis for the bilateral relationship and as an explicit counterweight to Western liberal discourse.

First, the defense of sovereignty and non-interference stands out strongly as the core organizing principle of the discourse. China not only affirms its respect for the “sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Nicaragua,” but also actively legitimizes the country’s right to “determine its own future and destiny” (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, 2022).

This principle is complemented by a direct criticism of international sanctions, characterized as “power politics and coercive diplomacy” that harm the development and rights of the Nicaraguan people (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, 2022). Along the same lines, subsequent interventions at the Human Rights Council reinforced this narrative by demanding the lifting of sanctions and denouncing their incompatibility with international law (Wei, 2022).

Second, a redefinition of the concept of human rights aligned with the Chinese perspective becomes consolidated. Rather than prioritizing civil and political rights, the discourse emphasizes economic development and material well-being as fundamental conditions for human rights. Thus, the performance of the Nicaraguan government in this area is positively assessed, while an approach based on “constructive dialogue,” “equality,” and “mutual respect” is promoted, explicitly rejecting the “politicization” of human rights (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations, 2022). This implies an indirect legitimization of the Nicaraguan political model in the face of external criticism.

A third central axis is the discursive convergence surrounding the international order. Nicaragua appears to be aligning itself with China's vision of an alternative international system, based on non-liberal multilateralism, multipolarity, and opposition to hegemony. Nicaraguan authorities and affiliated actors highlight China as an "important force" for multilateralism and as a promoter of a more "just and equitable" order (Liu, 2023). This narrative is reinforced through the adoption and endorsement of Chinese global governance initiatives and concepts such as the "community with a shared future for mankind," which seek to reshape international norms (Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2025b). Within this framework, they explicitly promote joint opposition to the "abuse of unilateral actions—such as the imposition of tariffs" and the defense of the common interests of the Global South in order to "build a multipolar world" (Embassy of China in Nicaragua, 2025a).

Likewise, an internalization of Chinese discourse on development and modernization is observable. The narrative of "Chinese-style modernization," the success of the economic model, and state planning (five-year plans) are presented as valid and transferable reference points, offering Nicaragua an alternative horizon of non-liberal development (Qu, 2026). As the Chinese ambassador stated in an article published by the pro-government outlet *El 19 Digital*:

From education, healthcare, employment, and social security to rural revitalization, green development, and common prosperity, the CCP regards the people's sense of satisfaction, happiness, and security as the vital criterion for evaluating governance effectiveness. This ensures that all policies genuinely respond to the concerns and expectations of the people. This concept fully aligns with the vision of the "People's Presidency" promoted by Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front. (Qu, 2026)

Finally, the ideational arena also includes the dissemination of Chinese political concepts within Nicaraguan institutional spaces, such as "comprehensive process people's democracy," presented during exchanges between legislative actors from both countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022). These exchanges suggest not only discursive alignment, but also the circulation of alternative interpretive frameworks concerning democracy and governance.

El Salvador: The Illiberal Convergence

The ideational arena of cooperation between China and El Salvador is structured around the systematic dissemination of normative frameworks, governance narratives, and strategic concepts promoted by Beijing, particularly the notion of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” which functions as the organizing principle of bilateral discourse (Zhang, 2026). This concept is embedded within a broader vision of global governance based on “consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits,” as well as the promotion of a “more just and equitable” international order (Zhang, 2025).

Within this framework, one of the pillars of China’s ideational apparatus is the narrative of cooperation “without political conditions” and “without geopolitical calculations,” presented as a defining feature of its relationship with Latin America (Zhang, 2026). This formulation, reiterated in various official documents and communications, is articulated around principles such as sovereignty, self-determination, and opposition to external interference, explicitly promoted as the foundation of bilateral relations (Zhang, 2025).

Beyond non-conditionality, China’s ideational projection in El Salvador actively incorporates the promotion of alternative models of democracy. In particular, the concept of “comprehensive process people’s democracy” is presented as a form of political organization that integrates participation, consultation, and effectiveness in decision-making, emphasizing its capacity to “solve real problems” and reflect the will of the people. This discourse has been adopted by high-ranking officials within the Bukele government, such as Vice President Félix Ulloa (see Santos, 2025).

At the same time, official Chinese narrative emphasizes that every country should “independently explore a development path suited to its national conditions,” a principle reiterated within the bilateral relationship with El Salvador, as occurred during the meeting between Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Salvadoran counterpart Alexandra Hill (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2024a).

This discursive framework not only legitimizes the bilateral relationship, but also contributes to softening and delegitimizing international criticism of the authoritarian nature of the Bukele government by reframing such critiques as

foreign demands detached from the Salvadoran national context. At the same time, it disseminates a conception of governance in which the provision of public goods—particularly development, stability, and security—is presented as a sufficient criterion for political legitimacy, displacing or relativizing the centrality of liberal democracy and institutional checks and balances, and even suggesting that such outcomes can be achieved without them.

Honduras and the Internalization of the “One China” Principle

In the case of Honduras, the ideational arena of cooperation with China displays features similar to those observed in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Despite the novelty of its ties with Beijing, it is already possible to identify the emergence of a set of shared discursive frameworks that structure the relationship and contribute to reshaping the normative references of Honduran foreign policy.

A first central element has been the affirmation of sovereignty as the legitimizing principle behind alignment with China. The decision to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing and sever ties with Taiwan was framed in terms of national self-determination and the sovereign choice of a model of international insertion. This framing is significant because it allows a geopolitical decision to be reinterpreted in normative terms, aligning it with one of the pillars of Chinese international discourse—non-interference—and reinforcing its domestic and international legitimacy. Along the same lines, recognition of the “One China” principle constitutes not only a diplomatic act, but also the explicit adoption of an ideational framework promoted by Beijing that redefines the foundations of international recognition and state legitimacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023a).

Second, the Sino-Honduran relationship is discursively articulated around notions of cooperation based on equality, mutual benefit, and shared development, all characteristic elements of Chinese diplomatic language. Chinese and Honduran authorities have emphasized that bilateral ties are developed on the basis of “mutually beneficial cooperation” and “joint development,” framed within “healthy and stable” relations between the two countries (Yu, 2025; Honduran Ministry of National Defense, 2024). Such formulations not only describe the relationship, but also contribute to internalizing a specific political grammar that

displaces traditional categories of the liberal order, such as democratic conditionality or governance standards.

A third relevant axis is alignment with China's vision of a multipolar international order and alternative multilateralism. During the Castro administration, Honduran officials emphasized the importance of strengthening dialogue and international cooperation within the framework of "inclusive multilateralism," in line with positions promoted by China in international forums (CGTN Español, 2024), even seeking to join the BRICS forum (TV BRICS, 2025). This emphasis reflects a discursive convergence around the need to transform the global order toward less hierarchical arrangements more favorable to developing countries, a narrative directly linked to China's proposals for reforming global governance.

Likewise, the ideational landscape in Honduras is expressed through the positive reception of Chinese global initiatives and its development narrative. The Belt and Road Initiative, for example, has been presented as a project that not only generates economic opportunities, but also contributes to redefining the way countries cooperate internationally by promoting "common development and prosperity" (Xinhua Español, 2023). Although this discourse remains in an early stage of consolidation in Honduras, its early adoption suggests an ongoing process of ideational alignment.

Finally, this arena also involves the circulation of discourses linking development, stability, and political legitimacy, in which China appears as an alternative model to the liberal paradigm. Within this framework, cooperation with China is presented as a pathway toward development without the normative restrictions associated with Western cooperation, reinforcing the idea that modernization trajectories compatible with non-democratic governance models do exist. In this regard, Rasel Tomé, former vice president of the Honduran National Congress (2022–2026), stated:

The exchange experiences on governance within the branches of the state, legislative assemblies, legislative management, on making the state more efficient, and on the path China followed to overcome poverty, they have already surpassed poverty, and additionally, how they managed to involve different regions in the nation's development project is very important. (CGTN Español, 2024)

China and Normative Diplomacy in Central America

As described above, the systematic circulation of a common repertoire of terms, categories, and discursive frameworks is clearly observed, transcending national particularities and pointing to a normative convergence actively promoted by China.

In all three cases, the documents show the reiteration of concepts such as “sovereignty,” “non-interference,” “mutual benefit,” “win-win cooperation,” “multilateralism,” “shared development,” and “community of common future,” which function as organizing categories of the political discourse in the relationship with China. In Nicaragua, for example, these terms appear explicitly in the defense of multilateralism and in the characterization of China as a guarantor of peace and global development. In El Salvador, they are structured around the idea of an “alternative democracy” based on stability and efficiency, as well as the promotion of the Chinese development model. In Honduras, although in a more incipient way, they emerge within the framework of the bilateral relationship as a sovereign decision and as part of a more balanced international order.

This discursive homogeneity is not accidental, but rather reflects processes of structured ideational dissemination, in which local political actors adopt and reproduce normative frameworks promoted by Beijing. This dissemination is not limited to abstract ideas, but implies the progressive internalization of principles such as the primacy of stability, the centrality of the state, political discipline, and the relativization of liberal pluralism. In this sense, the ideational arena acts as a key vector of convergence, symbolically legitimizing forms of governance compatible with the Chinese model.

From a comparative perspective, what is relevant is that these discursive frameworks are replicated with remarkable consistency in different political contexts:

- In Nicaragua, they are embedded in an openly anti-Western discourse and in defense of sovereignty against external interference.
- In El Salvador, they are linked to an illiberal project that redefines democracy in terms of order, security, and efficiency.

- In Honduras, they begin to operate as a legitimizing language for the geopolitical reorientation towards China.

Despite these variations, the normative core remains the same, suggesting the existence of a transnational process of discursive standardization. This finding allows for a direct examination of China's official foreign policy discourse. Beijing insists on presenting its cooperation as neutral, pragmatic, and devoid of ideological conditions. However, empirical evidence in the ideational arena points in the opposite direction.

The reiteration of specific normative frameworks, the promotion of certain political categories, and their adoption by local actors indicate that Chinese public diplomacy does incorporate an ideological component, although this operates indirectly, relationally, and non-coercively (see Garlick and Qin, 2023). In particular, this ideological component is characterized by:

- To shift the centrality of liberal democracy and human rights as universal standards.
- Reaffirm state sovereignty and political stability as overarching principles.
- To legitimize alternative governance models, where economic development is not conditioned by political openness.

Thus, rather than normative neutrality, what is observed is a form of “covert normative diplomacy,” in which the values promoted by China are disseminated under the guise of technical cooperation and mutual benefit. This process coincides with what is noted in the literature on Authoritarian Centers of Gravity: influence is not imposed, but rather shapes alternative frameworks of legitimacy that facilitate ideational convergence. As Juan Pablo Cardenal mentions:

China is attempting, in many areas of international relations, to have its message filtered through. It's not that it intends to export its model [“socialist with Chinese characteristics”], but rather to change perspectives on human rights, which is the classic example. In the free world they are considered universal rights [...] and in the case of the Chinese regime there is this whole story of cultural relativism: human rights depend on the circumstances of each country. In fact, China speaks of the right to life, the right to development, and a series of primarily economic and social rights, leaving aside political and individual rights. (J. P. Cardenal, personal communication, March 25, 2026)

Consequently, the ideational arena is particularly relevant within the analysis of authoritarian cooperation, as it allows us to observe a phenomenon that other arenas do not capture with the same clarity: the construction of normative affinities that reconfigure the political horizon of local actors. It is precisely on this level that it becomes evident that China's international projection is not merely economic or pragmatic, but rather involves the active—albeit subtle—diffusion of a set of political principles that offer an alternative to the liberal order.



However, it is important to note that the case of Honduras, as demonstrated throughout this study, possesses a particular characteristic: the alternation in power and, with it, the reconfiguration of foreign policy discourse. While the anti-Western orientation of Xiomara Castro's leftist government facilitated normative convergence with China—especially on issues such as criticism of the liberal

international order and U.S. hegemony—Asfura’s closeness to Donald Trump could reverse that dynamic.

Asfura has not only proposed reviewing Honduras’s ties with Beijing, but has also aligned himself with the U.S. president’s regional agenda through participation in forums such as the Shield of the Americas, which brings together governments ideologically aligned with Trump. Honduras’s shift toward the West is also evident in the conversations the president has held with Volodymyr Zelensky, to whom Asfura expressed his support for “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine” (Romero, 2026). Furthermore, during a visit to Israel prior to taking office, the Honduran president stated that the country is “a true friend” (EFE, 2026).

These developments suggest that Asfura’s ideological orientation—rooted in the conservatism of the National Party—remains distant from China’s normative diplomacy, particularly with regard to discourses critical of the United States and the Western world. Nevertheless, this dimension does not necessarily constitute an obstacle to maintaining—or even deepening—commitments with the PRC. Cases such as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Javier Milei in Argentina—new-wave right-wing leaders aligned with Trump—demonstrate that relations with Beijing can continue to develop in trade, investment, and even political spheres without breaking normative affinity with the current U.S. administration.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the arenas of authoritarian cooperation between China and Central American regimes allows for a more complex, relational, and empirically grounded understanding of Beijing's international projection in the region. Far from consisting of isolated or merely sectoral interactions, the evidence demonstrates that these arenas configure a dense network of political, technological, institutional, and ideational ties operating simultaneously, interdependently, and in a strategically articulated manner.

In this regard, the principal finding of this research lies in demonstrating that Chinese influence is not deployed through a single channel, but rather through the convergence of multiple dimensions of cooperation that, taken together, produce cumulative effects on state capacities, normative frameworks, and power dynamics within recipient countries.

First, the arenas of authoritarian cooperation should be understood as an interrelated system rather than as independent analytical compartments. The distinction among the administrative, public policy, institutional, and ideational arenas is useful for identifying specific mechanisms of interaction; however, in practice, these dimensions are deeply intertwined.

The transfer of surveillance technologies within the public policy arena, for example, is complemented by official training programs within the institutional arena, while both are legitimized through discourses centered on development, sovereignty, and state efficiency within the ideational arena. Likewise, police and military cooperation within the administrative arena not only strengthens coercive capacities, but also relies on normative frameworks that justify the primacy of stability and order over democratic standards.

This interrelationship produces a synergistic effect that amplifies the impact of cooperation. The adoption of digital governance technologies cannot be fully understood without considering the accompanying processes of institutional socialization, nor the discursive frameworks that legitimize them. Similarly, the dissemination of concepts such as “comprehensive process people's democracy” or

“non-interference” acquires greater significance when analyzed alongside concrete practices of cooperation in security, justice, or infrastructure. Taken together, these arenas operate as an ecosystem of influence in which each dimension reinforces the others, generating processes of political and institutional convergence that transcend mere technical cooperation.

Second, this interdependent nature translates into a logic of mutually reinforcing benefits for the actors involved. For China, the articulation of these arenas constitutes an effective instrument of strategic projection that enables it to expand its institutional, economic, and regulatory presence in the Western Hemisphere. Through cooperation in security, technology, infrastructure, and elite training, Beijing not only expands its access to strategic sectors within recipient states, but also promotes the adoption of technological standards, governance models, and discursive frameworks compatible with its global interests. This process contributes to consolidating China as an authoritarian center of gravity capable of attracting, socializing, and shaping other regimes beyond its immediate regional environment.

At the same time, this cooperation offers significant benefits to recipient regimes, particularly those displaying authoritarian or hybrid tendencies. In contexts characterized by institutional weakening, concentration of power, and deteriorating relations with Western partners, relations with China provide access to financing, technology, and political support without the conditions associated with liberal cooperation.

Moreover, the various arenas of cooperation contribute directly to the survival of these regimes. The administrative arena strengthens their coercive capacities; the public policy arena expands their tools of governance and control; the institutional arena facilitates the consolidation of power networks and the reconfiguration of the state; and the ideational arena provides frameworks of legitimacy that justify their actions both domestically and internationally.

In this sense, authoritarian cooperation should be understood as a mechanism of co-production of power. It is not merely a matter of China exporting models or Central American governments passively receiving them, but rather an interactive process in which both sides obtain strategic benefits. For recipient regimes, these

benefits translate into greater control capacity, increased autonomy from external pressures, and the legitimization of their governing practices.

For China, they entail the consolidation of its influence in countries that, in many cases, can become preferred partners or “client regimes” within the framework of its hemispheric projection. Thus, the final outcome of this interaction is the simultaneous reinforcement of authoritarian capabilities at the domestic level and China’s strategic presence at the international level.

Third, the findings of this research carry important implications for policymakers and democratic governments, particularly regarding the identification of sectors of influence that have thus far received limited attention in public debate and policy analysis. While discussions about China’s presence in Latin America have tended to focus on infrastructure investment or trade, this study demonstrates that some of the most sensitive and strategic arenas are located in less visible domains, such as judicial cooperation, party diplomacy, and the dissemination of ideational narratives.

Judicial cooperation, for example, does not merely involve technical exchanges between courts or prosecutors’ offices, but may also contribute to the circulation of models of “autocratic legalism” that strengthen executive power, reconfigure mechanisms of institutional oversight, and weaken judicial independence. Similarly, the party diplomacy promoted by the CCP’s International Department enables the establishment of direct ties with key political actors, facilitating processes of ideological socialization and the transfer of organizational practices that shape the structure of political power. These forms of cooperation operate through relatively closed circuits, distant from public scrutiny, thereby increasing their capacity for influence.

Likewise, the ideational arena—often underestimated—plays a central role in the reconfiguration of frameworks of political legitimacy. The spread of concepts such as non-interference, unconditional cooperation, or “alternative democracies” not only accompanies cooperation in other areas, but also contributes to transforming how political and social actors evaluate democracy, development, and governance. In this regard, Evan Ellis (2026b) argues:

Beyond trade and investment, U.S. pressure has done relatively little to curb the expansion of the People's Republic of China's engagement with the region in strategic areas such as multilateral cooperation through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and its subforums; "collaboration" in the fields of space, artificial intelligence, and other technologies; the development of compromising relationships for personal and business gains that China refers to as "people-to-people" exchanges; the acceptance of Chinese donations by military and police forces; the travel of officials to the People's Republic of China; or cooperation in new areas such as transnational organized crime, money laundering, and cybersecurity.

In this context, it is particularly relevant that the United States has, in practice, tolerated the expansion of Chinese cooperation in sensitive areas even in countries considered close allies. The case of El Salvador under the government of Nayib Bukele is illustrative: despite warnings regarding the risks associated with China's presence in strategic sectors, bilateral relations between Washington and San Salvador have continued to develop in key areas such as security, migration, and police cooperation. This coexistence has enabled Bukele to deploy a strategy of multi-alignment, simultaneously leveraging his ties with both powers while expanding his room for maneuver in critical sectors.

Such dynamics are not accidental, but rather are embedded within the specific programs defined by China in its strategy toward Latin America, as outlined in the 2025 White Paper. The Solidarity, Development, Civilization, Security, and Social Connectivity programs should not be interpreted merely as frameworks for sectoral cooperation, but as a comprehensive architecture articulating the various arenas analyzed throughout this study. In this regard, the perspective of the arenas of authoritarian cooperation makes it possible to translate these strategic guidelines into concrete practices, revealing the internal coherence of China's policy toward the region.

For democratic governments, this implies the need to adopt a broader and more sophisticated approach to analyzing Chinese influence. It is not enough to assess the risks associated with infrastructure projects or economic dependency; it is also necessary to consider the cumulative effects of cooperation in institutional, technological, and ideational spheres. In particular, it is crucial to pay attention to the transfer of dual-use technologies, elite training programs, exchanges between

judicial systems, and the dissemination of narratives capable of eroding the normative foundations of liberal democracy.

From a national security perspective, these processes must also be interpreted within the framework of strategic competition among great powers (see Berg, Levin, and Lin, 2025). The expansion of China's presence in sectors such as telecommunications, ports, energy infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and data systems not only poses risks to democratic quality, but also to information security, the integrity of critical infrastructure, and the institutional resilience of states. The potential use of Chinese-origin technologies and platforms for data collection, surveillance, or access to sensitive networks introduces vulnerabilities that could be exploited in crisis of conflict scenarios.

Furthermore, the growing integration of countries in the region into technological, logistical, and normative ecosystems linked to China may generate strategic dependencies that limit their autonomy in matters of foreign policy, defense, and technological regulation. In this sense, the concern extends beyond the domestic sphere to the broader hemispheric geopolitical balance, insofar as the consolidation of these networks can facilitate Beijing's power projection within the immediate vicinity of the United States. Addressing authoritarian cooperation with China therefore requires not only an agenda of democratic strengthening, but also a comprehensive security strategy capable of addressing the risks associated with systemic competition and growing technological interdependence.

About the Author

César E. Santos holds a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and a master's degree in Social Sciences from the Universidad Veracruzana (Mexico). He is a researcher at *Expediente Abierto*, where he specializes in China's authoritarian influence in Latin America, electoral violence, populism, and illiberalism. He is the author of the book *Old Ideas, New Challenges? A Theoretical Study on the Rise of Illiberalism (Viejas ideas, ¿nuevos desafíos? Un estudio teórico sobre el ascenso del iliberalismo)* (Traveler, 2023). He has published articles in various academic journals on social sciences and international relations in Latin America and Europe. He is also a recurring columnist in regional and international analysis outlets such as *The Diplomat*, *Letras Libres*, *Diálogo Político*, and *Latinoamérica 21*. He is a member of the Cuba Section of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

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This report examines the nature and implications of cooperation between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and three Central American countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras—through the analytical framework of the “arenas of authoritarian cooperation”: administrative, public policy, institutional, and ideational.

The central argument is that relations with China is not limited to conventional economic or diplomatic dimensions, but rather constitutes a multidimensional network of ties encompassing technological transfer, elite training, institutional interaction, and the dissemination of regulatory frameworks. In contexts of democratic erosion, these dynamics can contribute—without the need for direct coercion—to strengthening state capacities that favor the concentration of power and social control.

