



Panama: A Bridge in Latin America for China's "Belt and Road"?

OE Watch Commentary: After establishing formal diplomatic relations with Panama in 2017, the People's Republic of China continues its efforts to strengthen these ties. As the accompanying excerpt from the centrist Panama daily *La Estrella* points out, Chinese authorities recently hosted a conference in Panama titled, "Think Tank and Media Forum," which provided an opportunity to "exchange views and proposals about the future of the China-Latin American economic cooperation." During the conference, attendees spoke about how this relationship is already bearing fruit, pointing out that China-Panama cooperation has "resulted in the signing of 23 agreements in political, tourist, economic, and infrastructure matters; among them, a light train that will connect Panama West with Chiriqui that requires an investment of about \$5 billion." As the excerpt points out, to facilitate greater cooperation between the two countries, "in April of this year, a direct flight between China and Panama was opened successfully."

Just as Panama served as a key juncture for trade in the Western hemisphere in the past century, so today, China regards Panama "as an important point of arrival in Latin America of the natural extension of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road." As the excerpt indicates, Panamanian officials "signed with China the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation to Build together the Belt and Road." Chinese authorities have not only made inroads with Panama, but as the article explains, during "the last decade China established diplomatic relations with 24 countries of the 33 that make up the Latin American region." The article quotes a Chinese official who asserts that "relations with Latin America are an important part of Chinese diplomacy and guided by the important exchanges of the countries have reached a level never seen before."

End OE Watch Commentary (Wedman)

"In the last decade, China established diplomatic relations with 24 countries of the 33 that make up the Latin American region."



Goods From China Passing Through Panama Canal (2012).

Source: Katja Schulz from Washington, D. C., USA [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goods_From_China_Passing_Through_Panama_Canal_-_Flickr_-_treegrow.jpg.

Source: Larish Julio, "China Holds Forum in Panama to Strengthen Chinese-Latin American Relations," *La Estrella*, 15 October 2018. <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/china-panama-tienden-puente-para-fortalecer-relaciones-chino-latinoamericanas/24087867>

With the recent establishment of diplomatic relations of Panama and the People's Republic of China, the Asian giant carried out in the Isthmian soil the first Think Tank and Media Forum. The conference organized by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China and the Association of Public Diplomacy of the Asian country had the purpose of reflecting and exchanging views and proposals about the future of the China-Latin American economic cooperation....

During the event, the Chinese diplomats, in general, highlighted the role of Panama as a bridge of Latin America in China's "Belt and Road."

"The forum ... serves as a bridge to strengthen the academic exchanges between China, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and the promotion of the mutual understanding and friendship among the peoples..."

Meanwhile, Liu Biwei, the vice president of the Public Diplomacy Association of the People's Republic of China said that the Think Tank and Media Forum is a space to reflect on the important issue of relations of equality, mutual benefit, and shared development between China and Latin America. Liu Biwei claimed that the relations with Latin America are an important part of Chinese diplomacy and guided by the important exchanges of the countries have reached a level never seen before.

In this context, he recalled that in June 2017, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Panama inaugurated a new era in the bilateral relations that with the leadership and momentum of the two Heads of State, the cooperation between the two countries in various fields have been developing "vigorously" and have gained a great leap, bringing tangible benefits to the two peoples. Likewise, in April of this year, the direct flight between China and Panama was opened successfully, the first to travel directly to the Panamanian isthmus from Asia.

Liu Biwei also stressed that Panama, as an important point of arrival in Latin America of the natural extension of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road signed with China the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation to Build together the "Belt and Road."

"We must take advantage of this situation to strengthen the interaction of our development strategies and make the efforts to turn Panama into a 'bridgehead' of the construction of the 'Belt and Road' initiative between China and Latin America, to benefit the two countries and the two peoples," he specified. He also mentioned that in the last decade China established diplomatic relations with 24 countries of the 33 that make up the Latin American region. Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador are the most recent ones. With this, 'the countries recognize the principle of one China,' he stressed.

The diplomatic relations of Panama and China, which were established in June 2017, have resulted in the signing of 23 agreements in political, tourist, economic, and infrastructure matters; among them, a light train that will connect Panama West with Chiriqui that requires an investment of about \$5 billion....