

## Ibero-America Briefs

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### Fernández to Beijing, Argentina into the BRI

Argentine President Alberto Fernández's twice-postponed visit to China is now reset for Feb. 4-8, coinciding with the opening of Beijing's Winter Olympics. On his agenda is a meeting with President Xi Jinping, a likely meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is also attending the Olympics in China at the same time, and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for Argentina to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. When that happens, only Brazil, Mexico and Colombia of the region's larger countries will remain outside that grand global infrastructure cooperation framework. And there are some who think that Mexico could ride Argentina's coattails into the BRI—formally or otherwise.

That Fernández has just succeeded Mexico as President Pro Tempore of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) is also significant, as China and CELAC maintain a close collaborative relationship through the China-CELAC Forum. On Dec. 3, 2021, China and CELAC signed their Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024), outlining an ambitious agenda for cooperation across an array of areas.

Washington has squeezed Argentina hard to stay away from China, but detailed discussions on potential Chinese-Argentine projects to boost the Argentine economy have been underway. Argentine Strategic Affairs Secretary Gustavo Béliz and Foreign Minister Santiago Cafiero sent China's National Development and Reform Commission a proposed "New

Integrated Five-Year Investment Plan" at the end of December, listing 17 infrastructure projects for which Argentina is seeking Chinese financing. Some of these projects had been proposed during the 2011-2015 government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, but were rejected by the neoliberal President Mauricio Macri who succeeded her.

Alberto Fernández also heads off to China without an agreement with the IMF, and facing the likelihood that Argentina will be unable to meet the first, \$2.8 billion payment due in March on the \$45 billion standby loan taken by Macri in 2018. A year of threats from Washington—that if Argentina joined the BRI, that would sink Argentina's efforts to refinance that loan—failed, because the IMF would not budge on its demands for unacceptable austerity measures and a too-low fiscal deficit, and refused to lower interest rates or extend repayment timeframes.

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### Nicaragua into the BRI; Grand Canal in the Future?

Just hours before Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was inaugurated for his fourth term Jan. 10, his International Investments, Trade and Cooperation advisor, Laureano Ortega Murillo, and President Xi Jinping's special envoy to the inauguration, Cao Jianming, Vice President of the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Assembly, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

No details on projects have been announced, but the Nicaraguan gov-

ernment has made clear it wants to proceed with the construction of the inter-oceanic canal across Nicaragua, begun in 2014 with private Chinese businessman Wang Jing's HKND company. On Dec. 10, 2021, the day Nicaragua reestablished relations with the People's Republic of China, President Ortega assured a military graduation ceremony that the canal project "with a great Chinese Company" is "alive." China's Global Times also reported that "a staffer" at China Railway Construction Corp. had told the daily that it plans to work in Nicaragua again. The CRCC had worked with HKND in developing the initial designs for the inter-oceanic canal.

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### Neoliberalism of 'Chicago Boys' Voted Out in Chile's Presidential Election

The large victory of self-described social democrat Gabriel Boric in Chile's Dec. 19 presidential elections, again showed the widespread ferment in the region for governments serving the people rather than finance. Boric, a 35-year-old former congressman who came out of the leftist student movement of a decade ago, defeated, 56% to 44%, right-wing fanatic José Antonio Kast, an admirer of the late fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet, whose German father had been a member of the Nazi Party. The race had been predicted to be very close, but the turnout of 55% of the electorate, including large numbers of young people, gave Boric a victory with the highest vote total in Chile's history, close to 5 million. Millions of jubilant citizens poured onto the streets to celebrate, seeing the results as a well-

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deserved condemnation of 40 years of the Chilean Chicago Boys, austerity-based “economic miracle.”

Whether Boric will or can defend the Common Good remains to be fought out. Early in his campaign, Boric promised to “bury” neoliberalism and carry out dramatic reforms, including of the privatized pension system rammed through by Pinochet’s free market economists. He pledged to create a universal health care system, to reform taxes, and to put an end to economic inequality and privatized education. Following the Nov. 21 primary in which he lost to Kast by 2%, Boric moderated his views, admitting that eliminating the private pension system would have to be gradual, for example.

When he is inaugurated on March 11, Boric’s “I Approve Dignity” coalition will have to seek agreements with other parties to pass legislation, as it has only 35 deputies in the lower House of Congress.

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## Team Biden Worries about Losing Control of Central America

U.S. Army War College Latin America expert Evan Ellis warned Dec. 10, when Nicaragua and China re-established relations, that “Nicaragua’s Flip to China” is the biggest “wake-up call” yet, that the U.S. military-industrial complex-plus is no longer the only game in town in the Western Hemisphere. He concluded a lengthy screed posted to the Global Americans website, wailing that “Washington has never faced a hemisphere so politically disposed to resist U.S. pressure, or so fully enabled by an adversary’s money to do so.”

Three days later, in midst of an angry uproar in Central America over the Biden team’s refusal to invite Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras to its hypocritical Summit for Democracy (no one expected

blacklisted Nicaragua to be invited), U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris announced, to great media fanfare, that she had rustled up “seven new commitments” to promote “economic opportunity” in those three countries—consisting mainly of promises to invest in new low-paid assembly plants, provision of credit cards, “gender-equity” programs, and the like.

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## Argentine, Mexican Presidents Snub Agenda of Democracy Summit

In his brief speech to the White House Summit for Democracy Dec. 10, Argentine President Alberto Fernández exposed the hypocrisy of the summit, by denouncing the November 2019 coup carried out in Bolivia in the name of “democracy” against the legitimate President, Evo Morales. The overturning of that coup a year later in an honest election still burns the democracy mafia.

“Bolivia suffered a coup d’état, backed in large part by the international community, and by the Organization of American States (OAS),” Fernández reminded the summit participants. He did not name the U.S. State Department, but that was not necessary. OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro is well-known as a State Department front man, and they jointly supported the coup, with its attempted assassination of Morales, which Argentina and Mexico prevented.

“Democracy assumes non-intervention. Democracy is the best guarantor of peace. Democracy is not imposed with sanctions, or by force. Democracy is like peace—it is not exported; nor is it imposed.... Let’s work so that democracy will become the best guarantor of world peace,” Fernández lectured the summit.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador snubbed the summit by

sending only his ambassador in Washington, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, to deliver a speech about democracy in Mexico—about as close as Mexico could get to not participating without refusing to show up.

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## Hunger in Ibero-America and the Caribbean Highest Since 2000

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) “Latin America and the Caribbean—Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2021,” released in December, reported that with the increase of 13.8 million more people going hungry in the region in just one year, from 2019 to 2020, that makes a total count of 59.7 million in the region who now have insufficient food, the most since 2000. The largest increase occurred in Mesoamerica, which includes parts of southern Mexico and most of Central America, although the Caribbean (e.g., Haiti) has the greatest overall prevalence of hunger.

“We must say it loud and clear. Latin America and the Caribbean are facing a critical situation in terms of food security. There has been an almost 79% hike in the number of people living in hunger from 2014 to 2020,” Julio Berdegué, FAO’s regional representative, warned.

Overall, 14% of the region’s people now suffer “severe food insecurity”; that is, 92.8 million people, as of 2020, are in a situation of having run out of food, or have gone a day or more without eating, as compared to 47.6 million in that condition in 2014. In 2020, four out of every ten persons, or 267 million, suffered “moderate to severe food insecurity,” an increase of 60 million people in one year. The FAO report noted that the 20.5% increase over one year, in moderate and severe food insecurity, was the most pronounced increase in any region of the world.