

Preamble

Since the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 has spread all over the world. Based on their own national conditions, countries all around the world have taken different preventive and control measures to confront the challenges brought about by this rare pandemic to public health, the economy, society and international relations. In order to have a clear view about the ideas and mechanisms of different countries in response to the pandemic as well as the impact of such measures on the world structure, the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS), and PKU's Office of International Relations have been co-sponsoring an online Broadyard Workshop (博雅工作坊) seminar series, titled "The Global Epidemic: Observations and Analysis by Diplomats."

Latin America was the last area in the world where confirmed cases of COVID-19 were found. However, the epidemic spread rapidly, with more than 100,000 confirmed cases in less than two months. Affected by the epidemic, the economies of Latin American countries have seen increasing downward pressure, and the economic and social development of Latin America has taken a severe hit. The continent's trade volume and value have both decreased; bulk commodity prices have fallen; its connection to global value chains has been interrupted; tourism services have shrunk; and the international financial environment has deteriorated. In this regard, the

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean believes that making collaborative anti-epidemic efforts is the only sustainable solution. Countries should explore new globalization methods and promote new models for more sustainable development.

What are the considerations behind the different epidemic prevention and control measures adopted by Latin American countries? What are their future prospects? Amid the epidemic, how will the changes in Latin America make a difference in the current international situation? How will China view the changes and the difference? From the perspectives of politics, economy, society, history, culture and public health, the workshop invited many experts to discuss the above topics. The experts were Li Jinzhang, former Chinese ambassador to Brazil; Dong Jingsheng, a professor in the Department of History of Peking University; Xie Zheng, deputy director of the Department of Global Health of the School of Public Health, Peking University; and Wu Hongying, director of the Latin America office of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

The 33rd Broadyard Workshop
The Global Epidemic: Observations and Analysis by
Diplomats (IV): Latin America

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Li Jinzhang, former Chinese ambassador to Brazil, delivered the keynote talk at the workshop. He pointed out that the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak in Latin America came about later in comparison with other places in the world, but it spread quite rapidly and widely. The first confirmed case was discovered in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on February 26, arriving from Europe. After that, most of the confirmed cases in Latin America were imported from Europe and the US. As of May 11, the epidemic was still spreading in Latin America and the Caribbean, with more than 300,000 people diagnosed and over 90,000 cured.

There has been a widespread concern that Latin America might become the epicenter of the world COVID-19 epidemic. However, due to the fact that it broke out relatively late, Latin American countries have had time to borrow epidemic prevention experiences from Asian and European countries. Most Latin American countries have adopted a series of prevention and control measures in a relatively quick manner, which, as a whole, have played a positive role in combating the epidemic and ensuring economic and social stability.

First, they took various measures directly aimed at the

epidemic, including travel restrictions, aircraft grounding, oil tanker suspension, border closures, social distancing, and work, production and school suspension. Some countries even declared a state of national emergency to strictly control the spread of the epidemic.

Second, a series of economic, fiscal and financial policies were introduced, such as increasing the fiscal expenditures and deficit ratio, issuing more national debt, and urgently increasing medical and health investment. This was seen mainly in large-scale purchases of epidemic prevention equipment, supplies, medicine, and increasing the number of beds in hospitals. Some countries, such as Argentina, launched special airline flights for transportation of anti-epidemic supplies. Brazil purchased a very large amount of medical material, including masks and breathing machines, from China. However, due to historical reasons, the average level of medical investment in the entire Latin America was relatively low with large gaps.

At the same time, Latin American countries also adopted measures such as tax reduction and exemption, issuing preferential loans, and debt restructuring. By surrendering some national profits and cutting interest rates, they aimed to support enterprises, stabilize finance and employment, and avoid the collapse of the national economy. To avoid social unrest, some Latin American countries urgently launched various social assistance projects to ensure people's living standards, including

issuing unemployment insurance, providing relief funds and consumption coupons and seeking financial support and material assistance from international financial institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank) and other countries.

Li expressed his belief that Latin American countries have generally adopted a series of policies and measures to stabilize the economy and the society, which have to a certain extent played a positive role in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic and ensured economic and social stability. The epidemic has been a major test for all the Latin American countries, especially of their comprehensive national strength, government executive capability, emergency reserve response capability, and their citizens' national consciousness and quality, he said.

In practice, because countries adopt quite different epidemic prevention and control approaches, and have work priorities with different levels of policy implementation capability, the results have differed greatly. If we make a simple comparison of the epidemic prevention and control situations in these countries, we can see that Latin American countries basically show a large middle group and a few outliers.

Those in the larger middle group have been mainly Caribbean countries. With most of them relying on tourism, they are generally small in size, and their medical and health systems

are undeveloped. Some island countries are poorly equipped, having few hospital facilities and breathing machines. Some senior officials or heads of state of these countries go to Havana, Cuba, for medical treatment, and some of them even have to go to Europe or the US. Under such circumstances, those countries would suffer from disastrous consequences if the epidemic were to get out of control. Therefore, these countries have attached great importance to epidemic prevention and have adopted relatively strict measures. Generally speaking, they have done good work in epidemic prevention and control, Ambassador Li said.

The countries in the middle group have their own characteristics, with both advantages and disadvantages. Some governments responded effectively to the epidemic and were fully supported by their people. Their government executive capability rose instead of falling during the epidemic. Some countries did not exert adequate efforts to fight the epidemic. They were not decisive enough, resulting in a significant drop in public support. Some countries were affected by certain European countries and did not implement their anti-epidemic policies and measures well. These countries had one thing in common, which was they were unable to enforce strict measures, such as locking down cities and forbidding people to go outside.

Per Ambassador Li, although their economy is not highly developed, the people of Latin America and the Caribbean enjoy

a high happiness index. Thus, they have had difficulty accepting the harsh reality of being isolated from each other. Before the epidemic began to spread widely in Latin America this year, many local large-scale events were still being held as planned. In terms of material foundation, quarantine means a suspension of work and production, which would affect material supplies. In addition, in Latin American countries, a large percentage of the population are engaged in service-oriented jobs. It is difficult for them to maintain their livelihood if there is a suspension of work and production. As a result, strict measures such as quarantine are difficult to achieve in Latin American countries.

The general feeling among people in Latin America is that if you don't work, you will be hungry; therefore, it is better to go to work, even if you are sick. It is very difficult to choose between the two. For example, in Peru, even though the government has taken a series of necessary measures, people still went to the streets to conduct commercial activities in order to live. This made it difficult to implement quarantine measures, leading to an increase in the infection and diagnosis rate, he said.

The outliers were countries such as Brazil and Nicaragua. Brazil has more than 200 million impoverished people, accounting for one-third of the entire population of Latin America. The COVID-2019 outbreak in that country had a huge impact on the data for all of Latin America. First, Brazil is

characterized by areas of dense population. Large urban agglomerations, such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, hold one-quarter of the country's population and receive a lot of traffic to and from foreign countries.

Second, there are a large number of slums in Brazil's cities, containing a population of more than 10 million who live in impoverished conditions. The government has taken some measures to ensure water and power supply to the slums. In Rio de Janeiro, a cable car line was built over the slums on a mountain to provide transportation for the slum dwellers. However, it has been difficult to carry out quarantine due to the high population density. In addition, there have been also great differences in anti-epidemic approaches among Brazilian people, some of them even in opposition to others.

Brazilian President Jair Messias Bolsonaro's view has been that "the economy is first; the anti-epidemic fight is second." He believes that COVID-19 is nothing more than a "small cold" and has called on all localities to stop strict anti-epidemic measures, resume production and allow people return to their normal lives as soon as possible. His view has greatly influenced the anti-epidemic measures promoted by the government. In fact, Brazil's federal government and its states in some ways have each been doing their own thing, thus making the epidemic situation in Brazil very worrisome.

In addition, international and Brazilian research

institutions have expressed great doubts about some of the statistics released by the Brazilian government. Some people believe that Brazil's current officially reported epidemic numbers are far smaller than they should be. They suspect that the number of confirmed cases might have already reached 1 million, which is five to 10 times the officially released figure.

It should be noted that there are 300,000 to 400,000 overseas Chinese in Brazil, most of whom live in the big cities. The infection rate among them is very low, which is mostly due to the strict prevention and control measures adopted by the local Chinese-funded enterprises. It is obvious that the spread of the epidemic can be controlled or even prevented to a certain extent as long as proper measures are fully implemented. Unfortunately, it has not been possible in Brazil, Ambassador Li said.

As for Nicaragua, it has basically adopted a laissez-faire attitude toward the COVID-19 epidemic. Some media have claimed that Nicaragua has been the most passive of any of the Latin American countries in addressing the epidemic. Thus, the country's economy may shrink 6.5 percent this year, and the unemployment rate may rise to 9 percent from 7.1 percent in 2019. As a result, the country may get caught in the worst economic recession since the 1980s, he said.

Latin America has seen economic stagnation over the recent years, with its economic growth rate lingering between

0.2 percent and 0.4 percent. It is still in a critical period of adjustment, reform, recovery and development, but its political situation has been turbulent and its society severely divided. Against this background, the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 has made things worse for Latin America with manifold adverse effects:

First, people's lives are threatened. Due to insufficient medical statistics, the number of confirmed cases and deaths in Latin America is probably much higher than the official data. Latin America has long been a relatively peaceful corner of the world, and the local people, especially those in South America, have developed an innate concept that they are either the descendants of God or the sun, with the land as a gift from heaven, he said.

Brazil rarely experiences major earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, or droughts. Compared with other countries, it enjoys a smaller incidence of natural disasters. The epidemic has caused serious panic among Brazilian people since they seldom encounter large-scale natural disasters. In addition, its public health system is relatively fragile; therefore, if the epidemic continues, the public health system may collapse.

Second, the economy will face the worst recession in history. The large array of strict anti-epidemic measures adopted by Latin American countries have shut down most industries and interrupted their connection to the global industrial chain and

supply chain. International trade has shrunk and the prices of bulk products have fallen, bringing insurmountable difficulties to many businesses that are highly dependent on the international market. Manufacturing serves as the pillar industry in Mexico and Brazil, with most of the products sold domestically and overseas. However, many accessories and parts needed in manufacturing industry failed to get in place in time due to the production suspension in China, causing many companies to close their factories.

The epidemic has also caused great turbulence in the stock market (the Brazilian stock index has triggered eight circuit breakers) with plummeting exchange rates, sluggish investment, and capital outflows. Against the background of political turmoil, social divisions, and economic declines over the recent years, the COVID-19 epidemic has undoubtedly worsened the situation for Latin American countries, bring even more daunting difficulties. It is forecast by CEPAL that Latin America's GDP will experience a negative growth of -5.3 percent this year, which is worse than the -4.9 percent growth during the Great Depression and can be viewed as the biggest drop in history, Ambassador Li said.

In addition, the economies of Central America and Caribbean are highly dependent on tourism and overseas remittances. Tourism has been the most affected industry in all Latin American countries during the epidemic. Since many

Central American immigrants legally or illegally remit US dollars back to their home countries from the US or other countries, the COVID-19 outbreak in the US led to a significant decline in overseas remittances, triggering a severe economic recession in Central America.

Third, people's social lives have been severely affected with the increasing unemployment and poverty rates. Unemployment in Latin America was already very serious before the epidemic, and the epidemic has increased the number of unemployed people in the region by 11.6 million to over 34 million. The regional poverty rate has also climbed to 34.7 percent due to the increasing unemployed population, making over 200 million people impoverished. Underemployment and declining income have forced many families to face the big problem of not being able to satisfy their basic living needs.

Also, the COVID-19 epidemic has triggered political fluctuations in some Latin American countries. Influenced by the epidemic, conflicts between the central and local governments in Brazil have intensified. Brazil's congress has received more than 20 applications for impeachment of the president. In addition, new changes have taken place in the political ecology of some countries. The worsening epidemic situation is bound to intensify social conflicts, thus injecting more negative factors into regional security and stability, he said.

Regarding the relationship between China and Latin American countries during the epidemic, Ambassador Li Jinzhang expressed his belief that the China-Latin America ties will continue to be generally stable with a positive trend. During the epidemic, state leaders of both sides maintained high-level exchanges via phone calls, video conferencing, letters and more. At such special moments, the two sides called for political solidarity and exchanged emotional condolences, especially encouraging each other to have the political will to develop friendly cooperation, and firmly grasp the general direction of China-Latin America development. Government diplomatic departments, medical and health systems, localities, enterprises, and the private sector have all carried out unprecedented large-scale interactions to exchange epidemic situations, share anti-epidemic experience, and provide material assistance, which further enhanced mutual trust and friendship, he said.

The two sides have been doing their best to maintain pragmatic economic and trade cooperation under extremely difficult conditions. The bilateral trade between China and Brazil increased in the first quarter of 2020. Brazil exported 16 million tons of soybeans to China, seeing a year-on-year increase of 17 percent. Relevant agricultural associations in Brazil stated that they would ensure the goods transportation to China despite the epidemic, and each port would work hard to carry out normal loading and unloading business while obeying

relevant regulations put up by health supervisors.

China has recently achieved some new gains in overseas investment in Latin America. China Communications Construction Company Limited and China Railway Construction Corporation Limited are still actively participating in the bid for the Mayan Railway in Mexico. In Brazil, the Chinese auto company BYD won the bid for the Overseas SkyRail project in Salvador and the bid for the Line 13 project in São Paulo. The China Three Gorges Corporation has been intensively carrying on various follow-up tasks during the epidemic after it acquired large-scale photovoltaic, solar, wind and other new energy bases in East Brazil.

Ambassador Li continued that the epidemic has also given rise to a mixed picture in China-Latin America relations. A series of major diplomatic activities scheduled to be held this year have been postponed, simplified or canceled. Due to the disruption of logistics, some of China's major overseas investment projects have had to be delayed. And certain foreign media have used the epidemic to attack and discredit China.

Ambassador Li Jinzhang said that the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Latin American countries came relatively late. With the hard work of both sides, the ties now possess a fairly profound political, economic, and cultural foundation, which will withstand the test of time and international vicissitudes. As long as the two sides proceed with

firm confidence and work together while adhering to the consistent principles of mutual respect, mutually beneficial cooperation and joint development, they will be able to address the obstacles on the way ahead and continue to elevate the relationship to a new and higher level.

Ambassador Li pointed out that the increasingly obvious US influence on China - Latin America relations is an issue worthy of attention. Over the years, although China and the US have always had differences and competition on Latin America issues, and the US has always regarded Latin America as its backyard, the two sides have for a long time used effective communication mechanisms to avoid differences and competition, so as not to cause a crisis and interfere with the overall situation of Sino-US relations. But now, this situation has changed a lot, especially after the US has positioned China as its main strategic opponent and implemented a new comprehensive containment strategy. Latin America has also become a new battlefield for the US in its strategic game against China.

The hawks of the US government have spread various versions of the China threat theory everywhere, driving a wedge between China and Latin America relations, and forcing Latin America to choose sides between China and the US. They have introduced some so-called “new plans” or “new initiatives” and pledged to increase investment and assistance to Latin American

countries in order to squeeze and exclude pragmatic cooperation between China and the region as a hedge against the overall diplomacy between China and Latin America. In addition, the US has also enlisted anti-China forces, which has led to the appearance of individual policies against China in some countries in the region, and certain media to discredit and slander China, he said.

In the short term, what the US does will not be able to hinder the relatively solid foundation of China-Latin America ties. With the evolution of Latin American geopolitical ecology, the US strategy in the region has not been without gains. China's diplomacy toward Latin America will also face new challenges and more complex situations.

Amid this unprecedented epidemic, there has been an increasing number of new ideas and views on whether the international structure will be fundamentally changed, whether globalization will be greatly reversed, whether the global industrial chain and value chain will be reorganized, and whether China and the US will decouple and form new polarities. Latin American countries have generally remained calm in light of the level of their comprehensive strength and international status. They are more concerned about the issues closely related to their interests, Ambassador Li said.

The first is to revitalize regional integration, that is, through strengthening macroeconomic policies, the overall

coordination of production, life and trade, and improving the status of the region and the ability to formulate new rules, so as to be able to participate in a more inclusive, equal and sustainable globalization process.

The second is to promote the regionalization of industries to deal with the danger of disruption in the global supply chain. It is necessary to seize the opportunity for industrial transfer offered by large multinational companies in developed countries such as the US which are concerned about avoiding risk and other factors, and try to build regional industrial supply chains with the help of enterprises which have transferred from East Asia, especially from China.

The third is to promote the diversification of foreign economic and trade relations. The epidemic has shown that over-reliance on imports, especially over-reliance on supply from only a certain few economies, is dangerous and uncontrollable under special circumstances. The idea is, no country should “put all its eggs in one basket.”

Ambassador Li Jinzhang pointed out that under the special background of the spread of the epidemic, it is necessary for China to take the initiative to promote diplomatic ties with Latin America. China should make full use of its advantages in being the first to get out of the shadow of the epidemic. Thus, it can fully leverage the emerging opportunities to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages, and to serve the overall situation.

First, from a humanitarian perspective, China should ensure the efficient and high-quality production and timely delivery of various anti-epidemic medical supplies purchased by Latin American countries from China. The two sides should actively expand cooperation in the medical and health systems, exchange information and share experiences through more channels. We have already begun doing this, and we must stick to it, he said.

Second, China should take special measures to open up logistics channels and provide facilitation services, so as to ensure continuous trade and avoid a major recession. At the same time, China will seize the favorable opportunity to promote the establishment of a long-term, stable and direct trade mechanism with Latin America in fields such as agriculture, husbandry and energy so that Latin America will truly become the fulcrum for ensuring China's energy, food, and security fields. We must keep in mind the uncompleted projects postponed due to the interruption of the industrial chain and supply chain from the epidemic situation. Through keeping in touch with the Latin American side, the stage can be set for a timely recovery.

Third, China should look out for Chinese-funded enterprises in Latin America, help them tide over the disaster, and encourage them to help each other and overcome difficulties together. Assuming that there is legal protection to ensure the

safety of funds, the Chinese government should support enterprises to capture opportunities, expand investment in Latin America through various methods, including equity participation, mergers and acquisitions, and bidding. Internet companies should also be guided and encouraged to expand businesses on contactless services, telemedicine, cloud office and the Internet of Things in Latin America. New business forms, such as mobile payments, artificial intelligence and big data, which are very convenient in China, have made these new formats a new hot spot and bright spot for investment by China in Latin America.

Fourth, consultation, dialogue and exchange mechanisms of various types, fields and scenarios between China and Latin America, such as think tanks and university symposiums, should be quickly activated through the Internet and other channels. Resume all diplomatic agendas as soon as possible to promote mutual understanding and specific cooperation. Exchange views and coordinate positions on major international issues, Ambassador Li concluded.

In his talk, Prof. Dong Jingsheng, from the Department of History of Peking University, stated that neither the US and Europe nor Latin America realized the seriousness of the COVID-19 epidemic at the very beginning. It cannot be said which approach is better and which approach is not good since countries can only make choices based on their specific circumstances. Latin American countries have had some obvious

disadvantages in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic, such as the people's free and easy personality and poor medical conditions. However, Latin America also has had some relatively favorable factors, Dong said. They are mainly as follows:

First, Latin America's population structure is relatively young, and aging is not a problem yet. Young people in good physical condition clearly enjoy a better resistance against the virus. Second, Latin Americans like sports, which helps to strengthen their physical fitness and improve their resistance. Third, Latin America has adopted a publicly-funded medical care system for all people. Take Cuba as an example. Not only does the country provide free medical care for its citizens, it also offers cheap medical treatment to foreigners. Tourism is one of Cuba's pillar industries, and among its foreign tourists, many are going for medical treatment. Many foreigners, including some low-income Americans and those without medical insurance, take the opportunity to travel to Cuba for medical treatment, Prof. Dong said.

Civil society organizations in many Latin American countries are relatively developed and can often play an important role in the face of crises. After the 1985 earthquake in Mexico, the Mexican government did not perform well in disaster relief, but the country's civil society organizations acted quickly to offer medical treatment, food, shelter and so on. It can

be said that a mature civil society is also one important aspect of a healthy society, he said.

The COVID-19 epidemic caused so much loss of life and property and delivered a heavy blow against the economy which was largely due to Latin America's economic structure. Latin American countries are heavily dependent on exports of petroleum, mineral products, agricultural products, and bulk products. In general, the prices of bulk products in the international market have risen since 2002, and the economic situation of Latin America has continued to improve. At that time, some leftist governments in the region implemented many social welfare measures, such as poverty alleviation, taking advantage of the increasing foreign exchange brought in by rising oil and commodity prices in the international market.

However, the prices of bulk products fell after 2015, severely affecting the economy of the entire Latin American world. The COVID-19 epidemic has worsened the situation, causing a fatal blow to the economy. Also, the epidemic fully exposed the weaknesses of Latin America's industrial structure, which has been completely dependent on oil exports and tourism. Such an economic structure is undoubtedly too fragile to enjoy a sustainable development.

In history, economic crises in Latin America have always been opportunities for reforms. After the Great Depression of the 1930s, Latin America began to embark on the road of

industrialization. After the debt crisis in the 1980s, it began to open up to the outside world and carry out neoliberal reforms to establish a market economy. As a result, in many cases, crises have been an opportunity to carry out reforms.

Prof. Dong opined that it is worthwhile to observe whether the economic crisis brought about by the epidemic will push Latin American countries to adjust their industrial structure and explore modern development models. It may be difficult on the whole, but they have to work hard in this direction. There are many economists in Latin America, who can also put forward some views and propositions.

In addition, it needs to be observed whether the impact of the epidemic will affect Latin American politics. The epidemic has caused political turmoil in some countries. After the epidemic, the political ecology in Latin America may undergo some changes. If the current governments and ruling parties fail to effectively address the epidemic and prevent it from spreading, their support rate will definitely decline and this may affect the result of a future election.

Observers should be clear about the two kinds of political changes in Latin America. One is keeping the basic political system unchanged when different parties take turns holding power, at most making some policy adjustments. The other is making large-scale adjustments to economic policies when the current ruling party is replaced by a new one. The new party or

state leader will even redraft the constitution to make major changes to the political system after taking office. On the whole, the epidemic is spreading in Latin American, and how it will affect the politics and economy of Latin American countries in the future is difficult to determine. It is impossible to draw conclusions prematurely and it requires continuous observation, he said.

At the end of his talk, Prof. Dong Jingsheng pointed out that the US and the trilateral China-US-Latin America ties are always mentioned when talking about China-Latin American relations in the past. People believed that “China-Latin America relations should be subject to the overall situation of Sino-US relations.” Now that some new changes have taken place in Sino-US relations, do the above principles still apply and do they still need to be upheld? This is a question worth exploring.

The development of China-Latin America relations up to this point has not come easily, and yet the economic interdependence between China and Latin America has reached a high level. Under the situation of global economic recession caused by the epidemic and globalization setbacks, the healthy development of China-Latin America relations is essential to both sides. Therefore, both parties should work together to overcome difficulties and promote the development of China-Latin America relations, especially economic and trade relations, which would be beneficial to both parties, he said.

Xie Zheng, deputy director of the Department of Global Health of the School of Public Health, Peking University, emphasized the importance of governance in her speech. She pointed out that, in the past, “governance” was considered to be only a small factor among the six factors of the public health system, but, in fact, it is closely related to public health effects.

On the global stage, governance is divided into two levels, one is global governance, and the other is the domestic health governance system. Reflecting on the course of the epidemic in Latin America, my understanding is that, in order to do a good job in public health governance, the following proverb holds true: “The ability to deal with threats from abroad depends on having stability at home.” That is, Latin America should have right to speak out on global governance and offer better public products. However, the core and foundation are still domestic public health governance, Prof. Xie said.

Latin American countries enjoy their own advantages in public health governance. China has only in recent years proposed to tell “China’s story” to the world and participate in global public health governance, while Latin American countries have long spoken out on the global health stage. In 2005, the WHO established the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH), an influential organization whose core philosophy is to put health equity at the top of all factors that affect the public health system. Brazil has played a leading role

in this organization. It held the World Conference on Social Determinants of Health in Rio de Janeiro, in 2011, which issued the iconic *2011 Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health*, recognized by many countries.

Brazil has also played a leading role in other fields, such as the World Health Organization reform. Another example is the framework for interaction between the World Health Organization and non-state actors, whose chairman is the ambassador of Argentina to Switzerland, which also exerts a good influence in this framework. It can be said that, in the field of public health, Latin American countries have formed their own self-directed and independent views different from the US and other countries, and have their own independent and clear propositions. Representing developing countries, it demands that the relationship between the World Health Organization and developed countries, enterprises, and the private sector be very clear in order to avoid unfair influences. Another feature is that Latin American countries support each other and unite closely in global consultations to speak through one voice, she said.

The Pan-American Health Organization is also an important international organization in Latin America. With independent financial power, it was established earlier than the World Health Organization. American countries, including the US, need to pay membership fees both to the World Health Organization and to the Pan-American Health Organization. The

Pan-American Health Organization has autonomy in elections, and its independence is particularly high. This also allows Latin American countries to have a global organization in the health field in responding to the health crisis.

Prof. Xie opined that it is obvious that the public health governance capabilities of Latin American countries rank relatively high in the world. However, in the case of a sudden public health emergency such as the COVID-19 epidemic, they were neither able to do their work as they should have, nor were they able to take the lead in marshalling international cooperation. This failure is rooted in the fact that, while Latin America has, on the whole, shown strong capabilities in public health internationally, the internal health governance in each country is obviously backward.

The climate of Latin American countries is similar to that of Africa due to the continent's geographical position, so their populations are inherently vulnerable to frequent occurrences of tropical diseases. In addition to the three long-existing diseases of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, the 17 easily neglected tropical diseases specified by the World Health Organization can also be found in Latin America. Currently, the challenges and burdens brought about by infectious diseases in Latin America are similar to those in Africa. With multiple existing diseases consuming medical resources, the COVID-19 outbreak brought about a new crisis, exerting much more pressure on the Latin

American countries' medical systems compared with countries in other continents. Latin America is also facing various social crises. Some countries have relatively low levels of economic development. There are many slums, and serious social corruption which make it impossible to allocate resources effectively.

In addition, two issues should be specially focused on. One is the Latin American countries' own medical systems, and the other is the improper anti-epidemic strategies adopted by the countries. As for the former, most Latin American countries are highly privatized with their public healthcare system similar to that of the US. As we all know, public health is a public undertaking, and countries must invest in it. However, the state's investment in public health in most Latin American countries is seriously insufficient due to the high degree of medical privatization and the medical security coverage rate is relatively low. As a result, it has been completely impossible for these Latin American countries to achieve universal medical coverage for its citizens, Prof. Xie said.

Many basic health services that require government investment are still at relatively low levels with a weak foundation, such as provision of vaccines and maternal and child health care, and even the reporting of infectious diseases. Their medical resources are insufficient, with large gaps between urban and rural areas. Urban slums have especially poor

conditions in public health. Therefore, although Latin American countries like Brazil have become global models in putting up proposals in the area of social determinants of health, they do not do well domestically.

Instead of advertising their achievements on the basis of a well-built domestic fundamental public health system, they exerted “too much effort” in propaganda too early, which sowed the seeds of the subsequent crisis. During this epidemic, the insufficiency of infectious disease prevention and control reflected the insufficiency of the public health system, which is a very serious problem, she said.

Another problem is the insufficient leadership in governance, which is closely related to the state leaders. Lancet magazine unceremoniously pointed out that Brazil’s greatest threat to its anti-epidemic undertaking is its president. Although such criticism by name is rare, it fully shows that not only Brazilian residents, but even the public health sector around the world are dissatisfied with Brazil’s anti-epidemic efforts. Public health strategies for infectious disease prevention and control are simple indeed, but they must be taken seriously. China’s essential experience is the “five early”: early detection, early reporting, early diagnosis, early treatment, and early quarantine. However, the Brazilian president did not pay enough attention to this, and many measures were not in place, resulting in poor anti-epidemic effects.

All in all, Latin American countries are generally quite political. Many politicians in these countries are playing their roles by leveraging governance tools and leadership — for example, their outstanding leadership in the international public health arena. However, the positive and negative force of politics are being exerted on public health simultaneously. The positive force of politics would be its ability to solidly achieve full coverage of public health and medical security so that governance becomes a driving force for public health.

On the other hand, if it is only for propaganda, politics will become a negative force. For example, some Latin American countries with empty internal capacities will promote their “advanced ideas” internationally when they fail to do well in their domestic affairs. It in the end holds back their domestic public health governance, Prof. Xie concluded.

Wu Hongying said in her talk that the COVID-19 epidemic has been a serious test for mankind. What surprised people during the “test” was the poor performance of almost all the developed countries. In just three months, a great many developed countries with the world’s most advanced health and medical systems and medical standards fell into the epicenter of the epidemic.

The most worrying thing now is that the epidemic has been spreading to developing countries. Developing countries in the four major regions of Asia-Pacific region, Middle East,

Africa and Latin America have responded differently to the epidemic due to their different conditions. Compared with the Asia-Pacific region, Middle East and Africa, Latin America has had certain advantages to some extent, she said. Following are the main points:

One is that Latin America is the earliest of the developing regions to modernize; another is that Latin America has a relatively young population, second to Africa, with an average age of about 35 years old. Still another is that most countries in Latin America specify the civil right to free medical care in their constitutions. Also, the three-level health system of “federal-state-city” in Latin American countries is relatively complete.

However, some disadvantages have been seen during the Latin American countries’ fight against the epidemic:

One has been the lack of in-depth understanding of the epidemic, which resulted in underestimation of the seriousness of the epidemic. Another has been the lack of awareness among industries and deep divisions among the president, officials, the media, and the public regarding the implementation of anti-epidemic measures. Still another has been that the anti-epidemic measures were not systematic and comprehensive, and especially, not strict enough.

Also, the Latin American region has sustained low economic growth in recent years. It has been experiencing a

severe recession to some extent, which has weakened the region's defense capabilities. The most obvious feature of the COVID-19 epidemic in Latin America is that although the outbreak emerged the latest, it has caught up quickly. It not only spread rapidly, but almost all countries in the region are now suffering from the epidemic, Prof. Xie said.

Almost all Latin American countries have adopted some timely systematic measures:

First, most Latin American countries (such as Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, and Chile) either declared emergencies or public disasters. Second, some countries closed their borders, including Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Peru and Chile. Chile closed almost all land borders on March 18. Argentina shut down all ports and airports on March 26.

Third, they adopted home quarantine measures. Some countries, such as Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Peru, have announced the closure of some public places. Factories and schools were suspended. Many large-scale gatherings were canceled, and residents were restricted from participating in outdoor activities. Mexico extended its school suspension till June 1, and, on March 11, Peru required people from China, France, Italy and Spain to be quarantined at home for 14 days. Also, most countries implemented social distancing policies. The Supreme Court of Brazil clearly stipulated that all states should adopt such measures, and similar measures were also

gradually well received in Mexico.

In addition, the Latin American countries also tested some high-risk groups of people. Some countries sent representatives to China to learn from its anti-epidemic experiences and then took corresponding measures according to the Chinese model in their own countries. Online classes started in countries like Mexico and Chile after schools were suspended. While ensuring domestic production, some countries purchased anti-epidemic supplies from China. They also introduced various relief plans, which roughly focused on three topics: economic stimulus, unemployment compensation and increasing the amount of loans for SMEs.

For example, Argentina launched an emergency plan for employment and production assistance; Brazil launched a \$29 billion emergency economic and social assistance program; Chile proposed an emergency program to help poor families increase their incomes. Most Latin American countries have been fighting the epidemic while stabilizing their economies, but the impact of the epidemic has still been very serious.

Wu Hongying expressed her belief that the epidemic has tested Latin American countries in four aspects:

First, the epidemic directly threatened the health and lives of Latin American people. As of May 9, the number of confirmed cases in Latin America had reached 350,000. Among the cases, 150,000 were in Brazil, and that country's death toll

had exceeded 10,000. And the epidemic was spreading in countries such as Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Dominica, Panama, Colombia, Cuba, and Argentina.

Second, the epidemic directly impacted the weak medical and health systems of the Latin American countries. Although their existing medical systems were relatively complete, they were still weak. It was difficult for them to test all suspicious cases, hospitalize all patients in need and offer them due medical treatment. However, compared with those of Asian and African countries, Latin American countries' medical and health systems are certainly more advanced.

Third, the epidemic has inflicted deep blows to the Latin American economy, mainly in five areas: trade, investment, global industrial chain, product prices and tourism. These areas are very important pillars of Latin America's economy. Since they were all impacted, it will be more difficult for Latin America's economy to recover. According to the latest IMF report, on April 14, the Latin American economy will decline sharply in 2020, with the amount of the decline exceeding the global average. Latin America will also become the hardest-hit region by the epidemic, she said.

Fourth, the epidemic has posed challenges to the governance system and crisis response capabilities of Latin American countries. They have long adopted a democratic system; thus, Latin America has been called the "democratic

continent.” Party politics, universal suffrage and the separation of powers are all in good order. However, in many countries, although the laws are complete, enforcement is poor, such that the law has become a mere scrap of paper and an ornament of politics.

The original intent of the separation of powers is to balance and decentralize power. However, disputes have arisen between courts and governments in many Latin American countries, continuing to affect the development of democratic politics in Latin America. To a certain extent, the year of 2019 became Latin America’s “year of chaos,” with large-scale anti-government demonstrations taking place in 15 countries in the region. These arose from a concentrated outbreak of inherent contradictions, demonstrating the lack of governance capabilities of Latin American countries, Prof. Wu said.

Before the epidemic, China-Latin America relations were at their best period in history, which can be seen mainly from the following aspects:

First of all, high-level exchanges and state visits were very frequent. The state leaders of almost all Latin American countries that have established diplomatic relations with China have visited China. President Xi Jinping has also visited Latin America five times. Second, the closeness of China-Latin America economic and trade ties has been beyond the expectation of all social sectors. Last year, the total economic

and trade volume between China and Latin America exceeded \$300 billion, and accumulated investment volume exceeded \$300 billion. There were more than 2,500 companies in Latin America invested in or operated by Chinese people.

In addition, people-to-people exchanges between the two sides continued to increase. There were four direct flight routes between China and Latin America, and Latin America became a favorite tourist destination for many Chinese people. Also, some Latin American countries, especially some big ones, adopted a mutually supportive attitude in regard to China in major international affair cooperation.

Wu Hongying expressed her belief that the epidemic is both a challenge and an opportunity for future cooperation between China and Latin America. Challenges include interrupted trade, reduced investment, forced suspension of some projects and declining personnel exchanges. Opportunities are mainly seen as the following:

First, anti-epidemic cooperation in public health has become a major new content and a new driving force of China-Latin America cooperation.

Second, the cooperation and mutual support between China and Latin America in the fight against the epidemic has enriched China-Latin America cooperation. China has provided for free a large array of medical supplies to many Latin America countries (e.g., Brazil, Venezuela, and Cuba). Brazilian civil

society also offered support for China's anti-epidemic fight at the outset. The cooperation between the two sides in regard to anti-epidemic supplies has been continuously strengthened.

Third, China and Latin America can expand online cooperation in many fields, including labor division, financial services cooperation, and academic exchanges. The National Autonomous University of Mexico showed great enthusiasm in online cooperation and invited Chinese scholars to participate in a video conference on the impact of the epidemic on human society, science, and performance art. In the future, scholars' online academic exchanges will become the new normal, she said.

Fourth, Latin American countries have learned from China's anti-epidemic and State governance concepts. More and more government departments and scholars in Latin American countries have asked China for *The Governance of China* by Xi Jinping. The book's Spanish version sells well in Latin America. Latin American countries hope to learn from China through the book. In the anti-epidemic cooperation, a new trend has emerged in the mutual learning between China and Latin America, Prof. Wu concluded.

During the Q&A session, the speakers and audience members discussed the content of the presentations.

Qian Chengdan: Our previous workshops focused on one certain country each, such as Germany and France. Our theme

today is about a group of countries in Latin America. We have seen that some countries have done quite well in addressing the epidemic, while some countries are not doing a satisfactory job. Why?

Li Jinzhang: First of all, from the perspective of the leadership, under the current Latin American political system, state leaders' ability to govern the country or the efforts of leaders who dare to assume the role of leaders in the face of the epidemic cannot be maximized. Second, the ideology and starting point when dealing with various emergencies are very important. The problem with the Brazilian president is that he has given priority to politics; economy, second; and the fight against the epidemic, third.

China starts from humanitarianism, emphasizing that human life must be valued above everything else, and therefore, the lives of people must be protected. With this as the starting point, China's anti-epidemic measures have been very effective. Third, there is political intervention. In emergencies, some politicians are still more concerned about how the pros and cons of the relevant anti-epidemic measures would affect their votes and personal reputation. "Too much selfishness" often entails no end of trouble.

Qian Chengdan: The ideologies of Latin American countries are different. Some are "Leftist" and some, "Rightist." Could there be an ideology that leads governments more to

failure in addressing this epidemic, while another ideology leads to success? Are there any factors at work on the left or right, or in neoliberalism or conservatism?

Li Jinzhang: The political views of different parties and their ideas on how the country should be governed have obvious influence on what anti-epidemic measures are taken, but this influence is relatively low in Latin American countries. At present, the disputes between the left and right in Latin America are still continuing, but the connotations are quietly changing, leading to a gradual blurring of the definition of “left, middle and right.”

For example, Nicaragua’s government is left-wing in the traditional sense, but its approach to the epidemic is very similar to that of the far-right Brazilian government. China’s basic principle for developing its relations with Latin American countries is to transcend ideology. This has left a very deep impression on many countries in Latin America. In short, ideology has an influence, but it is not a decisive factor.

Wu Hongying: Since the 1980s, a very important feature of the development of democratization in Latin American countries has been for the leftists and rightists to take turns holding power. Latin American people have a concept that has proved effective every time, which is allowing the right-wing party to hold power when the country encounters an economic crisis. Since right-wing parties advocate free trade and free

economy, it is hoped that right-wing governments will launch economic reforms after taking office. As a result, after the debt and economic crisis in the 1980s, Latin American countries have been generally governed by right-wing governments that practice neoliberalism.

However, people demand more equalization when the economy is well developed and social distribution is not fair enough. Latin American countries also want left-wing governments to govern because those governments emphasize social justice. The leftists were more powerful than the rightists in the first decade of the 21st century, while the rightists began to grow gradually during the second decade. Some people considered that the “pendulum effect” had failed during the third decade, especially in 2019, when neither left-wing nor right-wing governments could bring the large-scale social protests under control. To some extent, the “pendulum effect” has been a historical phenomenon in Latin America, and it will not disappear in the short term. I think it is a relatively special period now, and the “pendulum effect” will return in the future.

In addition, when we look at issues in Latin America, we must remember that Latin America is a completely different system from ours. It is a capitalist production system with Western political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics. It is too difficult or even impossible to require such Westernized countries to adopt strict anti-epidemic measures. The future

trend of the epidemic in Latin America still depends on the response capabilities of governments and their implementation of specific anti-epidemic measures.

Question: There are reports that due to the government's inaction, Mexican drug lords began to distribute supplies to the society, and some underworld organizations in Brazil issued strong orders to lock down cities in certain regions. We are used to criticizing drug lords and underworld organizations, but during the epidemic, they played an effective role in replacing the government. How do you think of that?

Li Jinzhang: This is quite common. Not only during this epidemic, but in the face of similar public crises or natural disasters in the past, these drug cartels or underworld organizations often performed certain government functions in specific areas (such as slums). When the country and the government are unable to provide effective administrative management to these areas, these organizations take responsibility for basic safety, health and other aspects.

After the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak, they organized spontaneously when the government failed to effectively implement anti-epidemic measures. They acted for their own benefit, for the social groups they belong to, and for the benefit of the people under their control in the slums. I would not consider them in the scope of civil society organizations or autonomous management. They are an exception.

Xie Zheng: In my opinion, the underworld is actually a kind of civil society organization, but with a special form that can play a certain social role. In fact, there are many such examples. For instance, anti-government organizations in northern Myanmar also provide residents with mosquito nets and other daily necessities. This kind of organization is illegal under local law, but it plays a good role in promoting local public health.