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Taking stock of a "Francis geopolitics" decade

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Abstract:

13 March 2023 marks a decade since Francis' arrival in Rome. It is a good time to ask about the successes and failures of the geopolitical vision of the first Latin American pope. Throughout these ten years of Francis' pontificate, the Vatican has conducted itself in the wake of a renewed Ostpolitik adapted to the new world power, China, and also to Latin American communist regimes, Russia and Islam: a position that entails relaxing red lines and renouncing putting non-negotiable principles first on the negotiating table. This attitude is well summed up by an expression frequently used by the pope: "Build bridges instead of walls."

This document analyses the agreements with Beijing to repair the rift in China between the patriotic Church and the clandestine Church; the good harmony with the Cuban regime and Francis' mediating role between the island and the United States; the Pope's efforts not to break bridges with Venezuela and Nicaragua; the Vatican's balancing act to position itself as a possible mediator between Russia and Ukraine; Francis' historic rapprochement with the main figures in the hierarchy of Islam and his defence of the fight against climate change and dialogue with the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords:

Write here... Francis, Vatican, Holy See, pope, Islam, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Russia, Ukraine, climate change, Agenda 2030.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Balance de una década de «geopolítica Francisco»

Resumen:

El 13 de marzo de 2023 se cumple una década de la llegada del papa Francisco a Roma. Se trata de un buen momento para preguntarse por cuáles están siendo los éxitos y los fracasos de la visión geopolítica del primer papa latinoamericano. A lo largo de estos diez años del pontificado de Francisco, el Vaticano se ha conducido en la estela de una renovada *Ostpolitik* adaptada a la nueva potencia mundial, China, y también a los regímenes comunistas latinoamericanos, a Rusia y al islam: una posición que entraña flexibilizar líneas rojas y renunciar a poner en primer lugar sobre la mesa de negociación los principios que son innegociables. Esta actitud queda muy bien resumida en una expresión que utiliza frecuentemente el papa: «Construir puentes, en lugar de levantar muros».

A lo largo de este documento se analizan los acuerdos con Pekín para reparar la ruptura en China entre la Iglesia patriótica y la clandestina; la buena sintonía con el régimen cubano y el papel mediador de Francisco entre la isla y Estados Unidos; los esfuerzos del papa por no romper puentes con Venezuela y Nicaragua; los equilibrios del Vaticano para posicionarse como posible mediador entre Rusia y Ucrania; el histórico acercamiento de Francisco a las principales figuras de la jerarquía del islam y la defensa de la lucha contra el cambio climático y el diálogo con la Agenda 2030.

Palabras clave:

Francisco, Vaticano, Santa Sede, papa, islam, China, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Rusia, Ucrania, cambio climático, Agenda 2030.

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Introduction

In September 2021, George Weigel, an American Catholic writer, political scientist and biographer of John Paul II, recalled in an article his conversations with Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, Secretary of State of the Holy See between 1979 and 1990 and architect of the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* ['policy towards the East'], a diplomatic approach that translated into a soft hand and an attempt at rapprochement with the communist regimes of Eastern Europe:

“Casaroli’s *Ostpolitik* began with a premise and a question: saving the church behind the Iron Curtain required access to the sacraments for Catholics, but how best to maintain that access under totalitarian regimes? *Ostpolitik*’s answer was this: access to the sacraments required priests; ordination of priests required bishops; getting bishops meant making deals with communist regimes; getting those deals meant avoiding rhetorical confrontations¹.”

While the majority opinion holds that Casaroli’s *Ostpolitik* was a success and contributed to the communist collapse in Eastern Europe, in Weigel’s view this has no basis in historical reality and has generated a mythology that is laying out “21st century Vatican policies of accommodation and dialogue that undermine the Church’s moral witness against repression in China, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and elsewhere².”

Throughout this decade of Francis’ pontificate, the Vatican has conducted itself in the wake of a renewed *Ostpolitik* adapted to the new world power, China, but also to Latin American communist regimes, Russia and Islam: a position that entails softening red lines and renouncing putting non-negotiable principles first on the negotiating table. This is summed up very well by an expression frequently used by the Pope to refer to the attitude that the Church must maintain in its relations with the outside world, with those who are different: “Build bridges instead of walls.”

13 March 2023 marks a decade since Francis’ arrival in Rome. It is a good time to ask about the successes and failures of the geopolitical vision of the first Latin American pope.

¹ WEIGEL, George. *The Casaroli Myth*, *The Catholic World Report*. 29 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2021/09/29/the-casaroli-myth/>

² *Idem*.

Rapprochement with China: Francis' unique profile makes agreement possible

In 1951, China and the Vatican broke off diplomatic relations. Pope Pius XII excommunicated two bishops appointed by the political authority of the communist regime, and Beijing responded by expelling the apostolic nuncio, who moved to Taipei (Taiwan). Since then, two churches have coexisted in China: the patriotic church, under the control of the communist regime and not recognised by the Vatican, and the clandestine church, which has maintained ties with Rome throughout the decades and is only answerable to the Holy See.

During the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Vatican diplomacy tried to get closer to Beijing, but it was during the papacy of Francis that an unprecedented agreement was reached between China and the Vatican. The pact was signed in Beijing by the Holy See's undersecretary for relations with states, Antoine Camilleri, and China's vice-minister of foreign affairs, Wang Chao. This compromise is the result of gradual and reciprocal rapprochement and has been achieved after a long process of delicate negotiations³. The pact, signed on 22 September 2018, is provisional in nature—it must be renewed every two years, and has been renewed in 2020 and 2022—and focuses on the appointment of bishops. In no way does it include the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two states, which is difficult to achieve as long as the Vatican remains the last European stronghold that continues to recognise the Republic of China (Taiwan). The communist regime does not establish diplomatic relations with countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, meaning that the Vatican would have to break with Taipei if it wants to re-establish diplomatic ties with Beijing.

The aim of the new understanding is to unite Chinese Catholics, so that all their bishops are in communion with the Pope, but at the same time have the recognition of the Chinese authorities. Thus, after the signing, Francis accepted into communion with Rome seven bishops of the patriotic Church who had been ordained without pontifical mandate. In addition, six appointments of Chinese bishops have been made jointly thanks to the collaboration between China and the Vatican within the framework of the agreement.

³ PRESS OFFICE OF THE HOLY SEE. Communiqué on the signing of an Interim Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the appointment of bishops. 22 September 2018. Available at: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/es/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/22/pol.html>

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Although the content of the pact is secret, subsequent developments suggest that it has been agreed that the Chinese bishops will be chosen by the Catholic representatives of the Chinese diocese and approved by the Chinese authorities. Subsequently, the Holy See would assess the elected bishops and decide whether or not to ratify the decision.

In any case, even if the agreement is limited only to ecclesiastical matters, it may contribute to the writing of a new page in Sino-Vatican relations, since “for the first time stable elements of collaboration between the authorities of the State and the Apostolic See are envisaged⁴.” China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed in a brief statement following the agreement that the two sides “will continue their communications to promote the progress and advancement of bilateral relations⁵.”

The pact was strongly criticised within the Catholic Church by authoritative voices such as Cardinal Joseph Zen, Archbishop Emeritus of Hong Kong. Zen’s review was that an agreement between the Vatican and Beijing meant handing over to the Communist regime Catholics who had remained faithful to Rome for decades and who had suffered persecution; all this, moreover, without apparently getting anything significant in return from the Chinese Communist regime.

Zen has distinguished himself throughout his pastoral ministry by a relentless denunciation of the lack of freedoms in China. He was elected bishop by John Paul II and made a cardinal by Benedict XVI. In May 2022, Zen was arrested in Hong Kong on charges of colluding with foreign forces to endanger China’s national security. The cardinal had participated in public fundraising events to raise money to pay for legal assistance for protesters arrested for participating in pro-democracy marches. He was subsequently tried on 19 September 2022, convicted and sentenced to pay a fine of \$500.

⁴ THE HOLY SEE. Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Catholics of China and to the universal church. 26 September 2018. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180926_messaggio-cattolici-cinesi.html

⁵ BBC NEWS. *El histórico acuerdo entre China y el Vaticano que algunos sacerdotes consideran una traición*. 23 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-45616338>



Figure 1. Cardinal Joseph Zen in Hong Kong
Source: scmp.samtsang

A few days before the trial, between 13 and 15 September, Francis visited Kazakhstan. At the press conference during the return flight, a journalist asked the Pope whether he considered the trial against Zen to be a violation of religious freedom. Francisco's response is a clear reflection of his attitude:

"It takes a century to understand China, and we do not live a century. The Chinese mentality is a rich mentality and, when it gets a little sick, it loses its richness, it is capable of making mistakes. In order to understand each other, we have chosen the path of dialogue, open to dialogue. There is a bilateral Vatican-Chinese commission that is going well, slowly, because the Chinese rhythm is slow, they have an eternity to follow: they are a people of infinite patience [...]. It is not easy to understand the Chinese mentality, but you have to respect it, I always respect it. And here in the Vatican there is a dialogue commission that is going well, Cardinal Parolin chairs it and he is the man who knows the most about China and the Chinese dialogue at the moment. It is a slow thing, but there are always steps forward. I don't think China is undemocratic because it is such a complex country... Rather than labelling,

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because it is difficult, and I don't consider it labelling, they are impressions, I try to support the path of dialogue⁶."

Precisely on the same trip to Kazakhstan, Pope Francis met Chinese President Xi Jinping, who was in the Central Asian country on a state visit, in Astana on 14 September. According to Vatican sources, the Holy See expressed its desire to take advantage of the coincidence between the two leaders to hold some kind of meeting. However, Beijing's response was negative, citing time constraints⁷. Although Francis became the first pope to obtain permission to fly over Chinese airspace during his visit to South Korea in 2014, and despite the fact that on different occasions he has expressed his desire to meet with the Holy See, the Pope's response was negative, citing time problems

How is the Sino-Vatican pact to be interpreted?

In Chinese culture, political authority has traditionally embodied both temporal and spiritual power and the emperor was represented as the "son of heaven". When Mao Zedong became president of the People's Republic of China and embraced atheistic Marxist doctrine, political power lost this supernatural dimension. Thus, all religious belief was abolished as a limit to Mao's authority. After Deng Xiaoping's reforms and opening-up, China's unprecedented economic growth led to what some have called a "spiritual vacuum", which gave rise to a renewed interest in religion. To meet this assumption of demand, religious activity was opened up in the 1980s. Since then, the number of Chinese Catholics is estimated to have grown to twelve million, a figure that includes adherents of both the patriotic and underground churches. Despite this, the Holy See has never been allowed to appoint its representatives. Firstly, because Chinese bishops, in addition to being religious leaders, play a social and ideological role. Secondly, because

⁶ THE HOLY SEE. Press conference on the return flight to Rome. 15 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220915-kazakhstan-voloritorno.html>

⁷ REUTERS. *El Vaticano propuso una reunión entre Xi y el Papa en Kazajistán, pero China declinó*. Euronews, 15 September 2022. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2022/09/15/papa-china>

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it has been seen as interference in internal affairs if religious groups and affairs are in any way subject to the control of foreign forces⁸.

Although the significance of this pact has not been fully appreciated by the international community, for those familiar with Chinese and Vatican domestic politics the agreement is a major milestone. Albeit in a very restricted way, for the first time a Chinese government has accepted a limitation or “interference” that affects its internal affairs. In a way, this is an acceptance of the separation of religious and political powers, at least in principle, since in practice the Holy See’s scope for decision-making is limited. And such separation is a basic principle of Western modernity, which China has somehow not rejected with this agreement.

China can draw inspiration from other communist countries’ relations with the Vatican. In Vietnam, Laos and Cuba, Party members are allowed to practice a religious faith. In fact, the Sino-Vatican agreement was inspired by the "Vietnam model". Cuba, for its part, is a communist country but willing to guarantee religious freedom, a status that led the island to serve as a “neutral” venue for the meeting between Pope Francis and the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill in 2016⁹.

But what interest could China have in such an agreement? On the one hand, the maintenance of social stability, which could at some point be threatened by opposition to the regime from underground Catholics. On the other hand, this interim pact could be the first step towards the withdrawal of recognition of Taiwan by the Holy See, the only European state that maintains it and one of the fourteen diplomatic allies that the island still retains. A break with Taiwan by the last European state would carry great symbolic weight for Beijing and would be a major victory in terms of international reputation.

As such, China sees this rapprochement with the Holy See as a unique opportunity to eliminate Taiwan’s most significant ally. Moreover, if one day the Vatican breaks with the island, a possible chain effect could be foreseen: countries with significant Catholic

⁸ MILANO, Jessica. The Vatican-China Agreement: What is it?. European Guanxi, 25 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.europeanguanxi.com/post/vatican-china-agreement-what-is-it>

⁹ LINBIN, Wang. China-Vatican Relations in the Xi Era, The Diplomat. 07 May 2022. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/china-vatican-relations-in-the-xi-era/>

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populations, such as Paraguay, St Lucia, Haiti, Palau, Guatemala and Honduras, could end up making the same decision¹⁰.

In China they are aware of Francis' admiration for their country and his misgivings about the US model, as the pontiff has expressed, especially during the Trump administration. Xi Jinping might think it is a question of now or never, because who knows who the Holy Spirit will choose next time as the tenant of the Holy See.

And what does the Vatican gain from all this? In its universalist vocation, the Catholic Church is interested in having a say in a country which, according to various projections, could in the coming decades become home to one of the largest communities of Christians in the world (Protestant and Catholic).



Figure 2. Pope Francis with a group of Chinese Catholics in Vatican Square

Source: <https://www.vidanuevadigital.com/2020/03/05/francisco-dedica-el-video-del-papa-de-marzo-a-la-iglesia-china/>

Lanxin Xiang, Professor of International Politics at the University of Geneva, makes an interesting reading of the relationship between China and the Vatican in the light of past events. Xiang argues that the rift between China and the West has its origins in the Enlightenment, but that China had previously maintained a healthy dialogue with Renaissance Europe, particularly Italy, and its European interlocutors were often Jesuits. The Jesuits were pioneers among European travellers: unlike travellers such as Marco

¹⁰ *Idem.*

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Polo, who had limited experience of immersion in the Chinese socio-cultural world, the Jesuits had actually lived in China and were intellectually and culturally engaged there. As in the past, the Vatican can now be a key player in the dialogue between China and the West. A Jesuit has become pope for the first time, and the Jesuits have been the vanguard of Christian missions in non-European worlds, with a long history of flexible and accommodating approaches to religion and culture. Thus, the Vatican has had some positive experiences in dealing with communist regimes, such as Vietnam. Francis and the Vatican understand the significance of China's "rise" differently from countries such as the United States, which sees this phenomenon in competitive and rivalric terms. The Vatican has been one of the best informed and most stable regimes historically. Unlike contemporary governments that come and go, the long-term continuity of the Holy See's positions and visions fits well with China's perspective¹¹.

Maintaining bridges with Russia in spite of everything

The Holy See has an important track record in international mediation. Different popes have intervened in wars over the centuries. The Vatican enjoys high international prestige and is regarded as a serious and reliable partner, not least because it has no territorial aspirations and does not act for political or economic reasons, nor does it have to import or export oil and gas.

In dealing with both international and internal conflicts, the ability to obtain good information is essential. William Casey, director of the CIA during Ronald Reagan's presidency, claimed that the Vatican's secret service is the best-trained spy network in the world. The main channels of information reaching the Holy See are the nunciatures around the world. The Vatican is the doyen of the diplomatic corps, having maintained a nuncio in every country for centuries. Moreover, the pope's ambassadors are in contact with a well-established capillary network, such as the one maintained by the Catholic Church in each country. They have a wealth of important and up-to-date information¹².

¹¹ XIANG, Lanxin. China and the Vatican. Geneva Graduate Institute, 17 May 2019. Available at: <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/china-and-vatican>

¹² CURIEL, María. *Los espías del Vaticano: la red de información más importante del mundo*, *El Debate*. 21 August 2022. Available at: https://www.eldebate.com/religion/20220821/espias-vaticano_55191.html

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Other unique features of the Vatican are its high level of organisation, the extraordinary qualifications of its members or collaborators and its internal discipline. All these factors are of utmost importance for developing a mediating role¹³.

Since Francis' arrival in Rome, his relations with Putin have been good. It should be recalled that in September 2013, Barack Obama requested permission from the US Congress to attack Syria in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons by the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Francis' reaction was to address a public letter to Putin in his capacity as president of the G20; a position he held that year. In the letter, the pontiff called on the Russian president to urge the group's member countries "to find ways to overcome the various oppositions and to abandon any vain pretense of a military solution" in Syria¹⁴. As is well known, Putin is a prominent ally of al-Assad and was among the leaders most opposed to US military intervention. It should be contextualised that the Al-Assad regime protects Syrian Christians from the hostilities they face from Islamists. It was therefore not surprising that the Russian president found in Francis an ally for his positions in Syria. This first coincidence subsequently facilitated a meeting of great ecumenical significance: the historic meeting between Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in Havana on 12 February 2016.

Francis has successfully mediated between the United States and Cuba or in the negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas. Regarding the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Pope has tried to mediate and has held telephone conversations with Putin, Zelenski and Biden. In October 2022, Russian spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia was ready to discuss with the Americans, the French and the pontiff. These statements were very well received in the Vatican, where they expressed openness and availability. Thus, a few weeks later, Francis publicly expressed the Vatican's readiness to do everything possible to mediate and end the conflict: "The Secretary of State is working every day, evaluating every hypothesis and

¹³ ESTEPA, Héctor. *Del deshielo con Cuba a las "maras": la Iglesia Católica, el negociador jefe en Latinoamérica*, *El Confidencial*. 28 May 2018. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2018-05-28/iglesia-catolica-mediacion-crisis-latinoamerica_1569041/

¹⁴ THE HOLY SEE. Letter of Pope Francis to H. E. Mr. Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, on the Occasion of the G20 St. Petersburg Summit 04 September 2013. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130904_putin-g20.html

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assessing every possibility that could lead to a real ceasefire and real negotiations¹⁵.” Peskov welcomed the Pope’s offer, but apologised that the Ukrainian position prevented such a dialogue¹⁶.



Figure 3. Francis welcomes Putin at the Vatican

Source: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/papa/news/2019-06/papa-francisco-audiencia-presidente-putin.html>

Francis has refused to reduce the current conflict to “a distinction between good guys and bad guys¹⁷.” However, he has always maintained a discourse condemning the Russian-initiated war and has on numerous occasions referred to Ukraine as a suffering and martyred people.

The pontiff has made public statements that have sometimes annoyed one side and sometimes the other. Thus, in an interview with the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*, Francis pointed out that “perhaps it was NATO barking at Russia’s door” that motivated Putin to invade Ukraine. The pope then said he had no way of knowing whether Russia’s anger had been provoked and expressed his suspicion that the conflict was “facilitated

¹⁵ AGASSO, Domenico. *Tra Kiev e Mosca la pace è possibile non scordiamo gli ultimi*, *La Stampa*. 18 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2022/11/18/news/papa-francesco-tra-kiiev-e-mosca-la-pace-e-possibile-non-scordiamo-gli-ultimi-12246796/>

¹⁶ REUTERS. *Kremlin: Aceptamos la oferta de mediación del Vaticano, pero la postura de Ucrania lo impide*. Euronews, 28 November 2022. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2022/11/28/ucrania-crisis-kremlin-vaticano>

¹⁷ AFP. *El papa condena la “brutalidad” de Rusia en una guerra que “podría haber sido provocada”*, *Swiss Info*. 14 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/afp/el-papa-condena-la-brutalidad-de-rusia-en-una-guerra-que-podr%C3%ADa-haber-sido-provocada-/47672400>

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by the attitude of the West¹⁸." These statements were strongly criticised, among others, by the Polish government.

The Pope has also made statements that have provoked Russian anger. Thus, the pontiff sparked Russian anger when he claimed in an interview with America magazine that the "cruellest" soldiers fighting in the war are not from the Russian tradition, but are Chechens and Buryats, different ethnic groups within Russia. The statement was condemned by the Russian Foreign Ministry. His spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, then criticised the Vatican's offer to host the Moscow-Kiev peace talks as a consequence of the pope's comments. The Vatican had no choice but to apologise to Russia and acknowledge the "profound respect" the Holy See has for all Russian peoples. At a press conference afterwards, Zakharova said the Vatican's apology had produced "sincere respect" in Russia and demonstrated the pontiff's capacity for dialogue, adding that the Russian foreign ministry would resume constructive interactions with the Holy See¹⁹.

It seems clear that at this stage the actors in the conflict are not in a position to sit down and negotiate. When such a point is eventually reached, it is possible that the Vatican will play a role, but it will probably be a very minor one. Given the geopolitical magnitude of the conflict and all the consequences and spin-offs it is entailing, it is unlikely that the pope will be able to play a decisive role in future negotiations.

Cuba, first goal for Francisco

Francis, like his two predecessors, travelled as much as possible to Cuba. He did so in September 2015, as a stop prior to his visit to the United States. During the trip he met with Fidel Castro and Barack Obama.

The pontiff played a key role as a mediator in restoring relations between the Obama administration and the Cuban regime. The pope wrote to Raúl Castro and the US

¹⁸ DENIS CRUZ, José. *El papa Francisco no se refirió a la invasión rusa como una operación para "desmilitarizar" Ucrania*, *Newtral*. 11 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.newtral.es/papa-francisco-perros-otan/20220511/>

¹⁹ ROME REPORTS. *Vaticano pide disculpas a Rusia por los comentarios del Papa sobre los grupos étnicos*. 15 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.romereports.com/2022/12/15/vaticano-pide-disculpas-a-rusia-por-los-comentarios-del-papa-sobre-los-grupos-etnicos/>

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president to encourage them to resume relations and address the humanitarian problems on the island. On 23 September 2015, Obama, in his speech during the official welcoming ceremony for Francis at the White House, stated: "Holy Father, we are grateful for your invaluable support for our new beginning with the Cuban people, which offers the promise of better relations between our countries²⁰."



Figure 4. Francis during his meeting with Fidel Castro in Havana in 2015.
Source: EFE

Throughout this decade, the pope has shown his personal closeness to the island. Thus, in July 2022, in an interview with Univisión and Televisa, when asked about Cuba, Francis stated: "I love the Cuban people very much, I love them very much. I had human relations with Cuban people and I also confess, with Raúl Castro I have a human relationship [...]. Cuba is a symbol, Cuba has a great history, I feel very close to it²¹."

Criticism of the pope's words from within the island was not long in coming. Thus, a Cuban priest responded to the statements with a public letter to the pope in which he used harsh words against Francis' stance on the Cuban regime:

"He (Raúl) with whom you maintain a humane relationship has shown us Cubans that he knows nothing of humanity. I will not mention to him the barbarities he has

²⁰ REDACCIÓN RELIGIÓN. *El Vaticano, un reconocido mediador en múltiples conflictos internacionales a lo largo de la historia*. COPE, 19 May 2021. Available at: https://www.cope.es/religion/hoy-en-dia/vaticano/noticias/vaticano-reconocido-mediador-multiples-conflictos-internacionales-largo-historia-20210519_1297488

²¹ CUBADEBATE. *Papa Francisco: "Cuba es un símbolo, Cuba tiene una historia grande."* Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCIKTzu6m5w>

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done during these more than sixty years. Just look at the hundreds of prisoners imprisoned solely for taking to the streets to shout for freedom. Holy Father, some are minors. Look at the crisis that the Cuban people are experiencing due to the lack of food and medicine, and the lack of freedoms that threaten human dignity. On the brink of despair. Why didn't you say anything about it? [...] Why does the case of the Cuban government's injustices always seem to be relegated to the back of your agenda? Listen to the cry of your people who are dying in the grip of the wolf that is the Communist Party of Cuba²²."

In the face of the debate that has arisen within Cuban civil society over the pope's words, a young Cuban Catholic journalist, Julio Pernús, came to Francis' defence with an article published on the Jesuit website²³, in which he tries to contextualise the pontiff's position and "give some clues about Jorge Mario Bergoglio's thinking that can help us to understand his way of interpreting our reality." It is not known whether the pope agrees with the Cuban journalist's interpretation of his words, but for the present analysis the details and interpretative clues that Pernús offers to contextualise and shed light on Francis' political stance are very valuable. Moreover, the fact that the article was published on a Jesuit website lends authority to the Cuban journalist's reflections:

"Francis is the first Latin American pope, a Jesuit, which is why what he proposes is always observed with a magnifying glass by a rigorist thinking—even within various Cuban Catholic sectors—that moves on the basis of unquestionable readings of reality, derived from the western centre, Europe. The pope is part of a school of thought that emerged in Argentina in the 1970s known as the theology of the people. According to the Italian philosopher Massimo Borghesi: "This thought was not a conservative alternative to liberation theology, but a liberation theology without Marxism" [...]. Bergoglio has never been a communist priest. To say so cuts off in advance any seriousness on the part of the person who wishes to express an opinion on his latest statements regarding Cuba. Francis has gone beyond the

²² GÁLVEZ, Fernando. *Carta al Santo Padre Francisco, Democracia Participativa*. 14 July 2022. Available at: <https://democraciaparticipativa.net/economia-society/columnistas-invitados/20402-carta-al-santo-padre-francisco>

²³ PERNÚS, Julio. *El papa Francisco y su visión de Cuba*. Jesuits, Conference of Provincials in Latin America and the Caribbean, 27 July 2022. Available at: <https://jesuitas.lat/redes-sociales/noticias-cpal-social/7647-el-papa-francisco-y-su-vision-de-cuba>

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communist or liberal revolutionary myths, which are taking hold in the region under authoritarian signs, to place himself at the head of the popular movements to which he offers a different way out of violence in order to achieve their emancipatory goals [...]. The reference to Cuba and its Revolution as a symbol in the thinking of the Bishop of Rome is historical, marked by his intellectual formation, and does not necessarily have to be situated in what has been happening in recent times in our social fabric [...]. Social friendship, understood as the search to overcome conflicts through dialogue and fraternal collaboration between opposing parties, is carried out patiently in the patient weft that does not pretend to deny the accents, the concrete diversities that subsist within the leaders of these processes. Some of those who accuse Francis of being a communist because of his human relationship with Raul forget that this gesture is evangelical, for Jesus, the founder of Christianity, wove human relationships to try to save even his greatest enemies.

Venezuela and Nicaragua, Francis fails to convince

Francis has travelled to Latin America on several occasions to visit Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Cuba, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Peru and Panama. There are two significant absences from the list, albeit for different reasons: Venezuela and Argentina.

In contrast to Cuba, the pope has not shown any sympathy for the Venezuelan regime, although he has not shown any predilection for opposition groups either. It should be borne in mind that both Chávez and Maduro have harshly disqualified the country's bishops—both have accused them of hiding the devil under their cassocks—and as a rule Venezuelan prelates have been very unfriendly to Vatican *Ostpolitik*. Although the Holy See has always defended the Venezuelan bishops in the face of attacks by the government, the Pope has publicly expressed his desire that no foreign force intervene in the conflict to overthrow the regime and has made recurring calls for national unity and for all parties to work together to achieve reconciliation²⁴.

²⁴ THE HOLY SEE. Video Message of this Holiness Pope Francis to Mark the Beatification of José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros 30 April 2021. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210429_videomessaggio-beatificazione-cisneros.html



Figure 5. Francis welcomes Maduro in a private audience at the Vatican on 17 June 2013 Source: AFP / Andreas Solaro.

The Vatican's negotiating impulse has not always been welcomed by the regime. Thus, in response to a letter that Parolin sent to the Venezuelan government in December 2016, in which he called on the executive to engage in dialogue, the vice-president of the Venezuelan Socialist Party, Diosdado Cabello, declared that it is "disrespectful to believe that the Vatican is going to protect Venezuela. Respect, we don't interfere in the internal affairs of the Vatican²⁵."

The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference does not recognise Maduro's current presidential mandate and in a communiqué declared that "the claim to start a new presidential term on 10 January 2019 is illegitimate by its origin, and opens a door to the disregard of the Government because it lacks democratic support in justice and law²⁶."

²⁵ VINOGRADOFF, Ludmila. *Severo ataque de la Iglesia venezolana al régimen: no hubo voluntad de dialogar*, *Clarín*. 07 January 2021. Available at: https://www.clarin.com/mundo/severo-ataque-iglesia-venezolana-regimen-voluntad-dialogar_0_ByRywJy8e.html

²⁶ MUTUAL, Griselda. *Obispos Venezuela: nuevo período presidencial ilegítimo en origen*, *Vatican News*. 09 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2019-01/obispos-venezuela-nuevo-periodo-presidencial-ilegitimo-origen.html>

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The Pope has always offered the Holy See's mediation and Vatican representatives have participated in various dialogue initiatives involving the regime and opposition groups. The diplomatic equidistance that the Holy See has traditionally maintained, however, seemed to be blown apart by the letter that the Pope sent to Maduro on 7 February 2019, the contents of which were revealed by the Italian daily *Il Corriere della Sera*. In the letter, in which the pontiff addresses Maduro as "Your Excellency" and not as "president", Francis reminds the Bolivarian leader of the Holy See's attempts to mediate in the conflict, at the request of the parties, and regrets that the regime has not fulfilled the agreements or the roadmap it promised: elections, recognition of Parliament, release of political prisoners and the opening of a humanitarian channel²⁷. Francis was referring to the negotiating process that began in the Dominican Republic in December 2017²⁸.

As things stand, it seems unlikely that the Vatican will play an important role in a hypothetical national reconciliation agreement that could provide a way out of the institutional, political, economic and social crisis in Venezuela. Despite the balance Francis has tried to maintain between Maduro and the opposition forces, for the current regime the pope is *persona non grata*.

With regard to Nicaragua, where in the last year the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega has intensified its persecution of the Catholic Church, Francis has tried not to close the path of dialogue at any time. And all this despite the fact that in March 2022 the Vatican nuncio in the country was expelled, a bishop was convicted and imprisoned, and several priests and religious men and women were also banished from Nicaragua.

Thus, on 21 August 2022, in his Angelus address, the pontiff said that he was following with concern and pain the situation that has arisen in Nicaragua. "I would like to express my conviction and my hope that, through open and sincere dialogue, the foundations for a respectful and peaceful coexistence can still be found²⁹," he added. A month later, on

²⁷ LOZANO, Daniel. *La bofetada diplomática del papa Francisco a Nicolás Maduro: excelentísimo señor, El Mundo*. 14 February 2019. Available at:

<https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2019/02/14/5c64688c21efa053238b4607.html>

²⁸ PINEDA, Jorge. *Gobierno y oposición de Venezuela retoman diálogo en República Dominicana*.

Reuters, 01 December 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/politica-venezuela-dialogo-idLTAKBN1DV4UA-OUSLD>

²⁹ POPE FRANCISCO. *Angelus*. The Holy See, 21 August 2022. Available at:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2022/documents/20220821-angelus.html>

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the return flight from his trip to Kazakhstan, when asked by journalists about the situation of persecution against the church in Nicaragua, Francis insisted in the same way: "Never stop the dialogue"³⁰. In his Angelus address on 12 February 2023, following the sentencing to 26 years in prison of the bishop of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, the Pope expressed his sorrow, his concern and his wish that Nicaragua's political leaders would open themselves to the search for peace "through the patient exercise of dialogue"³¹. To Francis' patience and call for dialogue, Ortega's response a few days later was: "The bishops, the priests, the popes are a mafia. Look how many crimes they have committed. Crimes for having absurd regulations. They commit in the financial field, for embezzling millions. We bear these horrors of those who present themselves as saints".³²

Encounter with Islam: Francis secures his place in history

With regard to relations with institutional Islam, Francis is undoubtedly the pontiff who has gone furthest in forging closer ties between Christians and Muslims, both Sunni and Shia. At the invitation of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Emir of Abu Dhabi and current President of the United Arab Emirates, the Pope travelled to Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019. Francis was welcomed at the presidential palace by Mohammed bin Zayed and was invited to a meeting with the Muslim Council of Elders at the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. The main event of the trip was the inter-religious meeting with the highest Sunni authority, Ahmad Al Tayyib, Grand Imam of Al Azhar. Egypt's President Al Sisi also took part in the event. At the meeting, Al Tayyib and Francis signed the joint declaration on "Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Common Coexistence", the content of which had been elaborated and negotiated over the previous six months by Vatican and Al Azhar teams. "I thank my friend and dear brother, the great Imam of Al Azhar, Dr Ahmed Al Tayyib, and all those who helped in the preparation of the meeting, for their

³⁰ THE HOLY SEE. Press conference on the return flight to Rome. 15 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220915-kazakhstan-voloritorno.html>

³¹ POPE FRANCISCO. *Angelus*. The Holy See, 12 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2023/documents/20230212-angelus.html>

³² MALDONADO, Carlos, El País, 22 February 2023. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-02-22/ortega-carga-contr-la-iglesia-y-el-vaticano-los-curas-los-obispos-y-los-papas-son-una-mafia.html>

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courage and willingness to affirm that faith in God unites and does not divide. I am happy for this opportunity offered to me by the Lord to write, in your beloved land, a new page in the history of relations between religions, which confirms that we are brothers even though we are different³³,” said the pontiff, aware that this day was probably the most important of his pontificate from the point of view of inter-religious dialogue.



Figure 6. Francis and Al Tayyib in Abu Dhabi Source:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/es/2019/2/4/frate-llanza-umana.html>

A year and a half later, in October 2020, Francis published the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, in the preface of which he acknowledges that the text was inspired by his meeting with Al Tayyib. This document and *Laudato si*, the encyclical on ecology, have become the most prominent texts of his papacy.

In March 2021, the pope wanted to go further and embarked on a trip to Iraq, the first ever by a pontiff. There, in the holy city of Najaf, he met with al-Sistani, the country's Shia leader and Grand Ayatollah. In 1999 John Paul II announced his intention to visit Iraq and meet Al Sistani, but Saddam Hussein opposed the trip, forcing the pope to cancel his plans.

³³ THE HOLY SEE. Video Message of his Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of His Upcoming Apostolic Journey to the United Arab Emirates 31 January 2019. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190131_videomessaggio-emirati-arabi-uniti.html

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Al Sistani, like Al Tayyib, is a prominent personality not only in religious but also in geopolitical terms. He was born in Iran but went to Iraq. He does not subscribe to the Shia Islamism of Khomeini's revolution. He advocates peaceful coexistence between Sunnis and Shiites. He was one of the first political and religious leaders to speak out against the barbarities being committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and has called for an investigation into the crimes perpetrated by the terrorist group against Christians and Yazidis in Iraq. He is a moral reference point within Islam, including for many Sunnis. "I felt it my duty, in this pilgrimage of faith and penance, to go and meet a great man, a wise man, a man of God," Francis told journalists on the flight back to Rome.³⁴



Figure 7. Al Sistani receives Francis in Najaf

Source: <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/papa/news/2021-03/papa-francisco-encuentra-ayatollah-al-sistani.html>

Climate change and Agenda 2030: a *woke* Pope in the chair of Peter?

Although the Catholic message has traditionally promoted care for nature and ecological awareness, Francis surprised the world in May 2015 with an encyclical on the environment, climate change and sustainable development: *Laudato si*. Although this was the pope's second encyclical, it was actually his first, as the previous one, *Lumen fidei* (2013), was published under his pontificate but had been written by Benedict XVI. Since

³⁴ THE HOLY SEE. Press Conference on the Return Flight to Rome 08 March 2021. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/march/documents/papa-francesco_20210308_iraq-volo-ritorno.html

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then, Francisco has become, together with Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, one of the world's leading figures in environmental advocacy and the fight against climate change.



Figure 8. Francis greets Greta Thunberg at the General Audience on 17 April 2019.
Source: Vatican Media.

In September 2015, the same year as the publication of the document, the pontiff was invited to address the United Nations Assembly in New York. It was the summit where the 2030 Agenda was to be adopted. In his socially charged speech, Francis urged world leaders to commit themselves to the promotion of the human person, the fight against poverty and the care of migrants and refugees. He also reserved a large part of his speech to defend decisive action against climate change and care for the planet.

“The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the world summit starting today is an important sign of hope. I am also confident that the Paris Climate Change Conference will achieve fundamental and effective agreements. However, solemn commitments are not enough, although they are certainly a necessary step towards solutions³⁵,” the Pope warned, inviting the leaders of the States to ensure that the social commitments contained in the documents do not remain only on paper. For those who criticised Francis’ apparent alignment with Agenda 2030, which is accused of promoting gender ideology and anti-natalist measures, it would be unfair not to underline

³⁵ THE HOLY SEE. Address of the Holy Father to the United Nations Assembly. 25 September 2015. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html

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that in the same speech the pontiff stressed that “the defence of the environment and the fight against exclusion require the recognition of a moral law inscribed in human nature itself, which includes the natural distinction between man and woman and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions.” He also defended “respect for the sacredness of every human life: the poor, the elderly, children, the sick, the unborn, the abandoned, those who are deemed disposable³⁶.”



Figure 9. Francis addresses the United Nations Assembly, September 2015.
Source: *L'Osservatore Romano*.

But what is Francis' position on the 2030 Agenda? It is told by the former representative of the Holy See to the United Nations between 2014 and 2019 and now nuncio to Spain, the Filipino Bernardito Auza. The Asian diplomat headed the Vatican delegation that participated in the negotiation process of the document. In a conference on the role of the Holy See in the 2030 Agenda that he gave at the Abad Oliba University in Barcelona, Auza explained that there are those who think that the Vatican is in total agreement with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, but that this is not the case,

³⁶ *Idem*.

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since throughout the drafting process it presented its reservations, objections and doubts³⁷.

The nuncio stressed that one of the first objections is the excess of ambition and idealism, but Auza's main warning was the risk of the 2030 Agenda becoming an instrument of "ideological colonisation": a repertoire of ready-made solutions that respond more to the priorities of the donor country than to the needs of the recipient countries, in other words, that impose models of life that are alien to the local culture.

The nuncio also referred to some developed countries that allocate 60-70 percent of their contributions to the 2030 Agenda to goals related to reproductive health, interpreting it to include abortion. Likewise, the Philippine prelate stressed that when the document speaks of gender, the Holy See defends that it should be understood according to a notion based on biological criteria.

We see, then, that once again Francis decided to build bridges and not erect walls to the 2030 Agenda, but always from a critical stance with some of the ideological postulates that permeate the document. However, right-wing sectors and some groups of Catholics who have remained with a superficial reading of the Pope's environmentalist discourse and his adherence (with reservations) to the 2030 Agenda consider Francis to be yet another activist of the "woke" ideology.

Conclusions

If anything has become clear in the course of this analysis, it is that Francis has been a source of scandal in each of the decisions through which he has guided the Vatican's external action. The agreements with Beijing have been criticised by some Chinese Catholics; the goodwill with the Cuban regime or the efforts not to break bridges with Venezuela and Nicaragua have been contested by opposition groups; both Russia and Ukraine have been offended when they have interpreted the pope's words as favouring the other; and the rapprochement with Islam, the defence of the fight against climate

³⁷ MARTÍNEZ, María. *Auza: En la Agenda 2030 hay aspiraciones loables y colonización ideológica*, *Alfa y Omega*. 27 January 2023, Available at: <https://alfayomega.es/auza-en-la-agenda-2030-hay-aspiraciones-loables-y-colonizacion-ideologica/>

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change or the dialogue with the 2030 Agenda have been the object of incomprehension by groups closed to dialogue.

While Francis' rapprochement with the main Sunni leader and a prominent Shia leader can now be considered a milestone in the history of relations between Christianity and Islam, it is still too early to know whether the interim agreement with Beijing will achieve effective communion among Chinese Catholics and the consolidation of a framework in which they can practice their faith freely. So far the pact has no express political or diplomatic implications, but on the symbolic and principled level there has been a novelty: the state has agreed to share with the Vatican part of its sovereignty in internal matters of a religious nature.

The German political theorist Carl Schmitt argued in 1923 in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* that there is no political or social opposition that the Catholic Church cannot somehow embrace, mitigate or combine in a constant play of accommodation and intransigence: "Its history knows examples of astonishing adaptation, but also of rigid intransigence; of manly resilience and feminine flexibility; of pride and humility strangely mixed". Schmitt was undoubtedly a visionary of Francis' pontificate.

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