Paper Tiger or Pacing Threat?

China's Security and Defense Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Ryan C. Berg
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A Report of the CSIS Americas Program

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China has long couched its engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean in primarily economic terms. However, China is becoming increasingly strident in its efforts to bolster defense and security initiatives in the Western Hemisphere. Chinese defense and security engagements manifest along a spectrum, including dual-use civilian and military infrastructure projects, public safety assistance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, arms sales, and joint military-to-military exchanges and trainings. An expanded military and security presence in the hemisphere poses significant concerns for the United States in the event of a potential conflict or crisis, imperils regional stability by empowering criminal regimes in the hemisphere, and risks eroding democratic norms within regional militaries and police forces.

Taken together, these trendlines place the United States at an inflection point—it remains a preferred security partner for most countries in the hemisphere but must act now to preserve this status, lest it slip at a precarious moment. To fortify security partnerships with countries in the region, and counter Chinese influence in the security and defense space, the United States should pursue the following lines of effort:

1. Leverage U.S. partners to fill force modernization and equipment shortfalls.
2. Bolster the defense cooperation mechanisms of the inter-American system.
3. Clarify U.S. red lines when it comes to security engagement.
4. Invest in U.S. core competencies in military education and training.
5. Enhance interagency and international cooperation for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

6. Improve cooperation on countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and the nexus between transnational organized crime and environmental crimes.

7. Strengthen awareness and training on cybersecurity.

8. Invest in citizen security and delink citizen security from the regional conversation on drugs.
Peering out from the treetops on a hillside near Bejucal, Cuba, massive parabolic antennas mark the location of a suspected signals intelligence base reportedly operated by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 1999. More recently, images of the facility have sprung up across U.S. media after reports that China and Cuba had reached an agreement to open another such facility on the island. The true extent of China’s military footprint on the island remains hotly debated in open sources but given the proximity of any such facility to key commercial, technological, and military infrastructure along the southeastern coast of the United States, it should inspire planning for the worst. Adding yet more fuel to the fire, on June 20, 2023, the Wall Street Journal reported that Chinese officials had been in high-level talks with their Cuban counterparts to open yet another base on the island, this one dedicated to military training. These combined revelations garnered a raft of comparisons to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, assessments which, while perhaps exaggerations to some, underscore both the strategic import of the Western Hemisphere to the United States and the changing nature of the security and defense challenges in the region. Over 60 years ago, fear of missiles housed less than a hundred miles off the coast of Florida brought the world to the nuclear brink, but today the spectrum of potential threats encompasses a staggering range of issues, from cybersecurity and infrastructure investment to overseas police outposts, security cameras, and telecommunications networks. In such a diffuse threat environment, it may be easy to downplay individual risks as not rising to the level of serious concern. However, failing to see the ways in which they intersect and cumulate would represent a serious lack of foresight.

The United States, for its part, has demonstrated an admirable degree of strategic clarity when it comes to defense of the hemisphere. The 2022 National Security Strategy states that “no region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere” and that preventing the emergence of a hostile military presence in the region has for decades been a guiding light of U.S. defense posture. Historically, the United States has oriented its approach to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) around the idea of “strategic
denial.” As one of the authors has noted previously, strategic denial consists of efforts to “prevent major rivals from developing regional footholds from which they can menace, distract, or otherwise undercut the strategic interests of the United States.” Nevertheless, the defense and security dimensions and considerations of China’s engagement with LAC has been comparatively understudied. Indeed, when faced with the scale of China’s economic and trade relations with the hemisphere, other dimensions of engagement often appear secondary priorities for Beijing at best. To categorize defense and security as afterthoughts, however, is to fundamentally misunderstand China’s approach in LAC, wherein economic ties often serve as a foray into security engagement and sometimes security gains. This can be seen most notably with the proliferation of PRC-financed dual-use infrastructure in the hemisphere, particularly ports, airports, and space facilities—a raft of projects that span the southern tip of Argentina to the ports of the Bahamas.

More explicitly in the military realm, senior People’s Liberation Army (PLA) officials conducted more than 200 visits to LAC countries between 2002 and 2019. Exchanges such as the defense forum between China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) provide additional opportunities for high-level coordination on security matters. For example, the “China-CELAC Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)” listed “Political and Security Cooperation” as the top issue area upon which to build. China has also stepped up its sales and gifts of arms to countries throughout the hemisphere and broadened the aperture of security to include citizen security initiatives to create both physical and digital beachheads throughout the region. China’s preference to let security engagement be overshadowed by economic and political engagement in LAC means that the United States may ignore the challenge until it proves too late. Cuba seems to be a case in point, as the United States faces limited options from a security standpoint, beyond diplomatic pressure and condemnation, to mitigate the risks posed by an expanding Chinese military presence. Elsewhere in the hemisphere, the continuous drumbeat of Chinese infrastructure in Argentina, the rising tally of countries accepting China’s “safe cities” technology and surveillance equipment, and Beijing’s unflinching support for the Maduro regime in Venezuela all suggest that the concept of integrated deterrence is at risk of failing in the very region where it should hold most firm.

Figure 1: PLA Military Diplomacy 2003–2018

Furthermore, there is reason to believe security and defense issues could rise on China’s priorities list due to its growing military power and the confidence of its leadership.¹⁰ As China’s economic dynamo continues to flag, security cooperation, carried out by the PLA, could represent a durable means to prolong the influence it gained originally from investment flows.¹¹ As competition with the United States sharpens in the Indo-Pacific, China can be expected to escalate in other regions, with LAC being viewed as a strategic blind spot within the United States’ traditional “sphere of influence”—and therefore open for exploitation in times of conflict. In addition, as home to the majority of Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic allies, LAC stands out as a potential catalyst for cross-strait escalation. If China is able to entice some or all of these countries to switch their recognition to Beijing, it may embolden China’s disposition and accelerate its timetable to pursue reunification by force.

Within the hemisphere itself, Chinese security and defense engagement presents three core challenges to the United States. First, such engagement most explicitly furthers China’s preparations for and options in a potential Taiwan contingency. Access to the Western Hemisphere during wartime opens a number of opportunities for the PLA. This includes both passively ensuring a continued flow of important foodstuffs and raw materials from the region to sustain China’s war effort and enabling more active efforts, such as using intelligence operatives, threatening U.S. deployment and sustainment flows, putting the U.S. homeland at risk, and even opening the door to the potential military use of LAC infrastructure such as ports and airbases for operations by PLA forces.¹² Second, Chinese security support, including both explicitly military systems as well as digital systems for monitoring and controlling populations, may empower and extend the life of dictators within the hemisphere, especially in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Third, Chinese engagement with armed forces throughout the hemisphere shows signs of eroding standards of military subordination to civilian control, respect for human rights, or otherwise leading militaries in the region to behave in undesirable ways. Taken together, these risks paint a troubling picture wherein China is able to compel “neutrality” from the region in times of conflict, foment ungovernability in the region that undermines or distracts the United States in its own hemisphere, and overall erodes the ability of actors in the region to resist China’s will.

Fortunately, the United States remains in a position of strength as the predominant security partner for the region. However, it must work to realign priorities and capabilities for competition with China, beginning with a clear statement of strategic goals. For the purposes of this report, the following is assumed to encapsulate the guiding policy objective of U.S. defense posture in LAC: to preserve freedom of operation, navigation, and access for U.S. forces in times of crisis, as well as maintain strategic denial of the region to adversaries, by remaining the partner of choice during peacetime.

Simultaneously, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and the U.S. Department of Defense should be clear about their limitations. China’s defense cooperation often comes on the heels of, or is intertwined with, vastly expanded economic cooperation. Without a broader U.S. strategy to meet the economic and development requirements of LAC, no amount of increased security cooperation will be sufficient to curb the growing Chinese presence in the hemisphere. A cohesive, practical, and forward-looking framework for engagement with allies and partners in LAC will nevertheless be essential, lest the United States lose one of its greatest assets for national defense.
For the purposes of this report, the following is assumed to encapsulate the guiding policy objective of U.S. defense posture in LAC: to preserve freedom of operation, navigation, and access for U.S. forces in times of crisis, as well as maintain strategic denial of the region to adversaries, by remaining the partner of choice during peacetime.

This report takes a comprehensive look at China’s means, methods, and motivations for engaging LAC countries on security and defense issues. Subsequent sections of this report first analyze China’s objectives for security and defense cooperation with LAC, proposing a typology that observes five overarching categories of engagement along a continuum from dual-use infrastructure investments to direct military-to-military trainings and exercises. Next, it outlines how each of these five categories manifest in the Western Hemisphere, and what role they play in China’s overall strategic framework. Subsequently, the report delves into the three primary threats posed by a more assertive Chinese security and defense posture in the region over the short to medium term. It concludes by outlining a range of policy recommendations to bolster U.S. security partnerships in LAC, limit the risks associated with existing Chinese engagement, and better address the growing security and defense challenges faced by partner countries.
Arrows in the Quiver

China’s Security and Defense Strategy in LAC

Conventional assessments of LAC’s strategic importance to China relegate the region to the bottom of Beijing’s priorities list. Indeed, compared to regions such as the Indo-Pacific, which has a direct bearing on the revisionist ambitions of China as the theater where any potential war over Taiwan would be waged, or Africa, which possesses important resource wealth and strategic geography China is looking to secure for itself, the Western Hemisphere is less directly critical to China’s national security. However, to write off the region as unimportant or marginal to U.S.-China security competition overlooks important evolutions in China’s strategic calculus in the Western Hemisphere.

China’s 2015 and 2019 defense white papers emphasize strengthening military partnerships with LAC nations. However, the most telling sign of China’s shifting view of security and defense engagement comes from President Xi Jinping’s announcement of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022. Proposing “a holistic approach, maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains,” the GSI broadens the aperture for Chinese international security activities, including on matters of cybersecurity, data governance, and public health. In doing so, it takes explicit aim at the U.S. model of security and defense engagement, described by one international affairs scholar as “increasingly militant and belligerent” in the post-Cold War era. A holistic approach to security that encompasses emerging challenges and non-traditional concepts such as environmental and health security is not unwarranted. However, the most proximate outcome of the GSI is to enable China to engage with countries, even traditional U.S. partners, across a broader range of activities, especially in the police and cyber domains, where the United States may have a weaker presence in regions such as LAC. In general, the GSI is but one of several new initiatives—along with the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative—launched by Xi to encourage a more Beijing-centric international order.

LAC countries are exemplary test beds for the application of the GSI. The region itself is remarkably free from interstate conflict but confronts a plethora of other security threats beyond this fortunate trend. The region
makes up just 8 percent of the global population while accounting for one-third of homicides worldwide, driven by deeply entrenched transnational criminal networks. Climate change has exposed many countries to increased extreme weather events, devastating communities and uprooting thousands. The Covid-19 pandemic hit LAC harder than any other region, with 1.74 million deaths reported as of December 2022, over a quarter of the global death toll at that point. For each of these challenges, the GSI promises ready-made solutions—tested, refined, and proven in the crucible of China’s highly efficient (and ruthless) state security apparatus.

In practice, however, the initiatives that China has sought to export and bring together under the GSI umbrella have led to an expanded Chinese presence—to the detriment of the sovereignty of recipient countries. China’s answer to crime and instability, for instance, has been opening new overseas police stations, exporting cameras and digital infrastructure with dubious safeguards, and deploying former PLA and People’s Armed Police personnel as security contractors. Its answer to the pandemic was to use vaccines as a cudgel to suppress criticism from countries such as Brazil and to try and pressure Paraguay into dropping its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Such tendencies are indicative of China’s motivation in recent years to apply its internal quest for order at the international level to “make the world safe” for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in the words of a leading scholar who has carefully studied Xi’s “Comprehensive National Security Concept.”

The Western Hemisphere also plays a crucial role in China’s strategy of political warfare. As the region with the greatest potential to affect U.S. national security, every advance China makes in the Western Hemisphere is inherently more consequential. Even if these gains appear minor, they are often zero-sum and compounding. A country which elects to buy its armored vehicles from China will most likely not purchase similar platforms from the United States. Similarly, countries that use Huawei as the backbone of their telecommunications infrastructure will have little use for U.S. or European firms offering similar services. On the diplomatic front, China’s military-to-military exchanges and trainings hold the potential to increase familiarity and goodwill between regional militaries and the PLA, as well as undermine the United States’ links to and ability to coordinate with longstanding allies.

Officials from Cuba, Ecuador, Costa Rica, China, and the Bahamas attend the first ministerial meeting of the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC) in Beijing on January 6, 2015.

Photo Source: Rolex Dela Pena/AFP/Getty Images
Such advances will undoubtedly be useful for China in the event of a war with the United States, but even below the threshold of armed conflict, they shape the theater in which the United States must operate and live. Activities that may appear minor on the surface, such as denial of port calls or the rejection of U.S. bids to supply military equipment, can subtly reshape the physical and human terrain of the Western Hemisphere, throwing up unexpected wrinkles and pitfalls for the United States while at the same time smoothing over these obstacles for China.25

Finally, China’s strategy for defense and security engagement recognizes that the United States’ conventional preponderance in the Western Hemisphere makes competing one-for-one on traditional defense issues an impossibility. As a result, China has exploited a variety of tools not commonly associated with direct military competition, but which nevertheless offer important security benefits and enable military operations. These include areas such as civilian infrastructure, policing, and even professional military education. U.S. institutions are not prepared to compete in these areas and are allowing China to advance steadily on several fronts. In this context, military engagement is not the spear tip of China’s advance in the Americas. Rather, a diffuse array of security and defense policies comprise a quiver of arrows China can use to turn the strategic environment to its advantage.
The Full Spectrum of Engagement

China’s strategy of avoiding overt military action in the Western Hemisphere can make it challenging to disentangle security engagement from other forms of influence. Accordingly, it is useful to conceptualize Chinese engagement in this space along a continuum encompassing five areas: (1) facilities and infrastructure, (2) citizen security assistance, (3) humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, (4) arms sales and equipment transfers, and (5) joint training and exercises.

1. FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Strategic infrastructure projects are one of the most successful areas in which China has been able to advance its defense and security interests in the Western Hemisphere. With the exception of the proposed Cuban training facility, China does not maintain any overt military bases in the hemisphere. Indeed, in accordance with Deng Xiaoping’s exhortation to “hide your strength and bide your time,” China remains exceptionally cautious in its terminology, referring to its first overseas naval base in Djibouti as a “support facility.” As a result, this category does not always fall neatly within the framework of defense and security engagement. However, it is crucial to consider facilities and infrastructure given China’s pattern of “civil-military fusion”—the effort to ensure civilian resources and infrastructure can be seamlessly integrated with military capabilities when needed, which has been documented in projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Civil-military fusion is therefore closely tied to the PLA’s pursuit of overseas basing and access, a capability that will be essential for that force to achieve its aspirations of power projection on a global scale.

Key to China’s definition of interoperability is familiarity with and reliable access to infrastructure that its forces can use, and it has worked assiduously to expand its influence through infrastructure investments that cast long shadows due to dual-use military and civilian capabilities. Dual-use facilities present an inherent
challenge for U.S. deterrence. First, their military utility can be obfuscated from public view until a project is a near \textit{fait accompli}. This is doubly true given China’s penchant for opaque contracts, which, in the case of port facilities in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, have later been revealed to contain specifications that would allow People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships to dock and conduct resupply.\textsuperscript{29} PRC-funded port projects in the United Arab Emirates and Equatorial Guinea have also been revealed to house facilities and capabilities that could be used to provide overseas refueling and resupply capabilities, as well as command and control assistance, for the PLAN.\textsuperscript{30} Second, if the United States seeks to block such facilities, it risks the appearance of stymieing a country’s development.

Although dual-use infrastructure is often associated with more overt displays of military power, such as the appearance of a PLAN warship in port, or the presence of military officers at a satellite research station, the ways in which such projects can further China’s strategic goals are often much more subtle and yet omnipresent. Chinese port projects around the world are illustrative of this fact. In Germany, for instance, a logistics hub in Wilhelmshaven recently drew attention for its location a mere three miles from Germany’s largest naval base. Replete with cameras, cell towers, and PRC-designed data management software, the facility provides China with a permanent base from which to collect human and electronic intelligence on the German navy.\textsuperscript{31} Within LAC, Chinese-owned and-operated ports in Veracruz, Mexico, and Paranaguá, Brazil also operate virtually next door to host country military bases.\textsuperscript{32}

Even the raw data collected by port operators, which in the case of Chinese firms are required to hand over data to the CCP if deemed relevant for national security, can be a powerful strategic asset. Knowledge of shipping manifests, and vessel locations, as well as the ability to hold cargo, delay departures or prevent vessels from docking could be used, according to one recent study, “to selectively seize critical goods, such as medicines; divert or delay military components; or let essential supplies just sit in storage—no naval deployments needed.”\textsuperscript{33} Thus, the appearance of a gray-hulled PLAN destroyer in a LAC port does not encompass the totality of the dual-use challenge. Rather, the risks to U.S. and regional security and defense are a constant from the moment the first ship docks at a PRC-owned or operated terminal.

The strategic relevance of dual-use infrastructure projects is further underscored by leaked U.S. intelligence documents that show several such projects included as part of “Project 141,” an ambitious effort by China to expand the global reach of its armed forces and power-projection capabilities. According to these documents, the PLA has identified overseas basing and logistics facilities as essential to China’s national security objectives and made it a priority to secure access to these bases by 2030.\textsuperscript{34} At the time of the leaks in April 2023, no facilities in the Western Hemisphere were included as Project 141 initiatives, though the Cuban training base would almost certainly qualify.\textsuperscript{35} Within the Western Hemisphere, two dual-use infrastructure projects carry implications for U.S. defense and security that are significant enough to describe here in detail.

Chinese forays in the Panama Canal Zone have been the subject of growing alarm, most recently voiced at a high level by SOUTHCOM commander General Laura Richardson in her 2023 force posture statement before Congress.\textsuperscript{36} Since its inauguration, the canal has been a strategic commercial and military node in the hemisphere, further cemented as the site of SOUTHCOM’s original headquarters. As early as 1997, Hong Kong-based Hutchison Ports PPC won contracts to operate the ports of Balboa and Cristobal, located on the Pacific and Atlantic sides of the canal, respectively. While the move aroused controversy at the time, concerns were assuaged by the independence of Hong Kong relative to the rest of China, a status which Beijing has by and large dispensed with since 2019. In 2016, the Shandong-headquartered
Landbridge Group acquired Margarita Island to the tune of nearly $1 billion, home to Panama’s strategically and commercially critical Colón Free Trade Zone (FTZ). Shortly thereafter, as Panama first switched diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in favor of China in 2017, and subsequently became the first Latin American country to accede to the BRI, plans moved forward for construction of a deep-water port in the Colón FTZ. Construction was to be helmed by the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC), two key state-owned enterprises that also happened to be part of the winning bid on the $1.3 billion contract to construct a fourth bridge over the Panama Canal.

However, China’s progress on these efforts has been uneven. The government of Panama’s current president, Laurentino Cortizo, canceled the port project after a review from the Panama Maritime Authority found the project to be in violation of numerous contractual terms. Another proposal, for the Colón FTZ to be added to China’s “safe cities” initiative, was also rejected amid skepticism from the Cortizo government and pressure from the United States. However, these setbacks have not rolled back Chinese influence entirely. For example, 300 security cameras donated by China to help establish the Colón “safe city” remain in place; in 2021, Hutchison was granted a 25-year renewal of its port concessions; and, after a number of setbacks, CCCC and CHEC have moved forward with construction on the fourth canal bridge.

The Panama Canal is perhaps the most important piece of infrastructure in the Western Hemisphere. For the United States’ blue-water navy, the canal reduces the average time needed to reposition forces between the Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters by about five months, and commanders from World War II to the Persian Gulf campaign have cited its criticality to their efforts. For this reason, there are a number of mechanisms intended to prevent the canal from being disrupted in times of conflict, namely the Torrijos–Carter Treaties, which both established that the canal must remain neutral for international transit and enshrined the right of the United States to seize control in the event of a security threat to the canal’s continued operation. These measures mean China cannot easily use political or economic coercion to shut the canal in times of conflict, but U.S. military planners should not overlook the potential for China or others to disrupt access, either through sabotage or kinetic efforts, or by selectively manipulating the infrastructure and data that feeds this critical maritime artery. If China were to deny the canal to U.S. warships during a crisis, even momentarily, it could spell fatal consequences for forward-deployed units in the Indo-Pacific. During peacetime as well, China benefits from access to Hutchison’s shipping data and camera systems, which the company is obliged to share due to China’s stringent “national security” law.

Further south, the Espacio Lejano Station in Neuquén Province, Argentina, has drawn consternation for the direct role of Chinese military forces from the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) in its quotidian operations. Espacio Lejano represents China’s only deep space ground station in the southern hemisphere, thus filling an important coverage gap in China’s space domain awareness. The internal workings of the station are remarkably opaque, even by the standards of China’s dealings, with the media describing the facility as a “black box.” The facility is officially considered sovereign Chinese territory, and Argentina is barred from conducting inspections. The equipment contained in Espacio Lejano possesses important dual-use telemetry tracking and control (TT&C) capabilities, used for monitoring and providing positional guidance to satellites in orbit. In times of conflict, the TT&C capacity found here would greatly augment China’s anti-satellite warfare operations, a capability the PLA has assiduously cultivated since its first successful anti-satellite test in 2007. Even more concerning is the fact that the United States’ own satellite coverage of the southern hemisphere remains incomplete. Therefore,
Espacio Lejano not only offers the PLASSF an important capability to degrade or deny the space domain to the United States but also could enable China to conduct attacks with conventional or hypersonic missiles against the homeland, striking up from Antarctica and, in the process, evading U.S. missile defenses, the majority of which are oriented toward the Arctic.

The risks are compounded by the fact that China has pursued space cooperation agreements throughout Latin America. These include physical infrastructure in the form of satellite ground stations in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Chile. Elsewhere in Argentina, a proposed ground station in Rio Gallegos, close to the southernmost point of the country, promises to augment China’s coverage of the Southern Hemisphere and enhance the ability of China’s stations in Antarctica to communicate with the rest of China’s space support network. Today, LAC with the greatest quantity of PRC space infrastructure outside of mainland China. China’s efforts also encompass technical and diplomatic cooperation, such as the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite program and the recent incorporation of Venezuela into China’s lunar research station project. Thus, as concerning as the Espacio Lejano station is, it ought to be considered as part of a broader effort by China to establish space domain awareness under the nose and in the blind spot of the United States.

The above represent just two of a startling array of projects currently being pursued by China. Other noteworthy infrastructure projects either under development or proposed include a potential expansion of the port at La Unión in El Salvador, to be carried out by China-based Asia Pacific Xuanhao (APX), as well as the nearly completed $1.3 billion deep-water port of Chancay near Lima, Peru, where construction is managed by a laundry list of Chinese state-owned enterprises, including CCCC, CHEC, China Railway, and Cosco Shipping. China has also pursued several leads in its search for a foothold along the Strait of Magellan from which it could strengthen its strategic position in the Antarctic, as well as monitor and disrupt maritime traffic through that global choke point in times of conflict. These efforts have included talks with the Chilean government to grant access to port facilities in Punta Arenas and overtures to Argentina to help construct a “polar logistics facility” in Ushuaia. After Buenos Aires rebuffed these efforts under U.S. pressure, China pivoted again to a commercial strategy, with the state-owned Shaanxi Chemical Industry Group reportedly signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in May 2023 with the provincial government of Tierra del Fuego to build a multipurpose port in Rio Grande.

The security challenges posed by dual-use facilities are inherently difficult to estimate, as they depend not only on their technical specifications but also on how such facilities would factor into Chinese strategies and plans for military confrontation. Nevertheless, Beijing’s close involvement with the construction of so many critical infrastructure projects in the Western Hemisphere undoubtedly gives China more options for how and where it may project power within the United States’ shared neighborhood.
Map 1: Known PRC Infrastructure Projects


2. CITIZEN SECURITY ASSISTANCE

While the United States remains predominant in military-to-military cooperation, China has identified citizen security as an area ripe for expansion, opening the door to displacing the United States in military-to-military cooperation someday. As LAC countries grapple with resurgent transnational organized crime and under-resourced, sometimes corrupt police forces, such overtures are sure to meet with a receptive audience. Indeed, the “China-CELAC Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022–2024)” positions political and security cooperation first, ahead of even economic cooperation and development. The inauguration of the wide-ranging GSI promises to elevate China’s focus on security engagement with LAC further still.

To understand where such engagement may lead, it is instructive to first look beyond the Western Hemisphere. China’s security cooperation agreement with the Solomon Islands offers a concerning portent—
China has shown its ability to leverage cooperation on citizen security issues to gain advantages in the defense and military domains. While the text makes no mention of explicit military cooperation or basing, it intentionally conflates Chinese police and military personnel and includes a provision allowing for Chinese forces to conduct logistical replenishment in the islands. The Solomon Islands’ subsequent denial of port calls to all U.S. Coast Guard vessels further demonstrates the cumulative implications such Chinese engagement can have on freedom of navigation operations. Should this model of security cooperation become ascendant in LAC, it would likely grant Beijing a freer hand to project power within the Western Hemisphere.

This trend can already be observed in LAC, where police exchanges and training programs are starting to mature. While attention is often focused on the PLA and military exchanges, China’s Ministry of Public Security (MPS) has expanded its overseas reach and sought to compete directly with U.S. police assistance programs offered by agencies such as the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) at the Department of State. According to one analysis of MPS capacity-building programs, LAC ranks third in terms of overall allocation of MPS trainings, behind Asia and Africa, receiving 12 percent of all such programming between 2004 and 2021. In 2019 alone, these activities included a 15-member delegation from the Peruvian national police to Zhongshan to study counternarcotics and methods for countering fraud, 14-member delegations from Brazil and Cuba, and an anti-drug seminar at China’s Shandong Police College that hosted two dozen members of the Royal Grenada Police Force. China also sells and donates military-grade equipment to police forces throughout the hemisphere, often with substantial public relations campaigns, such as when it donated 6,000 ballistic vests to the Panamanian police forces shortly after the fatal shooting of one of their officers. Other recipients of Chinese police equipment include Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others.

Figure 2: China’s Police Engagement

Digital security assistance represents a growing area of concern and perhaps one of the sectors in which China has shown the greatest savvy in marketing itself to potential LAC partners. China’s “safe cities” initiative represents the culmination of such policies, with an estimated 12 countries across LAC that have deployed Chinese-made surveillance technologies, including in Ecuador, Guyana, and Suriname.\(^6\) Beyond formal “safe cities,” Chinese telecommunications and technology companies such as Huawei, Hikvision, and Dahua have been actively involved in installing interconnected monitoring systems, including cameras and other sensors empowered by biometrics and analytical capabilities throughout the hemisphere. These capabilities are themselves troubling but are made doubly concerning given their tendency to be clustered by embassies, ports, and other sensitive facilities.\(^6\) These approaches to citizen security attempt to replicate China’s own domestic model of policing, which involves conducting mass data collection in the name of tracking and preventing criminal activity. They also carry understandable appeal for policymakers in LAC, especially at the municipal and mayoral level, where crime and violence remain the most proximate threats.\(^6\) To these leaders, China’s promises of efficient, orderly, and comprehensive security are seen as useful to curb the powerful transnational criminal enterprises that have penetrated the highest echelons of power in every country in the hemisphere and curry favor with voters who increasingly report security as a top concern. However, absent significant reforms to public security institutions, and training these police forces on proper storage and cybersecurity measures, there is a serious risk that widespread adoption may simply grant China a back door through which to access the personal data of millions of individuals, companies, and government organizations throughout LAC.

Formal collaboration with police also opens the door to more overt forms of Chinese police presence in the hemisphere. While China approaches the question of overseas military basing with caution, it reportedly operates 14 overseas police outposts across 10 LAC countries.\(^6\) The physical presence of representatives from the People’s Armed Police in LAC countries is a major victory for one of the GSI’s core principles: to make the CCP’s state security—and by extension, party security—a matter of foreign policy. In some cases, an expanded overseas police presence may be welcomed by some countries, such as in 2016 when China and Argentina collaborated to bring down the Pixiu mafia, the most active Chinese criminal organization in Argentina.\(^6\) However, looking beyond the hemisphere once again reveals the troubling consequences of such collaboration. In Fiji for instance, Chinese police forces rounded up more than a hundred suspected criminals and sent them back to China in 2017 with only a modicum of cooperation with Fijian police and no extradition agreement in place.\(^6\) China’s globetrotting police operations Fox Hunt and Sky Net have also faced scrutiny after reports of Chinese forces engaging in state-sponsored kidnapping and targeting of political dissidents outside of China.\(^6\) Such incidents suggest that China has few qualms about violating other countries’ sovereignty when confronting a perceived threat to domestic order and tranquility.

The final piece in Beijing’s vision of security engagement involves a burgeoning number of Chinese private security companies (PSCs). Many of these firms are well established in Africa and Southeast Asia, where they play a role in protecting important investments and project sites, especially in fragile country contexts.\(^6\) In LAC, the on-the-ground presence of PRC-based security contractors has been more muted thus far, but they have been carefully preparing the legal terrain to significantly scale up activity in the region. The China Overseas Security Group, for instance, has reported conducting fieldwork in Argentina “to prepare the establishment of branch offices.”\(^6\) Meanwhile, the Zhong Bao Hua An Security Company has also reportedly held strategic cooperation dialogues with the governments of Panama, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. PSCs play a growing role in China’s strategy of political warfare and pursuit of strategic goals well beyond China’s borders. As one CSIS analysis notes: “Even if the activities conducted by a given PSC are not directly related to China’s geopolitical goals, they present an additional threat vector that allows Beijing to build nontraditional security and political relationships through market forces.”\(^6\) Indeed, China’s substantial economic interests
in the region provide natural cover for an expansion of PSCs as necessary to protect key investments in an increasingly challenging security context. Shandong Huawei Security Group already contracts with Chinese mining companies in Africa, while the China Security Technology Group signed a $21 million contract in 2018 with Grand Tai Peru S.A.C. to provide security services in the mining sector. An expansion of Chinese PSCs in the hemisphere would augment China’s ability to provide security assistance training and services to host governments, further undercutting the United States’ role as partner of choice in the security space.

Map 2: PRC Police Outposts and Extradition Agreements

3. HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF

If there is a sector where the United States ought to adopt a permissive approach to PLA activity in the hemisphere, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) is the most likely contender. Here the United
States is likely to remain the partner of choice, owing to its relationships with and proximity to the region, as well as the strong logistical capabilities of the U.S. armed forces. While Chinese efforts have been comparatively limited, spending just $19 million on HADR in the Western Hemisphere between 2010 and 2022, they remain an important means of enhancing China’s reputation and capabilities. Historically, HADR has opened doors for China in the region, such as when the PLA and Peruvian armed forces conducted a joint training exercise in the use of a mobile military hospital in 2010. The PLAN’s hospital ship, the Peace Ark, also visited the region in 2011 and 2018 and represents an important tool in China’s naval engagement with the hemisphere. China has also worked to establish the China-CELAC Ministerial Forum on Cooperation and Management of Disaster Risk Reduction as a channel for multilateral coordination between Beijing and the region.

Nevertheless, while there may be reasons to welcome an expanded Chinese HADR commitment to the Western Hemisphere, there is cause for skepticism as well. China has evinced a willingness to use disaster response as a political bargaining chip, such as in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan when China delayed the delivery of aid to the Philippines as a result of ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Even within the hemisphere, it is telling that the Peace Ark’s past deployments have focused on providing medical assistance to China’s authoritarian allies in Venezuela and Cuba, an approach which risks treating the symptoms of humanitarian emergency while simultaneously propping up the which drive such crises.

Furthermore, one report by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission found that “Beijing also exploits HA/DR-related exchanges to learn combat skills from and gather intelligence on advanced militaries, particularly the United States and its allies and partners.” Given the close collaboration between LAC armed forces and the United States on HADR responses, expanded Chinese involvement in such operations could open the door to greater awareness of U.S. capabilities and tactics. The China-CELAC disaster forum illustrates how China views cooperation on disaster response as a means to expand its ability to operate militarily in the Western Hemisphere. Indeed, many of the topics discussed, such as increased information
sharing, exercises, and access to LAC countries’ logistics infrastructure, would also help to grow China’s knowledge and relationships, which it could then exploit in times of conflict or crisis.

Finally, the participation of 130 Chinese riot police in the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti from 2004 to 2012 stands out as a notable case of engagement in humanitarian missions in a country that continues to officially recognize Taiwan. As climate change increases the vulnerability of the region to natural disasters, humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations could provide China with inroads for operating within other Taiwanese diplomatic allies such as Guatemala and the Caribbean island states.

4. ARMS SALES AND EQUIPMENT TRANSFERS

China is the fourth-largest supplier of conventional arms globally, behind only the United States, Russia, and France. In spite of a decline following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing has made strategic investments to insert itself in key sectors, including combat aviation, missiles, and uncrewed vehicles. Furthermore, Russia’s disastrous invasion of Ukraine has opened new opportunities for China to fill the gap when it comes to providing a similar supply of low-cost, no-frills weapons and equipment. Notably, Western sanctions on the Russian defense industry, combined with the steep attrition rates for military equipment in high-intensity modern warfare, has caused Moscow’s arms exports to fall from 22 percent to 16 percent of the global market, and such exports are set to decline even further in 2023. China, which currently captures 5 percent of the arms market, is well positioned to step into this gap.

Arms sales facilitate broad, long-term Chinese military relationships with countries in the region. When one country buys a weapons system from another, they are not just buying the physical gear but often are signing a contract for post-sale parts and servicing, which must be done typically by technicians from or certified by the seller country. Likewise, such purchases often also create a dependency on that country for replacement parts.

China already has a substantial presence in the region. Venezuela in particular is notable for being the first LAC country to purchase Chinese military radars, while Chinese VN-4 armored personnel carriers saw action in 2017 during the Maduro regime’s crushing of anti-regime protesters. Meanwhile, Bolivia is one of the largest Chinese clients in the hemisphere, having purchased millions of dollars in weapons from China, including capabilities from small arms and night vision goggles to artillery, helicopters, and planes. China has also made several large donations to the Bolivian armed forces. Peru increasingly merits close attention, having acquired 27 Type-90BM multiple rocket launchers from China, and previously the Peruvian defense ministry contemplated purchasing MBT-2000 tanks. In 2012, the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC) successfully convinced Peru to cancel a more than $100 million contract with Northrop Grumman for man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), replacing these with China’s indigenous QW-series MANPADs instead. With Peru’s defense acquisitions budget set to grow by 116 percent in 2023, and surpass $200 million by 2028, the Peruvian armed forces represent a potentially rich market for Chinese military hardware.

More recently, the Argentine air force’s consideration of the JF-17 fighter jet, mostly as a means to evade the United Kingdom’s supply chain chokehold on ejector seats through English company Martin Baker, has been perhaps the highest-profile instance of China’s arms export efforts in the region. The deal has gone through multiple rounds of negotiation, with a U.S. counteroffer proposing Danish F-16s as an alternative initially being rebuffed by Argentine defense minister Jorge Taiana on account of difficulties procuring replacement parts and the fact that the F-16s would come without weapons. While it appears Argentina has circled back to consider the F-16, finalization of such a deal would have represented one of the most sophisticated transfers of Chinese military capabilities to a South American country and would include a multi-year partnership between China and Argentina to train, sustain, and repair the aircraft.
In addition to sales, China has bolstered its position in the region with donations, including of a patrol boat to the Barbados Defense Force in 2018, a Y-12 transport aircraft and military construction equipment to the

### Table 1: Chinese Arms Sales to LAC
Not Inclusive of Donations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recipient</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of Weapon</th>
<th>Year of Delivery</th>
<th>Number Delivered</th>
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<td>WZ-551</td>
<td>APC</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bahamas</td>
<td>Tiger</td>
<td>APV</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>D-20 152mm</td>
<td>Towed gun</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M-30 122mm</td>
<td>Towed gun</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>HN-5A</td>
<td>Portable SAM</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Red Arrow-8</td>
<td>Anti-Tank missile</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>500</td>
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<td></td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>Trainer/combat aircraft</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>AS356/AS565 Panther</td>
<td>Helicopter</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tiger</td>
<td>APV</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<td>2018</td>
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<td>Portable SAM</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Trainer aircraft</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td></td>
<td>YLC-18</td>
<td>Air search radar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>YLC-2</td>
<td>Air search radar</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Guyana</td>
<td>Y-12</td>
<td>Light transport aircraft</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Model-58 105mm</td>
<td>Towed Gun</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>Portable SAM</td>
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<td>Type-90 122mm</td>
<td>Self-propelled MRL</td>
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<td>K-8</td>
<td>Trainer/combat aircraft</td>
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<td>PL-5E</td>
<td>SRAAM</td>
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<td>Y-8</td>
<td>Transport aircraft</td>
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<td>Anti-tank missile</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>250</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SM-4 81mm</td>
<td>Self-propelled mortar</td>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Self-propelled MRL</td>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>2014-2016</td>
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<td></td>
<td>VN-4</td>
<td>APC/APV</td>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>121</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ZBD-05/VN-18</td>
<td>IFV</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ZTD-05</td>
<td>Light tank</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>Trainer/combat aircraft</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Guyanese Defense Force in 2012, and vehicles to the Dominican Republic's military in 2020. Both sales and gifts exploit China's centralized power structure to outmaneuver the United States and deliver on timelines which may take only a fraction of the time to arrive compared to U.S. equipment. Therefore, while many LAC
militaries have expressed their preference for U.S. equipment, the lengthy approval processes associated with U.S. defense exports have pushed many into China’s arms for their defense needs. This is compounded by the fact that much of the equipment included in China’s sales and donations—such as ambulances and bridges—do not represent top-line combat capabilities. Rather, they are practical tools in high demand across regional militaries, delivered on a timeline that foments goodwill among recipient countries, especially when U.S. equipment packages remain mired in arms export bureaucracy. China’s operations demonstrate the importance of delivering with speed and meeting partners’ needs, as expressed on their own terms.

Finally, China has evinced a greater willingness to take part in joint ventures to co-develop and manufacture new weapons systems. The JF-17s considered by Argentina, for instance, are the product of a joint venture by China and Pakistan, a partnership which also birthed Pakistan’s new MBT-2000 tank. An earlier version of the JF-17 deal even suggested that China might transfer technology and co-produce the planes with Argentina. Such a partnership with LAC defense sectors could establish a durable and long-term military-to-military pipeline between China and the region. One candidate for such a joint venture could be Venezuela, which co-developed its Tiuna jeeps with Iran and has allegedly entered into an agreement to construct Iranian Mohajer-2 loitering munitions. However, given the collapsed state of Venezuela’s industrial and scientific base, a Chinese partnership with a country that is home to a more robust defense sector, such as Brazil, could be cause for even greater concern. More importantly, Chinese defense industrial supply chains tend to avoid many suppliers in the West, making them attractive alternatives to governments worried about being cut off for human rights, corruption, or governance concerns.

Figure 3: Chinese, Russian, and U.S. Arms Sales by Share to Selected LAC Countries, 2000–2022 (%)
Countries listed largest to smallest by total value of arms transfers

5. JOINT TRAINING AND EXERCISES

At the other end on the spectrum of Chinese defense and security engagement in LAC lies participation in joint training and exercises. China has been making comparatively small but compounding inroads in developing partnerships with regional militaries, including key U.S. allies such as Brazil and Colombia. Indeed, Chinese forces have participated in courses at Colombia’s Lancero School for special operations as well as the world-renowned Brazilian Peacekeeping Operations Joint Training Center and the Jungle Warfare Training Center. The latter is of note, as a future conflict scenario in the Indo-Pacific, including over Taiwan, would most certainly involve combat in jungle terrain. Training with Brazilian and Colombian armed forces also gives the PLA indirect exposure to U.S. doctrine and, in this respect, could play a direct role in helping develop China’s military capabilities for a U.S.-China conflict scenario.

While PLA forces are travelling to LAC, hundreds of officers from across the region have also received training in China at a variety of institutions, including the Chinese National Defense University. At least 18 LAC countries have sent personnel to China to receive a variety of courses offered to groups ranging from second lieutenants to colonels and higher. China trained more officers from LAC countries than the United States for the first time in 2015 and would continue to do so for at least four more years. However, Chinese PME overall remains focused on field grade officers, who rank between major and colonel, with fewer inroads at the captain rank and below, and more nascent efforts to engage non-commissioned officers. This is changing, however, as China works to overhaul its military education institutions and further position itself as a leading source for PME.

As with arms sales, these exchanges create durable linkages between the PLA and LAC militaries by sharing doctrine but also, even more importantly, by demystifying and marketing China to military personnel across the region. Indeed, reports from individuals familiar with China’s approach to training suggest that comparatively little effort is devoted to exchanging information on tactics, operations, and military best practices. Instead, China spends lavishly on visiting officers, many of whom will likely be visiting for the first time. Furthermore, one recent assessment of Chinese PME found trainings on human rights, democracy, and military ethics—mainstays of U.S. efforts—were largely absent from PRC training programs. China’s hope is that such efforts cultivate a favorable view of the country among attendees, who will in turn be more likely to advocate for participation in future trainings to their colleagues and carry such positive impressions with them long into their careers. In at least one of its training courses, programming included material seeking to convince LAC militaries that the United States is not a partner of choice for defense cooperation.

China views military education as an important mechanism for strategic competition and has refined its approach to professional military education with this in mind. For example, in Guyana, China has hosted more than a dozen members of the Guyana Defense Force (GDF) each year since at least 2019. Programming for these courses emphasizes cybersecurity and language instruction in Mandarin. For the GDF, whose armed forces number just 3,400 active personnel, with a mere few hundred of those being commissioned officers, the cumulative effect of this training seeks to ensure PLA doctrine guides Guyana’s approach to military cybersecurity. Meanwhile, the United States’ International Military Education and Training (IMET) program faces steep resource constraints, preventing it from supporting this kins of large-scale exchange, especially with smaller LAC forces. Furthermore, foreign participants in IMET are often scattered across numerous service academies and training programs, preventing the development of a critical mass of officers steeped in U.S. doctrine on any given issue as China has done for the GDF.
One area in which China has not made substantial inroads is on joint exercises and operations with LAC militaries. The most noteworthy PLA engagement in this regard was the 2022 Sniper Frontier competition hosted in Venezuela as part of Russia’s International Army Games. However, the number of foreign exercises conducted each year by China has grown since 2013, suggesting the potential for overtures from China to LAC countries in the future. Venezuela, with its deep security assistance ties to Beijing, stands out as one candidate. However, an even more concerning development would be PLA exercises with U.S. partner militaries such as Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia, which could offer critical insights into U.S. doctrine and capabilities in the region, as well as provide China an opportunity to test its ability to operate a military force in the hemisphere.

Joint training, arms transfers, and cooperation on HADR initiatives also contribute to enhancing interoperability between the PLA and regional militaries. Here it is important to note that China’s concept of interoperability differs substantially from that of the United States. While there is little reason to assume that PLA forces would deploy side-by-side with LAC militaries in a potential future conflict, familiarity with one another and positive military-to-military ties will be essential for China to make use of its dual-use facilities with a high-level of reliability. There is little sense in investing in ports capable of resupplying PLAN warships if the country they are based in refuses docking rights. Even upon clearing this threshold, for the PLA to successfully conduct replenishment and sustainment operations oceans away, it must be familiar with the logistics systems of the countries where it operates, from the physical routes and delivery systems used, to the key individuals in related military and civilian entities. This familiarity can be built over time through commercial operations as well as regular military-to-military engagement. In fact, it is one of the pillars of the United States’ own global logistics network. As the PLA seeks to become a force capable of global power projection, it is making a concerted effort to replicate this model for its own logistics and supply chains.

Layered Risks

While China’s security and defense engagement in LAC may still appear an afterthought in comparison to the behemoth of China’s economic ties, accounting for the full spectrum of engagement reveals a complex and layered set of challenges for the United States and its allies to confront.

At present, China’s security and defense efforts in LAC present three primary risks to U.S. defense and security as well as to the region at large. The first, most obvious, and most calamitous risk is the potential for dual-use infrastructure to be employed by China against the United States in a conflict or crisis scenario. As detailed previously, there is a wide array of forms such engagement could take, ranging from the interruption of commerce and navigation through the Panama Canal and around the Straits of Magellan, to the use of satellite stations to aid in counterspace activities, interception of electronic signals, and even strikes against the continental United States itself.

The penetration of Chinese-made sensors and digital infrastructure throughout LAC also poses risks for U.S. forces, as they may fall under intense surveillance long before they reach the Indo-Pacific. Cybersecurity gaps are another area where China has proven particularly adept at exploiting vulnerabilities, while LAC militaries themselves have been dragging their feet, as evidenced in a series of high-profile hacks and data breaches of sensitive government information in recent years. Much of this is driven by a lack of high-level commitment to cybersecurity among LAC governments, preventing the kind of interagency cooperation needed to shore up defenses in cyberspace. In Mexico, for instance, the lack of a national cybersecurity agency has left this role in the hands of the Secretariat of National Defense, which was itself the victim of a massive cyberattack in the fall of 2022, losing six terabytes of data in the process. In this environment, China can and has offered to supply cybersecurity solutions to governments in the region, and it can be expected that PRC-built digital infrastructure will contain a back door that allows Beijing a high degree of access. Critically, in this scenario LAC would not even need to take sides in such a conflict nor allow their physical infrastructure to be used for explicit military
confrontation. China’s presence alone could already provide it with a huge advantage to surveil U.S. movements. China’s cultivation of relationships with regional militaries can facilitate cooperation and interoperability with the PLA and, in doing so, undermine the United States’ own ability to interface with these forces, for fear that information shared may be willingly or unwittingly passed along to Beijing.

Beyond utilizing physical and digital infrastructure in the Western Hemisphere for intelligence-gathering purposes, China could also seek to spark concurrent crises to draw U.S. attention and resources away from the Indo-Pacific. China would be aided in this regard by its close relations with the hemisphere’s three dictatorships: Venezuela, Cuba, and, to a growing extent, Nicaragua. These regimes have invested heavily in both their conventional armed forces as well as hybrid and gray zone capabilities such as cyber warfare, disinformation and misinformation, and the use of irregular armed groups. For example, China’s spy base in Bejucal, Cuba, is allegedly operated in partnership with an electronic warfare unit attached to Cuba’s Directorate of Military Intelligence. Accordingly, the capacity for each of these criminal regimes to disrupt regional security should not be understated, especially if they are emboldened by a conflict between China and United States.

In addition to actively tapping these three hemispheric dictatorships in the event of a crisis, China’s defense and security engagement plays a passive disruptive role already by empowering, emboldening, and extending the life of authoritarian and other populist-autocratic regimes within the hemisphere. To date, Caracas, Havana, and Managua have been more reliant on Russia to meet their security needs; however, if Moscow’s ongoing war in Ukraine continues to drain Russian capacity to project power in the hemisphere, China may step up to fill that gap. As China’s red-hot economic growth appears to cool, security assistance has in many ways already eclipsed financing as the most important category of assistance to LAC dictatorships. For instance, Venezuela has not received any loans from Chinese policy or commercial banks since 2015 but has continued to receive support for its armed forces in the form of radars, drones, and a maintenance center for its fleet of Chinese-produced armored vehicles.
Venezuela’s unmitigated economic calamity brought on by the Maduro regime’s disastrous management has dissuaded China from extending new lines of credit. Nevertheless, Sino-Venezuelan security cooperation remains firmly in place and on full display, from the prominent role of Chinese riot control vehicles in suppressing protests against the Maduro regime (for which the regime is now under a nascent investigation for “crimes against humanity” by the International Criminal Court), to the more insidious effects of Carnet de la Patria (“Homeland card”), a national ID card co-developed with China and modeled on China’s social credit tool kit. China has also worked closely in both Venezuela and Cuba on refining digital tools of repression through misinformation and disinformation campaigns, as well as controlling access to information and shutting off internet access selectively to disrupt protests.

These developments suggest that while China has often been depicted as a lender of last resort to countries shunned by much of the international community, it is increasingly taking on the role of the security partner of last resort as well. As far back as 2014, for instance, when the heavy-handed response of Venezuelan riot police to protests caused Spain and Brazil to halt their exports of tear gas and police equipment to the regime, China stepped in to fill that void. Meanwhile, in the wake of the July 2021 mass protests in Cuba, China played an important role in propping up Havana both diplomatically and practically by helping Cuba enforce internet blackouts on its Huawei- and ZTE-provided telecommunications networks. The Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua has also benefitted from China’s focus on policing assistance, receiving donations of riot gear and protective equipment to its police force from China even amid mounting evidence of human rights abuses by the Nicaraguan security services.

For other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes looking to preserve their hold on power, China appears poised to deliver a full spectrum of repressive tools, giving rise to a third risk: growing Chinese engagement with LAC militaries and police forces may erode standards of civil-military relations. Currently, China has found more success in capturing political, rather than military, elites, and civil-military relations throughout the hemisphere appear stable, if less than ideal. However, military-to-military exchange almost invariably results in opportunities for imparting values, as well as tactics, techniques, procedures, and doctrine, which may lead to troubling behaviors by militaries in times of crisis. China’s growing efforts to train foreign military officials may include elements of China’s “discursive competition,” and promotion of its party-army model among graduates suggests an effort to undermine traditional notions of military subordination to civilian leadership.

Militaries in LAC remain some of the most trusted institutions, consistently ranked as the second most trusted institution, according to Latinobarómetro, behind only the church, and viewed as more efficient and professional than politicians. What military leaders say matters in the region, and to the extent that there is political and ideological transfer that accompanies China’s trainings and military diplomacy engagement, this can have profound consequences for the health of LAC democracies, which often suffer from corruption and unconsolidated institutions and checks and balances. Furthermore, in a hemisphere largely marked by small and shrinking military budgets, China’s approach of providing or donating equipment at low cost and with few restrictions might embolden armed forces, which have seen their societal roles swell considerably in recent years. China’s practice of gifting military and police equipment is an especially tantalizing tool for influence in this regard, allowing security forces to increase their stature without needing to spend from their own pocket.

In the citizen security space as well, rising Chinese engagement has already shown its potential to be especially corrosive to democracy. This applies not only to full-fledged authoritarian regimes but to ostensibly democratic governments as well, where leaders have often deployed the rhetoric of public safety as a pretext to restrict civic space and to intimidate and dismantle organized political opposition. Under former president
Rafael Correa, Ecuador was an eager adopter of Chinese “safe cities” equipment, which was swiftly used to spy on opposition parties and which had a chilling effect on journalists and civil society watchdogs. Footage from CCTV cameras were fed through the country’s central intelligence agency. In 2019, Bolivia also announced the development of a new Integrated System of Citizen Security, replete with the purchase of hundreds of facial recognition cameras from China, as well as a new center of operations to be built by the China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC). As of July 2023, the rollout of this program has continued apace, with CEIEC recently completing its deployment of more than five dozen cameras to the town of Warnes, the first provincial center to be integrated into Bolivia’s new security system.

More recently, the government of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador has shown deeply concerning autocratic tendencies, exacerbated by his heavy-handed and expansive security policy. Parallel to his challenges to El Salvador’s democracy, Bukele has been exploring closer relations with China. On the citizen security front, China has offered to provide computers and other equipment to El Salvador’s national police. Taken together, these developments mean that El Salvador joining a “safe cities” project should be of grave concern to both the United States and other defenders of democracy.
China is encroaching along several divergent axes in the security and defense space. The United States should engage the region with confidence that its longstanding partnerships and ties offer a strong foundation. However, the United States’ commitments to Europe and the Indo-Pacific mean that in the coming years policymakers must be realistic about the resource constraints they face. It will require a more agile, multifaceted strategy to insulate LAC militaries and police forces from the most corrosive effects of Chinese influence, curtail Beijing’s advances in infrastructure, citizen security, and arms sales, and compete to preserve strategic denial in the hemisphere.

1. **Leverage U.S. partners to fill force modernization and equipment shortfalls.**

Many Latin American militaries currently using legacy Russian weapons systems are liable to find these increasingly obsolete and to have no way of servicing them, particularly as U.S. sanctions on Russia’s military-industrial complex continue to bite. The United States can play a role in reducing dependence on Russian weapons, but only if it is forthcoming in sales of alternatives which are competitive on price, especially in comparison to China.\(^{124}\)

Additional funding for U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) is sorely needed. The Western Hemisphere receives the lowest levels of FMF and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) across all geographic regions. In fact, FMF for the region declined by about 12 percent between fiscal years 2019 and 2023.\(^{125}\) Absent alternative financing options, LAC militaries must pay up front for equipment purchased from the United States. These sales may in turn be caught up in bureaucratic red tape as they navigate the International Traffic in Arms Regulations, leading to further delays. Panama, for instance, waited for over a year to receive a second Beechcraft King Air turboprop plane for marine patrols on account of delays related to supply chain disruption and Covid-19.\(^{126}\) Yet, compared to the speed with which the United States has
proven itself capable of funneling equipment to its European and East Asian allies, LAC armed forces have found themselves hard pressed not to ascribe a double standard to U.S. military sales.

Figure 5: Value of Authorized U.S. Arms Sales to LAC, 2001–2022, USD

Another area where the United States can preempt potential encroachment from China is in joint ventures. While the Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status held by Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia is intended to facilitate co-development of defense technologies, the promise of this designation has been slow to materialize. The United States should seek to identify qualitative advantages in these countries’ sectors, beginning with Brazil, whose aerospace industry has extensive experience with military aviation and is currently partnering with Swedish firm Saab for research and development on the Gripen fighter jet. However, the United States must also look beyond the MNNA box to develop new, more innovative financing mechanisms and partnership opportunities with other key partners, including Ecuador, Uruguay, and Chile. At the same time, the United States must remain cognizant of the possibility that arms sales or technology transfers may find their way from LAC militaries into China’s hands or those of another geostrategic rival. To assuage such concerns, the United States can pursue formal agreements with key security partners that their defense industrial bases will adhere to U.S. standards for handling classified technologies and prioritize training regional militaries and defense firms on U.S. best practices for defense-industrial security.

At the same time, the top-line systems that would stir up the greatest concerns are only sought after by a handful of LAC militaries. For much of the region, far more practical equipment such as bridge-layers, trucks, small arms, boots, and personal protective equipment are in far greater demand, with China often moving the fastest to supply these bread-and-butter items. The U.S. Congress can address this blind spot by authorizing the secretary of defense to approve requests from geographic combatant commands such as SOUTHCOM to provide small-scale aid to local militaries. More broadly,
the Departments of Defense and State should work together to develop a list of less-sensitive defense articles such as logistics trucks or military construction equipment to be subject to an expedited FMS process, allowing the United States to deliver critical support to partners on competitive timelines while ensuring a more thorough review for sensitive technologies and advanced equipment.

Finally, where the United States lacks the resources to sufficiently meet the force modernization and equipment needs of LAC countries, it can look to like-minded countries such as South Korea, Israel, and Sweden, countries with their own established or ascendant arms industries that are also aligned with U.S. geopolitical goals. Bringing a coalition to fill LAC’s defense requirements promises to put more options on the table in order to prevent China from emerging as the primary arms exporter for countries in the hemisphere.

2. **Bolster the defense cooperation mechanisms of the inter-American system.**

The Western Hemisphere is home to an impressive web of security coordination mechanisms, such as the System of Cooperation Among the American Air Forces (SICOFAA), Conference of American Armies (CAA), and Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA). Among these, however, the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) and its counterpart focused on professional military education, the Inter-American Defense College (IADC), stand out as some of the most storied and expansive players in helping develop and align policy on hemispheric security issues. Both institutions are explicitly tied to the Organization of American States (OAS), which orients their missions around the OAS’s commitment to democracy and human rights. Together with forums such as the SICOFAA, CAA, and CDMA, which include promotion of healthy civil-military relations in their own mission and values statements, the inter-American system has a sound base of institutions to promote principled security cooperation.

Closer engagement with the IADB can serve as a force multiplier for U.S. defense engagement with LAC countries. Indeed, the board’s areas of focus, from leading the MECODEX 2022 disaster relief exercise to its efforts to promote awareness among OAS member states on cybersecurity, closely align with U.S. priorities in LAC. Meanwhile the IADB’s independent status means that it can serve as a more effective interlocutor with countries that may otherwise hesitate to welcome purely bilateral military engagement with the United States. A practical first step to help raise the profile of these inter-American security cooperation mechanisms would be to expand SOUTHCOM’s J7/9 directorate, responsible for exercises and coalition affairs. As the smallest combatant command, SOUTHCOM suffers from personnel shortfalls across the board, but given the premium placed throughout the hemisphere on multilateral defense cooperation, prioritizing this directorate stands out as an area where a small investment in additional staff can have an outsized effect.

Considering China’s forays into multilateral security conversations broadly through the GSI, and regionally with the China-CELAC defense forum, the United States should also seek to highlight the IADB and inter-American system more broadly as a counterpoint for countries in the region to conduct their military diplomacy and security cooperation activities. In doing so, U.S. policymakers should also use public messaging to question China’s fixation on working around these existing institutions and excluding the United States, one of the region’s core security providers.

3. **Clarify U.S. red lines when it comes to security engagement.**

The breadth and depth of the China’s engagement in LAC means that an all-or-nothing approach would likely be destined to fail. Especially when it comes to Chinese dual-use infrastructure, the lack of a
credible U.S. counteroffer for countries’ transportation, energy, or communications needs means that warnings of the risks of dealing with Beijing often fall on deaf ears. Nevertheless, China’s preferred approach to security and defense cooperation means that it is difficult to discern a clear point at which such engagement crosses into national security concern. In a worst-case scenario, China’s history of opaque dealings and espionage means that militaries which cooperate closely with the PLA could be deemed too risky for the United States to engage with, for fear that information on sensitive capabilities or doctrine would find its way back to Beijing. To avoid this future, especially in the case of MNNAs in the hemisphere, the United States must clearly spell out which elements of engagement it views as “red lines” to prevent unnecessarily isolating partners.132

Permanent deployment of PLA combat forces in the hemisphere represents one such red line. To this end, news of a potential new Chinese base in Cuba should be subjected to close inspection by the U.S. intelligence community. While it appears unlikely that any such facility would be designed with the intention of conducting offensive operations against the United States, the Departments of Defense and State should be actively involved in planning for such a contingency and drawing up sets of options for the administration to consider in the event such a project moves forward.133

Other clear red lines include participation of the PLA in exercises with a major U.S. ally in LAC. Such activities would give Chinese military forces the opportunity to observe the performance of U.S.-trained militaries up close, potentially offering critical insights into the United States’ own doctrine and capabilities. Transfers of high-end military equipment, especially if accompanied by offers of technological cooperation or co-production, represent another red line due to China’s ability to establish a long-term and deep presence in the partner country’s defense industrial base. The deal appears to have been a success in the end, but the lengthy and tumultuous process leading up to it portends ill for future U.S. efforts to dissuade countries from purchasing equipment from strategic rivals.134

One final area where the United States should seek to clarify its stance applies to the proliferation of Chinese space research stations in the hemisphere. In particular, the United States should urge the Argentine government to push for inspections and closer monitoring of the Espacio Lejano ground station. In doing so, the United States should reiterate that signing away sovereignty over such facilities is not only a concern for Washington but also undermines Argentina’s own sovereignty and security.

4. Invest in U.S. core competencies in military education and training.

The United States remains the security and defense partner of choice for LAC by a large margin and should endeavor to maintain the status quo. One of the greatest assets in this regard lies in U.S. professional military education, regarded as the gold standard by militaries across the region. Foreign graduates of these programs often go on to play leading roles in their home countries’ armed forces, and shared experiences forge long-lasting bonds at all levels of command.135 However, currently U.S. PME efforts are not purpose-built for competition with a near-peer adversary. The top-down approach, wherein domestic service academies dictate to embassy staff the number of individuals from each country they can accept and the types of courses they will offer, is counterproductive to a more strategic assessment of what kinds of trainings LAC militaries need most. A bottom-up approach, wherein embassies coordinate with regional combatant commands to identify the number of personnel and types of skill sets are most needed, would represent a sea change in the United States’ ability to leverage its core competency in military education for competition with China.
Other key limitations to reforming U.S. military education and training programs for competition with China include the Section 312 and 321 requirements that the Department of Defense focus on “developing countries.” The department uses World Bank income classifications to assess which countries fall into this category, meaning that military personnel from Chile, Panama, Uruguay, and most recently Guyana cannot receive funding to attend security cooperation meetings or train with U.S. forces. Such a standard is artificial at best and arbitrary at worst, limiting the ability of the U.S. military to engage some of its most important partners in the hemisphere. Tellingly, the World Bank itself has moved away from using income groups to assign “developing country” status in favor of a more holistic assessment of development indicators. The Department of Defense should follow suit, and the Joint Staff should urgently engage with the Office of the Secretary of Defense to reevaluate its method for determining Section 312 and 321 exemptions. Doing so would rapidly increase the range of tools available to the United States for military-to-military training and partnerships.

Within the hemisphere as well, a multitude of tools exist for joint exercises and trainings, ranging from Joint Combined Exchange Trainings, which focus on improving linkages between special forces, to larger initiatives involving thousands of personnel from several countries, such as PANAMAX 22, which concluded in August of last year. More exercises seeking to bring together a broad cross-section of the hemisphere may be important for fostering a sense of regional solidarity and alignment that China will find difficult to replicate.

The United States can further leverage the National Guard’s State Partnership Program, which has active relationships with 27 countries in the region, to serve as a force multiplier in training efforts. An integrated approach to professional military education which brings together SOUTHCOM, embassy, and National Guard personnel to train partner militaries would be a major step forward in terms of demonstrating sustained U.S. commitment and building up important skills. Such exercises can be tailored based on the security needs of the country in question while remaining oriented around a single key capability, such as cybersecurity or disaster response, to have the greatest effect.

5. **Enhance interagency and international cooperation for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.**

HADR represents one of the most critical mission sets the United States conducts in the hemisphere. The ability of U.S. forces to access disaster areas and distribute lifesaving aid, combined with the presence of pre-positioned supplies in the region through Joint Task Force Bravo, makes the U.S. military an indispensable partner. However, demand for HADR in LAC is liable to grow significantly across the region. SOUTHCOM can strengthen the United States’ role in disaster relief operations by expanding its efforts to convene regional militaries for planning, coordination, and exercises to improve responses in a region that has been heavily impacted as of late by extreme weather, health crises, and natural disasters. The two-week Tradewinds exercise, the 38th iteration of which included more than 1,800 participants from 21 partner countries as well as every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, is one of the most important tools in this regard for bolstering multilateral disaster response capabilities. SOUTHCOM’s investments in compact “clinic in a can” medical facilities, which can be deployed rapidly to offer care in times of crisis, also represent an important development for making U.S. HADR more reactive and prompt.

However, the United States continues to struggle to harmonize its policies around when and where humanitarian assistance can be deployed. Currently, USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (USAID/
BHA), as the lead agency on HADR, must issue a disaster assistance declaration before actors such as SOUTHCOM can step in. This process risks creating delays when speed is of the essence. It also limits the United States’ ability to engage partner countries on crises which may not rise to the level of a declared disaster, such as wildfires, oil spills, or water shortages. The United States should consider signing MOUs with countries in the region that allow local U.S. first-response elements to be deployed on request from partner governments.

Another area for increased focus should be developing and offering more courses on HADR operations as part of U.S. professional military education and training programs. Such efforts will be important for regional militaries to develop their own strategies for disaster response and ensuring these synergize with SOUTHCOM’s efforts. Information-sharing mechanisms should also be strengthened as the first pillar of disaster risk reduction, and streamlining early-warning and first-responder communications should be a critical area for investment.

Finally, to the extent possible, the United States should more extensively leverage partners from outside the hemisphere to augment its own HADR capabilities. For instance, Taiwan has a strong track record with its seven diplomatic allies, and closer cooperation with SOUTHCOM and USAID/BHA could help continue to elevate Taiwan’s profile in the region, along with that of other key U.S. partners, including South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

6. Improve cooperation on countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and the nexus between transnational organized crime and environmental crimes.

Just as climate change and environmental degradation is creating new risks for LAC countries and the United States alike, environmental crime throughout the hemisphere has surged. IUU fishing, in particular, is one of the most pervasive criminal, environmental, and economic challenges facing the region today. It is also a sector in which militaries, especially navies and coast guards, play a vital role. China stands out as one of the largest perpetrators of IUU fishing both globally and in LAC. China’s vast deep-water fishing fleet represents an important tool in Beijing’s gray zone arsenal in the South China Sea, often deployed alongside PLAN vessels as provocations in disputed waters.

In the Western Hemisphere as well, China’s complicity in IUU fishing presents layered security and environmental risks, such as in 2019, when more than 300 Chinese vessels conducted thousands of hours of illegal fishing off the coast of the Galápagos Islands, prompting urgent calls for assistance from the Ecuadorian navy. Elsewhere along the Southern Cone of South America, vessels originating from China have decimated marine ecosystems and been found responsible for labor and human rights abuses onboard. Likewise, other forms of environmental crime, such as wildlife trafficking and illegal logging, have grown in the hemisphere. Critically, these operations often form part of a nexus involving China, with the illicit animal trade in Mexico, for instance, becoming an increasingly important channel through which cartels acquire fentanyl precursors from China.

The United States should seek to raise awareness of China’s complicity in such activities in both regional and international fora. Indeed, China’s tacit encouragement of IUU fishing by its deep-water fleets undermines Beijing’s efforts to style itself as an exemplar of law and order at home and abroad. The United States should support efforts such as Panama’s recently announced IUU fishing protection center and seek to lead joint trainings and even enforcement exercises against IUU fishing fleets. U.S. Coast Guard, Navy, and Air Force assets should all consider host-nation rider programs to allow
regional militaries to come aboard for hands-on training and exchange. Indeed, both Panama and Ecuador were highlighted as priority countries for cooperation in the United States’ five-year strategy for countering IUU fishing. Outside of the military realm, the United States, through the Department of State’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, can pursue capacity-building partnerships with LAC governments on environmental crime and seek to improve intelligence sharing with national police forces on activities such as illegal wildlife and timber trafficking.

7. **Strengthen awareness and training on cybersecurity.**

Cyber vulnerabilities not only create practical information security risks that damage the national security of LAC countries, but a lack of general knowledge on cybersecurity also opens the door to Chinese offers to provide quick solutions. China is also not the only extra-hemispheric authoritarian making such inroads; the Brazilian military renewed its contract with the Russian company Kaspersky Lab to provide cybersecurity services in the summer of 2022 as the war in Ukraine was raging and just as the company was deemed a national security risk by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.

In March 2023, the United States released the *National Cybersecurity Strategy*, which included among its objectives efforts to “expand U.S. ability to assist allies and partners” as well as avenues for both multilateral and bilateral cooperation on network resilience and countering digital threats. One starting point would be to encourage LAC countries to adopt their own cybersecurity strategies. Indeed, less than half of the countries in the Western Hemisphere currently have a national plan for addressing cyber threats. Alongside the development of national strategies, U.S. Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) can engage directly with regional armed forces to outline the importance of developing specialized units for national defense of the digital domain.

SOUTHCOM, in partnership with CYBERCOM and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, can lead training with partner countries to outline key risks and the elements of a better strategy to counter cyber threats. Such efforts should also leverage U.S. allies and partners, with one key player in this regard being Costa Rica, which has invested heavily in shoring up its digital defenses since the 2022 Conti ransomware attacks. Indeed, regional partnerships will be critical to help tailor cybersecurity training to the LAC context and overcome language barriers and other obstacles to effective knowledge transfer. SOUTHCOM’s recent inauguration of a $9.8 million commitment to strengthen Costa Rica’s cyber defenses presents one opportunity to not only build up bilateral cooperation but potentially offer a springboard for regional cybersecurity efforts.

8. **Invest in citizen security and delink citizen security from the regional conversation on drugs.**

While the United States is competing from a point of relative strength when it comes to military-to-military engagement, the reverse may be true with respect to policing and citizen security efforts. Insecurity is the single greatest security threat most LAC governments face today, meaning that without a credible plan for citizen security assistance, the United States risks ceding this critical front entirely to China in its efforts to engage regional police forces. Accordingly, U.S. law enforcement agencies, as well as the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, have an important role to play in articulating a counternarrative to China’s when it comes to citizen security.

One key weakness of the United States in the citizen security space is its lack of a comprehensive menu of options. When partner governments request assistance, such as when the Guillermo Lasso
administration called out for a “Plan Ecuador” to address rising levels of violence and criminal activity, the United States often struggles to put together an effective package in response. The Department of State can lead an assessment of previous U.S. overseas security assistance programs, including efforts such as Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative. Identifying best practices and areas from improvement should subsequently inform U.S. planning for new citizen security partnerships. Understanding the types of assistance and their relative advantages and weaknesses is essential for the United States to be able to effectively deploy its resources to help partner governments. However, U.S. law enforcement and security assistance budgets have not kept pace with the needs of the region, meaning that ultimately Congress will need to appropriate additional resources to fully correct this mismatch.

The United States should also seek to bring delegations from its own local police forces, such as from New York and Los Angeles, to the region to share their experience on data protection in police work. These departments employ sophisticated surveillance technologies, including thousands of security cameras, in their police work. Bringing them into contact with their counterparts in LAC represents one way to promote frameworks for responsible use of surveillance technology.

Another particularly impactful development would be the establishment of a new International Law Enforcement Academy in the Caribbean region, where China has made significant inroads in the field of police and citizen security efforts. Given the important role of the armed forces in many LAC countries for countering transnational organized crime, SOUTHCOM has a role to play in ensuring healthy civil-military relations as well as best practices for armed forces which engage in domestic peace and security missions.

Even backed by strong political will and resource-backed commitments, countering China’s forays in the security and defense space represents just one facet of the grand strategy the United States needs to address China’s growing influence in LAC. Nevertheless, a revitalized, multifaceted, and forward-looking U.S. approach to defense and security in the Western Hemisphere promises to pay dividends not only in the context of strategic competition but in meeting shared challenges together with allies and partners in the region.
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