

# Assessing the Impact of China-Russia Coordination in the Media and Information Space

## *Tabletop Exercise Summary*

By Ryan C. Berg and Henry Ziemer

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### *Executive Summary*

Since the announcement between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping of a “no limits partnership” on the eve of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, concerns have swirled over the potential for a new axis of revisionist authoritarian powers. Spearheaded by Moscow and Beijing, such an alliance could not only threaten the Eurasian landmass but reach across oceans to challenge the United States in the Western Hemisphere. However, the full implications and scope of the China-Russia partnership, particularly as it may pertain to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), remain both undertheorized and underexplored.

For this reason, the CSIS Americas Program designed a novel tabletop exercise to better understand the consequences of China-Russia coordination in LAC. Specifically, the exercise considered a scenario in the aftermath of a disputed election in Guatemala, where the future of the country’s relationship with Taiwan was at stake. Players from a wide cross section of think tanks, academia, and government conducted two iterations of the same exercise, one in which the China and Russia teams were not able to coordinate, and one in which they were.

The findings from this exercise have major implications for future U.S. policymaking. First, when given the opportunity to coordinate, China and Russia eagerly did so and were able to secure a favorable outcome to the initial crisis. However, on the subsequent game turn, the United States,

which had invested in building more long-term influence within Guatemala, nevertheless secured its preferred policy outcome in both iterations of the game, including preserving Guatemala's status as a diplomatic ally of Taiwan. This suggests that U.S. influence in LAC appears to remain sizeable, but closer China-Russia cooperation should be accorded more gravity than it currently receives in policy discussions.

This exercise made a number of assumptions about the strategic and policy preferences of China and Russia. Importantly, the second turn of the game introduced an additional dynamic of a mining concession that the United States, China, and Russia were all interested in securing. While the China team was consistently unwilling to divert resources to this objective, Russia viewed the mining concession as its primary focus across games, creating a fissure in the Beijing-Moscow partnership even when the two were able to coordinate. While the authors believe this scenario adequately models a possible future scenario, changes in Chinese or Russian interests or the sequence of events could have significant effects on the outcomes. The exercise thus is intended to underscore broad trends, not predict exact outcomes.

## *Background*

On October 27, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt purported to have received a secret map outlining plans by Nazi Germany to carve up the Western Hemisphere. While the authenticity of the map has been disputed, even at the time of the speech, the president's fear of a potential German challenge within the Western Hemisphere was **palpable**: "This map, my friends, makes clear the Nazi design not only against South America but against the United States as well." For the United States, blessed with the natural barriers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, an ascendant Axis power leveraging connections to the Americas posed the only genuine territorial threat to the U.S. homeland. Indeed, concerns over adversaries successfully establishing a foothold in the Western Hemisphere figured in U.S. war-making policy in World War I as well, when the Zimmermann telegram generated furor over Berlin's efforts to enlist Mexico in waging war on the United States' border.

At the time of Roosevelt's speech in 1941, Germany was not alone in conjuring designs against the United States and its allies. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the subsequent declaration of war by Germany less than two months after Roosevelt's remarks, laid to rest any doubt about the Axis's position toward Washington. By declaring war virtually simultaneously, both Berlin and Tokyo hoped to divide and dilute U.S. industrial strength by forcing it into a two-front war in the Atlantic and the Pacific. The move was part of a series of coordinated efforts by the Axis powers of Germany, Japan, and Italy to rewrite global order in their image. Today, many scholars and policymakers believe that a **new axis** is forming, oriented around the growing cooperation between Putin's Russia and Xi's China, with important players such as Iran and North Korea joining the ranks on occasion.

On February 4, 2022, a mere three weeks before Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Xi held a meeting in Moscow at which they declared a partnership that both leaders purported to be greater than a traditional alliance. In the words of the two, this would be a "no-limits partnership." At a follow-up meeting a little over a year later, Xi **told** Putin: "Now there are changes that haven't happened in 100 years. When we are together, we drive these changes." Putin nodded in agreement. Xi's comment was more than a parting platitude; the notion of "changes unseen in a century" has

been identified by scholars as **foundational** to China's view of itself as an inexorably rising power set to overtake the United States as the world undergoes unprecedented changes that will catapult China into the driver's seat of history—and make it the progenitor of a new world order. The brief exchange is illustrative because it indicates that the China views Russia as a key partner in its mission to overtake the United States. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's steadfast support of Russia, and the economic effects of such support amid a coordinated effort to isolate and sanction Russia, have signaled the beginning of a new era of alliance building.

While China and Russia have long cooperated in pursuing similar ends, most notably by using their respective permanent seats on the UN Security Council to shield one another from international criticism and accountability efforts, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 drastically ratcheted up cooperation between the two powers. In particular, Russia's growing isolation from the rest of the global economy has left it dependent upon China as a financial lifeline. China, for its part, has been eager to buy up heavily discounted Russian oil and gas, previously destined for Europe, and allow tensions in eastern Europe to draw attention away from its own military provocations around Taiwan and in the South China Sea. During a visit Putin's made to Beijing in May 2024, the two countries reaffirmed their ties with a sweeping joint communiqué, **stating**, "Russian-Chinese relations stand the test of rapid changes in the world, demonstrating strength and stability, and are experiencing the best period in their history." Furthermore, during a recent diplomatic visit to multiple European countries, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas that China was **unwilling to allow Russia** to lose its war in Ukraine, lest the United States turn its full attention toward China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The alliance has also attracted a number of camp followers, most notably Iran and North Korea. Both have played a key role in Russia's war effort against Ukraine. Iranian Shahed **drones** bombard Ukraine's cities and civilian infrastructure, while North Korean **artillery shells** and **soldiers** have been shipped to the front lines to feed the voracious appetite for ammunition and manpower. While such cooperation is deeply concerning, especially from a regional stability perspective, as both Tehran and Pyongyang have demonstrated they are more than capable of generating security concerns for their neighbors, the two remain decidedly junior partners in the alliance. At present, only Beijing and Moscow have the combination of economic, diplomatic, and potentially military capabilities to challenge Washington's interests not just on the Eurasian landmass, but within the United States' own shared neighborhood.

If China and Russia's "no-limits partnership" were to extend into true cooperation in LAC), both countries would already have sizeable foundations to build upon. In the short to medium term, this cooperation could have deleterious effects on U.S. economic, political, and even physical security within the Western Hemisphere. The two countries could conspire to develop preferential access to the region's critical minerals and energy reserves or spin mutual support networks to help evade sanctions. Coordinated messaging campaigns could frustrate U.S. diplomatic efforts to shore up democracy and human rights and simultaneously lay the groundwork for expanded Chinese and Russian security footprints in the hemisphere. In the event of a crisis or conflict between the United States and Russia or China, such efforts would likely accelerate into overdrive to create a hostile operating environment for the United States close to home and defang Washington's long-standing strategy of **denying** the Western Hemisphere to adversaries.

If China and Russia are coordinating, a natural starting point would be in the media and information space. While Beijing and Moscow’s **abandonment** of Tehran in the face of recent Israeli and U.S. airstrikes suggests that the new axis, if it exists, may not be as strong as previously thought, exerting influence in the media and information domain has relatively low barriers to entry and potentially high returns on investment. Digital media can propagate messages hundreds of thousands of times without requiring new physical infrastructure or significant capital investments. Both countries have built formidable media apparatuses in the Western Hemisphere and already cooperate either formally or informally with one another to promote media content of mutual interest. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been illustrative of this latter form of cooperation, with China’s media presence in the region helping to **amplify** Moscow’s messaging that the war was provoked by NATO intransigence and U.S. imperialism and is thus defensive in nature. One report from the **National Defense University** traces this process of dissemination, noting how LAC journalists sympathetic to Moscow’s cause often have their articles platformed on Russian and Chinese state-affiliated media accounts like RT, Sputnik Mundo, and China Global Television Network. These “super spreaders” of Chinese and Russian propaganda are further boosted by Iranian networks like HispanTV and Venezuelan outlets like TeleSUR, which also have an interest in spreading anti-U.S. messages. Evidence also suggests that China and Russia have already cooperated on media operations in specific contexts, with a report from the International Republican Institute **finding** that Chinese and Russian outlets engaged in a “virtuous cycle of disinformation” in Argentina, sharing and re-sharing one another’s content to magnify desired anti-U.S. messages.

The ability of media networks to amplify one another means that coordination in this space is particularly useful, having a cumulative effect that makes disinformation or propaganda campaigns more effective the more media outlets buy into them. In the event of a conflict or crisis scenario, Chinese and Russian media in the region would likely amplify one another to flood the information space with bogus or otherwise biased content seeking to at the very least keep the majority of countries neutral—and perhaps sway some governments into backing the policy positions of Moscow or Beijing.

Ascertaining whether the relationship between Beijing and Moscow represents coordination or convergence, and the practical implications of both, has major implications for the United States’ own strategy toward LAC. Especially as U.S. policymakers still largely view China and Russia as separate and distinct actors in the region, a new strategy may be needed to think about how to deal with an integrated threat from two authoritarian adversaries, as well as how and when it may be advantageous to potentially drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing.

### *The Tabletop Exercise*

To test the implications of China-Russia collaboration in LAC’s media and information environment, the CSIS research team developed a unique tabletop exercise (TTX), which was conducted over the course of two iterations and featured a total of 20 participants, representing former government officials, think tank experts, and academics. The scenario at the center of the exercise revolves around a contested election in Guatemala and the role that U.S., Chinese, Russian, and Guatemalan authorities would play in the information domain to influence their desired outcome in the crisis. Both iterations of the exercise were identical, with one exception: In the first iteration, the teams representing China and Russia were not allowed to speak to one another at any point during the exercise; in the second iteration, they were permitted (though not required) to communicate and coordinate their activities.

The scenario begins after a theoretical narrow electoral defeat of the incumbent Semilla party in the second round of the 2027 Guatemalan presidential elections by a new pro-China party (deemed “Crecer” for the purposes of this exercise). However, numerous reports of irregularities have led the Arévalo government to push for a recount before certifying the results. The decision has drawn accusations of hypocrisy and mass protests throughout Guatemala, risking a major crisis of legitimacy for the eventual winner. The potential to flip another formal diplomatic ally of Taiwan has also drawn the attention of China, while Russia sees an opportunity to foment chaos within the United States’ neighborhood and potentially advance its position within Central America. With this context in mind, participants were divided into a total of five teams to begin, representing the governments of the United States, China, and Russia, and the incumbent and opposition parties in Guatemala.

Each iteration of the exercise was played in two turns. Turn 1 followed a discussion-negotiation-adjudication framework, beginning with teams convening to review their goals and prepare strategies for their turn. The U.S., China, and Russia teams each received an activity budget (see Table 1) approximating their relative capacity to influence the media and information space in Guatemala.

Following initial discussions, the U.S., China, and Russia teams were able to send one representative to meet with each of the Guatemalan teams to share plans and negotiate outcomes. The U.S., China, and Russia teams then assembled their respective activity agendas for the end of the turn. Teams could use their activities to either support the Semilla or Crecer parties in their bid for the disputed presidency, or work to expand influence in Guatemala. Furthermore, these activities could be either overt or covert. Overt activities were revealed to the entire group at the end of the turn. Covert activities were shared only with the TTX facilitators and revealed only at the end of the exercise.

After revealing all overt activities, both the Semilla and Crecer teams could choose to either endorse one overt activity or expose one covert activity. Endorsing an overt activity meant it counted as twice as effective for the purposes of the final score tabulation, representing the added legitimacy offered by local actors cosigning a country’s message. Exposing meant a team could force any other team to reveal one covert activity at random, simulating the ability of civil society organizations and individuals to track down media influence campaigns. Covert activities revealed this way were then negated for the purposes of the game.

The turn concluded with a simulated dice roll, representing the still uncertain nature of the election. The dice roll began with a 50/50 chance for either Semilla or Crecer to win. Each activity in support of one party further increased that team’s odds by five points. For instance, if in total the U.S., China, and Russia teams allocated three activities in support of Semilla and five in favor of Crecer, the final odds would be 60/40 for Crecer to win. After the winner was announced, both the Semilla and Crecer teams consolidated into a single team, representing the new government of Guatemala.

The second turn of the TTX took place six months into the administration of the new Guatemalan government, as it was contemplating two major policy proposals:

1. Whether to continue Guatemala’s diplomatic recognition of Taiwan or switch to the China; and
2. whether to grant a new nickel mining concession on which U.S., Chinese, and Russian companies have all bid.

Table 1: Activity Budgets and Rationales

Team	Budget	Rationale
U.S. Team	6 activities	The United States possesses the largest available budget, reflecting the long-standing diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between the United States and Guatemala, which accords the United States a wide range of options to shape the information space in Guatemala.
China Team	3 activities	China possesses the smallest available budget. Despite China’s media inroads, its relatively recent forays and Guatemala’s continued recognition of Taiwan limits the extent of Chinese media and information influence.
Russia Team	5 activities	Russia possesses the second largest available budget. This represents Russia’s cultivation of a powerful media apparatus as an asymmetric tool given its relative lack of economic heft in the Western Hemisphere.

Source: Authors’ design.

In addition to there being two policy outcomes teams could seek to influence, the overall activity budgets of each team were adjusted based on the outcome of the previous turn. These modifications are explained below.

As with the first turn, teams began with an internal discussion phase, followed by a negotiation step where the U.S., China, and Russia teams could send one representative each to meet with the unified Guatemalan government team. Rather than seeking to influence the outcome of the election or expand influence, in this turn, teams could either influence the vote on Taiwan in either direction or advance their country’s case in the vote on the mining concession.

At the end of the turn, the U.S., China, and Russia teams again revealed overt activities. The Guatemala team was then able to reveal up to two covert activities, divided across one or two teams. Activities revealed this way were negated for the purposes of the game.

Table 2: Turn 2 Activity Budget Adjustments

Turn 1 Outcome	Adjustment
Crecer wins election	Increase China’s activity budget by 1 to reflect the increased level of access and interest from Beijing.
Any team overtly supported election winner	Increase that team’s budget by 1 to reflect increased access to the new government.
Any team overtly supported election loser	Decrease that team’s budget by 1 to reflect loss of credibility and access to the new government.
Any team’s covert activities were exposed	Decrease that team’s budget by 1 to reflect loss of credibility and access to the new government.
Any team used their activities to expand influence in Guatemala	Increase that team’s activity budget by 1 for each activity used to expand influence.

Source: Authors’ design.

The unified Guatemalan government team then headed to a vote internally on both issues. Players were encouraged to envision themselves as individual members of the government who can take contrary stands based on what they have heard from the U.S., China, and Russia teams for this decision. After this vote concluded and the results were reported, the TTX facilitators revealed all activities from the U.S., China, and Russia teams and tallied their totals as additional votes, representing the power of information operations to shape the outcome of political decisionmaking.

After players completed both turns of the first iteration, they restarted the exercise using the same teams. The gameplay was identical, except that in the second iteration, the China and Russia teams were allowed (though not required) to coordinate their decisionmaking.

### *The Findings*

Over the course of the two game iterations, the CSIS research team documented internal team discussions and the specific actions that these groups decided upon. The following section outlines some of the major takeaways from this analysis.

#### **WERE CHINA AND RUSSIA LIKELY TO COOPERATE?**

It was notable that, when given the opportunity to collaborate in the second iteration, the China and Russia teams almost immediately began to work together. The resource restrictions that both teams faced in confronting a preponderance of U.S. influence seemed to naturally drive this partnership. In particular, during turn 1 of the second iteration, Russia and China allocated their full share of activities to supporting Crecer’s electoral bid. This proved a potent package of overt and covert activities that saw a Crecer sweep in the second iteration, compared to a narrow defeat during the first iteration.

Table 3: Activity Distribution, Turn 1, Game 1

	<b>Support Semilla</b>	<b>Support Crecer</b>	<b>Expand Influence</b>
U.S. Team	0	0	6
China Team	0	0	3
Russia Team	0	1	4

Table 4: Activity Distribution, Turn 1, Game 2

	<b>Support Semilla</b>	<b>Support Crecer</b>	<b>Expand influence</b>
U.S. Team	0	0	6
China Team	0	3	0
Russia Team	0	5	0

However, during turn 2 of the second iteration, Russia only allocated one of its activities to supporting a diplomatic switch on the part of Guatemala, with the vast majority of its activities aimed at supporting a Russian victory on the mining concession. This development reveals two especially interesting insights into the potential effect of a Russia-China alliance. First, whether Guatemala recognizes Taiwan or China is arguably of little importance to Russia, so the fact that this team was willing to allocate even one of its activities suggests that an alliance scenario could lead to some degree of authoritarian altruism between Moscow and Beijing. However, the fact that Russia’s support for this change in recognition remained limited despite fulsome dialogue with China suggests that the degree of cooperation may be limited, especially when Russian economic interests are also at stake.

Table 5: Activity Distribution, Turn 2, Game 1

	<b>Recognize Taiwan</b>	<b>Recognize China</b>	<b>Support Mining Concession</b>
U.S. Team	8	0	4
China Team	0	6	0
Russia Team	0	0	7

Table 6: Activity Distribution, Turn 2, Game 2

	<b>Recognize Taiwan</b>	<b>Recognize China</b>	<b>Support Mining Concession</b>
U.S. Team	9	0	3
China Team	0	4	0
Russia Team	0	1	5

Second, it is important to note the way in which the behavior by members of the China and Russia teams changed when coordination became possible. In the first iteration of the TTX, both teams generally sought to persuade the Guatemalan actors through appeals to the benefits of cooperation. During the second iteration, both were more willing to resort to overtly hard-edged measures, including allusions to economic pressure against the government of Guatemala. The China team was particularly willing to engage in such threats. This change in team behavior could be seen as an indication of the increased confidence China and Russia have when they feel able to count on one another's support.

### **HOW DID THE UNITED STATES FARE?**

In both iterations of the game, the United States was able to secure its preferred outcomes by the second turn. Its strategy remained unchanged: In both instances, the U.S. team elected to use its full complement of actions in step 1 to expand influence. This strategy broadly comports with stated U.S. policy of nonintervention in regional affairs, particularly in the context of a disputed election. In its conversations with the Semilla and Crecer teams, the U.S. team consistently sought to avoid the appearance of selecting either party's claim to legitimacy and stressed measures like recounts and international electoral observation missions as an alternative means of defusing the initial crisis without placing its finger on the scale.

It is important to note that the two-step structure of the game may have given the United States an advantage in the second turn. The TTX design deliberately left the decision on recognition of Taipei up for debate irrespective of which political party prevailed, in order to represent the complex nature of this decisionmaking. However, there was persistent debate within the government of Guatemala as to whether to move forward with the switch. Accordingly, while China and Russia were successful in influencing the outcome of the election in turn 1 of the second game, they failed to secure enough votes from the Guatemala team during turn 2 to effectively switch recognition from Taiwan to mainland China. The United States, meanwhile, was able to exploit these divisions, as well as the reluctance of the Russia team to expend more of its activities on encouraging a Guatemalan diplomatic pivot to China, to not only preserve Guatemala's recognition of Taiwan but also secure the mining concession for a U.S. company.

The introduction of China-Russia coordination, however, did force some degree of trade-offs in U.S. strategy between the first and second iterations of the game. For instance, during the first game, the United States allocated eight of its activities to preserving Guatemala's recognition of Taiwan and four to advancing the U.S. company's claim to the mining concession. In the second iteration, the U.S. team increased the number of actions supporting Taiwan to nine and decreased those in favor of the mine to three. In both instances, the allocation of U.S. activities seemed to reflect real-world priorities, wherein the preservation of Taipei's diplomatic allies in the Western Hemisphere is of greater importance for Washington than the advance of any particular U.S. company's economic interests.

Broadly, the lessons from the U.S. team paint an optimistic picture for Washington's ability to influence the media and information space in LAC. However, this conclusion comes with important caveats. For one, the United States has more tools at its disposal to influence Guatemala than it may have other countries in the hemisphere; Guatemala not only has an institutionalist government but remains closely tied to U.S. economic and political affairs. For instance, participants on the U.S. team brought up a review of Temporary Protected Status of Guatemalans living in the United States as both a carrot and

a stick for the Guatemalan government. In a South American country such as Brazil or Ecuador, with a lower level of economic dependency on the United States, information space interventions may be of more limited efficacy.

### **HOW DID THE STRATEGIES OF REGIONAL TEAMS DIFFER BETWEEN GAMES?**

Both regional teams sought to extract maximal support from international actors during the first turn of the game. Crecer was overall more willing to countenance more underhanded forms of engagement, such as receiving an electoral observation mission led by **BRICS+ members** (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates). Semilla, by contrast, initially sought support from the United States, but the U.S. team's reluctance to be seen as overtly supporting a particular side in the crisis meant these efforts met with few concrete results. In the first iteration, Crecer endorsed a move by Russia supporting its claim to victory, while Semilla exposed a covert Russian action. Ultimately, and despite Russian support, Semilla secured a narrow victory in turn 1 of the first iteration.

As previously noted, even when the winner of the election in the second game was Crecer, ostensibly a more China-aligned government, there was persistent division among the individual members making up the unified Guatemalan government team as to whether they should drop recognition of Taiwan in favor of the mainland. While this may represent a shortfall in the game design, as Crecer was designed to be an ostensibly pro-China political movement, the debate nevertheless reflected real concerns that countries considering such a diplomatic switch face internally. As such, the game suggests that Taiwan's influence may be more durable than conventional assessments suggest. Indeed, while cases like Honduras' recent **switch** to the China under President Xiomara Castro have raised concerns, previously states in LAC often considered changing diplomatic recognition only after careful consideration of the costs and benefits, or as one of a group of countries that switched recognition all at once to dilute the individual implications. Better U.S.-Taiwan coordination could help further insulate Taipei from China's efforts to sway its remaining allies into its camp.

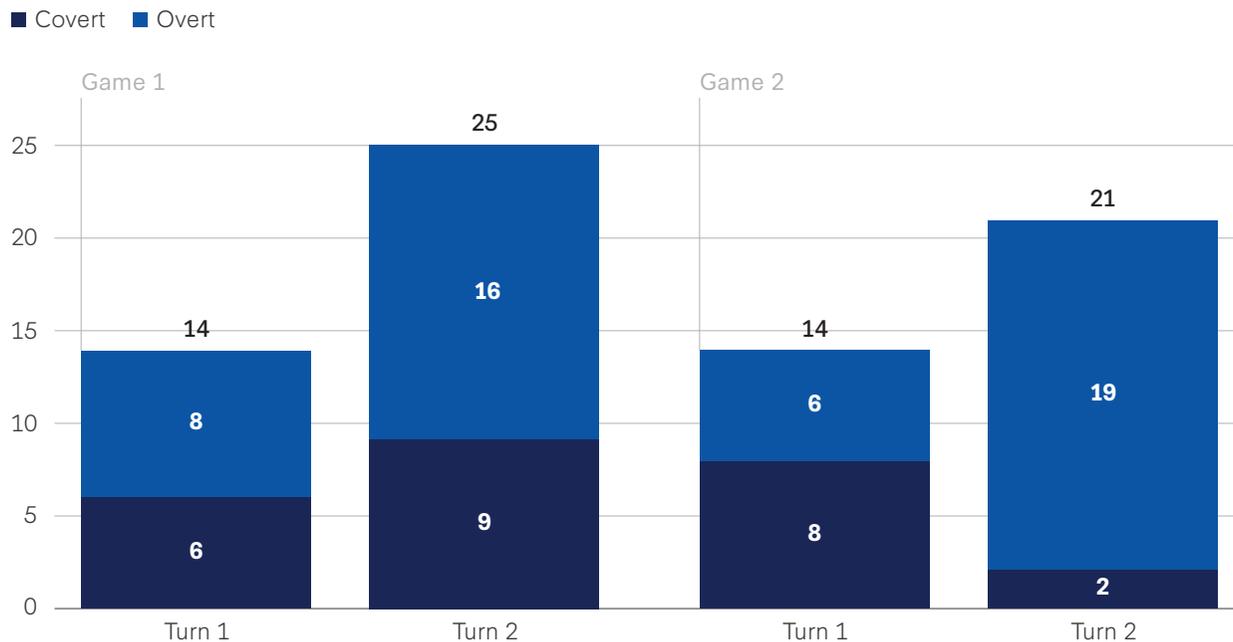
Also relevant was the heavy reputational penalty that the Russia team faced with the Guatemalan government across iterations, particularly in the mining sector. Despite the Russia team allocating a majority of its activities in both iterations to advancing the Russian company's claim to the mining concession, the Guatemala team consistently preferred working with either the United States or China first. This may in part reflect the specific context of the scenario, given Russia's involvement in recent **corruption scandals** in Guatemala, but it is likely still generalizable to LAC as a whole.

### **HOW DID COVERT ACTION INFLUENCE OUTCOMES?**

The potential for teams to take covert action introduced a level of information asymmetry to the game. When teams elected to undertake covert actions, it was generally nuanced and informed in part by participants' assessments of what their respective country would do in the scenario presented. Perhaps the most notable change between games was the behavior of the China and Russia teams between the first and second iterations of the exercise. On turn 1 of the first iteration, China employed exclusively overt measures while Russia mainly used covert activities. On turn 1 of the second iteration, Russia still largely relied on covert measures, but China pivoted as well, with just one overt activity and two covert activities. The increase in covert activities may have reflected the China team's reduced concern that its covert behaviors would be exposed, or its belief that if they were exposed, there was a sufficient mass

of activities combined with Russia's that it would not impact the team's overall strategy. By contrast, during turn 2, the first iteration of the game saw all teams pursue a mix of overt and covert actions. However, in the second iteration of the game, China and Russia exclusively employed overt actions. This suggests the China and Russia teams may have been more strident in their efforts to impact the policymaking calculus of Guatemala when working together, and therefore willing to employ overt persuasion and even coercion, a trend which is borne out from the individual interactions between those teams and the government of Guatemala.

**Figure 1: Distribution of Covert and Overt Activities**



Source: Authors' design

### LIMITATIONS AND CAVEATS

While the game sought to replicate real decisionmaking logic and tack as closely as possible to a realistic scenario, it fell short in some key aspects. First, as already noted, the merging of the Semilla and Crecer teams into a single government of Guatemala between turns 1 and 2 of the game did not always align with the stated policy preferences of the parties in the briefing book. For instance, while Crecer was depicted as a more pro-business, pro-China party, when the Crecer team won the election in the second game, there was a practically even split as to whether to change diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. While some level of internal dissent was encouraged by design to reflect disparate opinions within government, this level of contention was not necessarily expected and may have played a role in the U.S. victory in the second version of the game. This may be understood in part as a consequence of participants still being influenced by their roles in the first turn, and therefore unwilling to embody the policies of the prevailing party in the second turn. Future iterations of the exercise may be able to address this by stressing the shift in roles more clearly. Had the exercise merely dealt with a one-turn structure revolving around the winner of the election, the China-Russia alliance would have won handily by ensuring a Crecer victory.

Another weakness was the role that covert action played. While theoretically covert actions were intended to encourage participants to consider actions that they would otherwise not want to acknowledge to other teams, some participants highlighted that it was not necessarily clear when covert action would be preferable to overt. Although this may have skewed gameplay somewhat, it did not appear to significantly influence the broader strategies teams pursued during the exercise. Additionally, the iterative nature of the game, with participants playing the base case and cooperation case one after the other, may have impacted game outcomes by allowing participants to update their strategies. Overall, these challenges did not appear to change the nature of participants' actions beyond the bounds of realistic policymaking; nevertheless, these could be areas to improve upon in future iterations.

## *Conclusion and Recommendations*

Based on the findings of this exercise, it is possible to discern a number of recommendations for how the United States can better engage in LAC.

1. **Widen cracks in the armor.** Even in the alliance scenario, cooperation between China and Russia was not unlimited. Russia lent token support to China's efforts to sway Guatemala away from its recognition of Taiwan but was unwilling to back this at the expense of its own pursuit of the mining concession. The United States should seek to identify fault lines in the China-Russia relationship where it can force these difficult choices on prioritization to dilute the influence of both countries, especially where the United States has strong reason to suspect a divergence in strategic priorities. In the media space, this could mean spotlighting Russian participation in controversial Chinese infrastructure projects, for instance, to increase the cost of coordination for both powers. The United States, for its part, must also be able to prioritize effectively to ensure economy of efforts. If the China-Russia partnership proves to be as durable as the worst estimates assess, there may be cases where the United States will need to cede ground in some strategic sectors, only to stand firm on an even more critical issue.
2. **Don't pick favorites, build influence.** In both iterations of the game, the United States focused its first turn on building influence in Guatemala. This decision gave the U.S. team a broader activity budget to draw upon in the second turn. Rather than focusing on backing particular parties in the region, the United States should seek to build durable influence within partner countries that can help insulate them from Chinese and Russian media offensives. While the United States has historically **neglected** LAC as a region, it nevertheless continues to exercise significant influence when acting in a coordinated manner. However, leveraging U.S. influence in the LAC media and information space may prove increasingly difficult with the dissolution of agencies like Voice of America and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Amid the recalibration of U.S. foreign assistance, one focus should be on strengthening in-country media ecosystems by supporting local journalists who can uncover and report on Chinese and Russian malign influence and better equipping local populations to sift through disinformation and misinformation. China has already **pursued** its own version of this strategy, leading media trainings that advance a model of journalism that disincentivizes criticism of political elites or investigations into the state. U.S. embassies can lead the charge in identifying local journalists and media outlets to prioritize for cooperation.

3. **Bring in allies and partners.** While the exercise only contemplated a limited number of actors given time and participant constraints, in a real-world scenario, various **other entities** would have a role in determining the outcome of comparable crises. In particular, Taiwan would likely have a vested interest in preserving one of its 12 remaining diplomatic allies. Canada and the European Union have also increased investments in countering dis- and misinformation. And despite recent headwinds, the United States still enjoys long-standing partnerships with LAC countries, with dedicated coordination channels and strong rapports between officials that run much deeper than those between China and Russia and LAC. The United States should seek to elevate the possibility of China-Russia coordination in LAC with these partners and develop a joint strategy to counteract them in the information domain. ■

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# Appendix

## *Briefing Book Shared with Exercise Participants*

*The following text is a copy of the briefing that was shared with exercise participants in the lead-up to the tabletop exercise.*

The goal of this role-playing tabletop exercise (TTX) is to better understand the consequences of China-Russia coordination in the media and information space in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). This will be accomplished by role-playing different state actors in an imaginary scenario. Specifically, the scenario revolves around a crisis generated by a contested election in Guatemala and the role that U.S., Chinese, Russian, and Guatemalan authorities would play in the information domain to influence their desired outcome to the crisis. The exercise contemplates two versions of this scenario, one in which China and Russia are not able to coordinate in their pursuit of objectives, and one in which these two authoritarian powers can coordinate. The following sections offer additional details on the scenario background, gameplay mechanics, and team roles.

### **SCENARIO BACKGROUND**

President Bernardo Arévalo is nearing the end of his single four-year constitutionally mandated term. His presidency has succeeded in delivering improvements against corruption and organized crime in Guatemala. He has also reinforced ties with the United States and Republic of China (hereinafter Taiwan), making Guatemala one of Taiwan's most important remaining diplomatic allies. However, Guatemala's economy has grown at a lackluster rate over the past years, partly as a result of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter PRC) using coercive measures against its exports, while the country was ravaged by a powerful hurricane in 2026, which has underscored persistent failure to invest in infrastructure and climate resilience. Nevertheless, Arévalo remains confident that his Semilla party will enter elections in 2027 from a position of strength.

At the same time, a new political party, the Coalition for the Revitalization of the Economy, Community, and Hope (*Coalición para la Revitalización de la Economía, la Comunidad, y la Esperanza*, or Crecer) has erupted on the scene. One of Crecer's most prominent policy proposals involves switching Guatemala's diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in order to secure financing for major green infrastructure projects and open the Chinese market to Guatemalan exports.

In June 2027, Crecer surprised commentators as it surged to place second in the first round of Guatemala's presidential election with 18.4 percent of the vote to Semilla's 22.6 percent. The ensuing runoff saw both sides wage a fierce campaign against one another. During this period, an investigation by the Guatemalan national police revealed that senior advisers within Crecer had allegedly solicited bribes from PRC companies. The party's leadership has denied these allegations and in turn accused President Arévalo of tampering with the electoral process. The culmination of these events occurred in August with a second-round election that saw fierce protests break out across the country, helmed by both Semilla and Crecer supporters, as well as sporadic outbursts of electoral violence including at polling stations. Final tallies showed a narrow victory for Crecer of 50.8 percent to Semilla's 49.2 percent. While the leadership of Crecer quickly declared victory, the Arévalo government

held that the outcome could not be certified until claims of irregularities with the count, including potential intervention by foreign actors and criminal organizations, could be investigated by the appropriate authorities.

Arévalo, who himself faced an attempt to circumvent the democratic process and deny his electoral win, has stressed that he undertakes this decision with only the utmost caution, and will take care to respect the official process in calling for a recount. Crecer and its supporters, however, have cast the effort as a coup in the making and demand that their victory be recognized immediately. Within the region, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Honduras have congratulated Crecer on its victory, while El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Panama have yet to recognize either candidate.

Both parties within Guatemala have mobilized their supporters to take to the streets and social media championing their respective positions. The United States, seeing the explosive potential of this scenario, has urged a swift and orderly resolution to the crisis. But turmoil within the Western Hemisphere has also attracted the attention of China and Russia. The former is particularly encouraged by Crecer's pledge to shift Guatemala's formal diplomatic recognition to Beijing and peel away yet another of Taiwan's few remaining allies. Russia, meanwhile, sees this as an opportunity to foment chaos within the United States' shared neighborhood and potentially advance its position within Central America, which has been growing in Nicaragua and in its bilateral relations with Mexico.

## **OVERVIEW OF TTX GAME PLAY**

The full exercise consists of two iterations on the same scenario. Each iteration of the TTX consists of two turns and lasts approximately two hours.

*10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. » Game #1 | No Coordination*

### **10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. » Turn 1**

*Step 1 (20 minutes):* Players will divide into a total of five teams representing the following:

- Blue Team (U.S. Team)
- Red Team 1 (China Team)
- Red Team 2 (Russia Team)
- Green Team 1 (Semilla/Guatemala Team)
- Green Team 2 (Crecer/Guatemala Team)

Players begin by reviewing their strategic objectives and discussing strategy for the turn. Each team also receives a budget for the number of discreet activities they can pursue. The budget approximates each team's relative capacity to influence the media and information space in Guatemala. The budget and rationale for each team is as follows:

Team	Budget	Rationale
Blue Team (U.S. Team)	6 activities	The Blue Team possesses the largest available budget, reflecting the long-standing diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties between the United States and Guatemala, which accords the United States a wide range of options to shape the information space in Guatemala.
Red Team 1 (China Team)	3 activities	Red Team 1 possesses the smallest available budget. Despite China's media inroads, its relatively recent forays and Guatemala's continued recognition of Taiwan limits the extent of PRC media and information influence.
Red Team 2 (Russia Team)	5 activities	Red Team 2 possesses the second largest available budget. This represents Russia's cultivation of a powerful media apparatus as an asymmetric tool given its relative lack of economic heft in the Western Hemisphere.

*Step 2 (30 minutes):* After discussing internally, Blue and Red Teams can each dispatch one representative to meet with either or both of the Green Teams for consultation.<sup>1</sup> Teams can send only one representative at a time and must make their request to the TTX facilitators. Each consultation can last a maximum of five minutes, so teams are encouraged to go into these conversations with a clear strategy for the discussion.

Following this period of consultation and strategizing, Blue and Red Teams assemble a list of information space activities they would like to conduct to advance their strategic objectives in Guatemala. Blue and Red Teams are encouraged to consult with Green Teams to codevelop activities as relevant. Teams should share a full list of activities using the worksheets provided at the beginning by the TTX facilitators before the end of step 2.

1. Note: At no point during this iteration of the TTX can any member of the Blue or Red Teams talk to a member of a different Blue or Red Team.

Activities can be either **overt** or **covert**. Overt activities are revealed to the entire group at the end of the turn. Covert activities are shared only with the TTX facilitators and revealed only at the end of the exercise unless they are exposed (see below).

Blue and Red Teams can either **support** Semilla or Crecer in their bid for the presidency or work to **expand** influence in Guatemala. Expanding influence has no effect on this turn of the exercise but can be saved to be used in turn 2.

Some examples of activities follow:

**Blue Team Activity (Overt, Support Semilla):** The U.S. Department of State issues a press release condemning electoral violence in Guatemala and naming Crecer leadership as responsible for recent unrest.

**Red Team 1 Activity (Overt, Expand Influence):** Xinhua publishes an article highlighting the importance of economic growth for Guatemala to recover from its political turmoil and championing China as an ideal partner to do so. The article is then pushed out in Spanish through Xinhua's content-sharing agreements with regional newspapers.

**Red Team 2 Activity (Covert, Support Crecer):** Russian bots and troll farms are directed to push a narrative using edited video clips showing that Semilla leadership was present at a recent protest that turned violent and suggesting the party intentionally instigated the riot.

*Step 3 (15 minutes):* At the end of the turn, teams present their **overt** activities. Both Green Teams can then choose to either **endorse** one overt activity or **expose** one covert activity. **Endorsing** an overt activity means it counts as two activities for the purposes of the final calculation, representing the added legitimacy offered by local actors co-signing a country's message. **Exposing** means a Green Team can force any other team to reveal one covert activity at random, representing the ability of civil society organizations and individuals to track down media influence campaigns. Covert activities revealed this way are negated for the purposes of the game.

The turn concludes with a "coin flip" representing the still uncertain nature of the election. The coin flip begins with a 50/50 chance for either Semilla or Crecer to win. Each activity in support of one party further increases that team's odds by five points. For instance, if in total Blue and Red Teams allocated three activities in support of Semilla and five in favor of Crecer, the final odds would be 60/40 for Crecer to win.

After the winner is announced, Green Team 1 and Green Team 2 will consolidate into a single Green Team representing the new government of Guatemala for the remainder of the TTX.

### **11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. » Turn 2**

The second step of this TTX takes place six months into the administration of the new Guatemalan government, which is currently contemplating two major policy proposals:

- **First**, whether to continue Guatemala's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan or switch recognition to the PRC.

- **Second**, whether to grant a new nickel mining concession that U.S., Chinese, and Russian companies have all bid on.

Turn 1 Outcome	Adjustment
Crecer wins election	Increase Red Team 1's (China team) activity budget by 1 to reflect the increased level of access and interest from Beijing.
Any team overtly supported election winner	Increase that team's budget by 1 to reflect increased access to the new government.
Any team overtly supported election loser	Decrease that team's budget by 1 to reflect loss of credibility and access to the new government.
Any team's covert activities were exposed	Decrease that team's activity budget by 1 to reflect the loss of credibility and access from getting caught red-handed.
Any team used its activities to expand influence in Guatemala	Increase that team's activity budget by 1 for each activity used to expand influence.

*Step 1 (15 minutes):* Once more, the turn begins with an opportunity for the Blue and Red Teams to meet with the Green Team to discuss interests and objectives.

*Step 2 (30 minutes):* Following this initial period of consultation and strategizing, Blue and Red Teams assemble a list of information space activities they would like to conduct to advance their strategic objectives in Guatemala. Each team will have an identical budget to the first turn, with the following adjustments:

Activities can again be either **overt** or **covert**. Overt activities are revealed to the entire group at the end of the turn. Covert activities are shared only with the TTX facilitators and revealed only at the end of the exercise, unless they are exposed (see below).

Blue and Red Teams can furthermore **influence** the vote on Taiwan to either maintain recognition or switch it to the PRC. Alternatively, teams can **advance** their country's case in the vote on the mining concession. Blue and Red Teams are encouraged to consult with the Green Team to codevelop activities as relevant. Teams should share a full list of activities with the TTX facilitators before the end of step 2.

*Step 3 (15 minutes):* At the end of the turn, teams present their overt activities. The Green Team can then choose to reveal up to two **covert** activities, divided as they choose across one or two teams. Activities revealed this way are negated for the purposes of the game.

The Green Team then heads to a vote internally on both issues. Green Team players are encouraged to envision themselves as individual members of the government who can take contrary stands based on what they have heard from the Blue and Red Teams for this decision. After this vote concludes and the results are reported, the TTX facilitators reveal all activities from the Blue and Red Teams and tally their

totals as additional votes, representing the power of information operations to shape the outcome of political decisionmaking.

For example, if the Green Team vote on Taiwan is split 5-5 internally, but Red Team 1 allocated three of its activities to changing recognition and Blue Team only allocated one activity toward keeping recognition, the final tally would be 8-6 in favor of Guatemala changing its recognition to the PRC.

*12:00 p.m. - 1:00 p.m. » Lunch Break*

A catered lunch will be served for TTX participants.

*1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. » Game #2 | Coordination*

**1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. » Turn 1**

Turn 1 of the second iteration will be identical to turn 1 of the first iteration, with the exception that any number of players from the Red Teams (China and Russia) can meet at any point during deliberation to coordinate on activities.<sup>2</sup>

**2:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. » Turn 2**

Turn 2 of the second iteration will be identical to turn 2 of the first iteration, with the exception that any number of players from the Red Teams (China and Russia) can meet at any point during deliberation to coordinate on activities.

*3:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. » Debrief*

The TTX facilitators will lead a short debrief discussion among the participants on insights from the two games. Notional discussion questions for this conversation include:

- What, if any, were the main differences in outcome between the two iterations of the TTX? Did the ability of Russia and China to coordinate have a decisive effect on any outcome?
- What lessons should U.S. policymakers take from the outcome of this exercise? How could the United States respond more effectively to adversary information operations?
- How large a risk does cooperation between China and Russia in the media and information space pose to the United States in Latin America? What about risks to Latin American governments?
- What changes would you make to this exercise if it were to be run again in the future?

### **Final Considerations**

What constitutes an “activity” is left deliberately vague. Players are encouraged to think creatively about how to leverage the full spectrum of their countries’ capabilities to exert influence in the information space when putting together their package of actions. If in doubt about whether a particular activity might be possible, or what category it falls into, please consult the exercise facilitators.

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2. Note: While communication between Red Teams is permitted, it is not required. Furthermore, the Blue Team can only meet with the Green Team, not any of the Red Teams during this iteration.

## **TEAM ROLES AND CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Blue Team (U.S. Team)**

The United States seeks a swift resolution to a regional political crisis that mitigates as much as possible the opportunity for adversaries like China and Russia to expand their influence. While the United States does not have a clear preference between Semilla and Crecer, the Arévalo government has been a consistent partner on issues of migration and security, while Crecer presents concerns over expanded PRC influence.

Publicly, the United States seeks to avoid being seen as interfering in Guatemala's domestic political affairs. Simultaneously, it seeks to expose and condemn Chinese and Russian disinformation and misinformation campaigns.

### **Red Team 1 (China Team)**

China's primary objective in this TTX is degrading Taiwan's diplomatic legitimacy by convincing one of Taiwan's most important allies to shift its recognition. In this regard, China is strongly inclined to prefer Crecer to Semilla based on the party's public statements in favor of shifting recognition.

### **Red Team 2 (Russia Team)**

Russia is interested in using the regional crisis as an opportunity to undermine U.S. credibility in Guatemala and Central America at large. Russia does not have a preference between the two parties but hopes to exploit the crisis to increase its own influence at the expense of the United States.

### **Green Team 1 (Semilla/Guatemala)**

#### **Turn 1 (As Semilla)**

As Semilla, Green Team 1 seeks to accrue international legitimacy through cooperation with external actors. It hopes that the United States, which was instrumental in safeguarding Guatemala's democratic process following Arévalo's election, will continue to support its claim to the presidency. However, Semilla will not rule out cooperation with other interested actors.

Semilla also hopes to identify and expose the efforts of foreign powers to support Crecer.

#### **Turn 2 (As Government of Guatemala)**

As the government of Guatemala, the Green Team hopes to maintain independence in decisionmaking while retaining constructive relationships with foreign powers. To preserve domestic legitimacy, it hopes to limit perceptions of being controlled or unduly influenced by foreign actors, as well as identify and expose efforts to covertly change the outcome of domestic political decisions.

## **Green Team 2 (Crecer/Guatemala)**

### **Turn 1 (As Crecer)**

As Crecer, Green Team 2 seeks to accrue international legitimacy through cooperation with external actors. Its campaign messages supporting China means it is inclined to seek support from the PRC, but it remains sensitive to Semilla's claims of undue Chinese interference.

Crecer also hopes to identify and expose the efforts of foreign powers to support Semilla.

### **Turn 2 (As Government of Guatemala)**

As the government of Guatemala, the Green Team hopes to maintain independence in decisionmaking while retaining constructive relationships with foreign powers. To preserve domestic legitimacy, it hopes to limit perceptions of being controlled or unduly influenced by foreign actors, as well as identify and expose efforts to covertly change the outcome of domestic political decisions.