

Chinese Security Engagement in Latin America

By R. Evan Ellis¹

Military engagement is an important and officially acknowledged part of the growing interactions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Latin America and the Caribbean. The **2008** and **2016** Chinese policy white papers toward Latin America, as well as the 2015 **China Defense Strategy White Paper**, all define military and other security activities as an important, if not necessarily leading, component of China's overall engagement with the region.

PRC economic activities in Latin America arguably eclipse military activities, both in terms of the resources and people involved and in terms of the attention given through official government discourse and interaction. This economic focus, along with Chinese leaders' general avoidance of threatening rhetoric or provocative military actions in Latin America, should not distract from the fact that security sector activities are an integral part of **China's multidimensional engagement** in pursuit of its strategic objectives—both in the region and globally.

The PRC's core objective—as expressed in its own leadership statements, such as President Xi's "**China Dream**" speech, and in policy documents such as "**Made in China 2025**"—is arguably the creation of a prosperous and secure state. In economic terms, achieving this objective involves building a strong and diverse economy, complemented by a robust commercial relationship with the rest of the world. By achieving dominant positions, Chinese companies would capture significant portions of the value added in global supply chains, own strategic assets giving China predictable access to markets and factor inputs (on terms that give decision authority to Chinese managers), and channel benefits to Chinese companies and the Chinese people. The PRC is building this strategic position by fundamentally mercantilist means, focusing on controlling or dominating sufficient parts of agricultural production, extractive industries, and other sectors in the interdependent global economy to achieve both security of supply and market access. Since the movement of goods is an integral part of the global economy and the generation of value added,

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a critical element of the Chinese approach is the control of transportation hubs, routes, and supporting infrastructure. China's **Belt and Road initiative** was first launched in 2013 and extended to Latin America in 2018. Consistent with its historic concept of the "**Silk Road**" and the **treasure fleet** of **Admiral Zheng He**, it reflects the contemporary mercantilist vision of building and restructuring global infrastructure—including transportation, electricity, telecommunications, and finance—to facilitate favorable flows of commerce and transfers of wealth from the global periphery to the Chinese center. As will be discussed later, the strategic imperative of protecting this expanding China-oriented infrastructure, and the associated operations of PRC-based companies and persons in Latin America and elsewhere, complements the more traditional mission of preparing for a conflict against the United States by creating imperatives for engagement by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese state in Latin America.

Although the strategic concept for the PRC's global advance strongly reflects its mercantilism, it coexists with other **objectives**. These include the isolation and eventual reincorporation of Taiwan and the push to influence institutions to prevent them from adopting positions prejudicial to the PRC—both on a global scale, such as with the United Nations and the Interamerican Development Bank, and on a regional one, such as in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the BRICS (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, five emerging economies with significant regional influence). China's objectives further include assistance to (or at least a lack of cooperation with the opposition to) partners such as the leftist populist regime in Venezuela, in the interest of facilitating a multipolar world that supports China's continuing commercial advance and undercuts the position of its global rivals, such as the United States.

PLA Engagement with Latin America in Support of PRC Strategic Objectives

For the PLA, engagement in Latin America supports multiple national and institutional objectives as a subset of its global engagement. One of the PRC's economic and strategic goals is building strong all-around relationships with countries in the region, which includes forging bonds with Latin American militaries. Arms sales and other interactions with Latin American partners, such as sharing technology and resolving product performance and support issues, help the PLA to improve the quality and functionality of its weapons and military systems in a range of global contexts. Such sales and support also build and strengthen long-term relationships with Latin American armed forces. These relationships are not simply grounded in sales; they are bolstered by ongoing maintenance, training, and other interactions involving military equipment, as well as by the opportunities those interactions create to expand PLA engagement with the partner nations into other areas, including institutional exchanges and professional military education (PME).

Reciprocally, the ability of the PLA to visit the region through military operations, institutional visits, and training and PME exchanges improves its familiarity with the operating environment and with Latin American partner institutions. This supports China's **strategic goal** to operate as a global force. In addition, those exchanges, in combination with hosting Latin American military officers in the PRC for official visits or training and PME activities, create opportunities for Chinese intelligence to collect information on—and potentially to compromise—partner nation officials, providing material to support future operations in the region or in any environment where China may encounter Latin American militaries either as partners or opponents.

As the PRC expands its global commercial operations and comes increasingly into conflict—political and otherwise—with the United States, there are multiple ways in which it may use the relationships, technical benefits, and experiences gained through its engagements in Latin America and the Caribbean. In the near

term, for instance, the PLA could be called upon to protect or evacuate its companies and nationals in the region, as it has previously done in [Libya in 2011](#) and [Yemen in 2015](#), among others.

As its international obligations and influence on regional partners expand, the PRC could also provide port security or conduct counterpiracy and other law enforcement operations in support of its companies and nationals in the region. It could also be called upon to conduct joint operations against [Chinese criminal groups](#) operating in Latin America—as it did on a smaller scale in 2016 in [Argentina](#), in cooperation with that nation’s police, against the Chinese triad Pi Xiu. It could also participate in future United Nations or other multinational peacekeeping operations, as it did in [Haiti](#) from 2004 through 2012.

In the context of large-scale hostilities with the United States or other major powers, PRC military relationships in the region would likely be used in all stages of the global-scope campaign necessary to wage that conflict. Military relationships could be used in conjunction with political and economic leverage to convince states in the region to support the Chinese position—or at the very least, to abstain from supporting the United States, be it through votes in international organs, economic or financial support, or permission for the United States to use partner facilities in the region as part of the war. The PLA and other Chinese security and intelligence organs might also leverage their acquired knowledge of the region to project operatives into Latin America to monitor the United States and its partner nations; they could also possibly act covertly to disrupt U.S. deployment and sustainment flows. Similarly, the PLA could use its military knowledge in conjunction with its commercial position to create diversionary crises in the region in order to undermine the U.S. political will and resources to continue the fight against China, or at least oblige the United States to divert assets from the fight in Asia to protect the U.S. homeland and key allies.

In the event of a prolonged fight in Asia, the PRC could persuade or intimidate one or more actors in Latin America to permit the PLA to use its ports, airfields, or other facilities in support of operations against the United States. Although difficult to imagine today, such permission could be less unthinkable in a future scenario in which the continuing growth, quality improvement, and operational experience of the PLA causes some Latin American and Caribbean governments to question the ability of the United States to prevail or to sustain a costly conflict. Such questions would be magnified if the United States were to suffer significant losses in the opening stages of the war, such as the sinking of multiple carriers and other capital ships. This would greatly impair the ability of the United States to quickly project power into the Asian theater, leading some to calculate that the United States might abandon the fight with the PRC short of a military victory. If some Latin American governments decided to “bet against the United States” and permit the PRC to use their facilities for military purposes, the accumulated PLA knowledge of Latin American military leaders, forces, organization, infrastructure, and operating environment would increase the speed and effectiveness with which it could establish a wartime presence to conduct operations against the United States.

Country Patterns in Security Engagement with the PRC

There is not currently a clear division in Latin America and the Caribbean between countries that engage militarily with the PRC versus those who engage with the West, unlike the clearly distinguishable dichotomy that existed between military allies of the Soviet Union and those of the West during the Cold War. The present ambiguity reflects the PRC’s avoidance of formal military alliances and of associating itself with positions hostile to the United States. Indeed, it has avoided explicitly “taking sides,” even when anti-U.S. regimes such as that of Hugo Chavez and later Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela have sought to [draw China closer](#). The PRC has also not, to date, sought to establish permanent military bases Latin America, as some have [speculated](#) could occur as a product of construction work or port concessions going to Chinese

companies in Panama, or through the port of La Union in El Salvador. Such caution in close proximity to the United States is consistent with PRC reluctance to acknowledge even the **military character** of its only current foreign military **port facility, which is located in Djibouti**, in Africa.

The lack of strong, consistent ideological alignments between the PRC and Latin American governments further complicates the idea of drawing a clear dichotomy between states who engage militarily with the PRC and those who do not. Historically, the PRC has downplayed its official identity as a communist government as a basis for military and political affiliation, although its Communist Party has long conducted “**party to party**” dialogues with those entities in the region who would engage with it. Of the two regimes in the Western Hemisphere led by a communist party for significant parts of the past half-century, the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua does not currently recognize the PRC, while Cuba’s relationship with the PRC is mixed, having sided with the Soviet Union against Chinese interests during the Cold War, and currently having limited appeal to the PRC as a consumer market or commodity supplier.

To the degree that a rough taxonomy can be applied with respect to PRC military engagement in Latin America, an analytically useful categorization can be made between (1) anti-U.S. communist and populist regimes, (2) diversity-of-partner and in-transition regimes, (3) diplomatically “off-the-table” regimes, and (4) strongly U.S.-allied regimes.

Anti-U.S. Communist and Populist Regimes. The first category includes the de facto Maduro regime in Venezuela; the Diaz-Canel government in Cuba; and, previously, Ecuador, Bolivia, and to a lesser extent, Argentina. These regimes are (or were) open to arms sales from Chinese companies and maintain relatively strong institutional relationships, such as official visits, training, and PME exchanges. Indeed, anti-U.S. regimes such as Venezuela (and previously Ecuador and Bolivia) have provided important opportunities for PRC-based arms suppliers to demonstrate the performance of increasingly sophisticated hardware through both sales and donations, as those companies have sought to move up the value chain of military products and build relationships in the region. Despite such relative openness to military engagement by the populist regimes, the PRC has not, to date, sought to build on that willingness by establishing permanent military facilities in the region, or to host provocative activities such as receiving combat aircraft or conducting exercises with a clearly anti-U.S. orientation.

In Venezuela, the leftist populist regime of Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro was one of the first purchasers of Chinese military hardware in the region, beginning with the Chavez regime’s **purchase** of Chinese K-8 light jets, principally for use as fighter trainers; the regime later **discussed** acquiring more capable L-15 fighters, but it never made the purchase. The Chavez government also went on to purchase Chinese **Y-8** military transport aircraft, and was also the first in Latin America to acquire PRC-made **military radars**, buying 10 JYL-1 systems in 2005 and another 26 radars in 2014. Even in 2019, when the successor regime of Nicolas Maduro was in the midst of an economic and political crisis and failing to pay its creditors, it took **delivery** on Chinese-made JY-27A long range air defense radars. Beyond aircraft and radars, Venezuela has also acquired **Chinese military ground vehicles**, both for its Naval Infantry and its National Guard, including VN-4 armored personnel carriers.

Beyond military sales, Venezuela has regularly sent its personnel to the PRC for training and professional military education. In November 2017, it was one of the only Latin American states to send personnel to the Chinese “**Clear Sky**” **military exercise**. Reciprocally, PLA personnel have participated in

military parades in Venezuela and have deployed to the country on occasion, possibly for training and in support of the maintenance of Chinese-supplied military systems.²

The Cuban governments of Fidel and Raul Castro, and most recently Miguel Diaz-Canel, have maintained regular military interactions with the PRC. China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe held talks with his Cuban counterpart in Beijing in November 2018, **pledging** to strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries. In September 2019, General Xu Qiliang, Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, received Cuba's Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Alvaro Lopez Miera and **pledged** an expansion of military exchanges. Cuba has hosted Chinese forces, including port visits by PLA warships in January 2016, as well as the hospital ship **Peace Ark** in 2011. Cuba has also **reportedly considered** allowing the PRC to use its Cold War signals intelligence collection facility at the **Bejucal or Lourdes** Signals Intelligence Facility near Havana. Despite such robust engagement, however, Cuba has not purchased significant amounts of military equipment from the PRC. This contrasts to other ideologically sympathetic regimes, such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, and arguably reflects Cuba's lack of funds for such acquisitions and its previous reliance on Russia for military hardware. The PRC's desire to avoid alarming the United States may also come into play, given the symbolism and attention given to Cuba in U.S. politics as a source of threats to U.S. equities in the region.

In Ecuador, the former anti-U.S. government of Rafael Correa followed the lead of its ally Venezuela in acquiring Chinese military equipment, albeit on a more limited basis and with more significant problems. Acquisitions included two Chinese MA-60 transport aircraft and a **2013 contract** with the Chinese firm CETC for air defense radars, although the latter became the subject of a legal dispute as the radars' performance in aerial coverage did not meet the Ecuadoran Air Force's requirements. The Correa government later acquired **709 Chinese military vehicles**—including 4x4 and 6x6 trucks, buses, and other items—filling a significant need for mobility assets the Ecuadoran military had at the time. It also acquired 10,000 **assault rifles** and other equipment from China.

The Ecuadoran military under Correa also sent forces for training, PME, and institutional engagements to the PRC, but to a lesser degree than Venezuela, and it did not publicly host PLA forces on Ecuadoran soil.

Bolivia, under the leftist populist government of Evo Morales, was also a significant recipient of Chinese military equipment and a partner in various institutional visits, training exercises, and professional military education activities. Bolivia's purchases of Chinese military goods actually far predated the 2006 assumption of power by Evo Morales; for instance, portable HN-5 air defense munitions were acquired in the 1990s, and later shipped to the United States to be deactivated and dismantled in 2005 by transitional president Eduardo Rodriguez **prior to Morales' arrival in office**, generating **controversy** in the country. From the beginning of the Morales regime, the Chinese regularly donated dual-use vehicles and military gear to Bolivia, culminating in the regime turning to China for the **purchase** of six Harbin H-425 helicopters in 2011 in a deal for \$108 million, leading to a **criminal investigation** for corruption through overpricing against the Bolivian officer who signed the deal. The Morales government went on to **contract** with the PRC for 31 armored cars and other military vehicles in 2016.

In the case of Argentina, while civilian governments had historically granted limited funding to the military since the restoration of democracy in 1983, the leftist Peronist governments of Nestor Kirchner and of his wife Cristina Fernandez, who succeeded him, opened the door for the procurement of Chinese military equipment and expanded engagement with the PRC. In 2008, the Kirchner government purchased four

2. Off-the-record telephone and electronic conversations with Venezuelan security experts, July through September 2020.

Chinese **WMZ-551 armored vehicles** in a \$2.6 million contract. This was initially conceived as part of a larger purchase to equip the Argentine battalion dedicated to the joint Argentine-Chilean peacekeeping brigade Cruz del Sur. Although the Argentine army's dissatisfaction with the vehicles helped prevent the follow-on purchase from occurring, the government of Cristina Fernandez engaged in **negotiations** with the Chinese for 20 FC-1 fighters in 2015, but she was voted out of office before the deal could be completed. Had the sale occurred, it would have been the **most sophisticated** PRC-made military aircraft sold to the region. The package of equipment that the Kirchner government was negotiating also included **110 VN-1 armored vehicles** and five P-18 **offshore patrol vessels** (OPVs), which would have been the second sale of a Chinese capital ship to the region following the **sale of an OPV to Trinidad and Tobago** in 2014. As with other leftist populist regimes, Argentina also sent its military personnel to China for military courses and institutional exchanges, and in 2013, it **hosted** two PLA Navy missile frigates for a port call, after they made a historic crossing through the difficult seas of the Straits of Magellan.

Diversity of Partner and In-Transition Regimes. A wide range of countries in the region maintain some military engagement with the PRC, generally without a strong ideological component, while also working with the United States and the West. Often, such a posture reflects a desire to maintain a diversity of relationships and global engagement beyond the hemisphere or derives from the need to accommodate limited budgets in acquiring military equipment.

The leading example of such countries is Peru. Across administrations of a range of political orientations, Peru's governments have maintained good military relationships with the United States while also purchasing Russian and Chinese equipment. In 2009, Peru's defense ministry considered the purchase of Chinese MBT-2000 tanks, which was then **abandoned** following public controversy when the vehicles were displayed in a military parade. The country also took delivery on Beiben, Dong Feng, and Shaanxi Chinese **military trucks**, although the Peruvian army had difficulties with their maintenance.³ Most significantly, in 2014, Peru **contracted** for 40 Type-90B Multiple Rocket Launch Vehicles, of which 27 were ultimately **delivered**. In a parallel with the corruption investigation surrounding Bolivia's purchase of Chinese H-425 helicopters, the Peruvian Type-90B system purchase also gave rise to a **corruption investigation** by Peruvian authorities. As is often the case among more anti-U.S. states, Peru's armed forces has regularly sent personnel to the PRC for institutional visits, training, and PME activities, and in 2011 it conducted an **exercise with the PLA** in conjunction with its receipt of a Chinese mobile field hospital.

Uruguay, under the center-left governments of Tabare Vasquez and Jose Mujica, maintained active military and political relationships with the PRC. The PRC donated cars, buses, and other dual-use vehicles to the Uruguayan defense ministry, and Jose Mujica's administration was in **negotiations** with China for a \$4.2 million warship before the victory of center-right candidate Luis Lacalle Pou in the October 2019 elections stopped the deal.

Many nations of the Caribbean, from Barbados to Guyana, also regularly send their personnel to military courses in the PRC and receive donations of vehicles and equipment for their military and police forces, typically without maintaining an anti-U.S. posture in their foreign affairs. Notable Chinese military equipment transactions in the Caribbean include the **sale** of an offshore patrol vessel (OPV) to Trinidad and Tobago in 2014, the **donation** of construction equipment to the Guyana Defense Force in 2017, and the **donation** of \$1.1 million in nonlethal gear to the Jamaica Defense Force in 2011. Chinese **donations** of goods to Caribbean police forces also include \$2.6 million in vehicles given to the Guyana Police Force in 2017 and 200 motorcycles **donated** to the Trinidad and Tobago police service in 2019.

3. Off-the-record conversation with Peruvian security experts, Lima, Peru, 2015.

In some cases, the mixture of a nation's defense partners also reflects legacy purchases or relationships inherited from prior governments. In Ecuador, the 709 military vehicles acquired from China under the former Correa regime were delivered, in part, during the administration of his more pro-U.S. successor, Lenin Moreno; these vehicles and their subsequent maintenance and associated training still form a basis for interaction between the Moreno government and the PRC today.

In the case of Argentina, previous negotiations under the leftist populist administration of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner for significant arms purchases from Chinese companies—including fighter aircraft, armored vehicles, and offshore patrol vessels—were terminated by the pro-U.S. center-right administration of Mauricio Macri, who came to power in December 2015. Nonetheless, the return to power of the leftist Peronist party in December 2019, with Cristina Fernandez returning as Vice-President to Alberto Fernandez, has created an opening to re-explore those previously established relationships.

Diplomatically “Off-the-Table” Regimes. The nine governments in the region that do not diplomatically recognize the PRC—Paraguay, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Haiti, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and St. Lucia—by default do not conduct military exchanges with the PRC, receive PLA Navy ships or other operational units, or generally buy PRC military equipment.

An important exception is Haiti, which saw PLA military police and others deployed to its territory from 2004 through 2012 as part of the **MINUSTAH peacekeeping force**. Nonetheless, that deployment was technically not a direct military interaction between the PRC and the Haitian government.

Strongly U.S.-Affiliated Regimes. An important, although small, number of regimes in the region have limited their purchases of military equipment and other interactions with the PRC—such as associated technology choices on matters like 5G infrastructure—in order to avoid undermining their relationship with the United States. Countries in this category include Chile, Colombia, and Argentina under the former government of Mauricio Macri. The degree of self-limitation has varied across governments.

Since the initiation of strong U.S.-Colombia security cooperation under Plan Colombia in 1999, Colombian governments have historically avoided purchasing significant PRC-made military end items. Still, Colombia's armed forces have received from \$1 million to \$7 million per year in material donations from the PRC, including \$3 million in **military bridging equipment** in 2013. In addition, in 2014, the Colombian military took delivery of **two Chinese Y-12 transport aircraft** which it used to support the Colombian Air Force-operated Satena airline, although the aircraft were ultimately removed from service five years later over a question of structural integrity. Colombia has also sent its officers to **military courses** in the PRC, including the full 5-year program of the PLA military academy. Colombia has also brought PLA soldiers into its own **Lanceros special forces course**, although such invitations have been discontinued.⁴

Chile, whose military has historically been well funded and has featured some of Latin America's most capable equipment, has traditionally not purchased Chinese military goods, although it has conducted institutional exchanges with the PLA and sent Chilean officers to courses in the PRC as part of maintaining a force with a diverse international orientation. It has also been one of the few countries in the region to conduct **naval combat exercises** with China, holding a small activity in conjunction with two visiting Chinese missile frigates. For a time, Chile also had Chinese instructors teaching Mandarin in its strategic-level military institution, ANEPE, although the practice was discontinued.⁵

4. Off-the-record interview with Colombian security experts, Bogota, Colombia, 2018.

5. Off-the-record interview with Chilean security experts, 2019.

In Argentina, the election of pro-U.S. President Mauricio Macri in December 2015 led to the abandonment of major arms purchases from China that had been under consideration, as noted, although some professional exchanges continued. The new left-of-center government of Alberto Fernandez appears to have reopened doors to military engagement with the Chinese.⁶

General Patterns and Tendencies

There is no standard model for PLA interactions within Latin America or its subregions, although there are a number of principles that the PLA and its supporting military companies have followed, per the previously described relationships.

While the PLA has engaged militarily with virtually all of Latin America and the Caribbean, it has cautiously shown interest in the Caribbean basin—which is strategically proximate to the United States—to a degree disproportionate to the size of its market potential or ability to pay. As noted previously, the first PRC **sale** of a major capital ship in the region was to Trinidad and Tobago in 2014, and China has made regular donations of equipment to both military and police forces in the region.

Defense sales of the PLA and Chinese military vendors has followed the trend of strategically-valued commercial sectors, in that they have generally competed on a price basis for relatively unsophisticated goods—such as military clothing and protective gear—in order to establish experience and relationships in the sector, which are then used to improve their product and expand their offerings to include more sophisticated items. China has often used donations of equipment, including dual-use vehicles such as buses and trucks, to strengthen relationships in the region and to move into new product areas. Such donations have played a particularly important role among militaries with limited resources, such as that of Bolivia, and among security forces in the Caribbean. Donations have also provided a useful way to introduce military products and defense officials from the PRC to pro-U.S. governments who would not otherwise buy Chinese equipment, such as Colombia. Such Chinese donations have gone not only to traditional military forces, but also to police and other security forces.

Chinese military companies, like their commercial counterparts, have become increasingly sophisticated in regional competition. In recent years, they have expanded their presence and the sophistication of their offering at military **tradeshows**, such as Fidae in Chile, LAAD in Brazil, and SitDef in Peru. Chinese companies have also had an increasingly sophisticated presence at the Chilean Navy-oriented trade show **Exponaval**, and two Chinese delegations came to the show in 2018.⁷ Chinese companies have also shown sophistication in their legal and contractual maneuvering in the region, including protesting lost bids in order to block them from being awarded to opponents, as they did in 2012 with the award of an **air defense system** in Peru.

The PRC has brought defense officials from virtually all of the countries in the Caribbean basin with which it maintains relationships to China for a variety of **courses**, ranging in length from days to a year or more. Reciprocally, courses to which the PRC sends its own personnel appear to be concentrated on those countries whose unique and respected institutions present particular opportunities for PLA learning, regardless of strategic geography or political alignment. In recent years, these have included the **Lanceros** special warfare school in Colombia, the **Brazilian Jungle Warfare School** in Manaus, and Brazil's peacekeeping

6. Off-the-record conversation with Argentine security expert, 2020.

7. Off-the-record interview with Chilean defense expert, 2019.

institution, **CCOPAB**. Nonetheless, a minimal willingness of the partner country to entertain such activities, despite U.S. concerns, has been a prerequisite.

With respect to military deployments in the region, as with military sales, the PLA has shown a disproportionate interest in the Caribbean basin. The Caribbean basin saw the only PLA peacekeeping deployment to the region, when they provided military police and others to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Haiti (MINUSTAH) from 2004 through 2012; moreover, all three of the visits by the PLA hospital ship **Peace Ark** (2011, 2015, and 2018–2019) have involved the Caribbean.

The PLA has also expanded its engagement with law enforcement entities in the region. China’s interest in “judicial and police cooperation” was mentioned in its **2008** and **2016** Latin America policy white papers. Its interest in working more closely with the region to fight organized crime and corruption was set forth in the 2019–2021 **China-CELAC plan**. The **expanding** presence of PRC-based companies in the region since 2009 has given the Chinese government a vested interest in security conditions on the ground, as well as ties with local law enforcement. Meanwhile, transpacific organized crime—including flows of drugs, precursor chemicals, and human trafficking from China, as well as trade-based and other money laundering in which Latin American criminal organizations involve Chinese partners and institutions—has created incentives for Latin American governments to expand work with their Chinese counterparts. **Collaboration** between the PRC and the government of Argentina against Chinese triad organizations operating in the greater Buenos Aires area was one of the more public examples of such joint efforts, although less public collaboration has occurred between the PRC and other police forces, such as national police in Panama.⁸ As noted previously, Chinese companies have also donated vehicles and other equipment to strengthen ties with police forces in the region, especially in the Caribbean.

Beyond official ties between Chinese and Latin American security forces, Chinese companies have increasingly been involving local private security as they expand their presence in the region, particularly in relatively dangerous areas. Chinese security companies, often formed by former PLA members, are consequently also seeking to leverage personal and business ties to Chinese companies to support them in their overseas operations. There are currently some 30 Chinese security companies **operating overseas**, although to date this has been more of a phenomenon in Asia and Africa than in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Impact of Covid-19 and the Evolving Strategic Environment

The Covid-19 pandemic has the **potential** to expand Chinese security engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, albeit indirectly and with some delay. The pandemic will create opportunities for PRC-based companies to expand their commercial presence in the region, with Chinese demand for the region’s commodities and agricultural exports increasing in relative importance. China’s economy is **projected** to show positive growth for 2020, while Latin America’s traditional markets—such as the United States, the European Union, and other parts of Latin America itself—continue to **suffer** from the pandemic. PRC-based companies will also have greater potential to expand their position in supply chains, filling in voids left by competitors who have shut down. Similarly, financially healthy Chinese firms, backed by financial institutions with money to lend, may have expanded opportunities to buy the assets of international companies selling their Latin American holdings to shore up their financial positions and pursue opportunities in more attractive markets (such as Asia). The combined result will likely be an expansion of Chinese companies in the region, with an associated increase in Chinese personnel and operations subject to regional po-

8. Off-the-record interview with Panamanian police official, November 2017.

litical and security conditions. To that end, those companies will likely face an environment with increased levels of criminal insecurity, social unrest, and possibly greater resentment toward the Chinese specifically, due to perceptions of China's contribution to the pandemic—from Chinese suppression of World Health Organization data about the virus, to later disputed claims that the PRC allowed travelers to leave Wuhan after announcing the curfew, to more damaging (albeit dubious) claims about the origins of the virus in a Chinese laboratory. The post-pandemic environment will thus generate incidents that increase PRC attention to conditions in the region, as well as possibly expanded police, private sector, and even military security cooperation. It could even generate the requirement for a PLA-supported non-combatant evacuation operation, as occurred previously in Libya and Yemen.

At the same time, China's increasing economic leverage—including Latin American states' need for its trade, loans, and investment—may expand the region's willingness to allow expanded Chinese security cooperation, despite U.S. discomfort. Indeed, the social unrest wrought by the pandemic, such as that already erupting in Chile and elsewhere, holds the potential to empower new populist governments which would be more receptive to work with the PRC on security matters. China's favorable economic performance relative to the West in recovering from Covid-19 may also embolden its leadership to take advantage of opportunities to engage in types of activities that it would not have previously done.

Recommendations

In responding to expanding Chinese security engagement in the region, the United States must respectfully, yet credibly, make a distinction to its regional partners between acceptable commercial engagement with China—conducted in a transparent fashion and on a level playing field, within the framework of equal opportunity and the rule of law—versus security engagement which creates risks for both those partners and the United States. While the United States should not attempt to forbid sovereign states in the region from security engagement with the PRC, it needs to convincingly lay out the risks involved. The United States must also explain, without seeming to threaten its partners, why such cooperation may restrict the ability of the United States to work with the partner institution on security cooperation matters that may be of even greater value, such as intelligence sharing and select arms sales, training activities, and exercises. At the same time, the United States must offer well-funded, agile, and credible alternatives. Doing so may require legal reforms to the current restrictions under the National Defense Authorization Act on how the Department of Defense (DoD) can engage with partner nations, along with the associated reporting requirements. It may also require long-delayed significant reforms to the Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing systems in order to reduce delays and provide greater flexibility in the U.S. ability to provide material solutions to partners in a timely and cost-competitive fashion.

To do all of these things effectively, and to inspire the region as a reliable partner and good example, the United States must also move quickly to get its own budgetary and economic house in order.

In seeking to limit or compete with Chinese security engagement in Latin America, the United States must apply a whole-of-government approach. Within each U.S. embassy team in the region, the military component must be attentive to the impact of the political and economic dynamics in the country and work to be the partner of choice. In evaluating the risk to its ongoing access, DoD can no longer assume that it is sufficient to meet partner needs in providing high quality equipment, training, exercises, and other forms of engagement; the political and personal influence accompanying China's expanding commercial activity in the country can impact who is in charge, as well as their policies, in ways that impact U.S. access despite successful performance of their missions “in their lanes.” Reciprocally, successful security cooperation support by the United States to its partners may limit corruption, strengthen institutions, or impair threat

actors in ways that help limit expanding Chinese influence and opportunities in the broader political relationship. As the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and other agencies create their strategies on country and theater levels, it is thus imperative that each agency look for ways in which it is impacted by, and can help, the others.

In anticipation of the probability that PRC engagement in the region will nonetheless continue to expand, the United States must also plan for its impact, and expect to counter activities by the PRC across the spectrum in a future global conflict. Such planning includes anticipation and preparation to counter PRC use of economic and personal leverage to prevent Latin American states from supporting the United States politically, economically, or logistically in such a conflict, or from cooperating with the United States in material ways, including not only the sending of forces but also the availability of intelligence, logistics, and security support in the region. The United States should have contingencies in place that realistically assess its ability to respond in Asia if disruptions to U.S. deployment or sustainment flows from Latin America occur due to PRC military action. The United States should also have plans regarding how to respond in the Western Hemisphere in order to protect itself against PRC actions there during wartime, such as PRC intelligence activities or attacks against the U.S. homeland, as well as disruptions of health, economic, or financial activities in the United States coming from Latin America. In planning for a conflict involving the PRC, the United States should realistically work through scenarios that go beyond those for U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and should take into account other areas in which PLA forces are operating. The United States should understand the potential for PLA operations in Latin American ports, airfields, and other facilities, and elaborate its options on how to respond, as well as study how this would affect the United States position in the lead up to, conduct of, and aftermath of a war in Asia, as mentioned in the first section of this paper.

This work has shown that Chinese security engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean follows logical imperatives to support the expanding capabilities and global reach of the PLA, as well as the strategic position of the PRC more broadly. It is consistent with the character and strategic aims of the PLA and Chinese state in other parts of the world, even while reflecting particular considerations germane to Latin America: its historical relationship and distance from the PRC and its proximity to the United States. It is important for Chinese security engagement in Latin America not to be treated as an isolated threat in the United States' "backyard," but rather as an integral part of the broader challenge that the PRC presents to the United States and the current world order, and thus that it correspondingly be addressed through a coherent global strategy. ■

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