— 11 —

China's Strategic Pursuits and Military Options in Latin America

R. Evan Ellis

The primary focus of a major war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) would likely be the Indo-Pacific. Historically, Beijing has focused on pursuing and protecting strategic interests close to home, including Taiwan and PRC maritime claims over the South and East China Seas.[1] Notably, the People's Republic of China has shown an increasing willingness to use limited force outside its home region through People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, PLA Navy support for the evacuation of Chinese personnel from Libya and Yemen, and the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti.[2] Additionally, the People's Republic of China provided some support to wars of national liberation in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s.

Nevertheless, PRC behavior, public statements, and military doctrine have de-emphasized the use of conventional forces in waging war far from home. Additionally, the People's Republic of China has historically been particularly cautious with respect to military activity close to its principal geopolitical rival, the United States. Thus, the proximity of Latin America to the United States—particularly Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and the northern part of the Andes Mountains—suggests PRC activities in the region, short of a major war, will continue to be cautious and limited, centered on protecting Chinese nationals

1. Paul H. B. Godwin, *From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capabilities Towards 2000* (National Defense University Press, 2000).

2. Tim Ditter et al., *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence: Changes in a Time of Global Shocks* (CNA Corporation, October 2024).

and core interests and advancing China's relationships and strategic position in ways that could be exploited in wartime.

Still, as a power with global interests and an increasingly global reach, the People's Republic of China inherently focuses a component of its security planning and engagement on Latin America and the Caribbean.[3] As in other parts of the world, PRC security-related activities in Latin America and the Caribbean include interrelated components oriented toward economic, political, and other strategic objectives in peacetime, as well as components oriented toward a possible large-scale war. Whereas open-source material regarding PRC thinking about wartime activities in Latin America is almost nonexistent, a reasonable picture can be assembled from Beijing's public statements and activities related to peacetime security engagement and broader military thinking. Wartime imperatives and opportunities in the region can also be inferred from the strategic geography of Latin America in relation to the United States and the Indo-Pacific.

This chapter crafts an assessment of China's regional thinking by examining how an established Asian conflict scenario would affect Latin America, exploring the trends that make this scenario possible, and forecasting future PRC activities in the region. The final subsection shifts the narrative back to the United States, proposing recommendations to mitigate the growing PRC influence in the US periphery.

Considerations for Latin America in a War with the People's Republic of China

Consistent with the scenario used in other chapters of this collaborative study, the present analysis assumes a period of Indo-Pacific tensions focused on Taiwan will occur, including an identifiable prehostilities phase. The analysis further assumes major combat operations will proceed between the People's Republic of China and opposing forces—operations that include a substantial role for the United States but do not lead to nuclear war. The PRC activities in Latin America discussed herein are also consistent with scenarios, such as a PRC blockade of Taiwan, that would require a major, sustained US military response in the Indo-Pacific.

In the aftermath of an initial engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the People's Republic of China would likely leverage Latin America and the Caribbean

3. R. Evan Ellis, "Preparing for PRC Military Actions in Latin America in the Context of a War in the Indo-Pacific," in *Expecting the Unexpected: Essays on Strategic Surprises in the 21st Century*, ed. Max Margulies and Patrick Sullivan (West Point Press, September 2025), 67–77.

as a supporting rather than primary theater of operations, focusing the main PRC effort closer to home. Nonetheless, the geography of Latin America and the Caribbean—relative to the United States and the People's Republic of China—creates strategic imperatives for limited PRC operations in the region. If the conflict were to continue to escalate, the region would become an important area in a major military conflict with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's major wartime imperatives in Latin America can be understood across six broad categories.

- blocking support for the war effort of the United States and its partners
- observing and collecting data on US operations
- putting US deployment and sustainment flows at risk
- exploiting access to space from the Western Hemisphere for offensive and defensive space operations, satellite operations, and space-domain awareness
- supporting PLA forces in the Western Hemisphere
- infiltrating and attacking the continental United States[4]

The following scenario envisions China's actions in Latin America across these six categories, accounting for varying levels of activity based on the limited Indo-Pacific conflict scenario established in this collaborative study.

China's War in Latin America: Scenario Spillover

As tensions escalate toward an initial kinetic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the People's Republic of China begins actively working to persuade Latin American governments to deny the United States cooperation in support of any war effort in the Indo-Pacific, just as China uses economic and other levers of power to pressure governments on issues of vital importance to China, such as the nonrecognition of Taiwan.[5] China primarily drives these efforts by leaning on the political relationships and leverage it holds over partners through commercial, financial, and personal ties. Specific Chinese actions include threats to call in loans and suspend major purchases of soy and other commodities critical to Argentina's exports. Similarly, the People's Republic of China threatens to suspend imports

4. Robert Evan Ellis, "The Strategic Role of Latin America in a Global Conflict over Taiwan," *Seguridad y Poder Terrestre* 2, no. 1 (January–March 2023): 113–31.

5. *Hearing on PRC Influence and the Status of Taiwan's Diplomatic Allies in the Western Hemisphere, Before the Subcomm. on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues of the S. Comm. on Foreign Relations*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Evan Ellis, senior associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies).

of key commodities—meat and soy from Brazil and copper and potassium nitrate from US ally Chile—which are key generators of export revenue for those countries.

In dealing with less cooperative nations, the People's Republic of China uses blackmail and thinly veiled threats to pursue its aims. Countless Latin American officials have benefited from side payments linked to authorizing deals with PRC-based companies in the region or have traveled to China on trips, during which the officials have received financial remuneration or other favors recorded by the PRC Ministry of State Security.[6] Countless other corrupt dealings by Latin American leaders in the region—including bribes, as well as conversations and visits with mistresses—have doubtlessly been transmitted via Huawei and Xiaomi phone lines, digitally captured during trips in Chinese Didi Chuxing taxis, or recorded in financial and other data stored in Huawei data centers in the region. Beijing's 2017 National Intelligence Law obliges Chinese companies to collaborate actively with and turn over records of interest to the Chinese state, giving the state access to all sensitive information. This access, in turn, enables the People's Republic of China to exert personal pressures that aim to achieve a range of effects: convincing Mexican security officials to raise superficial objections to, and ultimately deny, cooperation with the United States regarding the control of migrants flowing to the US border; causing otherwise cooperative regional officials in the Dominican Republic or Trinidad and Tobago to deny US military access to facilities in the Caribbean; causing Panamanian officials to obstruct cooperation the United States needs to identify threats to the Panama Canal; causing otherwise friendly Honduran officials to impede operations at the US forward operating location at Soto Cano Air Base; causing Peruvian officials to deny US access to areas close to the Chinese-operated port at Chancay; or denying US options to transit the waters of Argentina and Chile, make port calls in those countries, or obtain intelligence from their otherwise friendly governments.

In addition to its efforts in private, bilateral discussions, the People's Republic of China expands its information operations, targeting regional and intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization of American States and its subordinate institutions. These targeted operations are amplified by broader communications to Latin American populations through numerous sympathetic reporters in the region (including those who have benefited from paid trips to the People's Republic of China), as well as through newspapers and other media outlets that have benefited from significant paid advertising from PRC sources. China's information operations also include messaging through Chinese media such as the Xinhua News Agency and the China Global Television Network,

6. "Para Estados Unidos China juega sucio de la mano de la élite panameña," Expediente Público, April 10, 2025, https://www.expedientepublico.org/para-estados-unidos-china-juega-sucio-de-la-mano-de-la-elite-panamena/.

which have long provided content to numerous regional media outlets through content-sharing agreements. The messaging includes stories originating from those outlets, such as stories about what is happening in the Indo-Pacific conflict, about what is happening in the United States domestically, and about China's relationships with host Latin American governments relevant to the conflict. The general message to Latin American audiences is straightforward: The United States seeks to draw you into its unnecessary war of aggression, and any country that takes a nonneutral position will face economic and other consequences for aiding the US-led coalition of aggressors that seeks to impose its will on another region, just as the PRC has done in Latin America and the Caribbean.

With the US military response to the initial clash of arms still unclear, the People's Republic of China significantly increases its attempts to monitor US military and other war-related activities in and around the continental United States. This high-priority effort includes monitoring communications traffic and collecting electronic, acoustic, and other signatures of US and partner forces in the Western Hemisphere.

The People's Republic of China is prioritizing efforts to monitor and collect intelligence on US Eastern Seaboard facilities such as the headquarters of Joint Interagency Task Force South and Naval Air Station Jacksonville—as well as US operations in the Savannah, Georgia, and Norfolk, Virginia, areas—among others, using Chinese government and commercial facilities in the region. The collection facilities include PRC electronic-intelligence facilities in Cuba; PRC embassies in the Caribbean, including Beijing's outsize embassy in Antigua and Barbuda; and commercial sites with embedded PRC intelligence and other personnel.[7]

In the Pacific, the operation of PRC ports and other commercial facilities in Mexico provides the People's Republic of China with capabilities to monitor US military installations from San Diego northward. Additionally, the People's Republic of China is leveraging commercial facilities in northern Mexico to monitor US installations close to the US-Mexico border. This effort includes operating from the hundreds of facilities owned by PRC-based companies in the border region—facilities used for final-assembly operations and the warehousing of products destined for the US market. The People's Republic of China is also using CK Hutchison Holdings Limited–operated port facilities close to the United States, such as those in Tijuana and Ensenada, as well as digital infrastructure operated

7. Micah McCartney, "Map Shows China's Suspected Spy Bases in Cuba," *Newsweek*, updated June 19, 2026, https://www.newsweek.com/china-news-map-shows-suspected-spy-bases-cuba-1997464; and Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "China Building New Outpost on U.S. Doorstep, Leaked Documents Reveal," *Newsweek*, updated January 7, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/2024/05/17/china-caribbean-united-states-antigua-belt-road-diplomacy-debt-chinese-xi-jinping-rivalry-1891668.html.

by PRC-based companies such as Huawei and Lenovo. Beijing knows the Mexican and US governments will face difficulties in distinguishing between, on the one hand, technical personnel and equipment brought into China-operated facilities specifically for manufacturing and distribution, and, on the other, personnel actually affiliated with the Chinese military or security services.

Notably, PRC observational efforts also extend into space. Beijing has given the order to begin leveraging an array of facilities in the Western Hemisphere to track US satellites for targeting should the conflict escalate.[8] These sites include primary and secondary facilities for satellite tracking and control built by the People's Republic of China for both Venezuela and Bolivia, provided the facilities have not been removed by governments receptive to US leverage in those countries. The sites also include the Espacio Lejano Station near Neuquén, Argentina.[9] The geographic location of the PRC deep-space radar in Neuquén—as well as the facility's operation by China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, part of the People's Liberation Army—has allowed the site to serve as a hub for coordinating PRC space operations in the area.[10] Whereas the People's Republic of China is hesitant to escalate the conflict into space, the nation is still positioning assets to exploit access to the skies over the Western and Southern Hemispheres. Chinese assets support actions against US and allied satellites and enable offensive operations against the United States.[11]

Beyond observation, the People's Republic of China recognizes many US warships, military logistics vessels, and other ships would need to transit from the Atlantic or US Eastern Seaboard ports through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal in a major Indo-Pacific conflict. The People's Liberation Army has established a significant commercial presence along critical transit routes used by the US military, often leveraging substantial commercial and political influence, as well as security cooperation, with small Caribbean and other nations. For example, the People's Liberation Army's presence in hotels and port operations is particularly notable in the Bahamas and Antigua and Barbuda. The People's Liberation Army

8. Henry Ziemer, "To Prepare for a Pacific War, U.S. Must Harden Southern Flank," *The Maritime Executive*, November 16, 2024, https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/to-prepare-for-a-pacific-war-u-s-must-harden-southern-flank.

9. R. Evan Ellis, "China's Security Engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean," *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/chinas-security-engagement-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/.

10. R. Evan Ellis, *China – Argentina Space Engagement: Reconciling Science, Sovereignty and Strategic Risk*, REDCAEM Working Paper Series No. 40 (Red China and América Latina Enfoques Multidisciplinarios, May 2024).

11. *Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Posture of United States Northern Command and United States Southern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program, Before the S. Armed Services Comm.*, 119th Cong. (2025) (statement of Alvin Holsey, commander, United States Southern Command).

has similarly conducted numerous projects and constructed deep people-to-people relationships in Jamaica, Grenada, and Dominica, among other countries. As a result, the People's Republic of China is poised to leverage its physical presence, relationships, and technical knowledge to threaten US deployment and sustainment flows to the Indo-Pacific.

Building on its collection operations, the People's Republic of China is nesting special-forces teams in its embassies—including its large embassy facility in Antigua and Barbuda—and in China's logistics and other commercial facilities in the region, where these teams stand ready to attack or tag transiting vessels. Additionally, Beijing is staging capabilities to shut down the Panama Canal, if only temporarily.[12] In preparation for such an operation, the People's Republic of China has developed various options, including sinking a large cargo vessel at a choke point such as the canal's narrowest point, Gaillard Cut; collapsing one of the bridges spanning the canal; mining the canal; physically damaging the canal's locks; or electronically impairing the locks through the canal's mechanical-control and water-management systems. So far, China's plans remain contingencies. The People's Republic of China recognizes any such action, if attributable, would potentially escalate the conflict further, while also carrying secondary and tertiary implications for the global economy and damaging Beijing's global information campaign. Still, a delay of even several days in the transit of critical warships, heavy equipment, munitions, and other sustainment supplies into the theater could give the People's Liberation Army enough time to consolidate an invasion of Taiwan or secure other strategically decisive objectives.

If the People's Republic of China decides to disrupt operations in the Panama Canal, ships departing US Eastern Seaboard ports and transiting to the Indo-Pacific theater in support of the war effort would have to circumvent the canal. In turn, to complement actions against transits through the Caribbean and the canal, the PLA Navy is repositioning vessels toward a deep-water port in Argentina. These vessels are transiting from assignments in Europe, Africa, and other Atlantic regions, providing Beijing with a forward-deployed PLA Navy presence in Latin America. Concurrently, the People's Republic of China is leveraging its commercial presence in southern Argentina and Chile to identify and, if needed, target any US ships; monitor traffic; and possibly seek to deny transit around South America through the Strait of Magellan or the Drake Passage. The corresponding PRC narrative highlights China's increased naval presence as an economic-security endeavor designed to ensure the aggressive United States does not force its will on PRC-friendly nations or interdict critical PRC shipping vessels. Whereas direct naval hostilities might not be occurring

12. Gordon G. Chang, "China and America: The War over the Panama Canal," *The Gordon Chang Report* 1, no. 8 (February 2025).

in Latin America, the People's Republic of China has positioned critical capabilities and garnered the necessary influence to hamper drastically any movement of US naval capabilities from the Atlantic.

In the Pacific, China has begun conducting activities that place the US homeland at risk. To this end, the People's Liberation Army has begun positioning dual-use commercial vessels and special-operations teams at regional ports and other facilities operated by Chinese state-owned enterprises, an action the United States has condemned as an unnecessary escalation.[13] Most overt military operations—the staging of military equipment and PLA Navy vessels—are occurring at the Peruvian port of Chancay, which is operated exclusively by the PLA-affiliated, state-owned logistics giant China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company. Still, other Chinese-operated facilities in the region are being prepared to support military operations against the United States, including multiple ports operated by the PRC company CK Hutchison Holdings Limited on Mexico's Pacific coast and in Panama.

Naval staging is augmented by limited ground operations that emphasize plausible deniability. Just as the United States seeks to avoid a land war in Asia, China's direct action on the ground is meant to be disruptive, akin to gray-zone operations or tied to criminal activity. These efforts include the movement of small elements and equipment from embassies in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and possibly Colombia to port facilities and interdiction points along the Panama Canal route. Additionally, large numbers of military-age Chinese nationals have been attempting to cross the US border to infiltrate the United States. These individuals are logically positioning themselves to conduct attacks on US infrastructure or engage in other acts of terrorism, espionage, or sabotage should the conflict escalate. Importantly, the People's Republic of China would publicly condemn any such actions.

Takeaways from the Conflict

Overall, the People's Republic of China would use its military and other presence, relationships, and knowledge in Latin America to inhibit US and allied sustainment and force projection into the Indo-Pacific theater, disrupt US space and cyber operations, and put the US homeland and key allies at risk. To do so, Beijing would likely leverage its regional partners—including US-hostile regimes such as Cuba and Nicaragua, extrahemispheric US adversaries with a regional presence such as Russia and Iran, and nonstate actors such as Hezbollah, Colombia's National Liberation Army, and possibly other criminal and terrorist groups—to support PRC wartime objectives in ways China would probably not pursue in peacetime.[14]

13. Ziemer, "Pacific War."

14. Ellis, "War in the Indo-Pacific."

In this scenario, the forward presence and relationships of the People's Republic of China could provide Beijing with the opportunity to observe closely the initial US military actions in the conflict, which may well indicate larger movements. Information about US actions would create a window for disruptive operations against potential US military deployments. China's growing naval presence and capabilities in Latin America, as well as its more discreet land-based support through commercial entities and special-operations teams, provide Beijing with a viable means to extend an Indo-Pacific conflict into the Western Hemisphere, albeit as a supporting theater built based on a framework of disruption, delay, and denial.

Current PRC Trends and Posture

The previous scenario is possible because of Beijing's current efforts to gain access to and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Empirically, the People's Republic of China has continued to build military relationships and presence, engage in arms sales and gifts, and engage in the space domain in ways that could allow China to pursue its wartime strategic imperatives in the Western Hemisphere.[15] Beijing is expanding its commercial presence in the region, especially in strategic sectors such as digital technologies, ports, and space, and is partnering with academia and scientific institutions in those sectors. Beijing is also expanding its personal relationships with key government, academic, and commercial elites in the region, strengthening the PRC ability to exploit key opportunities and imperatives. The following section further examines these trends, aiming to understand China's future in Latin America.

Official PRC Policy and Thinking

The PRC government and Chinese military scholars have said almost nothing publicly about how Beijing might exploit its commercial and military presence in the Western Hemisphere in wartime. Scarce public evidence of Beijing following the imperatives of the strategic terrain and considering Western Hemisphere operations in wartime includes coverage of a November 2026 PLA war game in Xuchang (Henan province)—a war game involving simulated operations between PRC and opposing forces near Cuba, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean.[16]

As a supplement to such evidence, the People's Republic of China has highlighted the importance of global engagements in its official documents, including in its

15. R. Evan Ellis, "Chinese Military and Police Engagement in Latin America," in *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*, ed. Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen (Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, July 2022), 51–66, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/951/.

16. R. Evan Ellis, "China's Military Is Planning for Combat in Latin America," *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/chinas-military-is-planning-for-combat-in-latin-america/.

2025 white paper "China's National Security in the New Era."[17] Such highlights also appear in PRC military strategy and policy statements, as well as in the 2008 and 2016 policy white papers on Latin America.[18] An official PRC white paper on China's Global Security Initiative specifically mentions Beijing's interest in security engagement with Latin American multilateral institutions that exclude the United States, such as BRICS (a grouping composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.[19] At the May 2025 triennial senior leaders' meeting between the latter organization and the People's Republic of China, Beijing highlighted its commitment to expanding engagement in the security domain, including in the areas of cybersecurity and counternarcotics.[20] These documents and statements amplify long-standing trends in the region.

Arms Sales and Donations

The People's Republic of China has focused its arms transactions in Latin America on sales to anti-US regimes and gifts to smaller nations, creating goodwill, material dependencies, and long-term maintenance and training relationships with recipient countries. Beijing has sold Hongdu JL-8 fighters to Venezuela and Bolivia; radars to Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador; and military trucks and armored vehicles to Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina, among others. Additionally, the People's Republic of China has sold its Type 90B multiple launch rocket system to Peru, as well as an offshore patrol vessel to Trinidad and Tobago. Most recently, China has attempted to market its combat-tested Chengdu J-10 fighter aircraft to Brazil and Colombia.[21]

The People's Republic of China has donated, among other items, police cars and motorcycles to the Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Costa Rica; mobile bridges to the Colombian army; and tractors and ambulances to the Guyana Defence

17. Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Security in the New Era" (white paper, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 12, 2025).

18. "China Defense White Papers—1995-2019," *Andrew S. Erickson* (blog), July 23, 2019, https://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/07/china-defense-white-papers-1995-2019-download-complete-set-read-highlights-here/; and "Full Text of China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean," *People's Daily Online*, November 24, 2016, https://en.people.cn/n3/2016/1124/c90000-9146474.html.

19. "Full Text: The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," *Global Times*, February 21, 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285900.shtml.

20. Zhou Jin, "Joint Declaration, Action Plan New Milestones for Ties," *China Daily*, May 13, 2025, https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/611656; and "Full Text: President Xi's Keynote Speech at Opening Ceremony of 4th Ministerial Meeting of China-CELAC Forum," CGTN, May 13, 2025, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-05-13/Full-text-Xi-s-speech-at-4th-ministerial-meeting-of-China-CELAC-Forum-1DlxnWicLDi/p.html.

21. "China's J-10C Offer to Colombia Threatens to Shatter U.S. Hegemony in Latin American Skies," Defence Security Asia, May 19, 2025, https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/chinas-j-10c-offer-to-colombia-threatens-to-shatter-u-s-hegemony-in-latin-american-skies/.

Force.[22] China has also donated riot-control equipment to Panama, Costa Rica, and various other countries.

Recently, amid ongoing regional tensions, China sent a hospital ship into the Caribbean, making port calls in Jamaica and Barbados while US forces prepared for military intervention in Venezuela in January 2026. The Chinese deployment may have sought to collect signals and other intelligence on US forces.[23]

Military Diplomacy

Virtually all Latin American and Caribbean countries with which the People's Republic of China maintains military relations send students to participate in short security and other courses at the PLA National Defense University in Changping. Some countries also send students to participate in longer programs in military leadership and other subjects in Nanjing and elsewhere in China. Most recently, the People's Republic of China has begun hosting Latin American police forces for training, including personnel from Nicaragua and Peru.[24] Brazil, whose leftist government has taken particular strides to strengthen the country's military relationship with Beijing, has assigned three general officers as military attachés to Beijing, demonstrating its commitment to and interest in strengthening the military relationship.[25]

The People's Liberation Army also regularly sends personnel to Latin American countries for institutional visits, training, and other activities. At the beginning of the most recent term of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Beijing sent an unprecedented delegation of 17 general officers to visit Brazil's military leadership and institutions.[26] Chinese students have participated in courses at Latin America's premier training institutions, including the Lancero course for Colombian special forces and Brazil's Jungle Warfare School, and Beijing regularly sends delegations to war colleges in the region.[27] The PLA Navy has sent hospital ships

22. Ellis, "Military and Police Engagement."

23. "Jamaica to Get Healthcare Boost with Arrival of Chinese Naval Hospital Ship — Tufton," *Jamaica Observer*, November 27, 2025, https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/2025/11/27/jamaica-get-healthcare-boost-arrival-chinese-naval-hospital-ship-tufton/.

24. "Clausura del 'Curso de Capacitación para Oficiales Superiores e Intermedios de la Policía Nacional del Perú' en China," Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, November 14, 2019, https://www.gob.pe/institucion/rree/noticias/68667-clausura-del-curso-de-capacitacion-para-oficiales-superiores-e-intermedios-de-la-policia-nacional-del-peru-en-china.

25. Robbin Laird, "Is There a Military Pivot to China Underway by President Lula's Brazil?," Defense.info, August 8, 2025, https://defense.info/defense-decisions/2025/08/is-there-a-military-pivot-to-china-underway-by-president-lulas-brazil/.

26. Edilson Salgueiro, "Chinese Generals Are in Brazil," *The Rio Times*, June 6, 2023, https://www.riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/brazil/chinese-generals-are-in-brazil/.

27. For example, see R. Evan Ellis, "Peru's 'Active Neutrality' Between China and the West," *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/perus-active-neutrality-between-china-and-the-west/.

to Latin America and the Caribbean for military diplomacy four times; most recently, the PLA Navy sent ships to Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Caribbean in December 2025.[28] Notably, facing increased US pressure over military engagement with the People's Republic of China, a number of countries in the region, including Argentina and Mexico, have limited the presence of PLA students at their educational institutions.[29]

Space

In the space sector, the People's Republic of China continues to pursue active technical and personnel collaboration across Latin America and the Caribbean, including by inviting space professionals from Mexico, Colombia, and other parts of the region to participate in courses and programs in China.[30] Beijing has established data-sharing and other cooperation with Peru through the latter's membership in the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, has actively pursued a relationship with the new Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency, and has invited personnel from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and other countries to participate in China's project to establish a permanent base on the Moon by the 2030s. Since the 1990s, the People's Republic of China and Brazil have collaborated on the development and launch of satellites under the China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite program.[31] Most recently, in 2025, the Brazilian telecommunications company Telebras committed to cofund and launch a new constellation of microsatellites, Qianfan, giving the People's Republic of China access to Brazil's strategic equatorial-launch facility at Alcântara, where the United States has long operated.[32]

As with military engagements, several Latin American and Caribbean countries have restricted new PRC-linked space projects with the potential to be used for military purposes, possibly partly in response to US pressure. The countries' restrictions include the blocking of a stand-alone PRC astronomical facility

28. "Falmouth Set to Host Chinese Hospital Ship," *The Jamaican Blogs*, November 30, 2025, https://jablogz.com/2025/11/falmouth-set-to-host-chinese-hospital-ship/.

29. R. Evan Ellis, "Amid Trump Tariffs, Where Do China-Mexico Ties Stand?," *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/amid-trump-tariffs-where-do-china-mexico-ties-stand/.

30. Evan Ellis, "El avance de China en Colombia en tiempos de Gustavo Petro," *Infobae*, updated June 11, 2025, https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/06/10/el-avance-de-china-en-colombia-en-tiempos-de-gustavo-petro/.

31. R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Update," *Diálogo Américas*, February 21, 2024, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-update/.

32. Eduardo Baptista, "Chinese Rival to Starlink Strikes Deal to Enter Brazil," Reuters, updated November 20, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/technology/space/chinas-starlink-rival-agrees-deal-enter-brazilian-market-2024-11-20/.

at Ventarrones on Cerro Paranal, Chile, as well as a long-planned 40-meter-diameter radio telescope at the San Juan observatory in southern Argentina.[33]

Ports

The opening and expansion of the port of Chancay, operated exclusively by the PRC-based China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company, has been the most significant development concerning Latin American and Caribbean ports that could be used for military purposes.[34] In addition, the PRC government has effectively torpedoed an initiative by CK Hutchison Holdings Limited, a Hong Kong–based company, to sell 43 of its global port holdings, leaving the company in control of port operations in Panama, Mexico, the Bahamas, and Argentina—assets with possible military uses in a conflict with the United States.[35] Although in 2026, the Panamanian government subsequently ended Hutchison's concession for the two ports for other reasons.[36]

Complicating matters, China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited holds a 49 percent interest in the port at Kingston, Jamaica, as well as stakes in ports in Brazil, whereas China Harbour Engineering Company Limited is expanding the port of Corinto for the US-hostile Nicaraguan government, among other projects in the region.[37] Other projects that could have strategic military significance—such as a potential megaport complex at the port of La Union in the Gulf of Fonseca, complemented by a port and interoceanic connection linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Honduras—have not progressed.[38] A proposed commercial port in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, which may have given China options to observe and threaten ships transiting the Strait of Magellan (a strategic choke point), has been suspended.[39]

33. "Red Flagged by the U.S., Chile to Review Chinese Observatory Project in the Country as Beijing Woos Latin America," *The EurAsian Times*, March 20, 2025, https://www.eurasiantimes.com/red-flagged-by-the-u-s-chile-to-review-chinese/; and "Argentina canceló un millonario proyecto chino de observatorio espacial en San Juan," *El Esquiú*, November 4, 2025, https://www.elesquiu.com/nacionales/2025/11/4/argentina-cancelo-un-millonario-proyecto-chino-de-observatorio-espacial-en-san-juan-559917.html.

34. R. Evan Ellis, *Strategic Implication of the Chinese-Operated Port of Chancay*, REDCAEM Working Paper Series No. 42 (Red China and América Latina Enfoques Multidisciplinarios, November 2024).

35. "China Moves to Block CK Hutchison Deal: Protecting Strategic Port Influence," Container News, April 2, 2025, https://container-news.com/china-moves-to-block-ck-hutchison-deal/.

36. "Para Estados Unidos."

37. "Puerto Corinto será ampliado y modernizado por empresa china," *Nicaragua Investiga*, July 10, 2025, https://nicaraguainvestiga.com/economia/163070-puerto-corinto-ampliado-modernizado-empresa-china/.

38. Max Channon, "The Incredible £15.7bn Mega-Project That Would Rival the Panama Canal," *Express*, December 6, 2024, https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1984941/7-9bn-mega-project-rival-Panama-Canal.

39. R. Evan Ellis, *The Evolution of Chinese Engagement in Argentina Under Javier Milei* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2024).

Digital Sectors

Since the late 1990s, PRC-based companies have accumulated significant positions in Latin American and Caribbean digital infrastructure and services, including 3G, 4G, and 5G data networks; smartphones; data storage and cloud computing; commercial and home surveillance systems; customs scanners; port cranes; and even rideshare services such as those offered by the Chinese company Didi Chuxing.[40] The ubiquity of PRC equipment and service providers in the region's digital infrastructure is particularly concerning. China's 2017 National Intelligence Law and other laws oblige PRC-based companies such as Huawei to relinquish data and cooperate fully with the Chinese government regarding user data and other matters under the companies' purview when deemed relevant to national security.[41]

Digital technologies have been a principal focus of China's commercial advance in Latin America and elsewhere.[42] Whereas some countries, such as Costa Rica, have restricted Huawei from participating in their 5G networks, the PRC digital advance in the region continues to deepen.[43] The government of Mexico currently places sensitive data in the Huawei cloud, and other governments, such as that of Colombia, are considering easing restrictions on Chinese participation in their digital infrastructure.[44]

From a wartime perspective, PRC digital access creates opportunities for Beijing to capture US-relevant data passing through Latin American servers and to obtain information on the plans of Latin American countries in that context. Such access also increases the ability of Chinese intelligence services to obtain personal information on Latin American leaders. This information could be used to persuade or blackmail those leaders into restricting cooperation with the United States, providing information on US operations, working against the United States, or providing the People's Republic of China and other anti-US actors with access during wartime.

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40. Huawei Cloud, "Enhanced Huawei Cloud LATAM Ecosystem: Building a Digital Cloud Foundation to Amplify Intelligence Across Industries," news release, March 26, 2025, https://www.huaweicloud.com/intl/en-us/news/20250326231926071.html.

41. *Hearing on Safeguarding the Homeland: Examining Conflicts of Interest in Federal Contracting to Protect America's Future, Before the S. Comm. on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs*, 118th Cong. (2024) (statement of Rush Doshi, C. V. Starr senior fellow and director of the China Strategy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations).

42. Margaret Myers, "China's New Playbook for Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, October 14, 2025, https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/chinas-new-playbook-in-latin-america/.

43. Juan Pedro Tomás, "Costa Rican Court Suspends Exclusion of Huawei as a 5G Provider," *RCR Wireless News*, February 14, 2024, https://www.rcrwireless.com/20240214/featured/costa-rican-court-suspends-exclusion-huawei-5g-provider.

44. Evan Ellis, "El avance de China en México," *Infobae*, March 24, 2025, https://www.infobae.com/america/opinion/2025/03/24/el-avance-de-china-en-mexico/.

Chinese Influence Networks

Complementing the influence gained through PRC commercial engagements and digital penetration in Latin America, Beijing continues to expand its web of personal relationships and obligations in the region. In times of war, ties to Latin American actors give Beijing options to influence regional discourse in ways relevant to each nation's support for the United States or the People's Republic of China. China's ties also enable it to influence decisionmakers and others through relationships based on shared interest, obligation, and blackmail, encouraging regional actors to work against the United States—or to allow others to do so—in ways similar to those enabled by blackmail through access to digital data.

Chinese people-to-people networks in Latin America include thousands of students who are offered scholarships to study in the People's Republic of China. Many of these students are recruited through the region's 44 Confucius Institutes and 18 Confucius Classrooms.[45] These points of leverage include education in China funded directly by the PRC state, as well as programs sponsored by private entities, such as Huawei's Seeds for the Future program.[46]

The People's Republic of China also regularly brings reporters, academics, government workers, local and national politicians, and others to China for training and cultural exchange. In the most recent three-year plan between the People's Republic of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Beijing promised the region's politicians 3,500 scholarships for Latin America, 10,500 additional "training opportunities," and 300 opportunities to travel to China.[47] Through its local embassies and consulates and the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, the People's Republic of China also regularly reaches out to local business councils, China friendship organizations, and local Chinese communities.

Critical Resources

Supporting both wartime and peacetime requirements, Latin America is an important supplier of lithium, rare earth elements, and other materials the People's Republic of China needs for the weapons, command-and-control systems, and various devices that sustain the PRC economy. The region contains a significant

45. "Confucius Institutes Around the World – 2024," Dig Mandarin, updated October 12, 2024, https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html.

46. "Seeds for the Future: Inspiring Global Talent to Shape the Future," Huawei, n.d., accessed December 2, 2025, https://www.huawei.com/minisite/seeds-for-the-future/index.html.

47. "Wang Yi on Five Programs for the China-LAC Community with a Shared Future and Implementation Measures," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, updated May 14, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbzhd/202505/t20250515_11623588.html.

portion of global lithium resources, concentrated in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia.[48] Brazil also contains a substantial portion of the world's known reserves of rare earth elements, with those deposits currently under control of China Nonferrous Metal Mining (Group) Co., Ltd., a company partly owned by Chinese state capital.[49] Through its extractive operations in Latin America, as well as its broader ability to influence regional policy toward other producers operating there, the People's Republic of China has substantial leverage to restrict US access to lithium and rare earth minerals needed in both wartime and peacetime.

Takeaways from Current Trends

Currently, the People's Republic of China is using its diplomatic, economic, and security engagements in Latin America to expand its regional position, taking advantage of opportunities arising from changes in US regional policies. This effort includes expanding Chinese purchases of agricultural goods from countries such as Brazil, whose exports to the United States have been harmed by significant tariff increases imposed by Washington.[50] Beijing has similarly advanced a new Global Governance Initiative and a messaging campaign emphasizing China's image as a reliable and respectful partner, both of which seem designed to take advantage of the region's discontent with US policies and expand China's regional position.[51]

China's Possible Next Steps in Latin America

The People's Republic of China seems to be on a trajectory to continue deepening its military relationships, dual-use commercial presence, and digital and people-to-people networks in Latin America. These developments will give Beijing options in the region should a conflict with the United States break out in the Indo-Pacific, without requiring China to engage in direct confrontation with the United States through the establishment of formal military alliances or bases.

48. Monsalve William, "Lithium: Latin America's Precious White Gold in Dispute," *ColombiaOne*, January 16, 2026, https://colombiaone.com/2025/05/27/lithium-latin-america-china/.

49. Jorge C. Carrasco, "As China Tightens Its Grip on Rare Earths, Can Brazil Be an Alternative Source?," Rest of World, October 30, 2025, https://restofworld.org/2025/china-rare-earth-export-curb-brazil/; and "Chinese Mining Giant Secures Brazilian Rare Earth Company," *The Rio Times*, November 28, 2024, https://www.riotimesonline.com/chinese-mining-giant-secures-brazilian-rare-earth-powerhouse/.

50. Rafael Cardoso, "China Clears 183 Brazilian Companies to Export Coffee to the Country," Agência Brasil, August 4, 2025, https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/economia/noticia/2025-08/china-clears-183-brazilian-companies-export-coffee-country.

51. "The Global Governance Initiative Comes at the Right Time, Points the Way Forward, and Demonstrates Responsibility," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN, September 1, 2025, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202509/t20250904_11702287.htm; and Pedro Camacho, "China Claims Latin America Is as 'a Zone of Peace', Urges U.S. to Stop Interfering 'in Venezuela's Internal Affairs,'" *The Latin Times*, November 19, 2025, https://www.latintimes.com/china-claims-latin-america-zone-peace-urges-us-stop-interfering-venezuelas-internal-591765.

Still, this analysis can be taken one step further to forecast potential PRC actions in Latin America. The following list attempts to synthesize the current trends, identifying 12 potential PRC actions based on the established conflict scenario.

1. **The People's Republic of China will likely persuade one or more Caribbean nations, possibly St Vincent and Grenadines, to switch their diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China.** Then, Beijing will likely use the new relationship to expand its commercial presence and influence rapidly, followed by expanded military donations and invitations for partner personnel to travel to China for training activities. In this way, Beijing will expand its range of actors in the strategically important Caribbean region—actors with which the People's Liberation Army can position forces to observe and disrupt US deployment and sustainment flows in times of conflict.

2. **Beyond flipping the allegiance of some Caribbean states from Taiwan to China, Beijing will likely continue expanding its people-to-people relationships in the region.** This effort will likely focus on military and police forces in the Caribbean, as well as on expanding economic and personal leverage over Caribbean government and business elites. In doing so, the People's Republic of China will expand its potential methods of observing and disrupting US deployment and sustainment transits in the region during wartime.

3. **The People's Republic of China will likely continue expanding its commercial projects and logistics operations in Panama, as well as China's relationships with Panamanian business and government elites.** This initiative would expand China's potential methods of shutting down the Panama Canal in wartime, even as the United States expands its formal military facilities in Panama, such as by reopening the Jungle Warfare School.

4. **The People's Republic of China will likely continue to expand its people-to-people programs at all levels in the region.** The relationships nurtured through people-to-people programs give China's intelligence services opportunities to obtain information on and compromise business and political leaders in ways China can exploit for intelligence purposes. Such relationships may also be used to oblige these leaders to take actions that would benefit China in wartime, such as resisting US access or intelligence cooperation during a conflict, in the name of neutrality.

5. The People's Republic of China will likely seek to continue deepening its military relationships with anti-US partners such as Cuba and Nicaragua, facilitating PLA military operations from those partners' territories in times of conflict. This effort would include the further exploitation of PRC-operated electronic-intelligence facilities in Cuba, as well as the possible use of the Nicaraguan port of Corinto, Punta Huete Airport, or other facilities for military purposes in wartime, even without formal basing or alliance agreements.

6. The People's Republic of China will likely expand the deployment of military ships and delegations, including Beijing's new hospital ships, to the region. This action would aim to strengthen military relationships and China's awareness of the operational environment, supporting operations in times of conflict.

7. Absent an abrupt change of government in Brazil's November 2026 national elections, the People's Republic of China will likely continue deepening its strategic relationship with Brazil—China's principal military and strategic partner in the Western Hemisphere. Brazil will also likely remain Beijing's principal Latin American partner in global forums, including vehicles such as BRICS.

8. The People's Republic of China may seek to collaborate with Cuba, Russia, and other US adversaries to weaken pro-US governments in the region. This effort could bring to power new regimes more disposed to cooperate with Beijing and to limit interactions with the United States.

9. The People's Republic of China will likely invest significant resources in Peru to expand PRC influence through mutually reinforcing infrastructure projects in mining, land and maritime transportation, and other areas, increasing Beijing's leverage at all levels of government. China will also likely seek to dominate transpacific shipping by exploiting its control over the port of Chancay, leveraging China's cost advantage in shipping through Chancay to make competitor routes economically unviable. As a result, an increasing portion of Latin American maritime shipping to the Indo-Pacific would be routed through the China-owned port.

10. The People's Republic of China may simultaneously work surreptitiously to reinforce corruption and political fragmentation within the Peruvian government. This effort could apply leverage over Peruvian government officials to ensure Beijing's logistics champion China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company has the latitude, through Peruvian institutional weakness, to use the Chancay port for any military or other surreptitious activities.

11. The People's Republic of China will likely continue to expand its access to space facilities in the Western Hemisphere, particularly through Brazil and possibly through other manipulable partners, such as Peru and Suriname. This focus on space would improve China's ability to locate, track, and retain custody of US satellites in the skies over the Southern and Western Hemispheres, as well as to communicate with China's own offensive and defensive space assets.

12. The People's Republic of China will likely seek to exploit the region's dissatisfaction with US tariffs and other policies, encouraging partners to reject security and intelligence cooperation with the United States and expand their work with Beijing. This effort will be particularly noticeable in areas such as arms sales, gifts, people-to-people exchanges, base access, and humanitarian cooperation, providing Beijing with additional options in times of conflict.

Recommendations

The United States, together with its partners, should prepare for PRC military actions in Latin America and the Caribbean. This preparation should include anticipating logical PRC actions that would leverage China's commercial and other regional presence to persuade governments in the region not to cooperate with the United States. The US-led coalition should also anticipate PRC attempts to disrupt US deployment and sustainment through the Caribbean, to shut down the Panama Canal and passage through the Strait of Magellan, and to exploit access to ground-based space assets in the Western Hemisphere, targeting US satellites and supporting Chinese space operations. Finally, the coalition's preparation should include anticipating China's use of ports and other logistics facilities in the region to rearm and otherwise support PLA warships. To enable the coalition's preparatory efforts, this section offers four distinct recommendations.

First, where possible, the United States should coordinate with its regional partners on courses of action to (1) limit the ability of the People's Republic of China and other US adversaries to undertake the aforementioned actions and (2) ensure the United States and its partners can respond appropriately if those actions occur.

Second, the United States should expand its peacetime efforts to restrict the presence of PRC dual-use space, port, and other critical facilities in the region, as well as to increase partner transparency regarding facilities that cannot be blocked.

Third, the United States should do more to restrict PRC sources of intelligence and influence in Latin America and the Caribbean—sources Beijing could exploit in wartime to induce decisionmakers and others in the region to restrict US access and cooperation, act against US facilities, or allow others to do so. This effort should include applying diplomatic and commercial pressure, as well as other tools, to counter PRC people-to-people networks and digital presence in the region.

Finally, the partial success Beijing would likely have in blocking the United States' access to physical facilities, air and maritime transit, base access, and other forms of cooperation in Latin America should be considered in US planning for a potential conflict with the People's Republic of China. Governments that have significant economic and people-to-people ties with Beijing—and have expressed reservations about cooperating with the United States in other areas, such as US counterdrug initiatives in the Caribbean, including in Colombia and Brazil—might logically yield to PRC pressure not to cooperate with the United States or to deny it access to their territories and airspaces. Complicating matters, pro-US actors whose economies are deeply vulnerable to China, such as Peru, Guyana, and Jamaica, might adopt such a posture as well.

Conclusion

Understanding how the People's Republic of China could operate in the Western Hemisphere during a conflict, working with partners to respond to those operations, and pushing back against near-term PRC activities that strengthen Beijing's wartime options continue to be cornerstones of US national security and homeland defense. Whereas a direct military engagement in the region remains unlikely, the United States should act now to disrupt PRC initiatives in Latin America, mitigate their effects, and strengthen US deterrence in the Western Hemisphere.