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CHINA'S EXPANDING REACH

Latin American Engagement... With Chinese Characteristics

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TOPIC: CHINA ; ECONOMICS ; LATIN AMERICA



Over the past decade, China's advance in the Americas has become the focus of considerable attention, and for good reason. The footprint of the People's Republic of China (PRC) south of the U.S. border is steadily growing, typified by things like control of strategic ports in places such as Panama and Peru, an increasingly dominant role in the digital technology sectors of assorted regional states, and strategic facilities in both Central and South America.

This penetration has teed up a potentially significant clash with Washington. The Trump administration's November 2017 *National Security Strategy* commits the U.S. to resisting the influence of external actors such as the PRC in the Western Hemisphere, and to denying them control over strategic geography.[1] Along those lines, the Administration's recent actions have created a number of setbacks for the PRC in the Americas, including ending the China-friendly tenure of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela, terminating Panamanian port concessions to Hong Kong-based Hutchison, and halting the development of the China-Argentina Radiotelescope (CART).

Regional states have gotten the message, and there is now growing reluctance on the part of many governments to engage in military and other sensitive activities with China that might provoke Washington. And if U.S. pressure on Cuba ends up fundamentally changing its Communist regime, the PRC could lose access to the island as a base for intelligence collection and other operations in the strategic southeastern maritime approach of its greatest adversary.

Even so, China now has deep roots and extensive influence in the region. It is widely admired by many for its economic and technological achievements. A recent survey by AMLAT Radar, for instance, found that 36 percent of respondents in Latin America saw the PRC as the best model for development.[2] The U.S., meanwhile, finished in third place, behind Japan. Furthermore, in specific domains, 49 percent of respondents saw the PRC as the best partner for trade, versus 26 percent for the U.S., and 67 percent preferred the PRC for digital technologies, as compared to 19 percent for America. Tellingly, some 40 percent saw China as the best partner for cultural engagement (as compared to just 18 percent for the U.S.) in spite of the longstanding notion that U.S. popular culture is something of a secret soft power weapon for Washington.

Moreover, in the wake of changes in both the style and substance of U.S. foreign policy, the PRC is now in the process of adaptation. Officials in Beijing are simultaneously working to protect their government against risks and looking to exploit the potential opportunities created by the Trump administration's more confrontational approach, its use of tariffs, and cuts in funding for developmental and institution building programs, media outlets, and multilateral institutions, among other changes.

In the context of the Americas, this has meant broader, multi-spectrum engagement. The PRC's third White Paper on its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean, released just days after the U.S. *National Security Strategy*, details Beijing's continuing commitment to expanding its engagement in the region.[3] The initiatives highlighted in the paper, moreover, go far beyond

commerce to embrace cooperation in strategic technologies such as artificial intelligence and space, governance in multilateral institutions, coordination among political parties and legislators, and security coordination, including military and police training, cybersecurity, money laundering, and narcotrafficking.

Economics First

Still, PRC activities in Latin America are consistent with its broader global engagement, and have the same defining features – although contacts are naturally shaped by the domestic conditions that prevail in each Latin American country. Thus, China's commercial profile in Latin America has expanded exponentially since it was accepted into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. In 2025, PRC bilateral trade with the region exceeded \$565 billion [4], with China principally importing commodities, foodstuffs and other low-value added items while simultaneously pursuing other markets in strategic goods and services. By the early 2010s, however, the PRC had surpassed the United States to become the major trading partner for most Latin American states south of Costa Rica.[5]

Since the mid-2000s, Chinese firms have built an on-the-ground presence across extractive sectors, construction, telecommunication, manufacturing, and, increasingly, technology, banking, and logistics as well. And as these firms have become embedded in the region, clear patterns have emerged: coordination between the local government and PRC-based companies, conditioning financing on the use of those companies, leveraging stolen or state-subsidized technologies, and negotiating lopsided contracts that build monopolies in strategic sectors and capture them for Beijing.

To advance its commercial prospects, China has invested in building infrastructure across the region. Twenty-two Latin American and Caribbean states have joined the Belt & Road Initiative since Panama became the first regional state to sign on to the PRC's flagship foreign policy project in 2018.[6] China has built or controls numerous ports from Mexico and the Bahamas to Chancay, Peru, and multiple sites in Brazil.[7] It controls 57 percent of all electricity distribution in Chile (100 percent in the greater Lima area) and approximately 12 percent in Brazil. Additionally, China has built or supplied components for an estimated 60 percent of the region's telecommunications infrastructure.[8]

This infrastructure development is part of a broader strategy to establish a dominant presence across the region's most economically and strategically important sectors.

Mining and resources

Chinese firms are entrenched in Latin American mining, particularly in Peru and Chile. Important new projects include the Cangrejos gold and copper mine in El Oro, Ecuador and the Los Calatos and La Roya copper mines in Peru. PRC-based companies also operate less transparently in smaller scale projects; in Nicaragua, for instance, little-known Chinese firms hold concessions

amounting to 8.5% of the national territory.[9] Chinese firms have also established multiple lithium projects in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia, and a presence in rare earth mining in Brazil through the CBMM consortium. However, these projects have experienced varying degrees of success. Traditional mining projects have also brought with them challenges, including protests in Chinese-owned Peruvian mines and violence at Zijin's Burtica gold mine in Colombia that forced a temporary halt of operations there.[10]

Construction

In the construction sector, Chinese firms have shifted from state-to-state projects – like those in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia – to public-private partnerships in more market-oriented countries like Chile and Colombia. Similar to its mining projects, PRC construction sector activities have faced challenges. Corruption tied to Chinese contractors in Peru, dubbed the “China Construction Club,” has tainted a succession of presidents there.[11] The downfall of interim Peruvian President Jose Jeri was likewise driven by the appearance of improper relations with a Chinese businessman.[12] Peru, moreover, is not alone. For instance, Costa Rica's Route 32 remains incomplete nearly a decade after breaking ground in 2017, while China Railway Construction Corporation was suspended from Chile's Highway 5 project, and Bolivia rejected Sinohydro's work on the Cochabamba-Santa Cruz highway over quality failures.[13]

Power, vehicles, and telecom

In the electricity sector, Chinese firms such as State Grid, China Three Gorges, State Power Investment Corporation, and China Power have captured a significant portion of the region's hydro, solar, and wind generation projects, as well as industrial batteries and long-distance transmission. BYD and other Chinese automakers now control roughly 85 percent of regional EV sales, as well as the market for electric buses.[14] In the telecommunications sector, Huawei and ZTE have operated in Latin America since the late 1990s as vendors of smartphones and other equipment, and as builders of telecommunications infrastructure for governments and private companies. Other PRC-based digital equipment providers (such as Xiaomi, Oppo, and the Huawei spinoff Honor) have recently made notable gains in the region as well.

Surveillance and space

Beijing has developed “smart city” projects in Ecuador and Bolivia and is currently working on a nationwide project in Guyana. In the private sector, PRC-based companies such as Hikvision and Dahua have become major suppliers for corporate and home surveillance, raising digital vulnerability concerns due to the images, sound, biometrics, and other data that are uploaded from those systems to remote servers.[15] Beijing is also investing heavily in Latin America's space infrastructure. For example, China built a radar facility in Argentina's Neuquén province staffed by Chinese military-affiliated personnel, with only sporadic Argentine oversight.[16] The PRC additionally built and launched satellites for Venezuela, Bolivia, and Brazil (the latter under

the Chinese Brazil Earth Research Satellite (CBERS) program) while training their space personnel and gaining access to their ground control facilities. The Brazilian government, meanwhile, has also given the PRC-based company Space Sail access to its Alcantara launch site for a new constellation of microsatellites that will put PRC-controlled data link and other capabilities into the skies over the Western Hemisphere.[17] Furthermore, Beijing cooperates with Peru through the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) and courts Colombian and Mexican space personnel with the lure of participation in plans to establish a base on the moon by 2035.[18]

AI and robotics

Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics is the newest area of PRC engagement in Latin America – albeit one with significant implications. Alibaba opened its first cloud in Mexico City in 2025; meanwhile, Huawei is investing in Brazilian and Mexican cloud services and AI compute capacity and has launched its Xinghe AI Fabric networking architecture in the region.[19] On the robotics side, Huawei mining robots now operate in Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, while State Grid has deployed power-line maintenance robots in Chile to support its electrical transmission infrastructure there.[20] China's Solix, meanwhile, is pioneering the use of agricultural robots in Brazil.[21] Much like they've done with smartphones and EVs, PRC-based companies can deploy new products fusing AI and robotics and use low cost features to rapidly capture market share in Latin America for industrial, transport, and security applications – locking in standards and scale advantages over Western competitors like Tesla.

China's expanding commerce with and investment in Latin America translates into influence among Latin American businesspeople and politicians hoping for country, corporate or personal benefit from their partnerships with the PRC. Meanwhile, Chinese companies are able to expand their presence across key sectors, locking in market positions through the elimination of competition and the setting of technology and other standards.

The Politics of Presence

Beijing backs its commercial objectives with political engagement at the national, subnational, and multilateral level.

At the national level, the PRC holds “comprehensive strategic partnerships” with 12 states in the region, with several anchored by standing bilateral working groups to facilitate and deepen cooperation. In the seven countries in the hemisphere where Beijing lacks diplomatic relations, it employs third countries or major state-affiliated Chinese companies to pursue its agenda. In Guatemala, which recognizes Taiwan, China's ambassador to Costa Rica makes periodic visits to recruit Guatemalan legislators for trips to China, using Beijing's observer status at the Guatemala City-based Central American Parliament to gain access to the country.[22] In Paraguay, which

also recognizes Taiwan, Huawei was caught using two of its employees and a company car to spy on the Taiwanese ambassador in Asunción.[23]

At the sub-national level, China has created numerous “sister city” and “sister province” relationships that it uses to invite Latin American officials to China and provide them other benefits in order to advance its objectives. For example, in Argentina, the governor of the Jujuy Province traveled to China three times by 2018.[24]

Multilaterally, meanwhile, China has held observer status in the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2004 and a seat on the board of the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB) since 2009, where it reportedly uses its participation to influence the organization’s studies and policing.[25] The PRC’s preferred instrument for multilateral engagement, however, is the China-CELAC forum, which brings together the sovereign states of Latin America and the Caribbean without the U.S. or Canada present. The PRC uses the organization’s quasi-annual high-level summits to socialize and advance its agenda with regional leaders. It has also formed multiple ancillary forums on defense, space, and disaster relief to work in strategic sectors.

Influence and People-to-People Ties

At the heart of PRC influence is the allure of opportunity: regional governments, companies, and individuals are courted by the PRC and enticed with benefits, including access to the Chinese market, partnerships with Chinese firms, and sponsored travel to China. While the problematic record of PRC-based companies in the region is generally well-understood, the calculus of political and commercial leaders is complicated by two factors: a lack of transparency around Chinese entities and their dealings in the region, and a reluctance among those who benefit most from Chinese cooperation to criticize Beijing openly, for fear of jeopardizing their own access.

Much of this courtship happens through people-to-people networks. The PRC is known to bring thousands of regional journalists, think-tank professionals, legislators, judges, and security officials on state-sponsored trips to China annually.[26] Indeed, a study by the Atlantic Council found that the number of people brought on such programs increased tenfold in the 2010s.[27] Additionally, scholarships for academic and language study in China, made available through assorted “Confucius Institutes,” are a critical gateway for these people-to-people initiatives.[28] Given the limited number of people with Chinese language skills or PRC experience in Latin America, those who complete these programs are well positioned to obtain important PRC-facing positions in regional governments and major companies – giving Beijing leverage at the highest level, insofar as those hired effectively owe their education and professional careers to the Chinese government.

Beyond this courtship, the PRC, through its embassies and Ministry of State Security (MSS), maintains a web of relationships within the Latin American countries themselves. For instance,

Chinese officials conduct outreach to PRC-friendly elites such as those in the “China” caucuses of Latin American legislatures, “Business Councils” oriented toward the Chinese market and partnerships there, and the ethnic Chinese diaspora looking for consular services or other help. That diaspora outreach has produced a network of unofficial, non-transparent “police stations” that can be used to monitor and coercively influence the behavior of local ethnic Chinese communities.

Latin America as a Strategic Front

Although Beijing has no formal military bases or alliance agreements in the Western Hemisphere, its commercial presence gives the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Ministry of State Security (MSS) options they could exploit in the event of a major conflict with the United States.

Thus, Chinese access to electronics and signals intelligence facilities in Bejucal and other sites in Cuba could enable the collection of information from the electronic emissions and signatures of U.S. ships, planes, and facilities, such as the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) facility that lies just miles north of Cuba, in Key West, Florida. PRC personnel could also operate covertly out of sites in Cuba or Caribbean islands that have a substantial Chinese commercial presence and government relations (for instance, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Grenada, Dominica, or Jamaica) to interdict U.S. naval combatant or military logistics ships through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal to the Pacific.

In the Panama Canal zone, PRC-based entities continue to retain a substantial footprint through China’s maritime logistics company COSCO, its construction company China Harbour, and numerous PRC-based firms with warehousing and distribution areas – a presence that could enable sabotage of the canal, including damage to water management or control systems, mining of the canal, or the sinking a large ship at the narrowest point, known as Culebra Cut, among other options.

In space, PRC facilities in Neuquén and ground control stations in Venezuela and Bolivia could help locate, jam, or intercept U.S. satellite signals, or potentially support Chinese offensive space-based systems.

In the Eastern Pacific, COSCO’s exclusive operation of the port of Chancay could allow covert rearmament and resupply of PLA Navy vessels, extending Chinese naval reach toward the continental United States. Closer to the U.S., China could similarly exploit facilities in PRC-aligned Nicaragua to threaten the U.S. homeland; these include the Port of Corinto and nearby Punta Huete airport, which has a runway long enough to recover and launch Chinese military aircraft.[29]

At the U.S.-Mexico border, the PLA or MSS could infiltrate personnel onto U.S. soil in order to spy on or attack strategic facilities. The tens of thousands of military-aged Chinese males who are

known to have crossed the border already amply illustrate the potential risk.[30]

What It All Means

Although the current U.S. pushback against PRC activities in Latin America has produced tangible results, over the long-term the shift in America's approach may be insufficient to halt that advance and may even end up facilitating it.

Commercially, even strongly U.S.-aligned governments, like that of Jose Kast in Chile and Javier Milei in Argentina, have been reluctant to jeopardize trade and investment ties with Beijing in order to satisfy Washington. At the same time, U.S. trade actions against China have pushed Beijing to buy more from Latin American producers, thereby deepening PRC leverage over those exporters, while higher U.S. tariffs on Latin American imports have created barriers that complicate Washington's own effort to encourage regional investment by U.S. companies.

U.S. tariffs and threats against governments in the region have also spurred diversification away from Washington – with some turning to Europe while others seek stronger ties to China. Reduced U.S. engagement with institutions like the United Nations and the Organization of American States may also allow Beijing to shape institutional norms virtually without meaningful opposition.

Other U.S. policies have accentuated this shift. These include cuts to development aid and educational scholarships, a perceived retreat from democracy and human rights promotion in favor of a more “transactional” approach, and government rhetoric and actions in areas such as immigration that may decrease partner incentives to “stay with” the U.S. and otherwise erode goodwill. Similarly, U.S. defunding of informational programs, including those for broadcasting as well as universities and think tanks in the region, arguably decreases public knowledge about the risks associated with partnership with China, thereby further enabling its advance.

That should be cause for alarm. No region of the world more directly impacts U.S. security and prosperity than Latin America and the Caribbean. It is therefore imperative that we continually calibrate the effectiveness of our response to China's advance in the hemisphere, in order to ensure that the unintended long-term consequences of our foreign policy do not outweigh its short-term gains.

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