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Lessons for Latin America from PRC Moves Against Taiwan

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This week's attempt by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to [intimidate the U.S. government](#), the democratic Republic of Taiwan, and its neighbors should be a clear warning for Latin America as they welcome PRC loans, investments, and other initiatives that expand China's presence in, and influence over their economies, institutions and political systems.

In marketing itself to Latin America, the PRC often speaks in respectful platitudes about "[win-win relationships](#)" and its [respect for the sovereignty](#) of its partners. By contrast to such false discourse, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) [aggression toward Taiwan](#) this week shows Latin America how the PRC behaves when it feels itself in a position of power, and what Latin America can expect as PRC leverage over the economies and political systems of the region grow in the future.

U.S Congressional delegations have [regularly visited Taiwan](#) since Communist forces displaced the nationalist government from the mainland in 1949.

In response to the August 2022 US Congressional delegation [led by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi](#), however, the PRC sent over [13 warships](#) and [100 PLA military aircraft](#) across the Taiwan straits to simulate a PRC invasion, [49 of which crossed](#) the "median line" in the Taiwan straits between the two countries.

The PRC fired [11 ballistic missiles](#), five of which landed in Japan's [exclusive economic zone](#).

Such PRC aggression and its arrogant disregard for its treaty commitments, rights, and the legitimate positions of those who stand in its way is the norm where the PRC feels itself powerful.

The PRC has disregarded the [United Nations Law of the Sea](#) in its "nine-dashed-line" [maritime claims](#) virtually up to the doorstep of its Asian neighbors, transformed reefs and shoals in contested areas [into military bases](#) for its forces, and used the PRC Coast Guard and "[maritime militia](#)" to displace the commercial and other vessels of those who would dare to object.

Once it became powerful enough, it [threw out its 1997 treaty](#) commitments to Great Britain on Hong Kong, crushed democratic resistance there, and eliminated most of the enclave's independence. It imprisoned [more than 2 million ethnic Uighurs](#) in Xinjian in "re-education camps," and has [embraced Russia's invasion](#) of the Ukraine.

From Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) to China's lesser diplomats, arrogant "[wolf warrior](#)" [diplomacy](#) is increasingly the rule, not the exception.

PRC bullying over the Pelosi visit is consistent with its increasingly harsh reactions to those who have dared to defy it elsewhere, including its cutoff of purchases of [Argentine soybeans in 2010](#) when that government dared to impose sanctions against Chinese manufacturers dumping goods into the Argentine market prejudicing Argentine manufacturers.

They also include the 2011 PRC cutoff of cooperation with Mexico when then President Felipe Calderon dared to [receive the Dali Lama](#), as well as the its ruthless imposition of broad economic [sanctions against Australia](#) in 2021 when that nation dared to call for an investigation into the Wuhan origins of COVID-19.

The PRC once feigned deference to its neighbors in Asia, just as it does in Latin America. The key predictor of the PRC switch from platitudes to ruthless arrogance in the pursuit of its objectives in a region is arguably its attainment of power and influence.

Latin Americans must remember this lesson as PRC-based companies become increasingly influential with [\\$160 billion](#) in business ownership stakes in the region, [more than \\$138 billion](#) in policy bank loans, [\\$170 billion of purchases](#) of the region's commodities in 2021, paid trips for Latin American elites to travel to the PRC, [thousands of scholarships](#) to study in the PRC, and an expanding PRC voice in regional institutions such as CELAC and the [Interamerican Development Bank](#).

The PRC's present aggression toward Taiwan should not be dismissed as a failure because Speaker Nancy Pelosi's plane successfully [slunk into Taipei](#). Rather, it is part of a pattern of brutal PRC rhetoric and actions, aimed at those observing, as much as those directly targeted, to drive those observers into future self-censorship and self-restraint to avoid "offending" the PRC.

Latin Americans and others, understanding the PRC reputation for vindictiveness, regularly fall into this trap. How many Latin American political and business leaders or others temper their criticisms of the authoritarian PRC political system, PRC repression in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, or its military activities against Taiwan, or avoid expressing such sentiments in public to avoid damaging "business interests" or "relationships" that they have with the PRC?

It is fashionable in Latin America to deflect warnings about PRC predatory behavior by arguing that the region [should not have to "choose"](#) between the U.S. and PRC, or that the United States has not always been respectful of the [sovereignty](#) of governments in the region. Yet in the U.S., permitting criticism of those who disagree with its policies, both at home, and abroad, has always been sacrosanct, even as similar criticism becomes increasingly impossible in China.

Latin Americans who harshly criticize the U.S., in ways they would never dare to do with the PRC, should reflect on what will happen to such liberties as their political leaders, media organizations and employers become increasingly dependent on PRC money.

The brutal PRC attempts to intimidate the U.S., Taiwan and its neighbors are a reminder of the type of partner that their elites are opening the door to, in exchange for projects that provide short-term benefits to those fortunate enough to sign the deals, yet which repeatedly have not provided enduring value to the region.

The Western democratic rules-based international order often seems more chaotic than the PRC system. Western governments and private sector are often slower in writing checks until they see that projects make sense for the country, rather than simply [ensuring that they get paid](#), regardless of how the project turns out, as is [too often the PRC modus operandi](#).

Indeed, Western institutions often put inconvenient but important conditions on loans like transparency and good governance, yet receive very little credit among average Latin Americans for the positive effect on the region of insisting on such items.

PRC behavior in Taiwan should remind Latin America that its self-interest involves more than selling itself to the highest bidder. The region's future security, prosperity, and democracy will be profoundly affected by who it empowers by letting them into their circle of trust.

This article is published concurrently in Spanish at [InfoBAE](#).

Dr. Ellis is Latin America Research Professor with the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. The views expressed herein are strictly his own. His work focuses on security and defense issues, including transnational organized crime, populism and the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has published over 330 works, including five books and has presented his work in 27 countries. Dr. Ellis previously served as on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff (S/P) with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean (WHA), as well as International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) issues. He has testified on multiple occasions regarding Latin America and the Caribbean before the U.S. Congress and his work regularly appears in the media in both the U.S. and the region. Through his work, Dr. Ellis calls attention to the strategic importance of Latin America and the Caribbean for the United States through bonds of geography, commerce and family and how the prosperity and security of the U.S. are tied to that of its partners in the region. Dr. Ellis has also been awarded the Order of Military Merit José María Córdova by the Colombian government for his scholarship on security issues in the region.

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