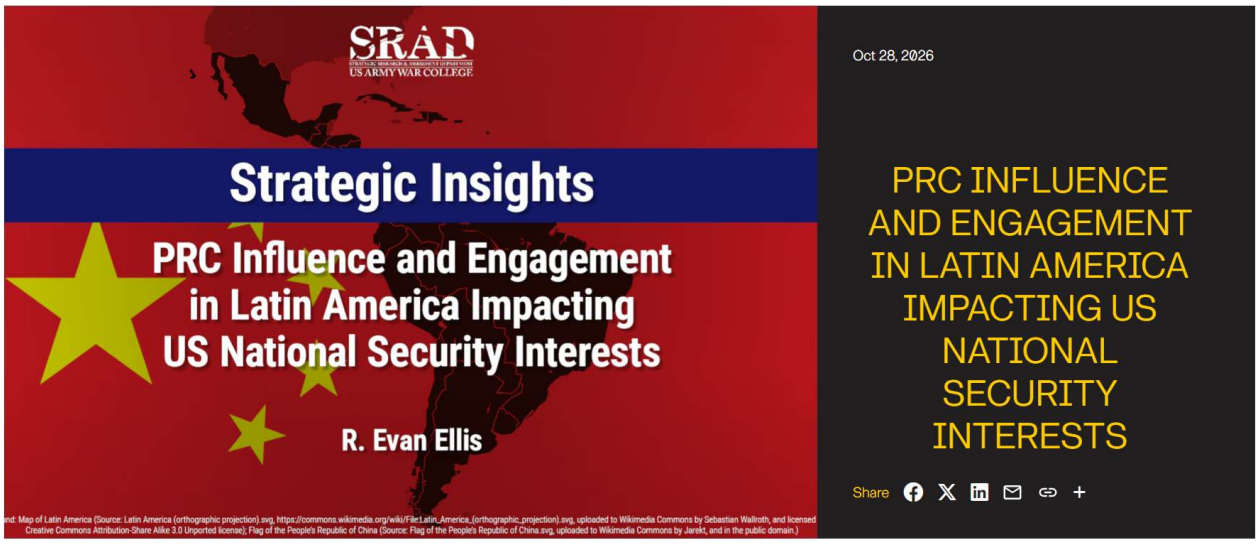
https://www.army.edu/News/View/Article/4635438/prc-influence-and-engagement-in-latin-america-impacting-us-national-security-in/



R. Evan Ellis

Introduction

The 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* commits to resisting the influence of extra-hemispheric actors in Latin America and the Caribbean and to preventing their presence in the region's strategic geography. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is generally understood as the focus of those efforts. The new *Latinobarometro* survey, released in October 2026, shows that influence vis-à-vis the United States has increased significantly over the last six years. The share of respondents viewing Chinese influence positively increased from 48 percent to 65 percent, while the share viewing US influence positively declined from 60 percent to 57 percent.

Although commercial transactions dominate PRC activities in Latin America and the Caribbean are dominated by, that focus, including in China's own policy documents, increasingly includes PRC attention to noncommercial engagement. The PRC's third policy white paper toward Latin America, released just days after the publication of the 2025 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, acknowledges and endorses expanding PRC engagement with the region in political and military domains and in sensitive technologies in sectors (such as telecommunications, super intelligence, and space), and in "people-to-people" interactions. All of these, particularly people-to-people engagements, can open up opportunities for expanded Chinese leverage and espionage, with strategic implications.

The relationship between expanding activities in Latin America and threats to US national security is often not specified clearly. They include multiple reinforcing types of activities that generate options for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the region in time of war, as

well as leverage and collection opportunities for PRC intelligence services, such as the Ministry of State Security (MSS), in peacetime and during armed conflict:

- Arms sales, gifts, training, and other relationships with military and other security organizations in the region;
- Military-civilian dual-use facilities such as ports, space sites, and communications facilities;
- Commercial facilities located close to the United States and in strategic geographies in the region;
- Cooperation in strategic technology sectors, including telecommunications, cloud computing, super intelligence, and space, which affords the PRC access for intelligence gathering and leverage over key personnel;
- People-to-people relationships, also affording intelligence and leverage; and
- Broader commercial, media, and personal influence dynamics that can impact the political course of a country, and with it, access by the United States, the PRC, and other US adversaries.

The purpose of this article is to review recent PRC advances relevant to US and other national security planners within this threat framework and to provide insights into the evolution of those challenges.

Arms Sales, Gifts, Training, and Other Relationships with Security Organizations

During the past two decades, by contrast to successes in Africa and other parts of the world, the PRC has had only limited success in selling sophisticated military platforms and systems to the region. It has, however, built significant relationships with military and police entities through sales, donations of dual-use items (such as trucks, engineering equipment, and motorcycles), training programs for Latin American and Caribbean military and police in the PRC, regular institutional visits, and periodic military deployments to the region.

With respect to arms sales, previous PRC advances principally involved sales to leftist governments, including sales of K-8 fighter aircraft and JYL-1 and JY-27A radars to the Hugo Chavez government in Venezuela; 709 military trucks, 10,000 rifles, and YLC-2V and YLC-18 radars to the anti-US Rafael Correa government in Ecuador; and six K-8 fighter aircraft, six Z-9/H-425 helicopters, and 31 armored vehicles to Bolivia, among others.

PRC-based military companies such as Norinco and CATIC are also frequently present at military shows in the region and have had limited successes selling arms to more neutrally

positioned governments, including 27 T-90 multiple launch rocket systems to Peru, an offshore patrol vessel (OPV) to Trinidad and Tobago, and four WMZ-551 armored vehicles to Argentina.

As the United States increasingly worked to persuade its partners in the region not to acquire Chinese equipment and the long-term training, maintenance, and other relationships inherent in such sales, PRC attempts to sell its FC-1/JF-17 fighter to Argentina and L-15 fighter to Uruguay were unsuccessful. Following the relatively positive performance of its J-10 fighters in combat between India and Pakistan in May 2025, the PRC sought to sell the aircraft, on generous terms, to Colombia and Brazil, but the sales were ultimately unsuccessful. PRC equipment donations in the region have been widespread, including to police forces and militaries.

For the militaries in the region, such donations have usually involved lower-end or dual-use equipment. It has, for example, donated military trucks to Uruguay (2017 and 2024), Bolivia (2018), and Peru (2019). It has donated military bridging equipment to Colombia (2013) and military tractors and engineering equipment to Guyana (2017), Uruguay (2018), and Peru (2019). It has donated military ambulances to Suriname (2016), Guyana (2017), Uruguay (2018), and Peru (2019), among others.

For police forces, the most common major gifts have been police cars, motorcycles, and protective gear. The PRC has donated police cars to at least eight countries in the region, including Costa Rica (2009 and 2012), Guyana (2017), Grenada (2017), Suriname (2017 and 2025), and Argentina (2018). In August 2026, it offered to donate police patrol pickup trucks to Ecuador's US-friendly Noboa government.

Beyond four-wheeled vehicles, the PRC has donated police motorcycles to at least eight countries: Argentina (2018), Costa Rica (2021), Dominica (2013), the Dominican Republic (2020), Guyana (2014 and 2017), Nicaragua (2025), Panama (2022), and Trinidad and Tobago (2019).

It has donated protective equipment such as vests, helmets, and shields to at least nine countries in the region: Argentina (2018), Costa Rica (2021), Guyana (2017), Jamaica (2011), Nicaragua (2022), Panama (2024), Peru (2025), Suriname (2016), and Uruguay (2020).

https://www.army.edu/News/View/Article/4635438/prc-influence-and-engagement-in-latin-america-impacting-us-national-security-in/

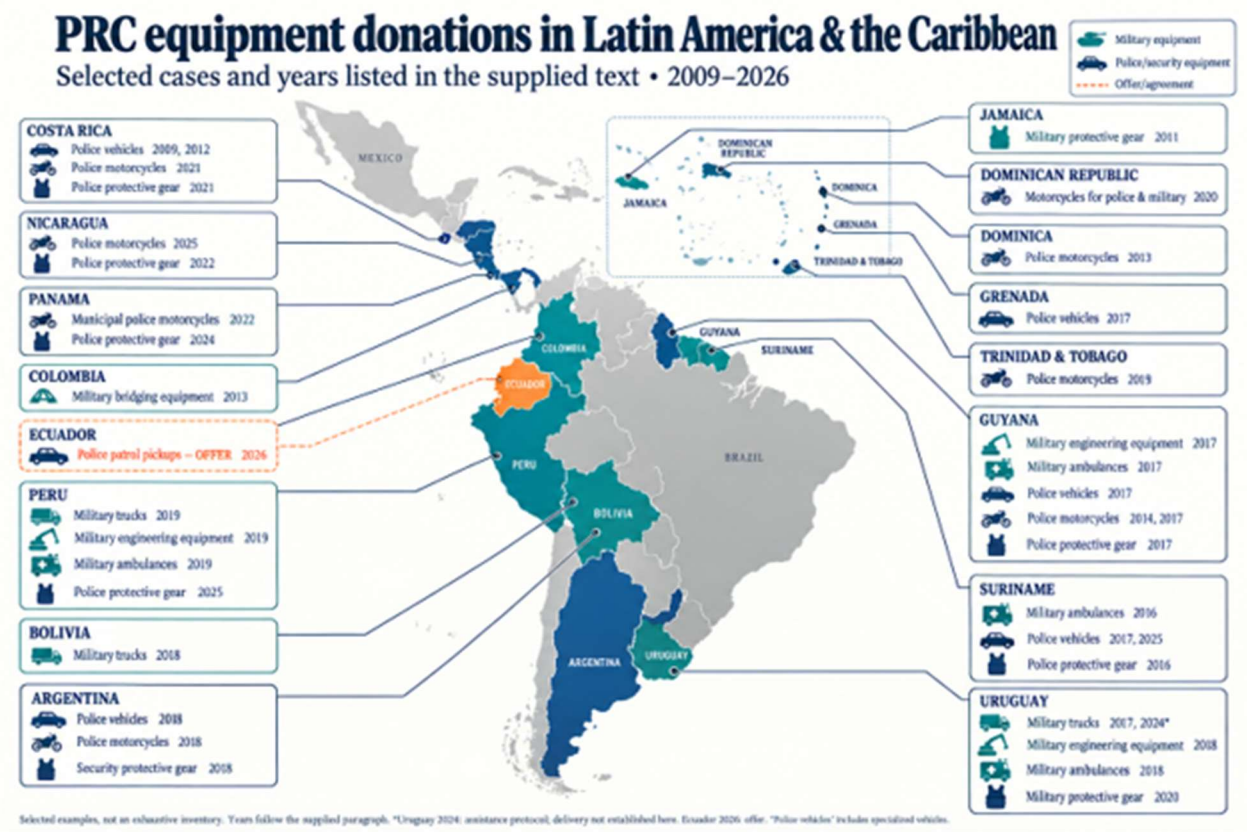


Figure 1. PRC equipment donations to Latin American and Caribbean armed forces and police
(Source: Created by ChatGPT based on prompts provided by the author.)

Such donations arguably foster bonds of gratitude between police forces facing severe equipment shortages and provide engagement opportunities for the Chinese.

The PRC has also occasionally offered electronics systems, including to Costa Rica in November 2018, creating opportunities for PRC access to the national systems to which they connect.

With respect to personnel training programs, the PRC has expanded its offerings in recent years.

For military education and training, in addition to offering multi-week courses at the PLA National Defense University in Changping, it now holds multi-month command and general staff programs there, as well as courses offered at the PLA Command College in Nanjing and a Special Operations facility in Shijiazhuang, among other sites.

With respect to law enforcement training, since September 2024, when the PRC held the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum in Lianyungang, China, it has expanded the

number of training courses held in China for police officials. Facilities include a People's Armed Police (PAP) facility in Tianjin, to which Peru sent 20 students in 2024, among others.

Reciprocally, many countries in the region, including Peru and Mexico, host the PLA at their professional military institutions, though some US-friendly governments (such as Argentina) have reduced the extent to which they do so, arguably driven by a desire not to concern the United States.

Officials from the PLA also regularly travel to the region, and officials from the region travel to the PLA for exchanges. Brazil has arguably been the most active partner, hosting a group of 17 PLA general officers in June 2023, at the beginning of the most recent administration of leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The PLA has also periodically deployed troops and military assets to the region, generally to participate in exercises, hospital ship visits, and other engagements that avoid an overtly threatening posture.

The most significant recent example of PLA participation in a military exercise in the region was its deployment of 33 naval infantry personnel in September 2024 to Brazil's Formosa military logistics exercise. Other examples include participation in the "Peace Angel" disaster response exercise in Peru (2010), an urban counterterrorism exercise in Venezuela (2011), a special forces counterterrorism exercise in Colombia (2012), a joint naval exercise with Chile (2013), a joint naval drill with Brazil involving the same ships, days later, on the Atlantic side of the continent, a jungle patrol competition with visiting Chinese forces at Brazil's jungle warfare school in Manaus (2016), and a joint maritime rescue drill with Brazil involving on of China's visiting hospital ships in January 2026.

Other PLA deployments in the region include semi-regular participation of PLA delegations in Mexico's annual Independence Day parade.

With respect to PLA Navy (PLAN) activities, its hospital ships have made regular visits to the region, stopping at multiple ports for medical and other engagements, including visits by the *Peace Ark* in 2011, 2015, and 2018–19. Most recently, China's newest hospital ship, *Silk Road Ark*, made a trip to the region from 2025–26, visiting Nicaragua (November 2025), Jamaica, Barbados (December 2025), Brazil (January 2026), Uruguay (January 2026), and Chile (January 2026). Notably, its stop in Montego Bay, Jamaica, ostensibly to provide medical services following Hurricane Melissa, whose worst effects had been concentrated on the Western side of the country, conveniently coincided with nearby US forces in the Caribbean planning to launch the January 2026 operation to capture Venezuelan de facto President Nicolás Maduro.

https://www.army.edu/News/View/Article/4635438/prc-influence-and-engagement-in-latin-america-impacting-us-national-security-in/

Although hospital ship visits have been its most common naval engagement in the region, PLAN combatants and training ships have periodically visited the region, too. The most notable examples include a November-December 2009 visit by the PLAN guided-missile destroyer *Shijiazhuang* and the replenishment ship *Hongzehu* to Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. In July 2012, the PLAN training ship *Zheng He* visited Jamaica and Ecuador. In October 2013, the PLAN guided-missile destroyer *Lanzhou*, the guided-missile frigate *Liuzhou*, and the replenishment ship *Poyanghu* made port calls and conducted activities in Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. In November 2015, the PLAN guided-missile destroyer *Jinan*, the guided-missile frigate *Yiyang*, and the replenishment ship *Qiandaohu* visited Cuba and Mexico.



Figure 2. PRC military engagements in Latin America and the Caribbean
(Source: Created by ChatGPT based on prompts provided by the author.)

In recent years, as US-friendly right-leaning governments have come to power in an increasing number of Latin American and Caribbean states, these governments have emphasized the less visible sending of officials to military schools and engagements in the PRC, rather than hosting Chinese military forces in the region. By far, the leftist Lula government in Brazil has maintained the most extensive military engagements with the PLA. In recent years, in keeping with his government's extensive military engagements with the PRC, as noted in the preceding paragraphs, Lula's government has designated an unprecedented number of general officer–level military attachés to the PRC.

The principal risk of such ongoing, albeit limited, PRC arms sales, donations, and other engagements in the region is that they build relationships and familiarity with Latin American military institutions, leaders, and strategic geography that could facilitate PRC access to the region in the course of a war with the United States. Specifically, for the PLA, the military utility of such relationships and familiarity could include coordination between military forces if the Latin American government is PRC-friendly at the time of the conflict. It could also include PRC opportunities for intelligence or cooperation through individual officials with whom they have built relationships, even if the Latin American government in question is not disposed to help the PRC.

Dual-Use Ports, Space Sites, Communications Complexes, and Other Facilities

Within the PRC doctrine of civil-military fusion, the operation of ports, airports, space sites, telecommunications complexes, and other sensitive facilities gives the PRC options to use them against the United States in time of war. This use includes the possibility of PRC-sympathetic governments explicitly authorizing such use that could occur without the knowledge of, or against the will of, the Latin American hosts, owing to a lack of government presence, technical oversight capacity, or a government crisis that paralyzes its response capability.

In the space sector, the most widely discussed risk case is the operation of a "Deep Space Radar" facility in the province of Neuquen, Argentina, by a PLA-affiliated organization, without a permanent oversight presence by the Argentine government. The PRC has also had access to space ground control facilities at the Manuel Ríos Air Base (near Caracas) and at Luepa (in Southeast Bolivar state) in Venezuela. In Bolivia, it has access to ground control stations it helped build for that nation's space program at Amachuma (near La Paz) and La Guardia (Santa Cruz department).

In Brazil, the PRC has been collaborating with the country's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) since the 1990s on the development and launch of satellites under the China-Brazil Earth Research Satellite Program (CBERS). Brazil and China plan to launch an X-band synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellite from Chinese territory in 2028 and the program's first satellite into geostationary orbit in 2030. The PRC-based company Space Sail currently has an MOU for access to the equatorial launch facility at Alcantara to launch a constellation of microsatellites there in partnership with Brazil's Telebras.

Facilities being built for Chinese telescopes at Ventarrones in Chile's Atacama Desert and the giant 40-meter China-Argentine Radiotelescope (CART) in the province of San Juan, Argentina, have been canceled due to security concerns.

In the space domain, PRC access to such facilities creates the risk of their use, or the use of their data, by the PLA to locate and target US satellites, intercept satellite communications, or communicate with Chinese offensive military space assets, such as the Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS), that could allow it to launch attacks from orbit with nuclear or conventional hypersonic projectiles against strategic targets in the United States.

With respect to ports, the PLA-affiliated Chinese company COSCO continues to expand the capability of its strategic port at Chancay, Peru, with plans to add 11 additional deepwater berths. Although Peru's new US-friendly President Keiko Fujimori could theoretically restrict Chinese activities in Chancay, the Peruvian government currently has little ability to supervise COSCO's operation. Peru's port supervision organization, Ositran, has acknowledged its limited authority due to the lack of a traditional public port contract, though an appellate court in a legal fight over the matter has given it some powers.

Beyond the legal and administrative technicalities of Peru's control, insofar as Peru has had 10 executives in the past 10 years, another political crisis could realistically inhibit its government from effectively responding if COSCO allows the port to be used to rearm and resupply PLA Navy warships during a conflict with the United States, just as it has supported PLA operations in Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Beyond Chancay, numerous other PRC-operated port projects raise similar concerns. These include projects for the PRC-friendly Daniel Ortega government in the port of Corinto, Nicaragua, and at the nearby Puente Huete Airport, with its Cold War–era, military-length runway.

Although the Hong Kong-based company Hutchinson was expelled in February 2026 from port operations at Cristobal and Balboa, in Panama, Hutchinson also has six port facilities in Mexico and two in the Bahamas. Other PRC-based companies, including China Merchants Port, which has port projects in Kingston (Jamaica), Paranagua (Brazil), Santos (Brazil), Açu (Brazil), and São Luis (Brazil), all of which could be used to host material—and potentially PRC Navy or special operations elements operating against the United States in time of war.

From a communications perspective, a PRC presence has been officially acknowledged in at least three of the 12 apparent signals and electronics intelligence facilities in Cuba. Such facilities could be used to capture US communications and the signatures of US assets, and to measure US military and other activity in nearby US facilities in Florida—in peacetime, in the lead-up to, and during a conflict with the PRC.

Commercial Facilities in Strategic Geographies in the Region

https://www.army.edu/News/View/Article/4635438/prc-influence-and-engagement-in-latin-america-impacting-us-national-security-in/

With more than $210 billion in commercial investment in the region, facilities operated by PRC-affiliated entities, operating under conditions of limited transparency with elites and criminal networks over which the PRC may have financial or personal leverage, create opportunities for the PRC to conduct espionage in peacetime and to conduct military operations in wartime. PRC operations in strategic geographies such as Mexico, the Caribbean, Panama, and the Strait of Magellan and the Drake Passage may present particular risks.

In recent years, a significant number of PRC-based companies have established operations on the Mexican side of the southern border, including Hofusan Industrial Park. Although pressure from the current US administration has significantly reduced the flow of Chinese investors, those Chinese factories and associated personnel, in conjunction with organized crime groups in the region, could potentially allow Chinese intelligence and other networks to smuggle people and conduct operations across the US southern border. The interception of more than 37,000 Chinese in 2023 alone, many of them military age, highlighted such potential risks.

Similarly, the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CAPRI) estimates that more than 800 PRC-based entities with operations worth more than $10 billion are operating in the Caribbean. Such operations, which include tourist hotels, ports, shops, warehouses, and other operations, could be used to host and sustain PRC intelligence and special forces monitoring and put at risk the movements of US warships, military logistics ships, and other assets that would have to navigate from the Atlantic or US East Coast ports through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal to reach the Indo-Pacific in time of conflict. During World War II, the Germans sought to threaten the same routes transiting the Caribbean.

With respect to Panama, although the PRC firm Hutchinson was removed from the operation of ports at Cristobal and Balboa in February 2026, the role of COSCO, the Chinese maritime logistics giant, as the Canal's fifth biggest user, plus the presence of the PRC-based construction company, China Harbor, to construct the fourth bridge and support infrastructure in the zone, as well as more than 100 other individual Chinese companies with warehousing and distribution operations in the Panama Canal Zone, could collectively give PRC agents the physical access, relationships, and technical knowledge they require to shut down the Canal in times of conflict. Possible ways for doing so could include terrorist physical or cybernetic attacks against the locks themselves, including their control and water management systems, mining the Canal, sinking a ship in Culebra Cut, and attacking ships waiting to enter, or via other means.

To the far south, in the Strait of Magellan, the Argentine government halted a 2023 attempt by PRC-based Shanghai Chemical Industry Group to establish a commercial port facility in

Tierra del Fuego that could have given the PLA options to observe and threaten US carrier battle groups, large amphibious ships, and others transiting the passage, since their size prevents them from using the Panama Canal. Although the immediate threat was averted, a significant number of Chinese commercial companies operate assembly and warehousing facilities in the free-trade zone at Tierra del Fuego, including Huawei, ZTE, and Xiaomi. In addition, in March 2026, the provincial government of Tierra del Fuego announced that the PRC-financed company Austral Petróleo, Gas y Electricidad S.A. is developing a new power-generating facility in the area. In addition, the PRC's principal "Great Wall" research station is located on the Antarctic side of the Drake Passage, on Fildes Peninsula of King George Island.

Without constant vigilance, such PRC commercial and scientific presence in southern Argentina and the Antarctic could introduce capabilities that would allow the PLA to put at risk the transits that US carrier battle groups and large amphibious ships would be required to make through these strategic waterways.

Cooperation in Strategic Technology Sectors

As a complement to PRC access to dual-use facilities, PRC commercial and scientific activities in the region in strategic sectors (such as telecommunications, cloud computing, super intelligence, and space) create opportunities for PRC access to data, key intellectual property, and sensitive personal information that could be used to influence or extort Latin American decisionmakers.

In telecommunications, PRC-based companies such as Huawei, ZTE, Xiaomi, Honor, and Oppo have already captured a significant portion of the market for smartphones, routers, servers, and other telecommunications devices and infrastructure.

With respect to marine and other fiber-optic infrastructure that carries significant portions of the region's data, an attempt by a Huawei-affiliated company to build a trans-Pacific data cable connecting Chile and Hong Kong was blocked, in part due to US pressure. The Chinese have built multiple other cables carrying the region's data, including the South Atlantic Interlink (SAIL) cable from Brazil to Cameroon, Africa, the *Fibra Optica Austral* (FOA) connecting central and southern Chile, and one along the Guyanese shield. PRC-based companies such as Huawei and Alibaba have built data centers in the region.

Huawei, Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance all have major cloud computing and super intelligence initiatives in Latin America. As of 2025, Huawei had five cloud regions in Latin America, serving 2,500 companies. Alibaba opened its first cloud region in Mexico in February 2025 and its first in Brazil in August 2026. China's TenCent has had a cloud operation in Brazil since November 2021. ByteDance is in the process of constructing a

massive 200 billion-Reias data center in the state of Ceará state, Brazil. Together, such Chinese digital infrastructure will handle and store an increasingly large portion of sensitive government, company, and personal information. Access to that information by the PRC could not only facilitate its theft of Western technology with military applications but possibly compromise personal information of Latin American leaders and military functionaries in ways that could expose them to manipulation or extortion by PRC intelligence services.

People-to-People Relationships

Under the framework of the "Global Development Initiative," PRC-based companies and the Chinese government are bringing scientists, scholars, and technicians from the region to the PRC for training and exchanges in sensitive domains such as space and supercomputing. The PRC promised to bring 3,500 Latin American academics and others to the PRC on scholarships for the 2025–27 period alone. Just as the PRC has a well-documented track record for compromising and obtaining sensitive information from US-based scientific and technical personnel, such "people-to-people" activities targeting Latin Americans, in the name of development, expand the ability of the PRC to obtain military-relevant technologies, further access to Western Hemisphere space assets and programs, or to gain access to sensitive Latin American data architectures.

Chinese people-to-people relationships with strategic significance also extend into the military and political domain. A Carnegie Foundation report estimated that between 2000 and 2025, the PRC brought more than 12,000 police personnel from around the world to the country. As noted previously, the numerous military, police, and other security personnel brought to the PRC from Latin America greatly expands the risk of Chinese intelligence compromising some portion of them, either through economic incentives or blackmail, in ways that open the door for obtaining military intelligence information from those individuals, including on their work with US partners or access to US systems. Indeed, such PRC access could give the PLA options to secure assistance from such military officials for actions within their countries that are prejudicial to the United States in time of war.

A similar logic applies to the PRC's courtship of Latin American legislators, government officials, and party officials. The Chinese government regularly brings many such officials to the PRC and, in its 3rd Policy White Paper and Global Governance Initiative, openly embraces expanding such contacts. As with Latin American military officials, ties of friendship, economic and ideological influence, and/or blackmail could give the PRC government opportunities to open the doors to military and other strategic cooperation to the PRC, or to close them for the United States and its allies, in peacetime and wartime.

Influence Impacting Political Dynamics and Access by the United States, China, and Other Adversaries

Although the relationship between public opinion, politics, and military cooperation is often indirect, growing favoritism toward the PRC and disillusionment with Washington should be cause for concern. Currently, the majority of Latin American and Caribbean governments are favorably disposed to cooperating with the United States and seek to avoid alarming it by avoiding excessive, overt collaboration with the PRC in military and other strategic areas. Nonetheless, history shows that politics in Latin America moves in cycles, alternating between right and left when successive governments disillusion their people by failing to meet expectations on core issues of security, material well-being, and the fight against corruption.

If their populations perceive a portion of the current crop of US-friendly governments currently in power as falling short in delivering the goods, in time, they will likely be replaced by governments less friendly to the United States, and more open to the PRC in security and other forms of cooperation in a political environment in which those populations look ever more favorably at the PRC and ever more skeptically or hostilely to the United States.

US military and other strategic decisionmakers should take heed of these longer-term dynamics because, historically, the political orientation of the regime rather than the performance of the US military as a good defense partner has been the principal determinant of those governments' cooperation with the United States on security matters, and conversely, access by the PRC and other US rivals in the security domain.

Conclusion

Although PRC activities in Latin America are principally economic in character, the analysis in this article should be a wake-up call for US national security decisionmakers and analysts, as well as for those in the region who seek to dismiss security-related concerns by saying that growing PRC activities and influence in the region are "just business." This article highlighted the imperative for US decisionmakers to more effectively articulate the relationship among PRC economic, political, technological, and security activities; influence and compromise; and real-world political and military risks for the region and for the United States.

For the region, finding their political, military, business, and technical elites personally compromised and their political room for action constrained, is a potential risk to national sovereignty. The use of their country's geography by the PRC in a conflict with the United States will present no less of a dilemma, if the now-gone politicians who authorized the

deals did so for money, not ideology. In short, the military-strategic risks from PRC engagement in Latin America are real, increasing the need for attention from US planners and for a respectful US dialogue with its partners in the region about how to work better together to manage the risks posed by developments that affect everyone in our shared hemisphere.

Keywords: Latin America, Caribbean, PRC, military engagements, commercial sectors, strategic technology sectors, people-to-people relationships, arms sales, military-civilian dual-use facilities

---

Author: Dr. R. Evan Ellis is the Latin America research professor and General Douglas Macarthur Research Chair at the US Army War College Strategic Research and Assessment Department, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non–Western Hemisphere actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. He is also senior non-resident fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Disclaimer: Super intelligence and SI is used in this article in place of artificial intelligence and AI as directed by Executive Order 14434, dated September 29, 2026. The articles and commentaries published on the Strategic Research and Assessment Department (SRAD) website are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views and opinions expressed on the website are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Department of War, the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government. Authors of Strategic Research and Assessment Department and US Army War College Press products enjoy full academic freedom, provided they do not disclose classified information, jeopardize operations security, or misrepresent official US policy. Such academic freedom empowers them to offer new and sometimes controversial perspectives in the interest of furthering debate on key issues. The appearance of external hyperlinks does not constitute endorsement by the Department of War of the linked websites or the information, products, or services contained therein. The Department of War does not exercise any editorial, security, or other control over the information you may find at these locations.