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*"Si labor empeñosa exige los intereses materiales, empeño aún más valioso reclaman los intereses morales"*  
(Juan Zorrilla de San Martín)



NOTICIAS DESTACADAS

OPIDATA

# The Impact of Chinese Organized Crime in Latin America on the Region's Resources and Environment

📅 enero 29, 2026 👤 Legado a las Américas

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The expansion of Chinese organized crime across Latin America has become a direct threat to natural resources, institutional stability, and hemispheric security.

In this special Opidata analysis, R. Evan Ellis—one of the leading experts on China, security, and geopolitics in the Western Hemisphere—examines how criminal networks linked to the People's Republic of China operate in illegal fishing, mining, wildlife trafficking, narcotics, and money laundering, and what this means for the region and for the United States.

Criminal activity by Chinese gangs in Latin America are a serious problem for its institutions and prosperity. They also threaten its resources and environmental health. These activities present unique challenges due to the limited capacity of regional governments to combat crime related to Chinese groups.

Chinese criminal activities in the region include IUU fishing, illegal mining, trafficking in lumber, flora and fauna, precursor chemicals for synthetic drugs, and money laundering.

These involve multiple groups of different sizes from familial networks, such as the Zhang cartel in precursor chemicals to the larger 14K and Sun Yee On Triads, Fujian Mafia, Flying Dragons, Tai Chen, and Fuk Ching.

IUU fishing costs South American economies an estimated \$2.3 billion per year in lost revenues. Chinese vessels also engage in overfishing and illegal fishing techniques such as the use of trawl nets. Their activities have already caused the collapse of fisheries in Asia, put those in Africa under strain, and are currently contributing to hardships in Latin American coastal communities which depend on fishing for their livelihoods.

In illegal mining, Chinese entities are involved in purchasing gold and other products locally and globally, as well as supplying materials, tools, food and clothing to miners.



implicated in illegal timber exports in Guyana, while in Peru, in 2021, Luis Hidalgo Okimura, Governor of Madre de Dios, was named in a timber smuggling case involving Chinese entities.

In wildlife trafficking, PRC demand is particularly significant in Mexico. It includes reptile skins, shark fins, Jaguar and puma skins, butterflies, totoaba swim bladders, and seahorses, among others. Chinese wildlife poaching increase the peril to endangered species, while generating illicit funds that undermine government control of the territories where they operate.

In narcotrafficking, PRC-based groups send precursor chemicals to laboratories in Mexico. Fentanyl from Chinese precursors kills an estimated 48,000 Americans per year.

In money laundering, the activities of Chinese gangs, companies and financial institutions has proliferated opportunities for criminal groups to hide their illicit earnings in ways that are faster, cheaper, and harder to detect.

In the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. Treasury, in 2024, stated that these organizations “have become more prevalent and are now one of the key actors laundering money professionally in the United States and around the globe.”

In one scheme “flying money,” Mexican narcotrafficking gangs in the U.S. deliver bulk cash to Chinese mafia groups, who assign ownership of the unregistered dollars to tycoons seeking to secretly get their money out of China. Those tycoons transfer the equivalent amount of RMB to Latin American businessmen who use them to import PRC goods, completing a laundering cycle that that is very difficult for authorities in the US an the region to detect.

Because Chinese illicit networks operate in both Latin America and the U.S., they potentially support PRC espionage activities in the U.S.

With respect to human trafficking, anecdotal evidence suggests a racket involving prepayments to move ethnic Chinese through networks from the PRC to the US, through multiple Latin American countries, collaborating with local Chinese gangs and often involving some form of obliged debt bondage work in Chinese communities.

In 2024, more than 30,000 Chinese were intercepted crossing the southern border from U.S. into the United States, creating opportunities for PRC security services to use some of these for the purpose of espionage or sabotage in a future war.



Similarly, increasingly since 2024, China trains police from the region in the PRC. It has also taken advantage of Chinese organized crime to send its National Police agents to the region to collaborate with local governments on the problem, including the 2013 takedown of the Pixue organization in Argentina.

The PRC, in its 2025-2027 China-CELAC plan, and in its most recent policy white paper toward the region, has reinforced its intention to increase law enforcement collaboration and people-to-people contacts in the region.

With respect to recommendations, it is important for the U.S. to increase its cooperation with law enforcement and intelligence bodies in the region, as part of the expanded prioritization of the Western Hemisphere, and increased security engagement there, as outlined by the new 2025 National Security Strategy. This arguably should include strengthened intelligence sharing, particularly involving Chinese crime groups, and PRC-affiliated persons operating across the Hemisphere.

While Latin America often pushes back on U.S. pressures regarding Chinese commercial activities in the hemisphere, cooperation on Chinese organized crime, if done with the correct approach and tone, could be a “win-win” for our relationship with the region, helping it to combat illicit activities which violate its sovereignty, rob its resources, destroy its environment and undercut the rule of law.

For the U.S., expanded cooperation with Latin America on organized crime not only would strengthen our own protection of resources and the environment, but also help us to better understand Chinese networks in the region that potentially impact our national security, while showcasing to our partners the harms to their own interests of improperly monitored and controlled PRC activities in the hemisphere that we share.

**[1] About the author:** R. Evan Ellis is a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and a leading specialist on security, organized crime, China, and geopolitics in the Western Hemisphere. He regularly advises government and security institutions and has testified before the U.S. Congress.

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📅 febrero 15, 2024 👤 admin

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### Primer evento de Legado a las Américas en Colombia

📅 febrero 8, 2024



### Inauguración de las actividades de Legado a las Américas en Uruguay

📅 noviembre 29, 2023





noviembre 1, 2023

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Quienes hemos decidido constituir el Movimiento Legado a las Américas, somos asociaciones nacionales y continentales, así como ciudadanos de 15 naciones, a los que nos motiva el unirnos para bregar juntos en una acción centrada en una Carta de Principios que nos son comunes, a fin de alcanzar la meta que nos hemos propuesto, la cual es un reavivamiento ético y cívico, y como resultado de este, una renovación y reforma en el campo político, económico y social. Podemos definirnos como un movimiento de conciencia.

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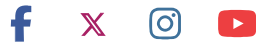
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Red Continental

*"La ocasión como el fierro; se ha de machacar caliente"*

José Hernández –

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