

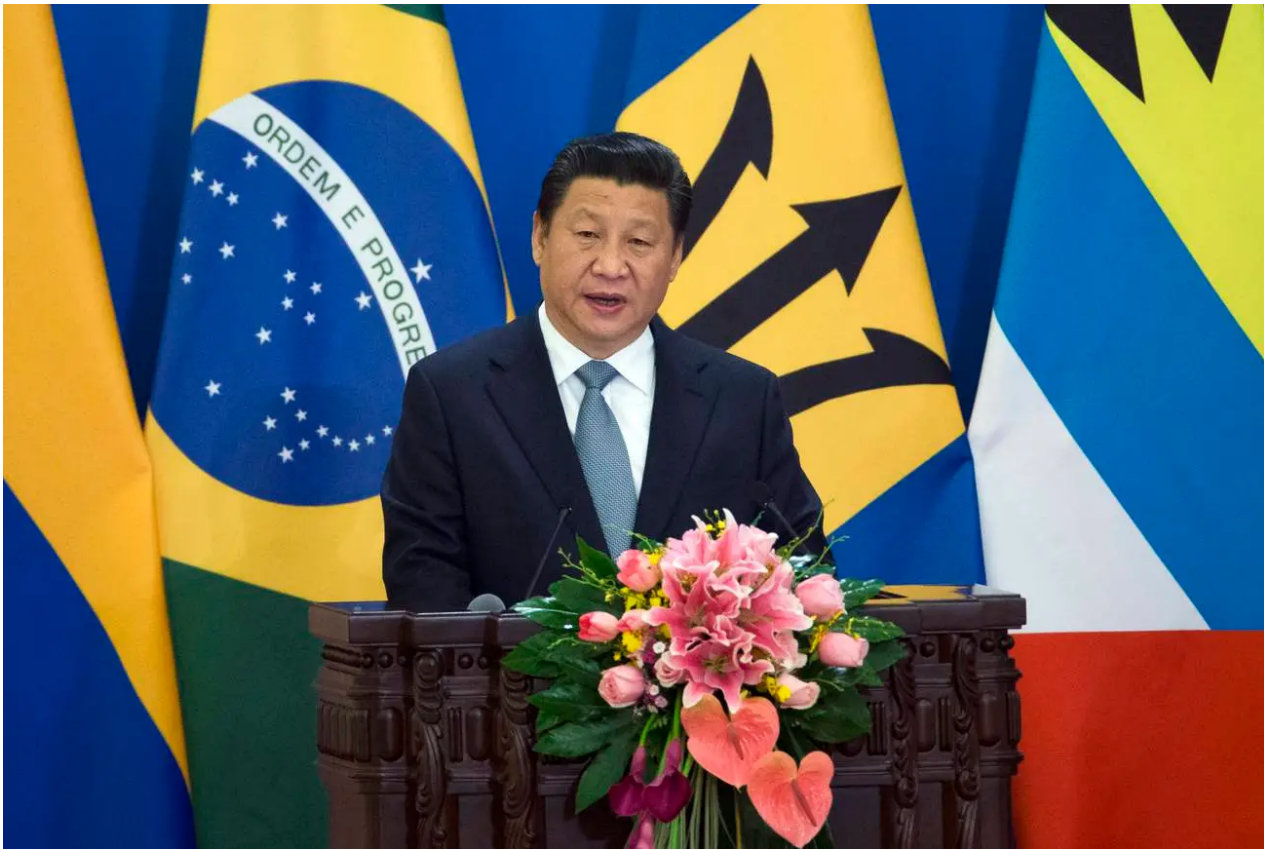


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Understanding PRC Political and Security Engagement in the Caribbean



Evan Ellis | February 21, 2023
Global Americans Contributor



Source: Reuters.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) arguably regards the Caribbean as strategic, in the context of its broader engagement in the Western Hemisphere and globally. This orientation reflects the fact that five of the 14 countries in the world continuing to diplomatically recognize Taiwan are found in the Caribbean. In addition, the geographic position of the Caribbean as the southeast maritime approach for the United States, and as a center for logistics, finance, and commercial flows mirrors the characteristics of China's own southeastern maritime approaches, including Taiwan and the straits of Malacca, as a strategically important area in which PRC military, political and economic activities illustrate its recognition of the geography's strategic importance. PRC engagement in the Caribbean is broad-based, including an array of investments and commercial projects, political engagement, people-

Taiwan and PRC Political Engagement in the Caribbean

In the political domain, PRC engagement is driven in part by the fact that five Caribbean states continue to recognize Taiwan, which the PRC seeks to isolate and ultimately incorporate as part of the territory it governs. These include Haiti, beliefs, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. PRC efforts to pressure these governments to change their diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the PRC may accelerate with increased U.S.-China tensions following the July 2022 visit to Taipei by former Speaker of the House of Representatives [Nancy Pelosi](#), and the upcoming visit by the current Speaker, [Kevin McCarthy](#).

Within the Caribbean, Haiti may be vulnerable to changing recognition, insofar as, according to Haiti experts consulted by the author, key politicians who would replace President Ariel Henry in the event of a democratic transition, have expressed interest in doing business with the PRC. On the other hand, the position of Caribbean citizenship for investment countries is complicated. Although the current government of Saint Lucia [previously recognized the PRC](#), upon returning to power, it has resisted reverting back from recognition of Taiwan to the PRC again. In addition, the incentives of the ethnic Chinese who purchased their way to citizenship in places like Saint Kitts, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and St. Lucia is complicated. For them, the government's continued affiliation with Taiwan may seem to offer safety for their financial holdings, against the

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the other hand, for some, support for their government's recognition of the PRC may be seen as a form of extortion payment, in exchange for the PRC leaving their financial holdings, and families back in the mainland alone.

PRC engagement in the Caribbean also has a multilateral dimension. In 2017, for example, China Export-Import Bank signed a memorandum establishing collaboration with the Caribbean Development Bank. The most important PRC instrument for multilateral engagement with the Caribbean, however, is the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which conducts a broad array of activities with the PRC from presidential-level forums with multi-year joint action plans, plus regular ministerial-level sub-forums and working groups with regular business meetings advancing Chinese interests on topics from defense and space cooperation to disaster response. In January 2023, the rotating Presidency of CELAC passed to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and its iconic leftist Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves, whose government does not currently recognize the PRC.

Within China's political relationships in the Caribbean, its ties with Cuba are strategically important, although complex. Dating back to the Cold War, when the new revolutionary government of Fidel Castro was the first in the region to recognize the PRC, Cuba's relationship with the PRC has been one of trust, with a heavier dimension of ideology and party-to-party ties than PRC relationships with other Caribbean countries. Nonetheless, owing in part to China's caution to not antagonize the United States, and Cuba's prior alignment with Russia in the latter's split with the PRC during the Cold War, its political relationship occupies a lower level, characterized by the slogan "good brother, good comrade, good friend." Tellingly, Cuba is not recognized by the PRC as one of its 10 "strategic partners" in the region. Reflecting Cuba's lack of access to the U.S. market, and limited economic opportunities in Cuba, PRC-Cuba economic ties have also been limited. Nonetheless, they include sales of cars and busses by Chinese manufacturers Geely, Sinotruk,

million golf resort, Chinese work on the port of Santiago, plus biomedical projects.

PRC Security Engagement in the Caribbean

In the security domain, the PRC has given significant attention to the military and police organizations in the region. For example, the PRC supplied a rotating contingent of 125 People's Liberation Army military police deployed to Haiti as part of the United Nations-led MINUSTAH peacekeeping force from 2004 through 2012. The Chinese hospital ship Peace Arc has included port calls in the Caribbean in each of its three visits to the region, in 2011, 2015, and 2018-2019. Significant numbers of officials from Caribbean militaries have participated in multi-week courses in China's National Defense University in Changping.

The PRC has regularly sold and/or donated equipment such as dual-use vehicles and construction equipment to Caribbean militaries and police forces. Prominent examples include the donation of \$1.1 million in equipment to the Jamaica Defense Force in 2011, the sale of an offshore patrol vessel (OPV) to Trinidad and Tobago in 2014, the 2016 donation of \$2.6 million in police cars, motorcycles and other equipment to the Guyana Police Force, the 2017 donation of military construction equipment to the Guyana Defense Force, the 2019 donation of 200 motorcycles to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, and the 2020 donation of 140 motorcycles and eight offroad vehicles to the Dominican Republic military and police, among others.

The PRC also has donated a mid-sized Y-12 transport aircraft to the Guyana Defense Force, although it is not currently flying.

The Path Forward for U.S. Policymakers

the scale and sophistication of its own efforts to provide viable alternatives from countries respectful of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Recognizing that the U.S. cannot fully stop the expansion of Chinese economic and other engagement with the sovereign countries of the Caribbean, the U.S. must also prepare for the consequences of that presence, both in peacetime, and in the undesirable event that the U.S. finds itself in a major war with the PRC over Taiwan or other sources of conflict.

The Caribbean is strategically important not only to the PRC, but also to the United States, from the perspective of its commercial, financial, and security interests. In the event of a war between the United States and the PRC, the Chinese commercial presence, port operations, and economically based influence in the Caribbean could take on additional importance, presenting opportunities for Chinese intelligence or military units to observe and seek to disrupt U.S.-Asia-focused deployment and sustainment operations, or even to conduct operations to enter and/or strike the continental U.S.

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