

**MONOGRAPH SERIES**

**Toward a More Effective  
DoD Contribution  
to Strategic Competition  
in the  
Western Hemisphere**

**R. Evan Ellis**



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# Toward a More Effective DoD Contribution to Strategic Competition in the Western Hemisphere

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## Foreword

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the expanding power and global reach of the People's Republic of China has become a central issue for US policymakers and their counterparts around the globe. Outside the Indo-Pacific, the People's Republic of China's growing engagement in the commercial, political, military, and other sectors of Latin America has commanded particular attention due to the region's proximity to the United States. The predominantly economic character of the People's Republic of China's activities in Latin America—and the absence of significant Chinese military forces, overt military alliances, and basing agreements in the region—has made the contribution of the US military to the whole-of-government US response less straightforward than the military's role in responding to the Soviet Union and affiliated partners and guerrilla organizations during the Cold War.

In this monograph, Dr. R. Evan Ellis, Latin America research professor with the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, lays out the military and other strategic challenges posed by the People's Republic of China's advance in Latin America, his recommendations for the appropriate role of the military in the whole-of-government response, and the steps that must be taken to optimize the Department of Defense's contribution. He argues, rather than simply increasing and enhancing the performance of its traditional engagement in Latin America, the US military must more clearly define its strategic objectives around the effects the military seeks to achieve. These objectives include helping democratic partners succeed in confronting their security challenges, leveraging the value the US military provides to make its partners advocates for working with the United States and limiting China's access to US partners' own institutions, making better use of US engagement and presence on the ground to understand and respond to China's advance, and preparing for Chinese military actions in the Western Hemisphere in the context of a major conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Ellis argues that the US military must take a hard look at the limitations of existing tools, including the level of resources, coordination challenges, and rules that may limit the agility and effectiveness of the US response. The US military must double down on fixing what can be fixed and limiting reliance on what cannot reasonably be fixed.

We proudly present this monograph, which addresses one of the most complex and important war-fighting challenges faced by the United States in the new era of great-power competition, as part of the ongoing contribution of the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute to the strategic thinking of the US Army, the Department of Defense, and the US government.

Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff  
Director, Strategic Studies Institute  
and US Army War College Press

## Summary

This monograph focuses on the People's Republic of China's engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, and its impact on US strategic equities in the region, from a US Department of Defense (DoD) perspective.

The adverse impacts this monograph details include how

1. the increasing presence of Chinese companies, products, and people-to-people networks in Latin America—and particularly their presence in digital architectures—gives the People's Republic of China influence and potential access to sensitive information, putting sovereign decision making and intellectual property at risk;
2. People's Republic of China (PRC) engagement with illiberal regimes facilitates these regimes' consolidation and continuation of power, indirectly contributing to the risk they pose as hosts of criminal organizations, terrorist organizations, and anti-US adversaries, such as Russia and Iran; and
3. PRC security engagement in the region and the physical presence of PRC-based companies—particularly in ports and space—give the People's Republic of China options against the United States during a potential conflict. (Note: This presence and these relationships may also give the People's Republic of China options in situations below the threshold of war, but the elaboration of such specific cases is beyond the scope of the present work.)

This work argues, to contribute more effectively to the American whole-of-government response to the People's Republic of China, the Department of Defense must design its response around strategic concepts focused on the effects the department can reasonably achieve through the tools at its disposal, better resourcing and repairing those tools where necessary to achieve the intended effects. Promising areas include:

1. using security assistance to help democratic partners succeed;

2. leveraging the benefit partners perceive in DoD security assistance to strengthen incentives for those partners to continue working with the United States and limit their engagement with the People's Republic of China;
3. using DoD presence in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) countries—and military relationships of trust—to support situational awareness about PRC activities and how best to respond; and
4. preparing, with partners in the region or alone where appropriate, to respond to likely PRC activities in the region in times of war.

This monograph recommends the Department of Defense:

1. Encourage more thinking within relevant combatant commands, organizations (which are focused on the future war-fighting environment), and academic institutions regarding effects-oriented strategic concepts for countering China.
2. More adequately resource instruments key to the effects these counter-China strategic concepts contemplate, with an emphasis on professional military education (PME) and training and other security assistance.
3. Increase resources and instruments for coordinating with other US government agencies in the conceptualization and execution of counter-China efforts.
4. Accelerate and institutionalize fast-track responses to deliver needed resources to partners in critical security states and political transitions.
5. Streamline planning and programming for partner defense needs.
6. Eliminate, where possible, program taxes and oversight organizations that increase costs and decrease the responsiveness of security-assistance activities.



7. Change the incentives within the foreign area officer (FAO) community and regional security cooperation office teams to decrease risk aversion in initiative taking.

8. Better message the complex value proposition of why working with the United States and minimizing exposure to PRC security and other critical sectors is in the partner's national interest.

Although many of these issues are recognized within the Department of Defense and the US government, including by senior leadership, a lack of momentum, which needs to be overcome, arguably exists in making and implementing the difficult choices to address these issues.



## Executive Summary

In the past two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has made significant advances in the commercial, political, and security sectors of Latin America in pursuit of global interests. Though the People's Republic of China's principal initiatives in the region have been economic, its advance has impacted the region and US strategic equities in multiple ways.

The hope of benefiting from engagement with the People's Republic of China—and the web of people-to-people networks such engagement facilitates—gives the People's Republic of China influence in various domains. That influence, and the indirect impact of PRC engagement on local politics, negatively impact the United States' pursuit of its policy agenda and strategic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean, including security engagement, while creating opportunities for the People's Republic of China and other extra-hemispheric rivals to exploit against the United States in war, as well as in peacetime.

The increasing presence of Chinese companies and products in digital architectures in Latin America creates risks of digital espionage, undercutting the countries' sovereignty and intellectual property. The People's Republic of China's engagement with illiberal regimes facilitates their consolidation of power and provides those regimes with tools to maintain control over their populations once in power, allowing them to host criminal and terrorist groups in their territory and from other extra-hemispheric US rivals such as Russia and Iran. Moreover, the physical presence of PRC-based companies in the region—particularly in dual-use sectors such as ports and space—coupled with PRC military relations and activities in the region, give the People's Republic of China options against the United States in times of war with the People's Republic of China, even in the absence of formal basing agreements or military alliances.

The US Department of Defense has a logical role in the whole-of-government response to the challenge of China, including but not limited to areas directly related to PRC security-sector activities. The Department of Defense has been tasked with contributing to efforts to address the China challenge, yet it lacks an effective strategic concept for doing so and is limited by issues of appropriate resources, coordination, and the agility and effectiveness of available tools in addressing the new mission. The Department of Defense needs to build strategic concepts around the effects it can achieve and desires to achieve through its tools in response to the People's Republic of China. The Department of Defense must also realistically assess the limits of resources, coordination, authorities, and processes to make more realistic

choices regarding how to achieve desired effects, while working to fix critical instruments of power.

As a starting point, some effects and associated instruments in responding to the People's Republic of China the Department of Defense should focus on helping democratic partners succeed through security assistance. Doing so will maximize the group of countries willing and able to work effectively with the United States, while limiting the political, security, and other options for the People's Republic of China and US rivals in the region.

The Department of Defense should also use its security assistance—including Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, professional military education and training, and other forms of benefit—to strengthen incentives for partners to work with the United States, making partner defense establishments advocates within their own political establishments for greater collaboration with the United States and for limiting security, space, digital architecture, and other types of engagement with the People's Republic of China that could harm the relationship with the United States. Although the Department of Defense is already using security assistance to strengthen collaboration to some degree, the department needs to focus more on the strategic effects it seeks to achieve and how to adjust its resources, approach, and constraining issues (such as administrative procedures and authorities) to do so more effectively.

The US military can also leverage its relationships of trust and presence to coordinate with regional partners in responding to possible PRC activities in the region in the event of war. Activities include leveraging PRC commercial presence and military relationships in the region to disrupt US deployment and sustainment flows; shut down critical logistics nodes such as the Panama Canal; put the US homeland at risk; punish partners supporting the United States; or use PRC access to and control over ports, space infrastructure, and other facilities against the United States.

In improving the effectiveness of the DoD contribution to the response to the People's Republic of China, the department should encourage more thinking within relevant combatant commands, futures organizations, and educational institutions regarding effects-oriented strategic concepts for countering China. Promising directions for such concepts include focusing on using DoD tools to shape the strategic environment to limit China's advance, rather than attempting to outrace or outbid the People's Republic of China in providing partners with security-sector benefits. The new concepts should also focus on identifying and channeling resources to help those partners

in critical political transitions maintain democratic paths or avoid a deterioration into anti-US authoritarian governance. This is not to advocate meddling in the internal affairs of partner countries but rather to support the programs of legitimate democratic governments and to empower those governments to succeed—thus preventing their failure and replacement by less democratic, less US-friendly alternatives. Strategic concepts should rethink how better to present why US values such as democracy, the protection of individual liberty, and rule of law are in the partner’s best interests, including by leveraging the goodwill of partner-nation personnel through their relations with the United States and their time in the US military education and training system. Finally, the new strategic concepts should evaluate threats posed by China’s commercial position, technologies, and relationships in the region through a wartime—and peacetime—lens and develop strategies with partners to respond to how the People’s Republic of China might use them in a war with the United States.

Beyond concepts, the Department of Defense must also increase the effectiveness of the tools it has to achieve the effects contemplated in its strategic concept. Doing so must begin with adequately resourcing key instruments such as professional military education and training and other security assistance. The Department of Defense should further increase resources and instruments for coordinating with other US government agencies in the conceptualization and execution of counter-China efforts. The department should also accelerate and institutionalize fast-track responses to deliver needed resources to partners in critical security states and political transitions. The Department of Defense should streamline planning and programming for partner defense needs and eliminate program taxes and oversight organizations that increase costs and decrease the responsiveness of security-assistance activities. Institutionally, the Department of Defense should change the incentives within the foreign area officer community and regional security cooperation office teams to decrease risk aversion in initiative taking, where doing so is invaluable for building trust and delivering results. Finally, the Department of Defense must better message the complex value proposition of why working with the US defense establishment—and the US government more broadly—is in the partner nation’s interest. Reciprocally, the department should communicate the risks to the partner’s own interest posed by working with the People’s Republic of China in security and other sectors.





# Introduction

During the past two decades, the People's Republic of China's expanding engagement and presence in Latin America and the Caribbean has received increased attention from US leaders, as well as academics and the media more broadly. The People's Republic of China's advance has been the subject of hearings in the US House of Representatives and the Senate, and statements by US military leaders such as Commanding General of United States Southern Command Laura J. Richardson and United States Northern Command General Glen D. VanHerck.<sup>1</sup> The topic has been a focus of multiple forums and publications by leading US-based think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, Florida International University, the Atlantic Council, the Americas Society, and the Inter-American Dialogue.<sup>2</sup> The PRC advance has been the subject of multiple books and regular articles by leading newspapers, magazines, and journals including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *TIME*, and *The Economist*, among others.<sup>3</sup>

The expanding PRC presence is arguably principally economic in nature, although it also includes an important political component and activities in the security domain, among others.<sup>4</sup> The implications of China's advance for the US security and defense community, and the appropriate role of the community as part of an effective, whole-of-government response, has arguably received less attention.

This work examines the specific threats the People's Republic of China poses in Latin America in areas in which the Department of Defense (DoD) is affected or bears at least partial responsibility, and advances recommendations for enhancing the DoD component of the US whole-of-government response to the China challenge.<sup>5</sup>

The report begins with a characterization of PRC advances in Latin America and the Caribbean and the challenges these advances present to the United States and the region from a military perspective. The report then examines the question of the Department of Defense's role in responding to the challenge, including the potential strategic objectives and instruments available to the Department of Defense in fulfilling that role, as well as difficulties with available instruments from the perspective of the inadequacy of resources, authorities, and coordination.

This work concludes with recommendations for US policymakers, focused on the Department of Defense, regarding ways to increase the effectiveness of DoD activities in the region, in coordination with other US government agencies and partners, in support of the strategic competition mission. These recommendations focus on the importance of articulating and employing a clear strategic concept regarding how best to leverage the Department of Defense's available resources and instruments as a complement to those of other US government organizations and partner nations. These recommendations also highlight the need to increase resources allocated to DoD engagement in the region substantially—particularly in the areas of professional military education and training—as well as highlighting the need for increased cooperation in planning partner engagement between the Department of Defense and other US government and partner organizations at the strategic level for added coherence. This work emphasizes the need to reform laws and regulations that significantly constrain the agility and effectiveness of the DoD response and to expand DoD planning for wartime scenarios in the region, including expanding associated dialogues with other combatant commands, such as the United States Indo-Pacific Command, and partner nations, both in and beyond the region.

## **The Scope of the People's Republic of China's Advance in Latin America**

The People's Republic of China is transforming the global strategic environment with its growing power and reach—including in Latin America and the Caribbean—in ways that prejudice the region and US strategic interests. China's suppression of democracy in Hong Kong—in violation of its prior treaty commitments to preserve the autonomy of the island—and its use of military force to displace its neighbors from their historical maritime zones in the South China Sea—despite the 2016 rejection of China's claims to the waters by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague—illustrate an increasingly powerful People's Republic of China disposed to do or take what it wants, irrespective of international law or the will of its neighbors.<sup>6</sup>

Globally, China is doing or taking what it wants for itself, giving only lip service to legal commitments or the rights of others, empowering its illiberal partners such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela to do so as well. China's Global Civilization Initiative indirectly undermines concepts fundamental to the Western system, such as rule of law and democracy,

by arguing multiple perspectives exist on such matters, effectively undermining the international community in asserting enforceable standards and coordinating to protect those whose rights are violated.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond China's own use of force to impose its will on Hong Kong, to impose its maritime claims in the South China Sea, and to imprison millions of its Uyghur ethnic minority, the People's Republic of China's expression of neutrality on the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia (with which China professed a friendship without limits and from which it profited handsomely by buying Russian agricultural goods and petroleum at steep discounts while selling Moscow drones and other war material) has furthered the degradation of the quasi rules-based international system, leading it toward the dangerous condition classically described by political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in which the stronger take what they want from the weaker.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar fashion, the People's Republic of China's early recognition of the Nicolás Maduro regime's transparently fraudulent claim to victory in Venezuela's July 2024 elections, and China's neutrality toward its South American petroleum partners over Venezuela's threats to take resource-rich Essequibo from China's militarily far weaker partner Guyana, illustrate how the People's Republic of China's economic and other support for illiberal regimes gives these regimes the resources and the confidence to pursue acts of aggression.<sup>9</sup>

## **People's Republic of China Commercial Advance**

Trade, investment, and loan statistics document the substantial, if uneven, advance of the economic engagement of the People's Republic of China with Latin America and the Caribbean over the past two decades, including in countries increasingly close to the United States, such as Panama, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico.<sup>10</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund, PRC trade with the region has expanded from \$14.62 billion when China was admitted into the World Trade Organization in 2001, to \$483 billion in 2022.<sup>11</sup> The People's Republic of China has become one of the top trading partners with every country in the region and, in many cases, has become the number one partner.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to PRC investment in the region, during the same period, nonfinancial foreign direct investment by PRC-based companies ascended from less than \$1 billion in 2001 to a cumulative total

of \$193.2 billion by the end of 2022, with at least 633 operations by Chinese firms in the region.<sup>13</sup>

In finance, since 2005, China's principal policy banks have loaned more than \$120.3 billion to the region while other Chinese commercial banks (such as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and China Construction Bank) have lent tens of billions more to support PRC-based companies' projects in the region. As a testament to the region's interest in commerce and investment with the People's Republic of China, 22 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have affiliated themselves with China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>14</sup>

## **People's Republic of China Commercial Activities in Sensitive Sectors**

Within the People's Republic of China's commercial engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean, critical infrastructure such as ports, electricity, and digital and space architectures attract particular attention.

The People's Republic of China currently has funded or built eight different port projects across the region, operates an additional seven, and has ownership stakes in others. As noted by General Richardson, PRC entities could use such ports for military and commercial purposes, known as dual use.<sup>15</sup>

In the electricity sector, PRC-based companies have made significant advances throughout the region since 2010, particularly in building or securing ownership of renewable energy-generation assets such as hydroelectric facilities, wind farms, and solar parks, as well as transmission and distribution capabilities. In Brazil alone, since 2010, 14 PRC-based companies have invested at least \$36.5 billion in electricity projects.<sup>16</sup> In Chile, PRC-based companies currently control an estimated 57 percent of the national transmission infrastructure, with the possibility of increasing that portion with the China Southern Power Grid Corporation's planned acquisition of the energy utility Transelec.<sup>17</sup> In Peru, pending approval of a major acquisition, PRC-based companies could control 100 percent of power distribution in the greater Lima area.<sup>18</sup> This ownership gives the People's Republic of China leverage over the companies and local government jurisdictions served by those distribution networks, possibly making them vulnerable to Chinese economic coercion.

## People's Republic of China Presence in Digital Infrastructure

For decades, PRC-based digital service companies have been expanding in the Americas.<sup>19</sup> In telecommunications, PRC-based companies have secured a significant position in transmission infrastructure, as well as in the digital device market. Major PRC-based companies in the sector include longtime Chinese players in the region, such as Huawei and ZTE, and device manufacturers such as Oppo and Xiaomi.<sup>20</sup>

Such a broad strategic position in the market complements select advantages of firms such as Huawei, with respect to price and features, allowing them to secure a major role in cloud computing and 5G infrastructure as the service is rolled out across the region, as well as in the associated Internet of Things, with an exponential increase in the quantity of user data such firms will have in their possession.

In addition to Huawei, Hikvision and Dahua Technology provide surveillance technology under safe cities and smart cities initiatives.<sup>21</sup> The rideshare company Didi Chuxing, and the presence of Chinese Nuctech scanners in the region's ports, airports, and other checkpoints, each similarly put significant and expanding quantities of data about individuals, sensitive company information, and data about government personnel in the hands of PRC-based companies across the region.<sup>22</sup> Risks also include PRC access to the content of shipping containers passing through Latin American ports (via the scanners embedded in Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries cranes) as well as information about Latin American customers using PRC-based e-commerce services such as Alibaba, Shein, and Temu.<sup>23</sup> Although China's presence in the logistics sector is a concern, the data access also makes such infrastructure a concern from an information-security perspective.

## Space Cooperation

In the space domain, the People's Republic of China has launched numerous satellites for Latin American countries and provided the electronic and other components of control stations, trained personnel, secured cooperation and data-sharing agreements, and even operated facilities.<sup>24</sup> This potentially gives PRC entities significant access to facilities and data that could be used against the United States and its allies in space during a conflict. In Argentina alone, a subsidiary of the People's Liberation Army operates a deep-space radar

in Neuquén.<sup>25</sup> China's National Astronomical Observatories of the Chinese Academy of Sciences operate a large 40-meter radio telescope at the Félix Aguilar Observatory in San Juan.<sup>26</sup> A PRC-based company plans to build a commercial satellite communication facility further south in Río Gallegos.<sup>27</sup> Other examples include the construction and launch of three satellites for Venezuela and one for Bolivia, the associated training of space personnel for each, and the instrumentation of tracking facilities for those satellites.<sup>28</sup>

The People's Republic of China has further deepened its collaboration with actors in the space domain by inviting Venezuela and Nicaragua to participate in China's lunar base, scheduled for initial operational capability possibly as early as 2028.<sup>29</sup> The People's Republic of China has also built and launched five satellites for Brazil, with a sixth scheduled for launch in 2028, and has collaborated with Peru since 2005 through the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, including a 2015 agreement with the Air Force of Peru and a 2023 agreement to work together on China's lunar base.<sup>30</sup>

## Political Cooperation

In politics, the People's Republic of China has made significant advances within Latin America and the Caribbean in bilateral and multilateral engagement. Eleven countries, most recently including close US partner Colombia in October 2023, have established strategic partnerships with the People's Republic of China.<sup>31</sup> Such relationships go beyond mere diplomatic designations and are commonly associated with the establishment of a binational committee at the ministerial level for facilitating progress on economic projects, and in some cases, coordination on political affairs. Twenty-two Latin American and Caribbean countries have also signed on to China's Belt and Road Initiative, with Brazil and Colombia indicating interest in joining the initiative soon. Although the latter is not a formal political relationship, it may be regarded as an expression of interest in a privileged economic relationship with the People's Republic of China that is inherently political in character.

Demonstrating the region's interest in political engagement with the People's Republic of China, from December 2022 through July 2024 alone, 12 Latin American presidents visited China, including Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Xiomara Castro of Honduras, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Mohamed Irfaan Ali of Guyana, Alberto Fernández of Argentina, Gabriel Boric of Chile, Gustavo Petro



of Colombia, Luis Lacalle Pou of Uruguay, Chandrikapersad Santokhi of Suriname, and Dina Boluarte of Peru. President Xi Jinping is expected to visit Peru and Brazil in November 2024 for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum leaders' summit in Lima and the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro.

Such engagement with the People's Republic of China is also widespread at the subnational and individual levels.<sup>32</sup> The People's Republic of China regularly works at the state or departmental / provincial levels, as well as through sister city relationships, to court local governors and mayors, who are often less leery than their national-level counterparts of the strategic and espionage considerations of interacting with and taking favors from the People's Republic of China.<sup>33</sup>

The Chinese Communist Party International Liaison Department, through its Central United Front Work Directorate, engages with Latin America on the individual level through local business councils, friendship associations, police stations monitoring the Chinese diaspora, and thousands of scholarships and paid trips to the People's Republic of China for Latin American academics, think tank personnel, politicians and government officials, and even military personnel.<sup>34</sup> The People's Republic of China also actively seeks to work with local Chinese diaspora communities to support its foreign policy interests. This work includes leveraging family members in the People's Republic of China to influence the behavior of diaspora members living abroad through Chinese police stations and other vehicles.<sup>35</sup>

The People's Republic of China's political engagement with the region also increasingly extends into the multilateral sphere. The People's Republic of China has been an active observer at the Organization of American States since 2004; a member of the Inter-American Development Bank since 2009; a participant in numerous subnational institutions, such as the Caribbean Development Bank; and a participant in superregional institutions, such as the expanded BRICS organization (which, in its pre-2023 form, comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

But the PRC vehicle of choice for multilateral engagement with the region has been the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, in which the People's Republic of China's rivals (the United States and Canada) are not present, and which lacks an effective standing bureaucracy to allow the members to forge a common bargaining position for what members want in return for engaging with the People's Republic of China.

The China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum typically meets at the national executive level every three years, and at the president / prime minister level to forge a multiyear cooperation plan.<sup>36</sup> The forum also includes numerous subforums and affiliated committees that meet regularly to facilitate cooperation on specific issues, including a defense forum, a disaster cooperation forum, a newly created forum on space cooperation, and even a think tank forum for facilitating PRC ties with—and influence over—individual Latin American thought leaders.<sup>37</sup>

In defense and security, the People's Republic of China increasingly sells and gifts defense items to Latin American police forces. The country has sold JL-8 (K-8) fighter aircraft to Venezuela and Bolivia; air-defense radars to Venezuela and Ecuador; military helicopters to Bolivia; Multiple Launch Rocket System vehicles to Peru; an offshore patrol vessel to Trinidad and Tobago; and military trucks and vehicles to Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela, and various other countries.<sup>38</sup> The People's Republic of China has also donated goods to a range of militaries, including Y-12 military transport aircraft to Guyana, Colombia, and Costa Rica; bridging equipment to Colombia; military construction equipment to Guyana; and a range of dual-use vehicles.<sup>39</sup> China has donated police cars and motorcycles to the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and other countries, as well as personal protective gear to police forces in Panama and Costa Rica, among others.<sup>40</sup>

The People's Republic of China also hosts security personnel in training and PME courses across China, hosts military and police personnel and delegations from across the region, and sends delegations to the region.<sup>41</sup> The country has operated an intelligence-collection facility in Havana, Cuba, since at least 2019.<sup>42</sup> China also periodically sends personnel to some of Latin America's most elite defense institutions, such as Colombia's Lancero course and Brazil's Jungle Warfare School and Brazilian Peace Operations Joint Training Center.<sup>43</sup> The People's Republic of China has also deployed its military police to the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti peacekeeping mission; has sent its hospital ship *Peace Ark* to the region three times (in 2011, 2015, and 2018); and occasionally sends its warships to transit the region, among other activities.<sup>44</sup>

## Nature of the People's Republic of China Threat and Its Impact on Defense Equities

As during the Cold War-era competition with the Soviet Union, the impact of the People's Republic of China's activities in Latin America (and in other areas) on the United States and the region is multidimensional and affects the responsibilities of a range of US entities, including the Department of Defense and associated US security and intelligence organizations. Although some facets of the challenge the Soviet Union posed to the United States during the Cold War are similar to those of the People's Republic of China, the Cold War should not be employed nonreflexively as a template for understanding either the nature of the challenge of the People's Republic of China or the appropriate US response, particularly with respect to the response's military dimension. The objectives and the nature of PRC engagement are substantially different from the Soviet Union's during the Cold War. Moreover, the substantially greater interdependence of the global economy makes the nature of the PRC challenge and the appropriate response very different.

The strategic threat from the People's Republic of China to the region does not arise from a deliberate plan to impose China's political and economic model in the manner the Soviet Union sought to use during the Cold War. Rather, in the course of pursuing its own economic self-interest, and engaging in associated political, institutional, and security-sector interactions, the People's Republic of China is profoundly transforming the region in ways adverse to regional prosperity, democracy, effective sovereignty, and willingness to work with the United States within the framework of the rule of law and meaningful collaboration on shared challenges.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the People's Republic of China's pursuit of its political and security objectives—principally in the Indo-Pacific—is increasing the risk of a global war with potentially enormous adverse consequences for the region.<sup>46</sup> These consequences include disastrous economic fallout for the global economy into which the region is intimately integrated, and the potential effects of escalation to a nuclear conflict. The consequences of a global war also include the People's Republic of China's likely exploitation of its growing commercial, political, military, and other strategic positions and relationships in the region as part of its struggle against the United States in such a war.<sup>47</sup>

The adverse strategic by-products of the People's Republic of China's pursuit of its interests in Latin America are not necessarily part of a grand Chinese Communist Party design, yet these by-products are not entirely accidental either. The uneven, yet cumulative and impactful, character of China's activities in the region reflects a PRC bureaucratic system involving multiple actors pursuing different—albeit not incompatible—interests. In that pursuit, opportunities created by the commercial success of a PRC-based firm in one area (such as in Latin America's telecommunications, digital surveillance, or electricity infrastructure) are seen positively by the PRC Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of National Defense—but for different reasons. Such impacts are in addition to the PRC practice of military-civil fusion, in which technological advances achieved in the civilian sphere are leveraged by the military and vice versa.

The People's Republic of China's successes in one area thus open up possibilities for exploitation and advance by Chinese actors in another, with levels of directed and spontaneous coordination between Chinese actors that frequently are far greater than coordination among Western companies or between Western companies and their governments.

From a commercial point of view, gains by a Chinese company in a key technology sector may present opportunities to achieve a monopoly, add value, and create opportunities for Chinese suppliers and other affiliated companies in the sector. From the Chinese technology perspective, the same advance may create the opportunity to dominate and develop strategic technologies, including locking in standards. From a political perspective, the expanded position of the People's Republic of China in a country as an investor, employer, and generator of tax revenues creates opportunities to impact the behavior of businesspeople and political elites in the country and, at the very least, suppress discourse critical of China by those hoping to secure partnerships or contracts with Chinese entities. For the People's Liberation Army or the Ministry of State Security, their presence in the sector may create opportunities to capture data flowing through their information architectures in the country, create future cyber warfare opportunities, or cover for injecting intelligence or special forces operatives into the country for possible use in wartime scenarios against the United States, as discussed later.

Although a specific commercial advance may thus be less part of a master plan than the initiative of a PRC-backed company with generalized support from the PRC government, once achieved, each Chinese bureaucracy seeks to use that advance in different ways, possibly asking different things of the same company, which must be reconciled. Although the commercial, political,

intelligence, and security-sector dimensions of Chinese activities in the region thus arguably reflect a mixture of planning, improvisation, and imperfect bureaucratic coordination, the strategic consequences are no less serious for the United States and the region.

In assessing and effectively responding to the challenges created by PRC advances in the region, the US military must assess the situation through peacetime and wartime lenses. The US military must think about how, in peacetime, such advances may create opportunities for digital or other espionage for the People's Republic of China, give it leverage over partners through relationships and personal and commercial benefits, impact political dynamics in ways that impede partners' willingness to work with the United States, or open doors for China.

Beyond peacetime considerations, US analysts must also look at each PRC relationship with commercial, political, and security-sector actors with an eye to how the People's Republic of China could make use of such positions and relationships in the context of a war with the United States, even in the absence of formal military alliances or basing agreements.

In all such evaluations governing peacetime and wartime, a key center of gravity and a focus of the present work is the question of political change and regime type. Although little evidence exists to suggest the People's Republic of China overtly seeks to promote political change in the region, political change—including the empowerment and extension of the life of regimes adverse to the People's Republic of China—is arguably a key by-product of PRC engagement. Reciprocally, although regimes of virtually all political orientations and levels of institutionalization seek what they hope is beneficial interaction with the People's Republic of China, anti-US authoritarian regimes tend to give the People's Republic of China particularly significant opportunities in security-related sectors such as military sales and training, space, ports, and digital technologies. By extension, US military support to help friendly democratic regimes succeed emerges as one of the most effective ways to maintain US security-sector access to partners and deny threatening types of access to the People's Republic of China and other anti-US actors, including Russia and Iran.

## Decreased Willingness to Work with the United States

As the People's Republic of China continues to import Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) countries' commodities and food and provide loans and investments, more LAC government partners may decrease cooperation with the United States, particularly when such cooperation involves politically difficult choices. The perceived availability of the People's Republic of China as an alternative partner, coupled with the desire not to jeopardize their relationships with the People's Republic of China, may lead partners in the region to distance themselves to varying degrees from positions on security issues in the international arena, including matters such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the conflict in the Middle East, or PRC aggression in Southeast Asia that is believed potentially to offend the People's Republic of China. In a similar fashion, the perceived availability of the People's Republic of China may lead to partner nations' reluctance to cooperate with the United States on defense matters believed to impact their relationships with the People's Republic of China adversely.

The reputation of the People's Republic of China for vindictiveness when other states criticize it, or oppose its policy objectives, is particularly relevant. The People's Republic of China has cut off shipments of critical minerals to Japan's auto industry over a 2010 dispute over islands in the East China Sea; cut agricultural imports from Australia over, for example, Australia mentioning the origins of the COVID-19 virus in Wuhan; threatened to suspend investment cooperation with the United Kingdom over its disposition to block Huawei from 5G telecommunication projects; and delayed the implementation of promised commercial investment projects with the Philippines over a dispute with the country over claims in the South China Sea, among other actions.<sup>48</sup> Such coercive use of China's commercial power, referred to by Victor D. Cha as China's "weaponization of interdependence," similarly casts a shadow over the reluctance of economically and politically fragile Latin American companies to take actions or speak out in ways that might offend the People's Republic of China, particularly when sensitive political and military cooperation with the United States is involved, and particularly in wartime.<sup>49</sup>

Some examples of PRC economic coercion in Latin America have even occurred. In 2023, the People's Republic of China suspended a \$6.5 billion line of credit to Argentina during a delicate moment as Buenos Aires navigated an economic, fiscal, and foreign currency reserve crisis; the People's Republic of China also suspended this line of credit arguably to send a message to the



new libertarian government of Javier Milei, who had made strong statements against China.<sup>50</sup> China also suspended purchases of agricultural products from Guatemala shortly after the new government of Bernardo Arévalo announced its intention to continue relations with Taiwan, sending a strong message Guatemala's continuation of the relationship could put its hope for expanding future—and even current—exports to the People's Republic of China in jeopardy.<sup>51</sup>

## Digital Architectures

The growing PRC presence in digital architectures in LAC countries, including telecommunications, surveillance systems, ride-sharing, customs and other scanner technology, port cranes, and e-commerce, among others, creates vulnerabilities in the information security of US and partner-nation data moving through the region, as well as giving the Chinese government opportunities to obtain information on the activities of partner governments and leaders that could be used for political leverage or military or commercial advantage.<sup>52</sup>

In the context of a well-established track record of the PRC government seeking to obtain strategically valuable data from foreign governments and businesses, its access to data available to Chinese companies operating in the region is a matter of legal obligation, whatever the stated commitments of Chinese companies to protecting the privacy of their clients. Specifically, the 2017 Cybersecurity Law of the People's Republic of China obliges companies under Chinese jurisdiction to turn over any data in their possession the communist Chinese government deems relevant to national security.<sup>53</sup>

The People's Republic of China's telecommunication companies, such as Huawei and ZTE, have been operating in the region for more than 20 years and supply a substantial percentage of the existing telecommunications infrastructure and equipment that could be used to capture user data. These companies are also positioned to be the dominant suppliers for new 5G networks and the Internet of Things—which will provide access to an order of magnitude more user data—and are setting up cost-competitive cloud services facilities across the region whose quality and cost competitiveness attract Latin American businesses and users to locate their sensitive data on Chinese cloud servers, purchase Chinese telecommunication devices, and contract with Chinese networks to carry their data.

Chinese surveillance technology, including biometrics, installed in smart-and safe-cities projects, and widely used at the retail level for corporate and home security, potentially off-loads the digital, biometric, and other data captured to servers controlled by Chinese companies, giving the Chinese state potential access to the collected data. Data collected on users' locations and travel by the PRC-based rideshare company Didi Chuxing, and the ability to extrapolate sensitive data about meetings or users' habits that could be used as a lever against them, create similar vulnerabilities.<sup>54</sup> Even the customs and port scanners of the Chinese company Nuctech, and scanners installed on the industry-standard port cranes produced by the PRC-based company Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries, provide sensitive data on material entering, departing, or moving through a country and who owns that material.<sup>55</sup>

## People-to-People Networks

The PRC people-to-people presence, including academics, media personnel, government officials, and others regularly brought to the People's Republic of China on paid trips by the Chinese government; the previously noted leveraging of the Chinese diaspora in the region; Chinese Communist Party International Liaison Department Central United Front Work Directorate engagements with local elites in the region through friendship associations; and China's chambers of commerce all give the People's Republic of China information and influence in ways that potentially undermine the autonomy of host governments, undermine their ability to pursue their sovereign interests, and possibly undermine US interests. In some cases, such networks may also facilitate the communication of information to the People's Republic of China regarding the activities of US personnel in the country and the attitudes of local government elites toward the United States.

The People's Republic of China currently has at least 44 Confucius Institutes for PRC government personnel to teach the Chinese language and culture.<sup>56</sup> These institutions serve as gatekeepers for sufficiently talented and motivated China-oriented youth in the region to obtain Chinese government scholarships to study in the region and go on to obtain important positions in Latin American government bureaucracies or companies.

With respect to people-to-people diplomacy more broadly, according to its own data, the People's Republic of China brings at least 5,000 Latin Americans to China, funded by the PRC government, for various engagement activities, including China-focused journalists, consultants

and academics, and even military and other government personnel.<sup>57</sup> Such benefits and recipients' hopes of continuing to receive such travel, access, and contracts in the future, arguably create a source of information for Chinese intelligence, while at the least, inducing those most knowledgeable about China in their countries to temper their critical remarks about the dangers of the People's Republic of China.

## **Sustainment of Anti-US Authoritarian Governments**

The People's Republic of China's resources and support help governments in the region transitioning to authoritarianism politically survive while the governments consolidate power, eliminate sources of opposition, and maintain themselves in office, extending the life cycle of such regimes.<sup>58</sup> In the process, the People's Republic of China indirectly facilitates a greater number of such governments in the region with anti-US orientations and a reluctance to cooperate with the United States on security, political, and other matters. Such governments have historically also acted to promote anti-US agendas beyond their borders, including by subverting democracies elsewhere in the region.

The People's Republic of China's support for anti-US regimes in Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Ecuador (under Rafael Correa) has included the purchase of commodities and foodstuffs from those regimes, as well as extending loans, limited investments, technical support, and often, the construction of infrastructure paid by PRC loans, and repaid (in the Venezuelan and Ecuadoran cases) through parallel contracts for the export of the nations' commodities, extracted from the country by PRC-based companies.

Though such resources and support for populist regimes are inadequate to overcome the deleterious effects of mismanagement by populist elites, the resources and support have arguably helped keep the local economies afloat at some minimal level and have facilitated corruption benefiting elites affiliated with the regime and involved in the transactions with the Chinese, thus incentivizing the elites to remain loyal to the populist leaders whose rule enables those opportunities.<sup>59</sup>

The People's Republic of China's support for authoritarian regimes also includes the sales of equipment and systems that facilitate these partners' control of their populations. Examples include riot-control vehicles sold by the People's Republic of China to Venezuela and used against democratic protesters in 2017 and afterward, as well as arms for disrupting drones.<sup>60</sup>

Examples also include providing digital systems for monitoring and controlling populations, analogous to those used in the People's Republic of China itself, such as the ECU-911 national surveillance system in Ecuador, the similar BOL-110 system in Bolivia, the Fatherland Identity Card system in Venezuela, and support to Cuba's telecommunications agency Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba, used to monitor and cut communication between dissidents during the July 2021 nationwide protests in the country.<sup>61</sup>

## **Chinese Options Against the United States in the Hemisphere in Time of Conflict**

To date, the People's Republic of China has avoided explicitly anti-US military alliances and basing agreements with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. China has maintained military activities within the region at a relatively modest level and has avoided activities of an explicitly provocative character. Nonetheless, PRC military engagement with the region is significant and expanding.<sup>62</sup> That engagement, in conjunction with various facets of its expanding commercial activities in the region, gives China substantial options to harm US interests in the Western Hemisphere in the context of a broader US-PRC global conflict.<sup>63</sup>

At the outset of a hypothetical war between the People's Republic of China and the United States, Latin American economic dependence on Chinese agriculture and commodity purchases—plus the People's Republic of China's role as a local employer and source of loans—would give the People's Republic of China significant leverage to demand Latin American countries refrain from supporting the United States. This leverage includes potentially restricting US military vessels from using the countries' airspace, waters, and logistics or other facilities, or even restricting LAC countries from sharing intelligence with the United States relevant to the conflict, in the name of showing their neutrality. Backing up such threats, the People's Republic of China has a long-standing reputation as a vindictive partner, taking actions including cutting off Japan's access to its lithium in 2010 during a dispute over the East China Sea, cutting purchases of agricultural goods from Australia after the nation's government called for an investigation of the Chinese origins of COVID-19, and the previously noted suspension of a \$6.5 billion credit swap with Argentina in response to the perceived anti-PRC rhetoric of its newly elected libertarian president Javier Milei.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout a conflict, beginning in the prehostility phase, the substantial number of Chinese-owned commercial facilities throughout the region could be used to observe and potentially disrupt US force deployments and flows of war material from the continental United States to the Indo-Pacific. Potential hosts of Chinese military and intelligence personnel and material for conducting such operations would likely include the People's Liberation Army (PLA) military presence in Bejucal, Cuba.<sup>65</sup> In the commercial domain, the People's Liberation Army and Ministry of State Security might also employ PRC-operated ports close to the United States for such purposes (such as those in Mexico and the Bahamas) as well as factories; construction, mining, and petroleum sites; office spaces; or telecommunication facilities in which distinguishing between Chinese commercial technicians and PLA or Ministry of State Security cyber warfare operators would be difficult.

Throughout the conflict, PLA and Ministry of State Security personnel and other Chinese state operatives could also exploit commercial facilities in the region and the Chinese diaspora to infiltrate the US homeland, as was suggested in the reporting on the alleged significant number of military-age Chinese men crossing the US border along with other illegal Chinese migrants in 2023.<sup>66</sup>

The People's Liberation Army and Ministry of State Security could also logically leverage Chinese commercial facilities near the United States to create diversionary crises in host countries that could impact or distract the United States. Such efforts might include disruption of production facilities and road, electricity, or other infrastructure in Mexico that would impact supply chains involving the production of defense or other critical goods in the United States. The Chinese, their allies, or persons contracted by China could also launch plausibly deniable terrorist or cyberattacks against either the United States or governments in the region that ignored PRC warnings not to support the US war effort.<sup>67</sup>

In the context of such a war, the People's Republic of China could further leverage commercial and technical knowledge from its presence around the Canal Zone in Panama, including its role as a major user of the canal and its operation of ports on both sides of the canal at Cristóbal and Balboa, to shut down the Panama Canal, likely in plausibly deniable ways. Such a shutdown could be achieved, for example, by sinking a ship in the locks themselves, or in a narrow part of the canal such as Culebra Cut, akin to the accident that shut down the Suez Canal for weeks in 2021.<sup>68</sup> The People's Republic of China could also employ cyberattacks against electronic control systems

critical to the operation of the canal, could mine the canal, or could stage an accident involving hazardous cargo, among the numerous possibilities.

In conjunction with the closure of the Panama Canal, the People's Republic of China could exploit its commercial presence near the southernmost tip of Argentina, such as a commercial port the country has sought to build there, to hold at risk ships alternatively seeking to transit through the Strait of Magellan or the Drake Passage.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond targeting such maritime choke points, during a time of war, the People's Republic of China might further leverage its access to multiple space facilities in the region to locate and target Western satellites, attempt to capture and decode transmissions to nearby ground facilities or allied ships, or possibly even communicate with PRC space-based weapons in the hemisphere, such as a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System coming over the South Pole to attack the United States.<sup>70</sup>

In the advanced stages of a conflict with the People's Republic of China, particularly where the initial portion of the maritime conflict in the Indo-Pacific does not go well for the United States, the People's Republic of China could conceivably exploit its access to—or control over—commercial ports to resupply its warships and project threats against the US homeland, or US Western Hemisphere allies, from the eastern Pacific Ocean.

Though anti-US states near the continental United States, such as Venezuela and Cuba, might be willing to allow the People's Republic of China to access their facilities against the United States, the former might be too close to the continental United States to be survivable. By contrast, the PRC-operated, 15-berth, private deepwater port at Chancay, Peru, would arguably be sufficiently far away from the United States to be survivable for use by the PLA Navy, though still close enough to allow the People's Liberation Army to use it to project threats against targets in the United States and put US allies in the hemisphere at risk.<sup>71</sup>

In the context of a global conflict, China's relationships with Latin American military leaders, including those it has hosted in the People's Republic of China, and the experience of PRC officers within the region (including military deployments and institutional visits there) would all contribute to the speed and effectiveness with which the PRC commercial presence in the hemisphere could translate into military action against US and allied targets.<sup>72</sup>

The role of the Department of Defense in responding to the challenges presented by the People's Republic of China in the region arguably involves, among other actions, preparing for and taking steps to mitigate the effects of each of the possibilities described in this section.

Beyond such war planning, the role of the Department of Defense also includes actions that shape the battlespace, to minimize or be prepared to control risks in wartime. These include providing security assistance and other types of engagement that help democratic partners succeed, maximizing the number of healthy democratic governments with robust security capabilities and institutions with a positive orientation toward, and experience in, working with the United States, while minimizing the number of anti-US governments working with, or opening doors to, the People's Republic of China and others, such as Russia and Iran.

## The Question of the Role of the Military in Responding to China

With the advance of the People's Republic of China in the Western Hemisphere, uncertainty has arguably surfaced about the appropriate DoD role as part of the US government's efforts to compete against the People's Republic of China.<sup>73</sup>

The impact of China's advance on US defense equities shown in prior sections, plus the resources and tools the US military potentially has to contribute in responding to such challenges, argue for focusing more thought and resources on the role of the US defense establishment as part of the whole-of-government response.

## Current Policy and Legal Considerations

With the designation of the People's Republic of China as the de facto US pacing challenge in the 2017 US *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* and the substantial continuation of that posture in the 2022 Joe Biden administration *National Security Strategy*, which superseded the 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, the US military has a presumptive role in supporting strategic competition with the People's Republic of China.<sup>74</sup>



The 2022 *National Security Strategy* recognizes the People’s Republic of China as one of the United States’ principal strategic competitors and calls for a strategy of investing, aligning with allies, and competing with the People’s Republic of China across multiple domains to respond to the challenge.<sup>75</sup>

The principally economic character of China’s engagement positions the military to play a principally supporting, not leading role.<sup>76</sup> This position is reinforced by the legal structure of the tools the US military has for engaging in the Western Hemisphere in peacetime. The US Department of State has the leading role for most security-assistance activities, even where the US military contributes substantially to overseeing Department of State–led programs.

But in wartime, the US military would have a greater role in responding to PRC activities, including direct and indirect attacks against the US homeland.<sup>77</sup> Military planners should think through the details in the near term, rather than later.

## **US Military Tools and Challenges for Responding to the People’s Republic of China**

To date, the US military has principally responded to the challenge of the People’s Republic of China through the execution of its traditional security-assistance activities within the region, albeit applying a strategic-competition overlay to these existing activities.<sup>78</sup>

The 2024 United States Southern Command posture statement to Congress gives significant attention to the China challenge and focuses on the importance of “presence” in building partnerships and countering the “malign intent” of China and other US adversaries in the region.<sup>79</sup>

The US military’s activities relevant to responding to the direct and indirect impact of Chinese engagement in the region include working with partners there to improve security conditions as well as conducting specific activities (such as counternarcotics operations and security assistance), providing value that bolsters the case of the United States as the “partner of choice.”<sup>80</sup> Such US value is produced in varying degrees by the broad range of activities in the region, including arms sales and transfer programs, and a range of other security-assistance activities, such as training partners in the region and in US schoolhouses, conducting joint exercises, bilateral and multilateral coordination meetings, and a broader set

of engagements and relationship-building activities.<sup>81</sup> But the value of these activities in strengthening partner relationships, as a vehicle for dissuading partners from seeking closer relationships with the People's Republic of China that could jeopardize their relationships with the United States, is not always fully recognized and designed into the initiatives in a way that optimizes such effects.

The current US military approach arguably reflects a disconnect between the importance US leaders give to China's advance and the relative silence of US strategic thinking and doctrine on the role of the military in responding to PRC activities in the Western Hemisphere short of war. The US Joint doctrinal manual Joint Publication 3-20, *Security Cooperation*, for example, makes no mention of the direct or indirect contribution of DoD activities, separate from or in conjunction with other US government entities and partner nations, to the question of China or great-power competition.<sup>82</sup>

The options for the US military to respond are also arguably hampered by a general lack of resources to compete, in transactional terms, with the People's Republic of China offering more military equipment and services faster, with fewer conditions.<sup>83</sup> For often good reasons, the US defense system involves burdensome oversight and rules and significant delays and constraints regarding what can be provided to partners and how quickly. This includes US systems for Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing as well as other security-cooperation and security-assistance activities.<sup>84</sup> For those in the US military charged with part of the response to the PRC challenge, the system often seems too slow, cumbersome, and inadequately resourced to be effective.<sup>85</sup>

Such constraints notwithstanding, many instruments are available to the Department of Defense for its contribution to the US government response to the People's Republic of China, each with a variety of different potential effects independent of—or complementary to—other US government and partner organizations. Each has its own strengths and limitations, particularly relative to the effects the United States is seeking at the strategic level. For the purposes of this work, the effects are divided into (1) the provisioning of defense equipment, (2) training and PME activities, (3) the supplying of other benefits (such as intelligence), and (4) presence and direct action in the region. The effects of each instrument vary, from directly affecting activities in the region to helping partners succeed in providing security and other benefits to their own societies to building relationships that can provide insights and influence partners in mutually desirable ways.

Many of the effects of the DoD tools, from the perspective of countering China, overlap, but the considerations involved in each and how to optimize the PRC-relevant effect of each instrument are different from how to optimize its effects from a more conventional standpoint. These differences also imply the desired mixture of tools to be used in a resource-constrained environment, from the perspective of countering China, may be different from the mixture when evaluated by more conventional standards of military utility.

In general, the China competition-relevant effects of these tools are as follows.

1. Help partners succeed in addressing security threats and the corrupting effects of associated illicit flows that could undermine citizens' confidence in and debilitate democratic regimes, possibly leading to fewer democratic governments less willing to work with the United States and more open to working with the People's Republic of China and other US rivals in troubling ways.
2. Increase partners' desires to work with the United States rather than the People's Republic of China and other threat actors based on what is being provided.
3. Build relationships that, over time, support awareness of potentially harmful PRC activities, as well as dialogue and joint planning regarding options for responding to such threats in peacetime and wartime.
4. Directly respond to PRC actions in the hemisphere, alone or in conjunction with partners, in times of conflict.

## Defense Equipment

The United States can provide physical defense assets and associated maintenance and training support to augment partner capabilities through a variety of mechanisms including Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, and excess defense articles.<sup>86</sup>

Because US military items are often expensive and require a considerable amount of time to secure relative to other alternatives, ensuring the delivered items are appropriate to partners' needs, training, and maintenance

abilities is important to achieving meaningful effects in providing assets for missions, such as counternarcotics or citizen security. Reducing costs, improving responsiveness, and increasing quality, where possible, through procedural reform and relationships with suppliers, are also important.

Where the quantity of support that can be provided is limited; delays are considerable; or a partner's ability to use the equipment effectively is constrained by corruption, political will, or other factors, the symbolic effect of providing the material may be as important as the item itself. In such circumstances, the high-profile nature of the items provided, the public presentation of the items, and private messaging to the partner's military and political leaders may have strategic effects as great as the operational impact of the delivery of the capability itself. Messages may include the capability acting as a symbol of broader US commitment, the promise of further US support to come, and the way in which certain types of military engagement with the People's Republic of China could put the future relationship in jeopardy.

Leadership's attention, to accelerate timelines and show the United States' ability to help in moments of crisis—such as when the United States accelerated the delivery of equipment to Ecuador in 2024 to help it counter an acute public security crisis—may be particularly valuable from the standpoint of operational impact and the partnership.<sup>87</sup>

Over the long term, the US training and maintenance support that accompanies such equipment creates opportunities the United States should leverage as much as possible to wean partners off Chinese and other adversaries' equipment. The lure of working toward NATO standardization and associated prioritized access to advanced US defense equipment for those interested in becoming one of the Department of Defense's major non-NATO partners, may be particularly useful in this regard. The person-to-person interactions inherent in US maintenance, training, and other support activities further create relationships of confidence that may help alert the United States to future inroads the Chinese are seeking to make in military sales and other matters, as well as create opportunities to counter them.

## **Training, Advising, and Professional Military Education**

As with providing and supporting defense equipment, non-equipment-related training, security advisory support to partners, and PME have a mixture of potential effects contributing to countering

China, including helping democratic partners succeed in confronting security challenges, supporting the role of relationship building and strengthening in identifying China risks and responses, and dissuading partners from taking certain courses of action regarding China. Instruments include the full range of US PME institutions, from senior service colleges to programs for Latin American cadets at institutions such as the United States Military Academy, the United States Naval Academy, and the United States Air Force Academy; shorter programs through the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation and DoD educational outreach institutions such as the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies; in-region training through the Security Force Assistance Brigades and other DoD and contracted training teams; faculty exchanges to partner service schools; and advisory support positions such as the Ministry of Defense Advisors Program—to name a few.

The United States often has a competitive advantage in the perceived value of its training, PME, and advisory services over the People's Republic of China with respect to the perceived quality, relevance of instruction, and democratic character of the messages being imparted. The US offerings also are particularly attractive as they pertain to the Chinese competing in certain niche areas where the United States is widely regarded as excelling and where Latin American militaries have significant institutional needs and weaknesses, such as programs for noncommissioned officers.

Beyond such quality advantages, the opportunity to spend time in the United States accompanied by family is often particularly valued by the potential recipients.

The argument that sending significant numbers of officers to the People's Republic of China may limit the number the United States can send to its own schools may thus have resonance among military leaders seeking to maximize the capabilities supported within their own institutions through US programs.

Beyond the value of the program itself, the time partner-nation personnel spend in the United States for such programs helps US officials build relationships of trust with the recipients of training and also may strengthen partner-nation recipients' desire to work with the United States in deeper, more indirect ways by demonstrating to the training recipient the nature of the United States and its people in an unscripted way.

On the other hand, although traveling to the United States may be, on average, more desirable than similarly traveling to the People's Republic of China for many in the region, the People's Republic of China arguably has options for courting the goodwill of partner-nation officials traveling to China through types of personal benefits and attention US laws do not permit.

In contrast to training and PME in the United States, in-region training may lack some of the opportunities for influence building in-US training has. Nonetheless, in-region training is far less expensive per person reached and thus creates the opportunity to build relationships with a broader group (albeit arguably in a shallower form) that balances more in-depth relationship building with more limited groups in the United States.

Even more than relationships that come through defense sales and support, building strong interpersonal relationships through PME, advising, and training exchanges creates a cadre within partner institutions that perceive the value of—and may advocate for continued close work with—the United States. Reciprocally, building strong interpersonal relationships through PME may facilitate less positive attitudes about deepening relationships with the People's Republic of China, particularly if they are perceived as occurring at expense of the relationship with the United States.

The United States' training, PME, and advising also facilitate improved US coordination with partner militaries and their expanded effectiveness in general, enhancing the effectiveness of operations that help partners succeed against transnational criminal organizations and terror groups and other security threats, within the framework of their national laws.

As suggested previously, in the lead-up to or during a future war with the People's Republic of China, such relationships of confidence may facilitate planning with partners regarding how to respond to PRC threats in the hemisphere contrary to the will of their governments. Subjects of such joint planning and discussions—made possible by these relationships—potentially include military deployments to protect against PRC attacks on their national territories or critical infrastructure (such as the Panama Canal) or actions against Chinese military or intelligence personnel operating in their territories against the United States without their governments' permission, including by using facilities such as ports, space assets, and digital infrastructure in their territories against the United States and its allies. Although not all partners are willing to have such discussions, and although for many, other

issues, such as transnational organized crime, are higher-priority threats, such collaboration—even if only preliminary discussions—should be on the agenda where possible.

## **Dialogues, Coordination, Exercises**

As with training, PME, and advising, the US military can build relationships and gain insights in support of responding to the People's Republic of China through a broad range of other ongoing and periodic activities in and with the region. At their heart, these activities include engagement by US security cooperation office organizations across LAC countries, within the broader US embassy country teams. As suggested previously, the ability of US personnel to provide materiel, training, and other benefits to partners, and to market this ability, is an important tool in building relationships and responding to challenges from the People's Republic of China's engagement.

Beyond the United States' continuous presence, US exercises such as PANAMAX, New Horizons, and Tradewinds are opportunities to help democratic partners operate and coordinate better against the security challenges they face, while building relationships with US personnel relevant in peacetime and in the possible event of a global conflict with the People's Republic of China. The United States also has a competitive advantage in such forums insofar as the People's Republic of China rarely conducts such activities in the region and is almost never present in multilateral activities conducted with the United States present.

Beyond US exercises, other contact opportunities include military forums in the region, such as the Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, the Conference of American Armies, the System of Cooperation Among the American Air Forces, the Inter-American Defense Board, and the Inter-American Defense College. As with exercises, the Chinese do not participate in such forums and, in recent years, have not sent personnel to forums where they are permitted an observer seat (as was the case at the Inter-American Defense Board).

Finally, US military senior-leader visits, including by the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the heads of United States Southern Command and United States Northern Command, are opportunities to demonstrate US attention to partners, as well as awareness of and concern toward engagement with the



People's Republic of China. As illustrated by the active engagement in the region by Commander of the United States Southern Command General Laura J. Richardson, senior military leader visits show partners the United States cares about their issues, is paying attention to their situations, and may be useful in facilitating security-assistance support or highlighting particular issues of interest, such as Chinese space facilities, strategic ports, or attempts to sell major defense equipment items to a partner country.<sup>88</sup>

Senior leaders' private conversations with their Latin American counterparts may also create opportunities to breach sensitive topics, such as possible joint US courses of action with partners in the context of a major global conflict with the People's Republic of China.

## Direct Action

As a complement to other engagement, within the context of the legal and other permissions granted by its partners, US presence in the region creates the opportunity to help democratic partners succeed and respond to potential Chinese activities in the hemisphere in times of war.

Efforts to benefit partners may include counterdrug operations, including those conducted with partner nations and outside partners such as the EU, the United Kingdom, or Canada. These efforts may also include support from US sensors and platforms to air-, maritime-, and land-domain awareness that limits the flow of drugs through the region, with their corrupting effects and associated violence. Where permitted by partners and US law and policy, the United States may also conduct operations that help support partners' security against organized criminal and other groups, again helping partners show their populations the concrete value of adhering to a democratic, rule-of-law approach. The United States' forward operating locations, such as Joint Task Force-Bravo in Honduras, further contribute to such benefits.

As with US provisioning of defense articles, PME, and training, the United States' counter-transnational organized crime, intelligence, and other support produced by direct action is also a benefit to partners, which may be of use if appropriately presented as a source of leverage for continuing to work with the United States and limiting engagements with the People's Republic of China that could jeopardize the United States' ability to engage in direct action in the future.

Beyond contributions to security, US direct action—including coordinating with partner nations—and its physical presence in the region, also create opportunities to obtain insight into Chinese activities where the United States is operating.

Finally, in the event of a conflict with the People’s Republic of China, with the permission of partners where their sovereign territory, waters, and airspace are involved, US direct action would play a role in responding to PRC activities in the hemisphere, including responding to transits by Chinese and other hostile aircraft, warships, special forces teams, and intelligence assets. The United States may also be called upon to prevent the People’s Republic of China from denying access to maritime choke points in the hemisphere, such as the Panama Canal, Drake Passage, or Strait of Magellan. Partners might also ask the United States to play a role in preventing Chinese exploitation of ports, space facilities, or other assets in the hemisphere against partner nations’ will.

## **Policy Recommendations and Conclusion**

This work illustrates the greatest risk to the US military’s relationship with countries in the region, and militarily relevant access by US adversaries in Latin America, is political change, not differences in the United States’ military performance in the region versus that of the People’s Republic of China. Nonetheless, the actions of the US military can and do make a difference in shaping outcomes in the competitive space. In situations in which the Latin American partner has a substantial security relationship with the United States and a will to maintain this relationship, sustaining and leveraging the relationship may help limit the partner’s engagement with the People’s Republic of China on security issues, at least for a time, but will not necessarily prevent the partner from engaging economically, politically, or technologically in ways that expand PRC influence or otherwise create issues for the United States or the partner.

Based on the patterns observed in this work, the most effective DoD contribution to responding to the challenge of PRC activities in Latin America arguably is effective security assistance and other forms of engagement with military partners, as part of a whole-of-government response, complemented by the efforts of like-minded partners within and beyond the region, which help democratic actors succeed. The desirable outcomes such engagement supports include strengthening democratic institutions and controlling corruption and criminality to limit the degree

to which the partner's government becomes involved in, and discredited by, criminal activities.

The primacy of institutionally healthy, willing partners in maintaining effective US defense relationships and limiting problematic types of PRC engagement and influence highlights the importance of the US military's attention to the political, socioeconomic, and criminal dynamics of its partners, as well as nonmilitary initiatives by the People's Republic of China and other US competitors that could influence those factors and, thus, contribute to strategic risks through PRC influence and presence in partner countries and through indirect destabilization, paralysis, or political change.

Beyond evaluating risk dynamics in normal times, this work also highlighted the importance of US planners evaluating the risks of PRC activities in the region, through the lens of a potential conflict with the People's Republic of China, in which the risks posed by commercial and other activities may take on more threatening implications.

## The Centrality of a Strategic Concept

For the US military to act more effectively in using the tools at its disposal to contribute to the response to the People's Republic of China in Latin America, the military must have and articulate a clear strategic concept for the specific effects it seeks and for how it will achieve those effects with the resources and tools at its disposal.

Major organizations such as NATO have recognized the importance of framing their approach in a strategic concept.<sup>89</sup>

The strategic concept US defense and political leaders ultimately advance should take into consideration the nature of US and DoD strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, in the context of the complex and challenging strategic environment and the nature of the PRC challenge. Fundamentally, the US approach must be rooted in a concept that is realistic and well considered, clearly articulated, and faithfully executed.

Although no single correct strategic concept exists, the author's study of PRC activities in the region over more than 20 years suggests the concepts advanced by the Department of Defense should be rooted in the following considerations.<sup>90</sup>

- Minimize the role of transactional competition in defense engagement.
- Focus on helping critical partners succeed and maintain democratic paths.
- Leverage US values and soft power to complement a transactional approach.
- Focus on shaping the strategic environment and applying significant effort decisively in select areas.
- Evaluate threats and conduct partner engagements through wartime, as well as peacetime, lenses.

### **Minimize Transactional Competition**

The United States, as a democratic, rule-of-law-based society, is at an inherent disadvantage in competing with the People's Republic of China in military and other domains in a fashion that seeks to outbid the People's Republic of China for the loyalty of or desirable behaviors by its partners through the quantity of weapon systems, training, and education the People's Republic of China can offer or the agility with which the People's Republic of China can offer it. Although at the margins, the resources used for defense engagement can be expanded and processes made more responsive. The imperative for the United States to maintain control over defense engagement to ensure assistance is not given to corrupt, abusive, or otherwise problematic partners, and that the money is spent for legitimate military purposes, is an inherent part of the US defense establishment's way of doing business and the oversight of the United States' democratic political system.

In addition, the US system will similarly tend to impose limits and delays in providing material and other support—including increments and decrements in originally programmed support—as a consequence of US political dynamics and cycles, independent of the United States' planning and programming of defense commitments with its partners, however skillfully or logically done. Of course, the United States should actively work to engage with partners to provide more, and more effective, support in a more agile and predictable fashion. Nonetheless, the United States should avoid making the ability to outcompete the People's Republic of China in providing defense goods and services a centerpiece of its strategy. Indeed, where possible, the United States should anticipate and seek to mitigate the adverse effects

of the People's Republic of China outbidding it in providing defense goods and other support to Latin American partners.

### **Focus on Helping Critical Partners Succeed on Democratic Paths**

Recognizing political change poses the greatest threat to effective US defense partnerships and the greatest risk of US competitors' access in problematic areas. The United States should focus its efforts on identifying democratic partners at risk of turning away from a US-friendly path through political change and on identifying newly elected pro-US regimes seeking to distance themselves from prior anti-US and China-friendly governments, and prioritize helping those governments succeed in combating the security (and other) challenges that confront them. Even while the United States seeks to maintain the most effective and agile defense relationships possible with all its partners, it should use assessment of political change, whether through electoral change or other vehicles, alongside its assessment of the quality of and partner satisfaction with its defense offerings, as a metric for assessing risks to its security relationship and ability to prevent the People's Republic of China from establishing strategically challenging positions in the economies, political systems, or security establishments of US partners.

In the course of evaluating, prioritizing, and managing its security engagements, pursuant to the guidance of elected officials, the Department of Defense may need to continue providing support to pro-US regimes that are tainted by corruption, criminal associations, antidemocratic practices, or other problematic behavior—rather than excessively pressuring or abandoning those regimes—to deny the People's Republic of China the ability to make inroads. But at the same time, the Department of Defense must consider the future cost to the United States' reputation among the people of that country, which may arise from supporting such regimes. If the regime loses power, US association with the former regime may itself open the door to Chinese influence if the new government looks badly upon the United States due to its support for the government's predecessors and seeks to turn to the People's Republic of China and others as an alternative.

## Leverage US Values and Soft Power

Recognizing the United States' ability to compete for partners' actions and goodwill in transactional terms is limited, the United States should maximize leverage and, where possible, partners' interests in aligning with the United States based on value congruence. In the traditional sense, this maximization includes leveraging the goodwill and orientation of partner-nation officials toward US democracy and the orientation toward individual rights among facets partner nations believe are best for their own political and economic systems. The personal experience of partner-nation officials who have studied in the United States or worked closely with the United States may be particularly useful in this regard.

In addition to partners' affinities for the US example, even partners that do not hold the US example of democracy or rights protection in high regard may nonetheless have strong motivations to work with the United States as a counterweight to, or buffer from, China to protect their own democratic systems, rights, and autonomy of action against threats engagement with the People's Republic of China could produce. Such motivations to associate with the United States to protect their democratic traditions may also include partners' interests in protecting themselves against threats from other extrahemispheric actors such as Russia and Iran, or subversive threats from state and nonstate actors in the hemisphere.

In leveraging partners' affinities to principles of democracy, the United States must highlight the protective value of procedural democracy, the rule of law, and choices in areas such as politics and technology architectures, rather than presuming the right option is clear or the value of democracy and the protection of individual rights are self-evident. In an era in which the US political system has become increasingly polarized and dysfunctional, and in which PRC government and party leadership seem to have brought significant development and order, the United States must continue to sell the value of true democratic choice, rule of law, and limiting the role of the state to its partners, even if these sometimes appear to be the messier or less efficient options.

Regardless of how the partner sees working with the United States as a vehicle for protecting its own democratic institutions, US strategic engagement and discourse at all levels should highlight the value of standing with the United States not because of what it can do for the partner, but because of what it represents, while also doing all it can, within its limits, to help the partner succeed.

## **Shape the Strategic Environment, Complemented by Decisive Action in Select Areas**

As discussed throughout this work, the United States is at a strategic disadvantage in attempting to prevent sovereign states in the region from engaging with the People's Republic of China, or in competing transactionally by offering more goods and services more quickly or through official rhetoric, which accommodates the diverse current postures of governments of the region.

Rather, consistent with its principles of democracy, the protection of individual rights, and the rule of law, the United States should focus on helping its Latin American partners obtain the best outcomes from their dealings with the People's Republic of China and other partners, and protect against adverse effects by focusing on partners conducting interactions with the People's Republic of China through a framework of transparency, strong institutions, a level playing field, and the rule of law.

The DoD contribution to this focus on shaping the environment logically focuses on US security assistance and other interactions that help strengthen partner institutions, whether in the security arena or in other domains. As a complement, the Department of Defense should leverage its trusted relationships with military partners in the region, and partners' desires to maintain positive, beneficial relationships, to encourage its partners to conduct their security interactions in a transparent manner, according to a consistent set of procedures in accordance with their own laws and constitutions. The Department of Defense should respectfully use its leverage to call out partner-nation leaders and others when they do not conduct security interactions in this way.

Although a US focus on such transparency, rules, and institutional strengthening (including the role of the Department of Defense) will not prevent the People's Republic of China's advance in the region, it will help limit some of the more predatory advances—particularly those which are most harmful to partners—and those of greatest concern to the United States. At the same time, the focus will maximize the value partners will secure from all their security engagements, helping democratic partners succeed, while positioning the United States to play a role that helps its partners advance their security and other goals rather than a role that blocks them from realizing interactions with the People's Republic of China or other partners they may perceive as beneficial.



Within such a framework, the United States should focus its resources and leaders' attention principally on a subset of critical sectors, as well as on a limited group of partners whose political situations or other attributes make their positions strategic.

Critical sectors include—but are not necessarily limited to—digital and other sensitive technical infrastructure, space, and significant military and police cooperation. Important sectors also include those in which a substantial PRC presence could put at risk the ability of the partner country to make private, sovereign decisions or to protect companies and individuals operating in its territory, such as those in the digital domain. Critical sectors should also include those with military-civilian, dual-use potential of strategic importance, in which a PRC presence could give the Chinese government an advantage in wartime.

With respect to strategic partners, the United States should focus particular attention on regimes at risk of moving down an anti-US authoritarian path, but in which pro-US democratic actors are still politically viable. The United States should also focus on regimes in which democratic actors that are open to working with the United States have recently replaced more anti-US authoritarian regimes and need to show results to hold onto power and advance a democratic agenda friendly to the United States and the West.

With both kinds of strategic partners, the Department of Defense, as part of a broader US whole-of-government effort, should employ a combination of the maximum possible senior-leader attention and resources, including special exceptions to normal rules, to make assistance available in the most rapid and responsive fashion and, thus, help such pivotal governments succeed.

### **Evaluate Threats and Engage Through a Wartime as Well as a Peacetime Lens**

In assessing the risk of PRC engagement in specific partner nations, and with respect to particular projects, US military (and other) analysts and leaders must examine the dangers from the perspective of the present environment and in the context of a possible future conflict with the People's Republic of China that would logically lead it to use all commercial, military, and other assets available to engage in all parts of the world, including the Western Hemisphere. In such a risk assessment, the United States should consider how commercial facilities—such as ports, digital architectures, and access to space facilities, as well as relationships

with partner-nation militaries, political elites, commercial actors, and technical personnel—could be leveraged by the People’s Republic of China in wartime. Such analysis should include how wartime developments in the Western Hemisphere could impact the warfighting in the Indo-Pacific, and vice versa. Accordingly, where appropriate, US dialogue and engagement with partners in the region should include peacetime security topics, such as the shared fight against transnational organized crime and combating natural disasters, as well as how partners might work together to respond to specific possible PRC actions in wartime.

Although the principles outlined in the prior paragraphs are intended to be a start toward an effective strategic concept for the US military’s contribution to the response to PRC engagement in Latin America, the principles should not be taken as the only possible answer. As in other arenas of strategic thinking by the US military, concepts for the most effective DoD contribution to responding to the PRC challenge should be discussed in US PME institutions in the classroom. The concepts should be a focus of theses by US military officers and others in senior service colleges, as well as in appropriate United States Northern Command and United States Southern Command organizations, in futures-oriented organizations within the Office of the Secretary of Defense and US defense-wide agencies, within corresponding future-planning-focused organizations of each of the armed services, and in the Intelligence Community. Such thinking should additionally be the focus of government-contracted private studies and incorporated into major institutional war games used to shape US military thinking and planning.

## **Using Realistic Assessments of Capabilities and Risk to Select Courses of Action**

Just as a military commander would not send a unit into combat whose size, equipment, training, or readiness was not adequate to succeed, the US Department of Defense must realistically assess the degree to which its expenditure of resources on specific activities is reasonably likely to achieve the hoped-for effects.

The US military should not conduct a counter-China activity in the hope the activity will make some difference simply because a specific organization would logically be expected to play a role. If the available instruments and resources are not adequate to the task, the commander may need to change

the operating concept or course of action, while providing feedback to higher leadership to overcome the deficiency.

In the special case of instruments to address PRC engagement in the region, considerations of adequacy should include the sufficiency of resources (considering the scope and longevity of the effort required); limitations in achieving the desired effect due to legal and administrative restrictions; requirements and inherent delays in the DoD process itself; risks the effect will be insufficient due to difficulties in coordinating the Department of Defense and other US government's portion of an effort; risks foreseeable US government budget and political processes may lead to interruptions or oblige midcourse changes in the scope of the planned activity; and even risks the non-DoD portion of the activity may not be successfully completed, significantly undermining the overall effect.

Given the cumulative effect of such possibilities, finding options without substantial risk of failure in the domain of responding to the People's Republic of China may be almost impossible. Nonetheless, realistic assessments of such factors may serve to prioritize more realistic over superficially more impactful courses of action.

## **Improvements to US Defense Effectiveness**

Advancing realistic, effect-focused strategic concepts for responding to the China challenge and ensuring the chosen DoD and other tools are up to the task, is an iterative process. Some of the most important areas in which to ensure the adequacy of those tools include the following.

### **Adequately Resource Strategic Competition-Relevant Engagement Tools**

The strategic concept for DoD support for competing with China outlined in this monograph suggests the importance of more funding for security assistance—particularly international military education and training programs for LAC partners included within the United States Northern Command and United States Southern Command areas of responsibility. Although the instruments required for the Department of Defense's role in responding to the People's Republic of China in the region will depend on the strategic concept, resourcing for such efforts is arguably inadequate across the board. Although the United States Southern Command is notoriously

an underresourced economy-of-force theater, its critical role in defending the United States near abroad in the context of a war with the People's Republic of China or other US rivals makes rethinking that long-standing reality imperative.<sup>91</sup>

### **Strengthen High-Level Planning Coordination**

United States Southern Command, United States Northern Command, and their supporting service components should strengthen high-level planning coordination with the Department of State, the US Agency for International Development, the US Department of Justice, the US Department of the Treasury, the US Department of Commerce, the Department of Homeland Security, and other entities relevant to engagement with partners in LAC countries. Strengthened planning coordination will ensure the value of the contributions of each organization together is not diminished by lack of coordination in either the conceptualization or execution of programs, including those for strengthening partner institutions or providing other benefits and messaging that help to compete with the People's Republic of China.

Such coordination should include strengthening liaison ties and increased or enhanced joint planning activities. Despite significant vehicles for coordination between organizations, in practice, the programs of each organization and their intended China-relevant effects are planned separately, increasing the burden on the US ambassador or senior US diplomat who is in a given country to integrate the execution and effects of events designed by each organization at the country-team level.

Expanding integrated planning across government on the level at which programs are planned and budgeted would increase the degree to which military and other resources are integrated across the whole of government from the very beginning to achieve China-relevant effects. Such coordination might include, for example, a mutually reinforcing combination of incentives from defense engagement, the US Agency for International Development, the Department of Commerce, and Department of State programs to help a democratic partner succeed. Reciprocally, a combination of the loss of valued security assistance, the possibility of Department of the Treasury sanctions, Department of Justice investigations, and Department of State visa denials could be used together to dissuade a partner from engaging problematically with the People's Republic of China.

## **Institutionalize Fast-Track Responses for High-Priority Cases**

The relevant leadership and organizations of the Department of Defense, Department of State, National Security Council, and other US government departments should institutionalize the process of responding to a strategic opportunity or risk with a whole-of-government response that includes senior-leader attention and expedited provisioning of defense material, training, and other benefits. Although the requirements of each case are different, the increasing importance of mobilizing to respond to a priority case enhances the potential benefits of streamlining the processes relevant to providing a response.

Institutionalization of such fast-track responses may also include standardizing the movement of money between accounts, the requesting of additional funds or authorities where relevant, and the coordination with like-minded partners relevant to the region.

## **Streamline Planning and Programming Requirements for Partner Defense Needs**

The use of planning processes when responding to partners' requests for defense material is important for accountability and to ensure the materiel provided to the partner is actually the best available solution for its needs, is appropriate to its institutional capabilities, and can be supported. Such processes are a part of Foreign Military Sales and Foreign Military Financing, as well as other security-assistance activities. Nonetheless, such well-intentioned process requirements have grown to the point they sometimes become a source of friction, impeding the relationship between the United States and the partner nation, rather than strengthening it. Such requirements become a particular problem in the context of strategic competition, in which the partner may perceive the People's Republic of China as offering materiel and other benefits with fewer administrative processes and delays. Although planning processes ideally make the US solution more suitable and maintainable for the partner than its Chinese counterpart, the administrative burden and magnitude of the delays may undercut such benefits, diverting the partner's manpower to ensuring compliance with the requirements and taking so long the situation driving the need has changed by the time benefits arrive.

To compete more effectively with the People's Republic of China, the Department of Defense—including the Defense Security Cooperation

Agency—should undertake a high-level review of security assistance and Foreign Military Sales / Foreign Military Financing to streamline processes and governing regulations to the furthest extent possible. Such a review should be further accompanied by the high-level identification of statutory constraints whose costs significantly outweigh the benefits, followed by a high-level, bipartisan dialogue with members of Congress and their staffers to explore reforming the governing legal framework, including possible changes in future National Defense Authorization Acts. Indeed, some in Congress have already taken steps in this regard.<sup>92</sup>

### **Streamline US Defense-Support Agencies and Associated Program Taxes**

As a complement to streamlining planning requirements, DoD leadership should review the value proposition of defense-support bureaucracies associated with US security-assistance activities. Although entities such as the Defense Security Cooperation Agency and the Defense Logistics Agency provide valuable services and control functions, the layers of oversight and indirect functions of some agencies have been arguably too far removed from the activities the agencies support, with their oversight activities introducing significant delays and their costs passed on as a tax to the program being supported, adding further to the lack of competitiveness of US-supplied defense goods and services versus those offered by the People’s Republic of China or other competitors.

### **Decrease Incentives for Risk Aversion**

The norms within US embassy country teams in the region, including the basis for evaluating and promoting US military foreign area officers, arguably discourage taking risks in interacting with partners that could substantially increase partner capabilities or strengthen the US-partner relationship where the initiative could turn out badly. Corruption and allegations of problematic past behavior among some partner-nation officials that could taint those in the United States working with the officials on a defense program—as well as actors in partner nations with anti-US ideologies seeking to discredit the United States through the appearance or reality of a defense-sector scandal—add to incentives for US officials not to take risks in their dealings with partner nations that could lead to significant successes and bonds of gratitude and trust with the partner.

As a result of such risk aversion, certain types of US defense engagement (such as materiel or technical support for aerial interdiction programs that might lead to the accidental killing of a civilian) are avoided, often to the consternation of US partners.

Although restrictions are sometimes a function of US policy guidance, in other cases, the impeding effect on individual initiative can be compensated for in part by the tone leadership sets in each US security cooperation office in the region, in the US embassy more broadly, and in higher headquarters organizations (such as United States Southern Command) regarding individual initiative, justified risk-taking, and the career and other consequences of mistakes when they sometimes occur. Each of the service branches may also wish to reexamine the performance rating system for its foreign area officers to combat the habit of risk aversion and to empower and encourage foreign area officers to take more initiative to build stronger relationships and better, more creatively meet the needs of US partners.

### **Strengthen Messaging on the US Defense Engagement Value Proposition**

From senior leadership engagements to day-to-day FAO interactions with defense partners, the United States can do better to showcase why working with the United States is a better long-term value proposition for partners than relying on PRC defense equipment, training, and other support for the partner's security needs.

To make a better case for working with the United States rather than the People's Republic of China, the Department of Defense, the United States Southern Command, the United States Northern Command, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and others can dedicate more resources to collecting and organizing data systematically that is sharable with partners on the relative performance of equipment supplied by the People's Republic of China and other US adversaries versus that supplied by the United States in terms of operating characteristics, availability, and other factors. This data should be made more accessible to in-country foreign area officers and those preparing senior US defense and other leaders for engagements with partners. Supporting data on intangible issues, such as cases in which partner-nation officials have been caught up in overpricing scandals and other corruption involved in the purchase of Chinese defense equipment, should also be systematically recorded and made easily available for US engagements with partners from the level of the security cooperation office team to leadership at the United States Southern Command, United States



Northern Command, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere affairs, and higher levels of DoD and US political leadership. Such data will help advance US solutions over PRC solutions and increase US leverage when warning partners certain types of engagement with the People's Republic of China may oblige the United States to withdraw benefits.

## Conclusion

This work has shown the US military has an important role to play as part of a coordinated, whole-of-government response to the advance of the People's Republic of China in Latin America. The interests of the US military, as well as the United States and the region more broadly, are impacted in multiple ways by the PRC advance. At the same time, the US military has multiple resources to contribute to an effective response, from providing military assets and training to partners, to exercises, in-region defense representation, senior-leader visits, and, in some cases, options for direct action. But to leverage such tools most effectively, the United States must refine its strategic concept for the use of the military in responding to extrahemispheric actors. Doing so necessarily includes a focus on how to optimize relevant effects, from helping democratic partners succeed, to gaining leverage and intelligence that comes from the provisioning of goods, training, and presence. The United States must look at PRC activities in the hemisphere through the lens of how commercial presence and military relationships in the hemisphere could be exploited by the People's Republic of China in a possible future conflict with the United States, working with partners and planning for future actions that respond to such threats.

In peacetime, the greatest threat to US access to the region, and the United States' ability to limit access for US geostrategic rivals, is political change arising from dissatisfaction in the region with the performance of governments, including inequality, corruption, and insecurity, leading to the election of populist governments that decrease cooperation with the United States and open the door to working with US rivals. The US military must help democratic partners address security challenges and provide responsive support to pro-US governments that return after populists have been voted out of office. This help will contribute to challenging the People's Republic of China. At the same time, for governments seeking to balance ties with the United States, China, and others, effective US defense cooperation can make a difference.

But to provide effective US defense cooperation, the United States must address issues of resources, authorities, and other constraints on the effectiveness of its support.

No other region is as intimately connected to US security and prosperity through bonds of geography, commerce, and family as is Latin America. Through its engagement, the US military can significantly contribute to US national security and the well-being of the region. The US military must recognize the importance of and fully engage in that task.

## Endnotes

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Dr. R. Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American studies at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemispheric actors, transnational organized crime, and populism in the region.

Ellis has published more than 500 works—including five books—most recently, *China Engages Latin America: Distorting Development and Democracy?* (Springer, 2022). He has experience serving on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as international narcotics and law enforcement.

He testifies about his work to the US Congress on various occasions and holds the Order of Military Merit José María Córdova from the Colombian government for his scholarship.



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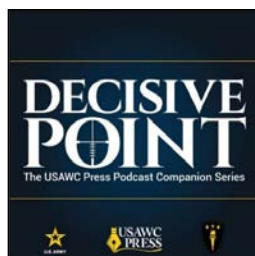




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